

**Elaborating Differential Impact of Media Exposure on Perceptions of Police Between  
Criminal Justice Majors and Non-Criminal Justice Majors**

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### Abstract

Researchers have argued that media exposure involving criminal justice can influence perceptions of police, but empirical research is decidedly mixed. Additionally, some scholars argue that media effects depend on audience characteristics. However, the moderating role of academic major remains unexplored. Using a laboratory-style randomized experiment ( $N = 270$ ), the current study examines the impact of media exposure that contains conflicting images of the police on perceptions of police and if this effect varies depending on academic majors by performing a series of paired *t*-tests, independent-samples *t*-tests, and a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance. Findings show that exposure to mixed images of the police dampens confidence in the police, but this effect is pronounced among non-CJ majors compared to CJ majors. Expanding our knowledge base in differential media effects between CJ majors and non-CJ majors can offer useful insights into future CJ curricula.

*Keywords:* media effects, media, perceptions of police, criminal justice majors

Elaborating Differential Impact of Media Exposure on Perceptions of Police Between Criminal  
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Researchers have documented that criminology and criminal justice (CJ) majors are different from those in non-criminal justice (non-CJ) majors in terms of their views toward criminal justice issues, including punitiveness, rehabilitation, gun control, capital punishment, prisoner rights, and juvenile justice policy (Benekos, Merlo, Cook, & Bagley, 2002; Falco & Martin, 2012; Farnworth, Longmire, & West, 1998; Lambert, 2004; Mackey, Courtright, & Packard, 2006; Tsoudis, 2000). Several studies also examined the differences in perceptions of police between CJ majors and non-CJ majors (Lim, 2015; Sethuraju, Sole, Oliver, & Prew, 2017; Wu, 2010).

Three recent studies examining the relationship between academic major and perceptions of police are worth noting (see also, Lim, 2015). In the first, Mbuba (2010) used data from a sample of 365 students who were attending a 4-year mid-sized university in the Midwest to examine differences in attitude toward the police depending on academic majors. His study found that CJ majors and non-CJ majors did not differ significantly in terms of their perceptions of police except two statements. For example, when respondents were presented with the statement, “it is risky to report crime to the police as they’ll turn around against you,” CJ majors were more likely to disagree with the statement though both majors tended to disagree with the statement. Both CJ majors and non-CJ majors also disagreed with the statement, “police should focus on dangerous criminals, not traffic violators,” but non-CJ majors were more likely to disagree with this statement compared to CJ majors.

In a second study, Wu (2010) used data from students not only in the U.S. but also in China to compare students’ global satisfaction with the police and more specific perceptions of

police regarding police misdemeanor, integrity, and effectiveness. In her multivariate analysis, she considered students' academic majors and found mixed evidence for the impact of college major; law students in China were critical of police demeanor than their Chinese counterparts, but CJ majors in the U.S. were less critical about police demeanor compared to their U.S. peers. CJ majors in the U.S. exhibited more positive perceptions of police integrity compared to non-CJ majors. Lastly, Sethuraju et al. (2017) used data from students from three universities in the U.S. and examined the extent to which academic major influences perceptions about police misconduct. Their findings revealed that those who majored in law enforcement, including those who double majored in law enforcement criminal justice viewed that there was significantly less police misconduct in general compared to those who majored outside of law enforcement and criminal justice. In short, these studies illuminate that perceptions of police can vary across academic majors, especially when comparing CJ majors and non-CJ majors.

The sources of different views between CJ majors and non-CJ majors remain unclear. Some researchers have suggested that students who possess authoritarian personalities are more likely to self-select into criminal justice major (Austin & O'Neill, 1985; Lambert, 2004) while others suggest that different attitudes toward crime and criminal justice are developed over the course of their CJ education (Finckenauer, 2005; Shelley, Waid, & Dobbs, 2011). Although scholars have called for future studies to address this casual order issues of the relationship between academic major and perceptions of police, they have overlooked another important implication from different attitudes toward criminal justice between CJ majors and non-CJ majors. If CJ majors and non-CJ majors hold different views regarding criminal justice, whether it is a result of self-selection or an outcome of educational experience, CJ majors and non-CJ majors may differently interpret the information regarding criminal justice issues.

The current study focuses on differential media effects between CJ majors and non-CJ majors when information that pertains to criminal justice issue is presented. Specifically, this article examines the differential impact of media exposure on CJ majors and non-CJ majors. Research participants were randomly assigned to watch a video clip; one video clip contained conflicting images of the police from reality-based shows and documentary; the other video clip contained educational information regarding public speaking, which was used as the control condition since the video clip was not directly relevant to criminal justice. In the next section, the findings from previous literature were reviewed to formulate a set of hypotheses linking media effects on perceptions of police between CJ majors and non-CJ majors.

### **Media Effects and Perceptions of Police**

Researchers have long been interested in factors that predict perceptions of the police because positive perceptions of the police can elicit compliance and cooperation with law enforcement from citizens and they are critical to effective police performance (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015; Tyler, Goff, & MacCoun, 2015). Much of the research on perceptions of police was centered on the effects of real-world experiences (e.g., victimization, encounters with the police) and individual characteristics such as race, gender, and age in the model (e.g., Brown & Benedict, 2002; Cao, Lai, & Zhao, 2012; Gabbidon, Higgins, & Potter, 2011; Huebner, Schafer, & Bynum, 2004; Skogan, 2005).

However, individuals' experiences of crime and the criminal justice system are limited (Langton & Durose, 2013), so the media can serve as social agents that provide vicarious experiences of them (Surette, 2015). A voluminous amount of research also examined media effects on perceptions of police (see reviews in Choi, 2018; Graziano, 2018). From early communication research, scholars paid attention to media effects on how viewers perceive police

officers and their performance. Using data from the National Opinion Research Center General Social Survey, Hughes (1980) examined if the extent to which viewers were exposed to television was associated with their approval of policeman striking an adult male citizens. His analysis indicated that those who watch television more frequently were less likely to approve violence by a policeman. Nonetheless, the following studies have yielded mixed findings, some of which supports the view that media exposure improves perceptions of police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dirikx & Van den Bulck, 2014; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Eschholz, Blackwell, Gertz, & Chiricos, 2002), some that media exposure erodes positive attitudes toward police (Dowler, 2002; Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005), some that media exposure does not have an appreciable effect on confidence in the police (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006; Dowler, 2003), and some that media effects depend on several moderating factors (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007).

The unsettled empirical status of media effects is evident in previous research even though the relationship between media exposure and perceptions of police was one of the primary interests among policing researchers (Choi, 2018; Graziano, 2018). Inconsistent measures of media exposure contributed to conflicting findings of media effects. Another important reason for mixed support can be attributed to research design. Most studies relied on cross-sectional data to test media effects, which limits causal inference (Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007).

A few studies were conducted to examine media effects on perceptions of police work using a randomized experiment (Graziano, Schuck, & Martin, 2010; Johnson, Wilson, Maguire, & Lowrey-Kinberg, 2017; Maguire, Lowrey, & Johnson, 2017). Graziano et al. (2010) used data from the last wave of the Chicago Internet Project. Their research participants in the

experimental condition were randomly assigned to watch a short video clip edited from public television discussion regarding the Meeks incident that raised concerns about racial profiling as a social problem. The video clip was manipulated to consider both police construction of the Meeks incident that emphasizes the danger police officers face during the traffic stops and the competing construction about the Meeks incident as an example of racial profiling. Their study showed that there was a significant difference in beliefs about how dangerous traffic stops are for police officers between those in the experimental condition and the control condition. Those in the experimental group were more likely to perceive that the police face danger during traffic stops than those in the control condition. While this study provides an important first step, the outcome variable of their study was not global assessments of the police. They examined media effects on perceptions of specific aspects of police work such as perceptions of danger that police encounter or whether respondents perceived that racial profiling by police is justifiable.

Maguire et al. (2017) conducted a laboratory-style randomized experiment using video clips. Three video clips featured three different police treatment conditions (procedurally just, neutral, and procedurally unjust treatments) involving a simulated traffic stop. Their findings revealed that media exposure can change participants' perceptions of the police. They also reported that watching the video clip portraying a negative encounter between an officer and a driver had a stronger impact compared to watching the video clip portraying a positive encounter. Building on Maguire et al.'s study, Johnson et al. (2017) used a randomized experimental design and investigated whether the impact of the quality of interaction with the police during traffic stops is universal across social groups, especially concerning race. They randomly assigned participants to view one of six video clips involving a simulated traffic stop. In addition to three procedural justice conditions (procedurally just, neutral, and procedurally

unjust treatment by police), they manipulated the driver's race in a simulated traffic stop (a white and an African American 18-year-old male drivers). Their study found that the effects of a negative encounter with the police were slightly larger than the effects of a positive encounter. However, driver race did not have an impact on any of the encounter-specific or global perceptions of the police although the race of the respondent mattered to how they perceive the police. Their studies suggest that media effects can be different depending on the portrayal of the police.

These studies notwithstanding, evaluating the impact of media exposure containing both positive and negative images of the police is virtually non-existent and deserving of empirical scrutiny. Media content involving the police is often contradicting (Dirikx, Van den Bulck, & Parmentier, 2012; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004). In popular media, police officers are often depicted as sacrificing heroes, but other times, they are portrayed as corrupt, using excessive force for unjustifiable reasons (Benekos & Merlo, 2006; Mastro & Robinson, 2000). Thus, a critical issue that remains a high priority for research is to examine media effects when media exposure contains both positive and negative images of the police. The current study seeks to find which side of the story individuals would adhere to when they are exposed to conflicting information regarding the police.

### **Differential Media Effects, Academic Major, and Perceptions of the Police**

Previous research on the relationship between media exposure and perceptions of police suggest that the key question is not whether media exposure affects perceptions of police, but for whom media exposure influences perceptions of police or is simply irrelevant (Dowler, 2002; Eschholz et al., 2002; Intravia, Wolff, & Piquero, 2018; Lasley, 1994). Upon reviewing the empirical evidence, an important gap in the line of theoretical and empirical work with respect to

differential media effects was noticed: the moderating role of academic major remains unexplored. Considering that a wealth of research has shown that there are marked differences in perceptions of crime and criminal justice between CJ majors and non-CJ majors (Falco & Martin, 2012; Hensley, Miller, Koscheski, & Tewksbury, 2003; Lambert, 2004; Lambert & Clarke, 2004; Lim, 2015; Mackey et al., 2006; McCarthy & McCarthy, 1981), this noticeable gap in the literature is striking.

While research has yet to assess the extent to which there is a disparity in media effects across CJ majors and non-CJ majors, there are some reasons why it is likely that media effects vary between CJ majors and non-CJ majors, likely in ways that media effects are less relevant to CJ majors. First, CJ majors are expected to be a more informed population regarding criminal justice issues. As noted by Shelley et al. (2011), CJ majors “are exposed to more detailed and accurate knowledge about crime and criminal justice than their peers majoring in a different subject matter” (p. 526). If CJ majors have accurate knowledge about policing, the influence of a brief media exposure about police misconduct on perceptions of police among them will be marginal.

Second, CJ majors may interpret the information regarding policing differently. In their discussion about law enforcement majors’ low levels of perceived police misconduct, Sethuraju et al. (2017) suggest that law enforcement majors be less influenced by the media coverage of publicized police misconduct because they would perceive high-profile cases as isolated events rather than a systematic abuse of police power. Different interpretations of police misconduct are more plausible given that CJ majors are more likely to be working as criminal justice practitioners after graduation (Ridener & Kuehn, 2017). Psychologists have found that an individual’s judgments are largely dependent on the emotion that an individual feels at that

moment (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; Haidt, 2012). Such affect heuristic can influence how CJ majors interpret a video clip involving the police because they tend to be attached to the police institution. The representativeness heuristic may also play a role in CJ majors' interpretation. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) argue that people tend to estimate the likelihood of a certain event based on our mental prototype (i.e., the representativeness heuristic). For example, when a video clip that contains both positive and negative images of the police is shown to CJ majors, they may find negative images of the police inaccurate. Thus, CJ majors can be less susceptible to negative images of the police when both positive and negative images of the police were presented.

### **Current Study**

The current study examines how media exposure affects perceptions of police when the media contain both positive and negative images of the police. The argument that media effects are conditional depending on academic major (i.e., CJ majors versus non-CJ majors) is advanced and empirically examined (cf. Benekos et al., 2002), especially when media content involves conflicting police images. Given that CJ majors have been found to hold different attitudes toward police from non-CJ majors, the effect of media exposure will be conditional on academic majors. The direction of the interaction is not conclusive. If CJ majors have more positive perceptions compared to non-CJ majors (Lim, 2015), mixed images of the police may influence perceptions of police CJ majors because they have more room for media influence. Conversely, CJ majors can be less influenced by media exposure regarding conflicting images of the police in comparison to non-CJ majors because of the cognitive biases discussed previously (Haidt, 2012; Kahneman & Tversky, 1972). The impact of media exposure unrelated to criminal justice issues is expected to be similar across academic majors.

## Data and Methods

### Data

Data for the current study came from a sample of undergraduate students at a Northwestern university. Disproportionate stratification was used by drawing a larger sample of students from the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice. A list of courses available for the spring semester of 2018 was used as a sampling frame. The courses were randomly selected, and the instructors of these courses were contacted through the university's e-mail system. The purpose of the study and the study methodology was provided to the instructors. When the instructors provided permissions to conduct the survey, scheduling date and time to visit the class was followed. When the instructors did not permit the survey, we continued to contact instructors until the target sample size was collected, which ended up collecting a total of 778 surveys. The response rate was 94.34%. While there were five video conditions, given that the focus of the present study is to examine the impact of media coverage of police misconduct, only participants who were assigned to view two of the five conditions were used for this study ( $N = 270$ ).

### Procedures

The survey was implemented in the classroom where instructors who had permitted to conduct the study. Using *Google URL Shortener*, the link for the *Qualtrics* survey was generated, and this link was displayed on the projector screen in each classroom. Students responded to the online survey using their devices (e.g., smartphones) by accessing the link for the survey. An alternative link was provided for those who did not want to participate or those who could not participate because they were under 18 years. Using the randomization function in *Qualtrics*, students were randomly assigned to watch one of the five video clips. The informed

consent page was attached to the first page of the online survey. Since it was possible that some students may not have earphones, about fifty extra earphones and five adapters for *iPhone* were prepared for students who did not bring them.

### **Treatments**

The current study uses data from the two experimental conditions. Considering that media effects on viewers' perceptions can be dependent on "the degree of reality that people 'see' in mediated messages" (Potter & Chang, 1990, p. 160), video clips were taken from reality-based programming. Edited video clips used in the study were parts of documentary footage or an online lecture. These video clips were approximately two minutes long. We did not include provocative or stimulating images considering participants' well-being. Several criminal justice experts examine if the experimental condition adequately contained both positive and negative images of the police proportionately as the study was designed (i.e., content validity). The experimental condition contained both positive and negative police images. Positive images of the police centered on the police officers' sacrifices, and the danger police work entails; the video clip was taken from *Heroes Behind the Badge* and *Fallen Project*. Negative images of the police showed victims' family members whose son experienced police use of force. This video clip was taken from *Once Upon a Crime: U.S. Police Brutality*. These two conflicting images were combined to create the experimental condition. The control condition contained a lecture about public speaking and was not directly related to police or crime. This video clip was taken from a *Ted Talk*.

### **Measures**

Before watching the video, participants completed a pre-viewing questionnaire about their perceptions of police. Participants then were randomly assigned to watch one of the two

video segments. After watching a video clip, participants completed a post-viewing questionnaire, including demographic information (e.g., academic major, gender, and race), their experiences with crime and the police (i.e., victimization experiences and negative police encounter), media consumption habits, and perceptions of police with the police to perform balance tests to make sure that the random assignment was accomplished. The online survey used visual analog scales (VAS); VAS is a psychometric scale that enables respondents to mark their response on a continuous measure between two ends. Methodologists have documented that VAS is instrumental in increasing the accuracy of responses and engaging respondents in the survey (Sikkel, Steenbergen, & Gras, 2014)

**Dependent variable.** Policing researchers have devoted their time and attention to differentiating similar concepts involving perceptions of police (Cao, 2015; Gau, 2011, 2014; Jackson & Gau, 2016; Reisig, Bratton, & Gertz, 2007; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Worden & McLean, 2018). While various ways to conceptualize and operationalize perceptions of police have been proposed, the current study employs measures of perceptions of police that have shown strong empirical validity and reliability (Gau, 2011, 2014; Reisig et al., 2007). Specifically, the current study used two measures—confidence in the police and perceived police legitimacy—as separate outcome variables. Four items used to measure confidence in the police based on the studies conducted by Gau (2011) and Reisig et al. (2007): (1) “*People’s basic rights are well-protected by police officers in my community,*” (2) “*Police officers can be trusted to make decisions that are right for my community,*” (3) “*Most police officers in my community do their jobs well,*” and (4) “*Police officers in my community are generally honest.*” Both of the scales used in pre-test (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .94$ , mean inter-item  $r = .80$ ) and in post-test (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .96$ , mean inter-item  $r = .86$ ) yielded a high degree of internal consistency, also

conformed well to a one-factor solution. Responses to these items were rated on a seven-point VAS that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with two decimals. The confidence in the police measure was created by summing the responses to the four items such that the higher score indicates higher levels of confidence in the police.

On the other hand, three items were used to measure perceived police legitimacy: (1) “*People should accept police officers’ decisions even if they think that the police are wrong,*” (2) “*When the police issue a formal order, people should do what the police say even if they disagree with it,*” and (3) “*Generally speaking, people should do what the police tell them to do.*” (Gau, 2011; Reisig et al., 2007; see also, Tyler & Huo, 2002). The reliability test for perceived police legitimacy scale showed high internal consistency for both pre-test (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .82$ , mean inter-item  $r = .61$ ) and post-test (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$ , mean inter-item  $r = .63$ ). All three items for pre- and post-test data loaded on only one factor respectively. Responses to these items were rated on a seven-point VAS that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with two decimals. Perceived police legitimacy was an additive scale so that the higher score indicates higher perceptions of police legitimacy.

**Moderating variable.** One of the primary focuses of the present paper is to examine if media effects are contingent on respondents’ academic majors. The major variable was dichotomized depending on students’ majors and minors; students who major in or minor in criminology and criminal justice (CJ) majors were coded as 1, whereas non-CJ majors were coded as 0.

**Variables for balance tests.** Victimization experience has been shown to be related to perceptions of police (Chow, 2012; Wu, 2010). Victimization was measured with eight different questions about respondents’ previous experience of victimization incidences during the past

year: (1) “*having my money or my property stolen (e.g., pick-pocketing),*” (2) “*getting robbed (threat by force or threat of force),*” (3) “*being beaten or hurt,*” (4) “*being scammed,*” (5) “*being sexually harassed,*” (6) “*having my property damaged,*” (7) “*someone broke into my house,*” and (8) “*someone followed and picked on me persistently.*” The response categories were *yes* or *no*. Direct experience index was created by summing and dichotomizing the responses (0 = non-victim, 1= victim). Participants were asked to mark what their races are. They were allowed to check more than one race: *White, Black or African American, American Indian or Native American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Some other race*. Race was dummy-coded (0 = non-White, 1= White). Sex was measured using a single item asking respondents’ sex at birth (0 = female, 1 = male).

Given that media effects are the main interests of the current study, two media measures were considered to compare differences across the experimental groups; the first variable measures respondents’ hours watching television. For a typical weekday, specific time frames were identified to enhance the precision of respondents’ memory: *6 a.m. to noon, noon to 6 p.m., 6 p.m. to midnight, and midnight to 6 a.m.* Respondents were also asked to report the average amount of hours that they spend watching television on Saturday and Sunday respectively. The scale was created by weighting the average amount of television watching during the average weekday by five and summing that with the amount of television viewing during the weekend.

The second media scale was designed to capture the use of various modes of the media (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which respondents agreed with the following five statements: (1) “*I often watch national evening news programs such as World News with David Muir or cable news programs like CNN,*” (2) “*I often watch local television news for information other than weather and sports,*” (3) “*I often read the news*

*or editorial sections of a daily newspaper,”* (4) *“I often listen to radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues, and politics,”* and (5) *“I often go online to get information on current events, public issues, and politics.”* Each item was measured on a VAS where 1 is *strongly disagree*, and 7 is *strongly agree*. The composite scale was created by summing the responses (range 5-35). The reliability of the scale was somewhat weak (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .69$ ; mean inter-item  $r = .31$ ).

### **Analytic Plan**

The analyses are presented in four steps. First, the results from balance tests are reported to ensure if the random assignment was effectively completed; a series of bivariate analysis (chi-square tests and independent-samples *t*-tests) are performed (Table 1). Second, it is tested whether there were media effects using paired-samples *t*-tests. Third, it is examined whether there were differences in perceptions of police between CJ majors and non-CJ majors based on an independent-sample *t*-test. Finally, a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) is conducted to test for interactions between the experimental conditions and academic majors.

## **Results**

### **Balance Tests**

Table 1 presents the results of the bivariate analyses. Overall, there were no significant differences in baseline information between the two groups. Specifically, the results from chi-square tests showed that the distributions of the categorical variables between the two experimental groups were comparable and that there were no significant differences in the composition of two groups. The results from a series of independent-samples *t*-tests also revealed that there were no significant differences in media consumption habits between the two groups.

Importantly, no significant difference in confidence in the police was found between the experimental condition ( $M = 19.76$ ,  $SD = 5.86$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 19.42$ ,  $SD = 5.88$ ;  $t(270) = .476$ ,  $p = .635$ ). Additionally, no significant difference in confidence in the police was found between the experimental condition ( $M = 14.49$ ,  $SD = 3.79$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 14.18$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ;  $t(270) = .652$ ,  $p = .515$ ).

[Table 1 near here]

### **Paired *t*-tests (Within-Subject Design)**

Table 2 displays the differences between respondents' perceptions of police before and after the experimental condition. Several interesting changes were observed. First, a significant decrease in confidence in the police ( $M = 19.39$ ,  $SD = 5.81$ ) was observed after watching the video clip that contained mixed images about the police as opposed to the confidence in the police at Time 1 before media presentation ( $M = 19.76$ ,  $SD = 5.86$ ),  $t(142) = 2.08$ ,  $p < .05$  (two-tailed). The magnitude of the effect can be considered small (i.e., Cohen's  $d = 0.06$ ; following Cohen's conventions, an effect size of .2 is considered small) (Cohen, 1988). On the other hand, those in the experimental condition did not experience a decrease in police legitimacy ( $M = 14.58$ ,  $SD = 3.79$ ) prior to watching the video clip ( $M = 14.52$ ,  $SD = 3.78$ ),  $t(137) = .471$ ,  $p = .638$  (two-tailed). Additionally, no significant changes in perceptions of police were found among those in the control condition before and after watching the video clip. Exposure to the control condition did not cause any reduction of participants' confidence in the police ( $M = 19.34$ ,  $SD = 6.11$ ) when compared to their prior confidence in the police ( $M = 19.53$ ,  $SD = 5.82$ ),  $t(131) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .207$  (two-tailed). Judgements about police legitimacy did not also show any changes from Time 1 ( $M = 14.27$ ,  $SD = 4.05$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 14.32$ ,  $SD = 4.04$ ),  $p = .727$  (two-tailed).

[Table 2 near here]

Based on the results from paired *t*-tests, whether the impact of media exposure on confidence in the police was contingent on academic majors was examined. Before testing the interaction between media exposure and academic majors, it was examined if academic majors were related to perceptions of police using post-test data. An independent-samples *t*-test was performed to compare the means of confidence in the police and perceived police legitimacy between CJ majors and non-CJ majors. Table 3 presents the results from independent-sample *t*-test from CJ majors and non-CJ majors. There was a significant difference in confidence in the police for CJ majors ( $M = 20.10$ ,  $SD = 6.01$ ) and non-CJ majors ( $M = 18.62$ ,  $SD = 5.86$ ;  $t(264) = 2.027$ ,  $p = .044$ , two-tailed). CJ majors tended to exhibit more favorable sentiments toward police compared to non-CJ majors. The magnitude of the difference in the means of confidence in the police (Cohen's  $d = .25$ ) was between small and medium according to Cohen's (1988) conventions. The mean difference in police legitimacy between CJ majors ( $M = 14.93$ ,  $SD = 3.84$ ) and non-CJ majors ( $M = 13.94$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ ;  $t(264) = 2.073$ ,  $p < .039$ , two-tailed) was also statistically different. The estimated effect size was between small and medium (Cohen's  $d = .25$ ).

[Table 3 near here]

### **Mixed Between-Within Subjects ANOVA**

The interaction academic majors and the experimental condition was marginally significant, Wilks' Lambda = .978,  $F(1, 135) = 2.982$ ,  $p = .086$ , partial eta squared = .022. While the effect of media exposure that contained mixed images of the police was negative and significant across all participants who were randomly assigned to this condition, non-CJ majors were more affected by the mixed video clip in comparison to CJ majors (Table 4; Figure 1).

[Table 4 near here]

[Figure 1 near here]

### **Discussion**

Most studies assessing the differences in attitudes toward criminal justice between CJ majors and non-CJ majors tended to focus on where the differences come from (Falco & Martin, 2012; Hawk-Tourtelot & Bradley-Engen, 2012; Lambert & Clarke, 2004). While this question is important to expand the knowledge base in our understanding of the role of criminal justice education, another important question remains unexplored: do CJ majors interpret the information involving criminal justice issues similarly to non-CJ majors? The current study sought to answer this question by examining whether media exposure influences perceptions of police. Specifically, it was examined if a video clip that contains conflicting images of the police can differentially influence perceptions of police among CJ majors and non-CJ majors. This research, using a laboratory-style random experiment with data from a sample of undergraduate students, yielded three key findings.

First, paired *t*-tests indicated that mixed images of the police eroded confidence in the police across the two groups. It appears that negative images of the police leave a more strong impression as compared to positive images, which consistent with social psychologists' concise summary: bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). As predicted, the video clip unrelated to criminal justice issues did not influence perceptions of police. Second, there were significant differences in the perceptions of police between CJ majors and non-CJ majors (Lim, 2015; Mbuba, 2010; Sethuraju et al., 2017). Consistent with prior studies, CJ majors tend to hold the police in higher regard than non-CJ majors. Lastly, while the effect of the video clip that contained contradicting images of the police lowered confidence in

the police, but this dampening effect of the experimental condition was more pronounced among non-CJ majors albeit this interaction was marginally significant.

The findings from the current study are striking considering that the media often present both positive and negative images regarding the practice of criminal justice agents (Kappeler & Potter, 2017; Surette, 2015). Additionally, given that many CJ majors plan to work in the criminal justice field, the differential impact of media exposure involving policing suggests important implications. Police officers often report that they feel misunderstood and wrongfully blamed by citizens that they serve partly because of media coverage (Nix & Pickett, 2017; Weitzer, 2015). If police officers and civilians interpret media coverage of policing differently, the media can be a source of great misunderstandings.

While the differential impact of media exposure about policing can be attributed to CJ majors' greater knowledge of policing issues, researchers have shown that difference in knowledge about crime and criminal justice issues between CJ majors and non-CJ majors is not substantial (Lambert & Clarke, 2004; Lambert et al., 2008). The findings from the current study may indicate that CJ majors may use different cognitive heuristics to evaluate the police as compared to non-CJ majors (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Tversky and Kahneman (1973) argued that individuals recall the memory according to "an assessment of the ease with which instances could be brought to mind" (p. 211). CJ majors may have felt uncomfortable to recall negative images of the police when reporting their attitudes toward the police since many of them could have hoped to work as criminal justice professionals (see also, Kahneman, 2011).

To counteract the possible impact of cognitive biases, it is important to develop curricula that can improve CJ majors' understanding of the relationship between the community and the police. There are several ways to improve awareness regarding the relationship between the

community and policing among CJ majors. First, the curricula should provide information on the types of police corruption (e.g., gratuities, taking bribes, and planting evidence), extent of police misconduct (e.g., police use of excessive force and lethal force), and causes of police deviance (e.g., systematic theory and rotten apple theory) (Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert, 1998). CJ curricula should also include the discussions about the connection between the police, the community and its consequence involving the criminal justice system. The discussions can begin with historical contexts in which distrust between community members and the police was fostered (Van Craen & Skogan, 2017). For example, CJ majors can learn that the police have been instrumental in suppressing the civil rights movements; this could provide CJ majors with a chance to understand where citizens' perceptions of the police may stem from.

The course should include evidence-based practices and strategies that are found to be effective (e.g., intelligence-led policing and problem-oriented policing) that CJ majors can understand that effective police practices and strategies are not necessarily based on the crime control model (Lum & Koper, 2017). Such efforts can help CJ majors to develop a fair and balanced view toward the police work and ethics.

There have been numerous police misconduct cases that involve misuses of police authority, ranging from police corruption, to use of non-lethal force and lethal force, to traffic stops, and these cases raise legitimate concerns regarding how police work is done (Greene, Piquero, Hickman, & Lawton, 2004; Kappeler et al., 1998; Ross, Fazzalaro, Barone, & Kalinowski, 2016). Researchers have developed various strategies to reduce police misconduct and corruption (Crank & Caldero, 2004; Pollock, 2017). First, it is imperative to use a rigorous pre-employment screening instrument to identify candidates who are susceptible to the temptation of abuse of authority. Second, there should be a more efficient system that keeps

track of problem police officers in the police department. Research indicates that a small portion of police officers are involved in a large portion of civil lawsuits and complaints regarding the use of excessive force and sexual misconduct (Harris, 2010). To identify problem officers, it is critical to establish a system that can identify a pattern of abuse. By reducing the number of illegal misbehaviors in which the police engage, the police can enhance their legitimacy.

The current study is not without its limitations. First, the results were not statistically strong. The magnitude of the effect of media exposure was not large, and the interaction between media exposure and the academic major was only marginally significant. The second limitation is that the current study cannot provide an answer regarding the long-term effect of media exposure. It is not clear how long the impact of media exposure lasts. Researchers in different fields have examined the short-term and long-term effects of the media (e.g., Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). Additional studies can replicate the current study using longitudinally-based data. Another important limitation involves the nature of video clips used. Experimental conditions were brief and short, so it is not certain whether participants actually changed their views toward the police after watching an assigned video clip. It is also possible that participants responded differently depending on their academic majors. For instance, CJ majors may not have wanted to be seen as changing their perceptions of the police after watching a video clip.

Despite its limitations, the current study is important in documenting that CJ majors and non-CJ majors respond differently to media coverage involving criminal justice issues; this clarifies our knowledge regarding media effects and differences in perceptions of police between CJ majors and non-CJ majors. If additional research replicates these findings, we can better understand how media exposure operates locally within subsets of people (e.g., CJ majors versus non-CJ majors) to offer useful suggestions for CJ curricula.

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Table 1  
*Demographic Characteristics and Bivariate Statics Results*

	Mixed Police Condition	Control Condition	Total Sample	Bivariate Statistics $\chi^2$ or $F$
Sex				$\chi^2(1, n = 266) =$
Male	48.2% (66)	41.1% (53)	44.7% (119)	1.351, $p = .245$
Female	51.8% (71)	58.9% (76)	55.3% (147)	
Race				$\chi^2(4, n = 263) =$
White	75.6% (102)	80.9% (105)	78.7% (207)	4.989, $p = .288$
Black or African American	20.0% (27)	12.5% (15)	16.0% (42)	
American Indian/ Native American	0.7% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.4% (1)	
Asian	2.2% (3)	1.5% (5)	3.0% (8)	
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	
Other	1.5% (2)	4.4% (3)	1.9% (5)	
CJ Major				$\chi^2(1, n = 266) =$
Yes	49.6% (68)	54.3% (70)	51.9% (138)	.570, $p = .450$
No	50.4% (69)	45.7% (59)	48.1% (128)	
Victimization Experience				$\chi^2(1, n = 264) =$
Yes	32.8% (45)	37.0% (47)	34.8% (92)	.503, $p = .478$
No	67.2% (92)	63.0% (80)	65.2% (172)	
Negative Encounter with Police				$\chi^2(1, n = 266) =$
Yes	27.0% (37)	17.1% (22)	22.2% (59)	3.258, $p = .07$
No	73.0% (100)	82.9% (107)	77.8% (207)	
TV Consumption	36.54 (26.43)	32.02 (25.45)	34.34 (26.01)	$t(269) = 1.434, p = .153$
Media Consumption	15.73 (5.80)	15.37 (5.68)	15.55 (5.73)	$t(269) = .525, p = .600$
Confidence in the Police	19.76 (5.86)	19.42 (5.88)	19.59 (5.86)	$t(270) = .476, p = .635$
Police Legitimacy	14.49 (3.79)	14.18 (4.09)	14.33 (3.94)	$t(270) = .652, p = .515$

Table 2  
*Paired t-tests for Perceptions of Police Within Each Experimental Condition*

Variable	Video group	Pre-test		Post-test		$t$ -Statistic	Cohen's $d$
		$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$		
Confidence in the Police	Mixed	19.76	5.86	19.39	5.81	2.08*	0.06
	Control	19.53	5.82	19.34	6.11	1.27	0.03
Police Legitimacy	Mixed	14.52	3.78	14.58	3.79	0.47	0.04
	Control	14.27	4.05	14.32	4.04	0.35	0.01

\*  $p < .05$ .

Table 3  
*Independent-samples t-test Results from CJ Majors and Non-CJ Majors*

	CJ Majors (n = 138)		Non-CJ Majors (n = 128)		<i>t</i> -Statistic	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Confidence in the Police	20.10	6.01	18.62	5.86	2.03*	.25
Police Legitimacy	14.93	3.84	13.94	3.96	2.07*	.25

\*  $p < .05$ .

Table 4  
*Confidence in the Police for CJ Majors and Non-CJ Majors Between Pre-test and Post-test (Mixed Condition)*

Time Period	CJ Majors			Non-CJ Majors		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pre-test	68	20.97	5.35	69	18.69	6.19
Post-test	68	20.91	5.82	69	18.01	6.07

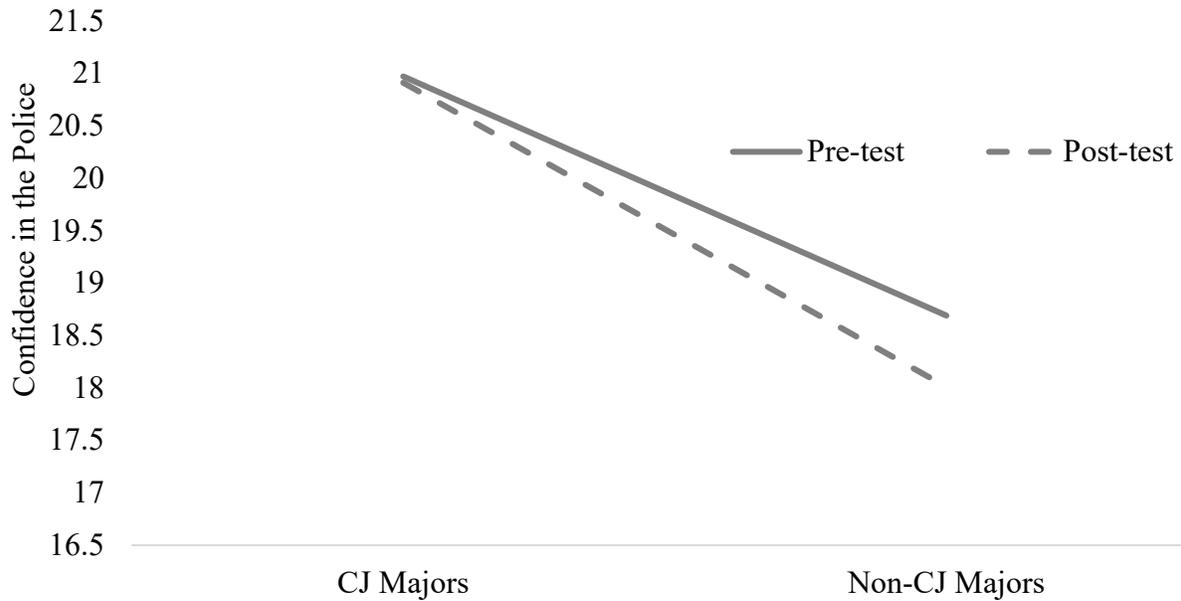


Figure 1. Interaction between the experimental condition and academic majors