How Social Media Effects College Students' Perceptions of Police Brutality

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

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May 9, 2019

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**Abstract**

In the past few years, police brutality and excessive use of force has been one of the most prevalent social issues facing our society. Specific cases such as the ones involving Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray has garnered national attention, and sparked widespread controversy. The newfound interest in this issue is heavily linked to the advent of cell phones and social media which allow for the public to hold the police accountable for their actions and gives them a direct way for their opinions to be heard. Social media easily allows for raw, unedited videos of transgressions between police and citizens to be widely distributed and connects to generations that are not as invested in traditional news sources. Despite the affect that social media has had in this shift in the media, there is little research on how social media discussions and posts have impacted how the public perceives police brutality. This study seeks to find if there is a correlation between social media consumption and how college students view the issue of police brutality. The relationship will be determined by gauging students' consumption of both traditional and social media and their opinions on specific use of force situations.

**Introduction**

Police brutality is an incredibly controversial topic. It has sparked quite a bit of debate and has opened up discussions about power, privilege, race relations, and other concerns. Although this is not a new issue, the problem of police brutality has evolved over time especially with the implementation of new technology, namely smart phones and social media. Combined with the increased awareness of racial disparity and an increased level of social justice in modern

society, the issue of police using excessive force especially against people in already

marginalized groups, is bigger than ever. With the rise of social media and 24-hour news

coverage, more cases of police brutality have captured the public's attention and more people

have had the opportunity to discuss and debate the issue (Gale 2016). Today almost everyone is

guaranteed to have a phone with a camera in their pocket, so any interaction between police and

the public is available to be recorded and shared with the world in an instant. Social media has

allowed for anyone to post a video, comment, reaction, or story and to be able to share it with

essentially the entire world with little restriction. This is what made cases such as the tragedies of

Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and Philando Castile, among others

become so widespread and to be nationally and internationally recognized.  Police brutality

discussions on social media even inspired the creation of the advocacy group Black Lives Matter

which has become a huge player in the fight for social justice and against police brutality.

Despite the large role the advancement of social media and technology has played in the

debate on police brutality, there is surprisingly very little research on the effects of social media

on this issue. Naturally, if people are more exposed to actual footage of police brutality and

different opinions and commentary on the topic, it should have at least some effect on how they

view the issue. Either way, the advent of social media constitutes a very large change in the way

police brutality is discussed and analyzed and it is important to understand its consequences.

This study attempts to add to or even start the conversation in understanding the relationship

between social media and police brutality. This study also analyzes the relationship between

student's news media consumption and their opinions on police brutality as their news media

consumption has changed over time and news media consumption has also been a big contributor

to the discussion of police brutality. Considering college students are one of the most fluent

generations in social media and one of the most active, this study seeks to find out if their use of

social media effects how they think about and understand police brutality.

**Literature Review**

Police brutality itself is a huge issue that can be analyzed in a multitude of different ways

but in this research, it was deemed important to understand the general issue as a whole to better

understand a more specific aspect of the problem. These articles found in prior research help give

an overview of the issue of police brutality and some of its most prominent consequences and

also helps discuss parts of the issue of police brutality that are more specific to this current study

and its focus on social media, traditional media and their relationship with police brutality and

public perception.

The Gale Database's *Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection* provides a great

introduction into the topic of police brutality. It defines police brutality as "...the use of

unnecessary force by police in their encounters with civilians. The force used is beyond what

would be considered necessary in the situation at hand". Essentially police brutality is when

police officers exceed what would be considered reasonable force in a situation. Furthermore,

this article delves into the current conversation about police brutality by introducing that with the

implementation of social media and constant news coverage, that this issue has really caught the

attention of the public who are now able to discuss and debate the problem on new platforms that

were not previously available and can now share their opinions with anyone, anywhere, at any

time. This is even further exacerbated by the fact that almost everyone has a smartphone and

therefore the capability to record and post incidents of police brutality on social media (Gale

2016).

      G. Brown's article "The Thin Blue Line on Thin Ice" was inspired by a personal experience of the author who was a police officer who was in a situation that required him to use force; but he was apprehensive about it due to his realization of the visibility of his actions. This article focused on how techno-social developments opened the door to analyzing police conduct that had previously been concealed from the public. They cited that the mass presence of mobile communication devices with  video recording functions, the polices' awareness of the fact that everyday citizens can document and get involved in situations around them, and the fact that the modern public can contribute to narratives of events afterwards and have access to a never before seen amount of data, has contributed to a "new visibility" of police officers and that this might affect how police officers use force due to the accountability that comes along with it. This is important in contributing to the understanding of how media affects the public perception of the police and adds another important perspective on the police side of the issue. They also suggest that the new practice of the public filming police-civilian encounters leads to the consequences of exposing misconduct, overcoming the traditional bias the media has had in favor of the police, and being able to stop police from changing the stories of events to deny wrongdoing. This study contributes greatly to the current study in that it does address somewhat the relationship between the public and the police and how police brutality is perceived in a new age of technology and connectedness. This study found that a vast majority of police officers surveyed reported that they were aware of being filmed while doing thier job and that they changed their behavior due to the prevalence of citizens recording them, with nearly half saying they use less physical force and use force less often as a result of this awareness. Furthermore, a majority of police officers surveyed reported that their choice to use less violence is influenced just as much by social media as it is by the public's ability to film them and about a quarter said that social media had

an even higher influence due to its capacity to spread videos on an enormous scale. These

findings show that the advent of social media and the commonality of people having phones that

can record videos has enough of an effect that it influences the behavior of police officers'

actions and has changed the narrative of traditional media, so it must have at least some effect on

the perceptions of police brutality by the public as was studied here (Brown 2015).

The article "The Malleability of Attitudes Toward the Police" was also very helpful in the

research for the current study as that study had results that are highly relevant to what is being

analyzed here. This study was designed to determine if videos of "controversial police

interventions" shape the opinions of individuals and if said opinions can be readily altered. The

basis of the study was that videos on social media tend to "go viral" and reach massive audiences

and in the case of police brutality instances caught on video, these interactions could be very

widespread which has a lot of consequences. The study sought to find out if people's opinions on

the issue are based on their actual understanding and evaluation of the issue at hand or if they are

just a regurgitation of what the person consumed on social media. They split the participants in

the study into two groups which both took surveys about their opinions on the police, but one

group answered the survey immediately after watching staged videos of police use of force

situations. The results showed that the group that watched the videos had opinions that were

significantly less in favor of the police which suggests that attitudes on police conduct and police

brutality can completely change after watching videos of questionable police interaction with

civilians. This also suggests that people who are exposed to videos like the ones in this study are

susceptible to overestimating how often police use force and how at risk they are to experiencing

police violence themselves. Although viewing the videos did not greatly affect general attitudes

towards the institution of the police and instead effects opinions on specific cases, these findings

are still vital to understanding the relationship between the media and police brutality

perceptions. This is relevant to the current study in that this determination of the effects of videos

of police use of force is related to the effects of social media, as social media is what lead to the

spread of videos like these and has sparked a lot of public outrage and discussion. The findings

of this study demonstrate the effects of a factor that plays a big role in how social media is

related to how the public perceives police brutality. Even more relevant, the participants in this

study were college students like the participants in this study which also suggests that there may

be some connections in the findings in both studies (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert, & Poulin 2016).

M. Gerber's and J. Jackson's article "Justifying Violence: Legitimacy, Ideology, and

Public Support for Police Use of Force" sought to find a relationship between police legitimacy,

political ideology and support for "reasonable use of force" and "excessive use of force". They

conducted a study due to the lack of psychological analysis of the opinions of the public on

police violence. They suggested that when the authority of the police is legitimate, citizens are

more likely to obey laws and can predict people's opinions on the use of violence to obtain social

control. They also suggested that political ideology was connected to an individuals' opinions on

police use of force. The study measured people's attitudes towards police use of both reasonable

and excessive force by determining how much respondents approved or disapproved of police

use of force. The study found that political ideology was a predictor of respondent's acceptance

of excessive force and that people who prefer collective security and are motivated towards

power and dominance are also more likely to rationalize police excessive use of force (Gerber &

Jackson 2016).  These findings are relevant in that it indicated that political ideology effects

perceptions of police brutality which is important to keep in mind going forward in the current

study. Also, it helped to provide further understanding to the issue at hand by looking into how

power dynamics of certain groups in society are connected to how they feel about police use of

force whether it be reasonable or excessive. This concept is also important to keep in mind, as

power relations between different groups is an important part of the issue of police brutality as a

whole and understanding it is part of understanding any other aspect of the issue of police

brutality.

The article "College Students' Perceptions of Police Use of Force: Do Suspect Race and

Ethnicity Matter?" discussed a study that looked to analyze the connection between suspect race

and ethnicity and the perception of police use of force. They did so by asking college students to

respond to vignettes that depicted different situations in which a police officer used forced

against a citizen and changed the race of the suspect in the vignettes. They found that both the

race and gender of participants in the study can predict how they perceived use of force.

Considering the current study is also focusing on how college students' perceptions of police use

of force are affected, it is imperative to take into consideration the fact that these features also

effect perceptions of police use of force. This article also states that "Exposure to media

coverage and highly publicized incidents of police misconduct have also been found to

negatively impact perceptions of the police, especially among Blacks and Hispanics". This is

relevant to the current study in that it indicates a relationship between media consumption and

police use of force and suggests an even more complex relationship involving race which could

also play a role in the results. In the discussion of the results of this study the authors also noted

how the generation of current college students is becoming more involved in civil and political

engagements and consuming news in an unprecedented way with the advancements of modern

technology. They delve even further into this by then stating '... [it is] possible that this exposure

to social media stories surrounding allegations of police misconduct, the militarization of police,

and the public's impassioned response to these events negate the effects of suspect race and

ethnicity". They also address how studies that focus on how social media impacts the younger

generations' attitudes towards police use of force are lacking (Girgenti-Malone, Khoder, Vega,

& Castillo 2017). This current study is seeking to fill the void of studies connecting social media

and attitudes towards police use of force and therefore the effects of the current generation of

college students and their move towards political and civic action and consumption of news

through social media and traditional media sources that are now more accessible than ever.

   A. Goldsmith's article "Police Reform and the Problem of Trust" asked the question of

how to create a police force that the public trusts and frames it in past knowledge of how difficult

it is to maintain and establish trust in police. They stated that people want police that they can

trust because police are in a position of power and control over the general public and if they

police can't be trusted then it is dangerous to the public due to the police's privileged position in

society. Furthermore, an inclination to not trust an institution is not necessarily a bad thing as

historically it has been used as a means of self-preservation. The article also points out that

communities comprised of people of certain ethnicities or social disadvantages have distinct

experiences with police and are socialized in such a way that gives residents a negative

perception of police and other public services. Goldsmith states that "For subordinate groups, the

perceived bases for distrust of police will emerge from the particular habitus they possess,

grounded in the personal experiences, shared narratives, and interpretive frames located within

those groups".  This notes how disadvantaged groups do not trust the police because they have

had negative experiences with the police either directly or through listening to the experiences of

others that they relate to.  This notion is important for the current research because it shows how

ethnicity, experience with police, and other related factors can affect how someone trusts the

police and in turn how they perceive them. The article also mentions how the polices' practice of targeting certain groups is connected to these groups having a poor perception of the police. They also note how the police's use of excessive force alienates citizens from the police and that police brutality reflects a police lack of confidence in their ranks and hostility from police towards groups like minorities, women and other disadvantaged groups. This is highly relevant to the current research as it explains some of the underlying causes of issues in citizen and police relations which is crucial to understanding perceptions of the police. Understanding how the police relates to different parts of the citizenry will help to more deeply analyze perhaps why police use excessive force, how it is related to the way the public sees the police, and how to solve the problem. The article also suggests some solutions to the problem of lack of trust in police by pointing out how advancements in the media such as the mass prevalence of video cameras, mass audience news broadcasts, and presumably social media creates a greater visibility of police use of force and that this could make fundamental change in police actions crucial. They also stated that "A clear role for non-government organizations in these societies lies in educating, organizing, and mobilizing citizens to play a more "engaged" role in monitoring government performance, and in debating that performance publicly".  These assertions are directly related to the goal of this current research as it suggests that the visibility and platform that social media, broader and more frequent coverage of traditional news, and citizens' ability to monitor and broadcast police actions is the solution to lessening police brutality (Goldsmith 2005). This is critical to understanding police brutality and the perception of it by the public as it shows that this new technology goes further than just possibly affecting how people think of the police but can also be used in a much larger fashion to truly spark some positive change.

E. Paoline III and W. Terrill's study in the article "Listen to Me! Police Officer's Views of Appropriate Use of Force" takes a different perspective in that it investigates police officer's views on typical application of less than lethal force. They cite the issues that there is currently no commonly agreed upon model of less lethal use of force policy so every police administration is operating under different regulations and there is no solidified basis under which these administrations can even model their policies after. Furthermore, the decisions on use of force policy is entirely up to police administrators who can take suggestions from anyone including national organizations, judges, media and others but surprisingly not really the police officers that are the ones actually administering the force. It is important to be aware of the fact that in administering force, police officers have to determine both when to use force and how much of it to use and this is difficult due to the lack of overarching use of force policies. The study sought to determine what police officers actually thought was appropriate use of force in different situations of citizen resistance regardless of what their agency's policy was. This type of research is critical in understanding police use of force whether it be reasonable or excessive as there is no better way to determine why or how police are using too much force than asking them directly about it. The study found that police officers believed that compliant citizens should only be subject to verbal direction and commands or threats, verbally resistant citizens should only be subject to verbal tactics and soft hand tactics, passively resistant citizens are subject to everything up to pain compliance techniques, and then assaultive, physically resistant citizens should be subject to all forms of less lethal force. Ultimately it was found that "the majority of street-level officers are more conservative in their views, as to what is and what is not reasonable force, than how police organizations presently conceptualize and implement the force continuum" (Paoline III & Terrill 2011). This is relevant to the current research in that it shows

that most police officers follow a continuum in their use of force and for the most part do not use as much force as they are allowed to. This is important to understand because it might suggest that the dramatization of social and traditional media may blow the issue of police brutality out of proportion by focusing on outlier cases of extremes that do not accurately reflect the actualities of policing. This should be kept in consideration as a possibility in and is important to keep in mind when looking into solutions for the issue of police brutality and how it effects citizen police relations.

The article "Ferguson and the Death of Michael Brown on Twitter: #BlackLivesMatter. #TCOT, and the Evolution of Collective Identities" investigated the effects of the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #TCOT (top conservatives on twitter) and how they contributed to conversations about police brutality, specifically in the case of Michael Brown. They analyzed how these hashtags created a polarization of opinions on twitter and created groups based on identities and opinions. They were inspired by how social media is now being used in social activism and provides social justice seekers platforms that have not previously been available. They also cited how social media allowed for activists to garner international attention for police brutality cases like the cases of the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray. The study consisted of analyzing a multitude of tweets containing either #BlackLivesMatter and #TCOT and determining the attention both the hashtags and the tweets themselves received at different points in time. They also broke the tweets down into different themes associated with the issue of police brutality. They ultimately found that the tweets about the tragedy in Ferguson in the case of Michael Brown give an essential insight into the evolution of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and the subsequent social movement it inspired, as well as the prominence of the hashtag #TCOT. They concluded that both of the hashtags served as "polarizing collective identities"

about both race and opinions about policing as a whole. #BlackLivesMatter was associated with

tweets that mostly centered on police brutality, solidarity, and activism, while #TCOT centered

on validating justifiable homicides, white crime victims, and on painting #BlackLivesMatter

protestors as radical terrorists. This is relevant to the current research due the fact that it shows

that both sides of the controversy of police brutality use social media, so the possible effects on

perceptions of police brutality can go in either direction. It also demonstrates how people on

different sides of the issue are actively using social media to attempt to further their agenda and

convince others about their opinions. The article also brings up important points about social

media that pertain to the effects being studied in this research. They bring up the point that social

media has a "unique material history" that presents what people are doing and saying as they are

doing it and it never stops. In the context of social activism and police brutality, social media

allows us to see how groups organize and communicate to create narratives that stand the test of

time and become engrained in the social consciousness of society. In their words "Social media

functions as a "complex, multi-organizational- and sometimes multi-institutional- arenas" that

are influenced by cultural, political, and racialized social contexts" (Ray. Brown, Fraistat, &

Summers 2017).  This is essential to the current research because this is a good description of

how social media functions in our society and especially in the context of social issues and how

it affects the opinions of citizens. This is an in-depth analysis of a new form of social

commentary by everyday citizens and how groups competing in the sphere of social issues

discusses and interacts with each other. This article allows for critical understanding of the real

world functioning social media and provides an actual example of social media influencing or at

least attempting to influence the public's perception of police brutality in both drawing attention

to the injustice of the problem and in defending the actions of the police. This article certainly

suggests there is a connection between social media and the public's perceptions of police

brutality and provides a real-life example which is highly relevant to the current research.

　　　　R. Weltzer and S. Tuch's article "Race and Perceptions of Police" determines that race

remains a key factor in structuring attitudes towards police and unpacks the reasons behind this

why it still remains today in an age that is increasingly more aware of racial discrimination and

motivated to eradicate it. Ultimately, Blacks are more likely than whites to be dissatisfied and

unhappy with a variety of features of policing. They employ the group position theory, which

states that hostility between races is a reflection of competition between groups and their conflict

over material rewards, power and status. They connect this to the study by claiming that whites

hold more positive views of police and aggressive law enforcement while Blacks and Hispanics

are more inclined to see police as a "visible sign of majority domination" and to perceive police

misconduct as a pressing issue. They cite that people's experiences with the police play a role in

how people perceive the police, which inspired the current research to include that as a variable

in this study. The article also cited that observations of police misconduct to others can also

impact a person's perception of the police as if they had had that experience themselves. The

article also cites other studies that have documented that more people view the police negatively

during or right after consuming news about police brutality, corruption, or scandals within the

police force. Furthermore, frequent exposure to isolated incidents of police misconduct can be

predicted to have a significant impact on how citizens perceive the police. This lead to the

authors making two of their hypotheses that "Exposure to media reports of police misconduct

frequently increases the perception that misconduct occurs frequently" and "Media exposure and

neighborhood crime interact in such a way that people who are exposed to media reports on

police misconduct and who reside in neighborhoods with serious crime problems will be

especially likely to believe that police misconduct occurs frequently". This is related to this

current research in that it is looking for connection between media exposure and perceptions of

policing which is closely related to the goals of the current research. Ultimately the study found

that Blacks were the most likely to hold negative perceptions of police conduct, whites are the

least likely, and Hispanics fall somewhere in between the two. It was also found that frequent

exposure to media reports of police effects perceptions of police misconduct in all racial groups.

Blacks and Hispanics tend to believe that police misconduct is common. Most importantly, it

was found that frequent and repeated exposure to media reports on police abuse is one of the

strongest predictors of citizen's perceptions of misconduct and that people who hear a lot about

instances of police misconduct, especially through mass media, tend to believe that police

misconduct is a common occurrence. These findings are very helpful in conducting this current

research as it establishes a relationship between media reports and consumption and people's

perceptions about police misconduct. Assumedly this connection is still present with the addition

of social media to the discussion and with the narrower focus on police use of force compared to

the more general concept of police misconduct (Weltzer & Tuch 2004).

Hirschfield and Simon's article "Legitimating Police Violence" analyzed how newspaper

reports of police homicides of civilians may reflect and promote both public and official

tolerance for police violence. This is a very dated study in that it focuses on newspapers and a

time before televised news and social media were major players in the realm of informing the

public, but is still relevant to this current research as it demonstrates how there was a massive

shift in how the media portrays police violence before modern technology changed how we look

at police use of force, especially deadly force. The study stated that newspapers use symbolic

communication to create images and mobilized meanings that legitimize police violence but also

acknowledged that a something like a sensational police killing could shift these patterns even if only in the short term. Newspapers and the media used to have a friendly and biased relationship with police that granted them privileged access to police matters but required them to carry out public relations functions on behalf of the police and paint them in a positive light. The study sought to show how news coverage at that time legitimized police use of deadly force and did so by breaking down different articles and analyzing how they discussed victims and the police. Ultimately, they found that "Mainstream newspapers, in respect of reformist ideals periodically document and problematize the inability or unwillingness of police and judicial agencies to hold police accountable for killing civilians...these same newspapers often normalize, obscure, and rationalize police violence" (Hirschfield & Simon 2010). It is important to understand how the media portrayed police and police violence before the shift that occurred with the advent of police brutality videos, mass media coverage and social media and it is important to recognize that police brutality cases used to be almost always about putting police in a positive light and the victim in a negative light. Now that civilians are about to take some of the reporting of these incidents into their own hands and have an infinitely larger platform to voice their opinions about it, media has shifted to not always taking the side of the police and attempting to lessen their violence like they used to. This is relevant to this current research as it shows how traditional media changed its perceptions of police brutality which may point to social media and modern news media also affecting people's perceptions of police brutality.

**Current Study**

Social media has been instrumental in the current movement of fighting against police brutality. The advent of social media allows everyday citizens to document everything they experience in their everyday lives and then share these experiences and their opinions with

essentially an unlimited audience. Social media makes videos of anything "go viral" by taking a

video that can be posted by anyone and allowing for it to be shared with more and more people

until it reaches massive audiences (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert, & Poulin 2016). Viral videos often

get picked up by the traditional media, which now also tends to operate on a "mass" scale with

huge audiences that can be reached instantly, who them facilitate even more discussion. This

creates a loop between both civilian conversations on social media, then conversations by media

personnel, which then sparks even more conversation on social media. Social media also has the

capability of creating narratives that can be updated in real time and broadcasts live

conversations, as well as creating communities for people who share similar views and are in

groups that share similar experiences. A prime example of this is the creation of the Black Lives

Matter movement that was started with a hashtag on twitter and has now evolved into a

powerhouse activism group fighting police brutality on the national political stage (Ray, Brown,

Fraistat, & Summers 2017). This is also how the cases of the deaths of Michael Brown, Freddie

Gray, Eric Garner and many more became household names and caught the attention of people

all over the world. Furthermore, videos of police encounters are constantly being shared on

social media allowing for citizens to essentially begin policing the policing by filming their

encounters. Studies have shown that the prevalence of mobile phones with cameras and social

media's massive reach has affected the behavior of police officers who have reported being more

apprehensive to use force and now use less physical force and use it less often due to this "new

visibility" and scrutiny of their work (Brown 2015).

Even before social media, a massive shift in the public's perception of police brutality

started with the events of the Rodney King case in 1991 which was the first recorded instance of

police brutality. A citizen used a home video camera to capture the senseless beating of Rodney

King by Los Aneles police officers (Gale 2016). This was a pivotal moment in the relationship

between the public and the police in that it inspired the public to call for more supervision of

policing and how it is conducted, sparked a broader public interest in the actions of the police

and misconduct, and perhaps most importantly, demonstrated new capabilities for tangible

documentation of police action and interactions from video recording devices. From this event,

technology has only advanced with video cameras becoming a staple of everyday life and being

found pretty much everywhere and with the implementation of social media (Brown 2015). This

has led to a shift in how the police are portrayed in all types of media as there used to be a strong

relationship between the police and the media that protected the police and their action from

public scrutiny as all of their use of force and encounters with civilians or suspects was reported

favorably to police and tended to villainize suspects (Hirschfield & Simon 2010).  Today the

media has become a lot more critical of police and has become much more of an adversary than

the ally it used to be. They are not as willing to protect police officers that use excessive amounts

of force and provide the pubic with a much more neutral and informed story (Brown 2015).

Social media has clearly played a major role in the shift in the conversation of how police

brutality is talked about. It has opened the door for an entirely new way to share things with

massive audiences and the traditional media has followed suit. The implementation has even

directly affected how police officers do their jobs and has created international conversations

about cases that previously would've barely made local news. But despite the obvious

connection and the large role social media has clearly played in the history of the issue of police

brutality, there is a severe lack of research on the topic (Gerber & Jackson 2016). This study

seeks to contribute to the understanding of exactly how social media fits into the issue of police

brutality and its discussion. This study is looking to see if there is a connection between usage of

social media and college students' perceptions of police brutality. Since social media tends to be

a hub of discussions about police brutality and is home to a multitude of stories, videos, and

pictures of experiences or actual instances of police brutality, if people are exposed to these

opinions and descriptions of police brutality it could have a significant effect on how they view

the police and police brutality, especially if the get most of their knowledge of current events

from social media.

Although the focus is on social media and traditional news consumption as independent

variables, ethnicity, gender, major, time spent watching cop shows, whether a person grew up in

a urban, suburban, or rural environment, political ideology and satisfaction with police

interaction were all also included as independent variables as studies have shown they all have

some effect on the dependent variable, perception of police brutality. Political ideology has been

found in previous studies to be a predictor of the acceptability of police use of excessive force

(Gerber & Jackson 2016). Both direct and vicarious experience with the police has been found to

have an effect on perceptions of police (Gergenti-Malone, Khoder, Vega, & Castillo 2017).

Neighborhood characteristics such as the amount of crime, socioeconomic conditions, and racial

composition, have been shown to influence how people see the police (Weltzer & Tuch 2004).

Ultimately this study will be investigating if college students are informed about police brutality

through social media as compared to traditional media sources and if college students' opinions

on police brutality are shaped through what they consume on social media.

**Methodology**

This study was conducted by providing college students at the SUNY College at

Brockport, medium sized state school in Brockport, NY, a survey that was distributed through

email. The population studied was a convenience sample of 40 students of different majors and

classes. The sample was admittedly not as diverse as it could be and is not representative of the

general population, but connections can still be drawn from the sample as it is. Unfortunately,

only one student who responded to the survey identified with a Black or African-American

ethnicity which makes analyzing the effects of race in this study very difficult. Also, no students

responded that grew up in an urban environment which also excludes that variable from being

effectively analyzed. Lastly there was a majority of female respondents (65 %) as compared to

male respondents (35%) but this majority should not have a drastic effect on the data.

As stated earlier, students were asked about everything that is considered to be an

independent variable in this study. Students were then asked to indicate how many hours per day

they spent on social media with the options to respond with I don't use social media, less than

one hour per day, 1-2 hours a day, 2-3 hours a day, 4-5 hours a day, or 5 or more hours a day.

Students were then asked how many hours per week they spent following national televised

news, how many hours per week they spent following local televised news, how many hours per

week they spent reading traditional newspapers, how many hours per week they spent following

legitimate online news sources, how many hours per week they spent following non-legitimate

online news sources and how many hours per week they spent reading news articles they found

on social media.

Students were then asked to state how much they agreed on a Likert scale ranging from

strongly agree to strongly disagree with how much force a police officer used in a situation in

three different vignettes describing encounters with a civilian and a police officer. The first

vignette was written as "A police officer notices a parked car with its motor running and inside

finds a very large, yet unarmed man that smelled of alcohol and marijuana. While escorting the

man to the police car, the man landed a roundhouse punch to the police officer's head. He then

continued to attack the police officer and eventually tugs on the officer's belt that holds his gun.

The police officer in fearing for his life says he will shoot if the man did not stop. The man did

not stop so the police officer shot him in the stomach and then shot two more times after the man

continued to lunge forward. The man survived but was seriously injured." This vignette was

loosely based on the case of officer Bob Anderson and victim Zachary Church.  In the case, Iowa

courts ruled that Anderson's use of deadly force was objectively reasonable due to the threat of

death presented by Church even though he was unarmed (Callahan 2018). Most students would

assumedly agree with the amount of force used in a case like this but disagreeing with the

amount of force used would indicate a that a student has strong opinions against police use of

force and had a negative perception of police brutality. This case was chosen to be an example of

more reasonable use of force.

The second vignette was written as "A man was selling products without a license on the

street and was approached by police officers. The man verbally resisted the officers which then

caused the officers to attempt to arrest him. When trying to take the man's arms behind his back,

the man pulled his arms away. The officer then put his arms around the man's neck and brought

him to the ground. The officer then pushed the man's face into the ground while other officers

continued to restrain the man. The man continually said that he could not breathe but the officers

continued to hold him down until he lost consciousness. The officers then got off of him and

called an ambulance, but he eventually died from his injuries." This vignette was loosely based

on the case of the death of Eric Garner. This was a very controversial case and was heavily

debated in the media. This case in particular, sparked national outrage in a lot of groups but a

grandy jury did not indict the officer involved in the death of Eric Garner (Death of Eric Garner

2019). Most people who are not as supportive of police using force would not agree with the

force used in this case but those who support police being more liberal in their use of force

would agree with the amount of force used here. This case was chosen to be a clearer example of

police excessive use of force.

The third vignette was written as "A police officer approaches two young men walking in

the street and tells them to move to the sidewalk. The officer then notices one of the men

matches the suspect description of a convenience store theft and then makes a call to the

dispatcher and attempts to block the men's path with his SUV. The man and the officer have an

altercation at the window of the police vehicle. The officer fires two shots but neither hits the

man. The man then begins to run away so the officer pursues him on foot. The man stops and

turns around, the officer also stops, the man then begins to move towards the officer which

causes the officer to fire more shots that fatally hit the man." This vignette was loosely based on

the case of the death of Michael Brown. This was another one of the most controversial cases of

police use of force in national history. This case started social movements and even incited riots

in the town it occurred in. But despite the incredible reaction to this case, it is not as clear of an

example of police use of excessive force as the Eric Garner case and has gained a lot more

support than other police brutality cases (Shooting of Michael Brown 2019). This case was

chosen as it is not necessarily a clear example of either reasonable or excessive police use of

force.

This study is based on the hypotheses that the more time students spend on social media

and consuming news media, the more likely they are to disagree with police use of force in all

three of the vignettes and college students get more information on current events from social

media than traditional sources of current events.

**Statistical Analysis**

This data was analyzed by performing an OLS regression for the responses of each

vignette as the dependent variable. The three vignettes were analyzed separately. The first

vignette based on the case of Bob Anderson and Zachary Church had a majority of respondents

strongly agree or agree with the amount of force used in the situation. This was expected as this

vignette was designed to depict an encounter in which the amount of force used would generally

be considered reasonable. But there was still 16% of respondents who either did not agree or

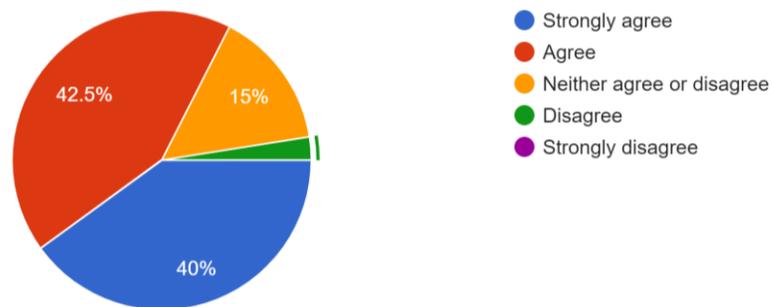disagree with the amount of force used or disagreed with the amount of force used.



Chart Depicting Proportions of Responses to Vignette 1

The responses to the first vignette were analyzed as the dependent variable with hours per

week reading news articles from social media, hours per week following legitimate online news

sources, hours per week following non-legitimate online news sources, environment grew up in ,

contact with police, hours per week watching cop shows, hours per day using social media,

satisfaction with police contact, class, political ideology, gender, hours per week watching

national TV news, major, ethnicity, hours per week watching local TV news,  and hours per

week reading traditional newspapers as the independent variables.

A multiple linear regression was run to determine the regression model summary and

overall fit statistics of the data. It was determined that none of the independent variables

explained a significant amount of additional variance in the data or were useful in predicting

agreement with use of force.

The second vignette based on the case of the death of Eric Garner had almost half of

respondents strongly disagree with the amount of force used and almost three quarters of

respondents strongly disagree or disagree. Some respondents did not agree or disagree and there

was a small but not insignificant number of respondents who agreed with the amount of force

used. This vignette was designed to depict an encounter in which a police officer used an

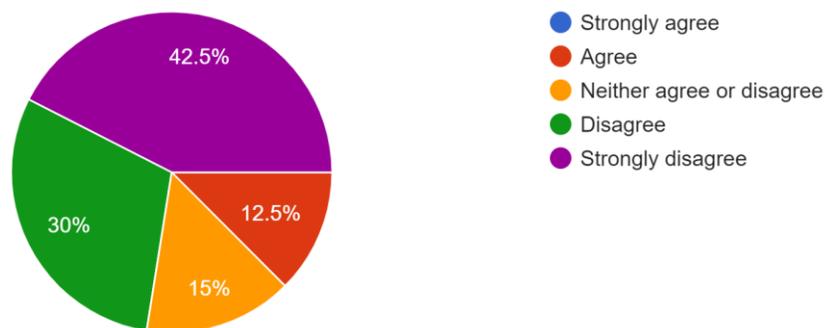excessive amount of force so it was expected that most respondents would disagree.



Chart depicting Proportion of Responses to Vignette 2

Just as the first vignette, the responses to the second vignette were analyzed as the

dependent variable with hours per week reading news articles from social media, hours per week

following legitimate online news sources, hours per week following non-legitimate online news

sources, environment grew up in , contact with police, hours per week watching cop shows,

hours per day using social media, satisfaction with police contact, class, political ideology,

gender, hours per week watching national TV news, major, ethnicity, hours per week watching

local TV news,  and hours per week reading traditional newspapers as the independent variables.

A multiple linear regression was run and it determined that the only independent variable to explain a significant amount of additional variance in the data and the only one that was useful in predicting agreement with use of force was hours per week spent watching cop shows. The analysis returned an R score of .410 which means that the linear regression explains 41% of variance in the data. An F test of the data determined that the significance was .030 which is less than .05 and therefore statistically significant so it can be assumed that this model explains a significant amount of the variance in student's responses to the vignette. Furthermore, the intercept of this analysis is highly significant and the hours per week spent watching cop shows coefficient was also significant which demonstrates that increases in hours per week watching cop shows predicts more agreement with police use of force in this situation.

The third vignette based on the case of Michael Brown had a majority of respondents strongly disagree or disagree with the amount of force used in that situation. A quarter of respondents were neutral in their opinions of how much force was used and some respondent did agree with the amount of force used. This vignette was designed to depict a situation that was not clearly a reasonable or excessive use of force situation and therefore a variety of responses was expected.
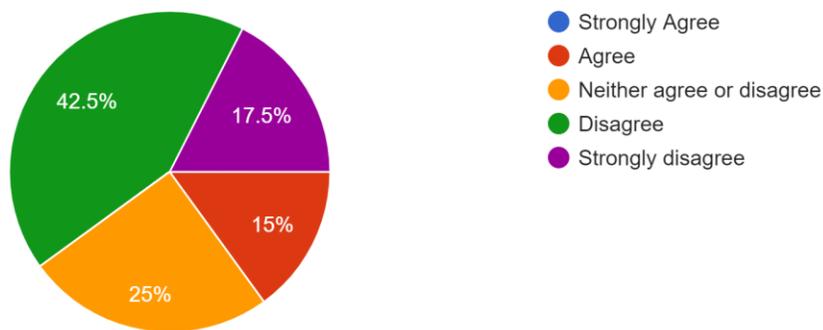


Chart Depicting Proportion of Responses to Vignette 3

Just as the first and second vignettes, the responses to the third vignette were analyzed as

the dependent variable with hours per week reading news articles from social media, hours per

week following legitimate online news sources, hours per week following non-legitimate online

news sources, environment grew up in , contact with police, hours per week watching cop shows,

hours per day using social media, satisfaction with police contact, class, political ideology,

gender, hours per week watching national TV news, major, ethnicity, hours per week watching

local TV news,  and hours per week reading traditional newspapers as the independent variables.

A multiple linear regression was run and it determined that the independent variables that

explained a significant amount of additional variance in the data and that were useful in

predicting agreement with use of force were hours per week following legitimate news sources,

satisfaction with police contact, and hours per day spent using social media. The analysis

returned an R score of .623 for hours per week following legitimate online news sources, which

means that the linear regression explains 62.3% of variance in that data. For the variable

satisfaction with police contact, the R score was .697 so the linear regression explains 69.7% of

variance in the data. For the variable hours per day spent using social media, the R score was

.755 so the linear regression explains 75.5% of variance in the data. An F test of the data

determined that the significance of the data was highly significant with all three variables having

.000 significance. This means that it can assumed that this model explains a significant amount

of the variance in student's responses to the vignette. Furthermore, the intercepts and coefficients

of all three variables were significant. This means that an increase in hours per week following

legitimate news sources predicts more disagreement with use of force in this situation, a decrease

in satisfaction with police contact predicts more disagreement with police use of force in this

situation, and an increase in hours per day spent using social media predicts more disagreement with police use of force in this situation.

**Findings**

For the most part the vignettes got the responses that were expected with the vast majority of respondents agreeing with a situation that depicts a reasonable use of force, the vast majority disagreeing with a situation that depicts an excessive use of force, and somewhat mixed responses to a situation that is controversial in the amount of force used. The first vignette did not show any statistically significant relationships between any of the independent variables used. So, in a case of reasonable use of force, amount of social media use and consumption of any news sources did not seem to have an effect on how much respondents agreed or disagreed with the use of force in that situation. The second vignette found a statistically significant relationship between hours spent per week watching cop shows and agreement with use of force in a situation involving excessive force. The hours per week a respondent spends watching cop shows predicts how much a respondent agreed with the amount of force used. It was found that the more time respondents spend watching cop shows, the more likely they will be to agree with the amount of force used in a situation of excessive use of force. The third vignette found statistically significant relationships between how many hours per week respondents spend following legitimate online news sources, how satisfied respondents were with their interactions with police, and how many hours per day respondents spent using social media. This means that the more hours respondents spend per week following legitimate online news sources, the more likely they are to disagree with the amount of force used in a controversial use of force situation. The more unsatisfied respondents were with their interactions with police, the more likely they are to disagree with the amount of force used in a controversial use of force situation. Lastly, the

more hours per day respondents spend using social media, the more likely they are to disagree

with the amount of force used in a controversial use of force situation. Furthermore, it was found

that the respondents used social media a lot more than they followed all types of news media.

45% of respondents did not spend any time watching national televised news, 47.6% of

respondents did not spend any time watching local televised news, 85% of respondents spent no

time reading traditional newspapers, 50% spent no time following legitimate online news

sources, and 52.5% of respondents spent no time following non-legitimate online news sources.

Only 5% of respondents did not use social media and 84.6% of respondents spent at least some

time reading news articles that they found through social media.

**Discussion**

The findings do support part of the first hypothesis and the second hypothesis of this

study. The results did show that college students spend more time using social media than they

do following different news sources by a large amount as was hypothesized. This was mostly to

be expected, especially since social media does provide entertainment and other functions while

news media is mostly just to inform the public about current events. As the findings

demonstrated, almost half of respondents did not have any interaction with news media in a week

but a vast majority of respondents did use social media as a source for news or information about

current events. This is important because with the use of social media as a platform in which

stories about cases of police brutality and people's experiences with police brutality can be

shared unedited and anyone can share their opinion, there can definitely be consequences if this

is where young people are primarily getting their information about current events. Traditional

news sources have fact checkers and are at least somewhat responsible for reporting the truth.

Social media is unfiltered and anyone can post anything they want no matter how true or false it

is. If college students are getting their information about police brutality through social media as opposed to traditional news sources, they are being exposed to potentially false information and a lot of opinions instead of facts, which could give them a potentially false perception of the actuality of police brutality. This is why it is also so crucial to understand the effect that social media has on college student's perceptions about police brutality because if the impact is large, then that means that people are forming strong opinions on police brutality, a highly relevant topic in today's day in age, from information that may or may not be true. This could mean that the issue of police brutality could either potentially be blown out of proportion or be minimized.

The other hypothesis was partially supported was that the more students used social media, the more they would disagree with police use of force in situations in which reasonable force was used, excessive force was used, and in which it was unclear whether the force used was reasonable or excessive. The responses to the first vignette and their subsequent analysis did not support the hypothesis as no significant relationship was found between social media use and perception of police use of force. So it can be assumed that social media usage does not affect how much college students' agree with how much force is used in a situation of reasonable use of force. None of the other variables that were expected to have an effect on college students' perceptions of police use of force appeared to have a relationship with these perceptions either.

The analysis of the responses to the second vignette also did not support the hypothesis as it also showed no significant relationship between social media use and perception of police use of force. This suggests that social media usage does not affect how much college students agree with how much force is used in a situation of excessive use of force. But unlike the first vignette, the amount of time students spent watching cop shows does predict how much students agree with how much force is used in a situation of excessive use of force. The more time students

spend watching cop shows, the more likely they are to agree with a situation in which police use excessive force. Cop shows such as Law & Order, Blue Bloods, or Hawaii Five-0, often portray police in a very positive light. They show police officers' thought process behind using force and allows for viewers to see situations in which force is used from the perspective of a police officer, which would naturally make them more sympathetic towards the actions of police officers. This connection should definitely be researched more in depth to better understand the relationship between watching cop shows and perceptions of police brutality.

      Unlike the other two vignettes, the third vignette did support the hypothesis as it did show a statistically significant relationship between social media use and perception of police use of force. The findings suggest that the more time students spend using social media, the more likely they are to disagree with police using force in a situation that is not clearly reasonable or excessive use of force. Just as was hypothesized, more social media usage leads to more negative perceptions of police use of force. This is important as this connection can have substantial effects on the issue of police brutality as a whole. Since college students get most of their information about current events from social media, this allows for any opinion or information to be posted without any requirement of truthfulness or factuality. This could lead to a misinformed public about a heavily debated social issue. On the other hand, this could be looked at as a positive as it is giving the public the power to essentially police the police as they can directly share their experiences and voices with an unlimited audience and people are able to see videos and other unedited evidence of direct interactions between police and citizens. This way people are able to see what happens exactly as it happens without having to worry about any of the story changing in an attempt to protect police or to sensationalize a story.

It was also hypothesized that there was a relationship between the amount of news students consume and how they perceive police use of force. The data also somewhat supported this hypothesis in the relationship found between hours per week following legitimate online news sources and perceptions of police use of force. This means that the more time students spend following legitimate online news sources the more likely they are to disagree with police use of force in situation where it is not necessarily reasonable or excessive. The hypothesis was not fully supported though, because no relationship was found for time spent watching national televised news, time spent watching local televised news, time spent reading traditional newspapers, or time spent following non-legitimate news sources and perceptions of police use of force which are all also news sources. There was also no relationship found for time spent reading news articles found on social media and perceptions of police use of force in the third vignette. More students reported spending at least some time watching both national and local televised news then reported that they spent any time following legitimate online news sources, so it is unclear why that was the only media source that had an effect on how students perceived police use of force in this situation. Perhaps the reasoning lies in the fact that students can exercise more of a choice in what articles or videos they consume on online new sources, but they just consume whatever happens to be reported when they are consuming televised news. This is an important connection to be made though as this may mean that in the context of police brutality legitimate online news sources may have the greatest impact on effecting people's opinions about and perceptions of the issue.

The analysis of the responses to the third vignette also found a relationship between satisfaction with police contact and how students perceived police use of force in this situation. The less satisfied respondents were with their contact with the police, the more likely they are to

disagree with police use of force in this situation. This is expected as it is logical to assume that if people had negative interactions with police that left them unsatisfied, it would influence how they see the police in other situations. They may project their own experiences onto other situations and it may affect how much they trust the actions of police. It is interesting that this was the only situation that there was a relationship between satisfaction with police contact and perceptions of police use of force. The explanation for this may be because the first and second vignettes were more clearly a more acceptable and less acceptable example of police using force and since this was a more controversial example it allowed for a more variability in responses.

This is also possibly the explanation behind why social media and traditional media consumption only influences students' perceptions of police use of force in the third vignette and why no relationship was found in the responses to the first and second vignettes. The first vignette was designed to be an example of reasonable use of force and a vast majority of students responded agreeing with the amount of force used. The situation itself could have just been a very clear example of what most people would consider to be a justifiable use of force and other factors were not necessary to have an influence on people's opinions. The case this vignette was based on was not a nationally known case that sparked controversy or outrage like the other cases used for vignettes were and the officer involved fully followed procedure, was acting in self defense, and despite his use of deadly force did not actually kill the victim. So potentially the facts of the situation the vignette was based on is the reason behind why respondents answered the way they did and why none of the independent variables affected how much they agreed with the amount of force used. The second vignette was designed to be an example of excessive use of force and most students responded by disagreeing with the amount of force used. This situation could have also just been a very clear example of excessive use of force that students just

naturally disagreed with in that situation. The Eric Garner case that this situation was based on garnered international attention and was met with a lot of outrage by the public. Despite the officer not being indicted in his killing of Eric Garner, it is a case in which most people acknowledge that too much force was used for what the situation called for and is ultimately considered a tragedy, especially with the video evidence that clearly showed what happened. This also might be why there was no suggestion that other factors affected how respondents felt about the amount of force used in this situation, because it called for a specific response. The third vignette differed from the other two in that it was not definitively an example of reasonable or excessive police use of force. Since it was more controversial and was designed to have more of a range of responses, this is perhaps why it was the only vignette to have its responses influenced by social media use and news media consumption. This is the type of situation that opinions are more influential in and are what would sway a respondent in one direction or the other. Social media use may have been connected to how much respondents agreed with use of force in this situation because of what they have seen on social media regarding police brutality and their subsequent opinions on the topic. Out of all the vignettes, this was the one that would be the most compelling to be influenced by social media use and time spent consuming legitimate online news sources, as it was the most subjective one. This connection may mean that in future cases of police brutality, especially those that may be controversial or unclear in how reasonable the amount of force used was, social media and legitimate online news source consumption may play a large role in how the public perceives the amount of force used by police officers and whether or not it constitutes police brutality. Therefore, we should be aware of what is being posted on social media and what is being reported as it can possibly tell us how the public is going to react to a new potential case of police brutality. On an individual level, if

people are aware that what they are consuming on social media and on legitimate online news

sources is affecting their perceptions of police brutality, they may be able to consume these types

of media with a more critical eye so they can more accurately perceive the issue of police

brutality and can remain or become properly informed. Advocacy and social justice groups may

also be interested in this connection as they can more effectively use social media and legitimate

online news sources to sway public opinion in their favor to push their agenda involving police

brutality. Since the connection between social media use and perceptions of police use of force

causes people to disagree more with police use of force with increased social media use, this may

also inspire people who have had experiences with police brutality to share their stories through

social media platforms as that is probably where they will find the most support and be able to

show a large audience how police brutality impacted them.

**Shortcomings in the Study**

This study helps us understand how social media, traditional media sources, and how

students perceive police brutality are connected, but there are some issues with the execution of

the study that may have impacted the results. Firstly, the sample size was very small and the

sample was a convenience sample so it is difficult to generalize the results of the study to the

entire population. A larger, more randomly selected sample would make future studies much

more effective and the results more concrete. The sample was also not as diverse as was hoped

for. Only a handful of students who responded to the survey were not white or Caucasian, a few

students who responded to the survey were Asian or Asian American, and only one student who

responded to the survey was Black or African American. None of the students who responded to

the survey were Hispanic or Latino. Research prior to the study heavily suggested connections

between race and opinions on police brutality especially since minorities like African-Americans

or Latinos are known to have more negative interactions with police, are targeted more often by police, and have more force used against them. The fact that this study had almost no minority respondents at all probably had a very big impact on the results of the study. Further research should make sure to have a more diverse and representative sample to get more accurate results.

This study could certainly be improved in a couple of different areas, but it is a good start in studying a relationship that has a severe lack of research surrounding it. The relationship between social media, traditional news media, and their effects on how people perceive police brutality is complex and more research needs to be done to more deeply understand the connection. Hopefully this study has at least established that there is some connection that needs to be investigated more in depth and perhaps inspires further research to dig deeper.

**Conclusion**

This study was designed to determine if social media usage and consumption of traditional news sources effected how people perceived the issue of police brutality. Police brutality is a huge social issue in current society and has created a lot of conversations and discussion about the topic. Some cases of police brutality such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, or Freddie Gray became international new stories and got public reactions of outrage. A large part in why these stories were able to garner such attention was the advent of social media and its ability to allow everyday citizens to share their stories, including their experiences with police, unedited and with mass audiences. This allows for people to see actual encounters with police that involve excessive force through videos or pictures and for people to share and spread their opinions about the issue. But despite the role social media has played in the issue of police brutality, there is very limited research on how it is related to how people

perceive police brutality and their opinions on police use of force. It was hypothesized that

college students spend significantly more time using social media than consuming traditional

news sources which in the past would have been how the public was informed about police

brutality. It was also hypothesized that in all three of the situations of police use of force depicted

in the vignettes in the survey given to the respondents, the more students used social media or the

more time that they spend consuming more traditional news media sources, the more they will

disagree with police use of force in all of the situations. The first hypothesis was supported as it

was shown that almost all students used social media for at least some amount of time every day,

while about half of students don't consume any televised news or online news sources and a vast

majority spend no time reading traditional newspapers per week. The other hypothesis was

partially supported in that for the responses to the first vignette, which was supposed to depict a

situation in which reasonable force was used, no relationship was found between how much

students agreed with the amount of force used and any of the independent variable, including

how much time was spent using social media and consuming traditional news sources. For the

second vignette, which was supposed to depict a situation in which excessive force was used, the

only relationship found was that the more hours per week respondents spent watching cop

shows, the more likely they were to agree with the amount of force used in the situation. Finally,

for the third vignette, which was supposed to depict a situation that was not clearly reasonable or

excessive police use of force, it was found that the more time students spent using social media,

the more likely they were to disagree with the amount of force used and the more time students

spent following legitimate online news sources, the more they were likely to disagree with the

amount of force used. Also, a relationship was found in which the more unsatisfied students were

with their interactions with police, they more likely they were to disagree with the amount of

force used. Ultimately, there is a connection between social media usage, traditional media

consumption, and how people perceive police use of force and brutality. The findings of this

study, support that there is a relationship and further research will help to more deeply

understand this connection and its consequences on the issue of police brutality and its current

discussion in society.

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