

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLICING AND HOW IT IMPACTS PUBLIC  
PERCEPTION

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in  
Criminal Justice

Charlotte

2024

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## ABSTRACT

ALBERTA MAYFAIR ASARE YEBOAH. Media Representation of Women in Policing and How it Impacts Public Perception.

(Under the directions of DR. JANNE E. GAUB and DR. SUNGIL HAN).

Diversity and representation are pivotal in the growth of organizations, particularly in policing, where women make up less than 13% of the total force in the US (Goodison, 2022). Despite various factors contributing to this underrepresentation, the way female officers are portrayed in the media (i.e., television and film) can potentially influence public perceptions, affecting aspirations to join the police force and overall views on women's capabilities in law enforcement.

This study addresses a critical gap by investigating how media (specifically television and film) representation of women in policing, shapes the public's perception of female officers. Using data from an online survey administered to a diverse sample of students at UNC Charlotte, the study employed descriptive statistics, bivariate correlation and ordinary least square regression to analyze the collected data.

Findings generally did not support the position that negative portrayal of police and policewomen in television/film is associated with negative perceptions of policing. Significance and limitations, as well as policy implications and directions for future research, are discussed. By exploring the multifaceted nature of media influence on public perception, this research fills a void in understanding the connection between media representation of female officers, how perceptions about women in policing are impacted, societal attitudes, and gender diversity in law enforcement.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to my mentor and ‘angel’, Dr. Janne E. Gaub. Throughout my master's journey, she has been my rock, offering unwavering support and encouragement. Her understanding, warmth, and dedication to my success have been instrumental in reaching this milestone. Without her, none of this would have been possible.

I'm immensely thankful to Dr. Sungil Han for his unwavering support, even on weekends, responding to emails, calls, and messages with unfailing dedication. And to Dr. Joseph Kuhns, your invaluable feedback and support has been pivotal in my journey. I couldn't have come this far without you both.

To my beloved Prince Owusu Attah, thank you for standing by me every step of the way, shouldering household responsibilities so I could focus on my studies. You're the epitome of a supportive life partner, and I'm beyond grateful for you.

To my children, Denzel and Lady-Elianne, your mere presence has been my source of strength and motivation. I embarked on this journey to show you that perseverance pays off. I hope to inspire you to believe in yourselves as much as I believe in you.

Lastly, I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to my parents, Dr. and Mrs. Asare Yeboah, and my siblings, Felix, Eunice, and Emmanuel. You've been my unwavering support system, showering me with prayers and encouragement. Mom and Dad, thank you for always lending a listening ear without judgment. I love you all dearly.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Diversity and representation are pivotal in the growth of organizations, particularly in policing, where women make up less than 15% of the total force (Goodison, 2022). Despite various factors contributing to this underrepresentation, how female officers are portrayed in the media (e.g., television, and film) can potentially influence public perceptions, affecting aspirations to join the police force and overall views on women's capabilities in law enforcement. There have been several government initiatives aimed at increasing female representation within the police force; however, accomplishing this objective has proven challenging, despite the implementation of various strategies (Walby & Joshua, 2021).

While there are few women in policing, studies have documented female officers' significant roles in the community (e.g., being assigned to cases of sexual assault, rape, and victimization; (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). A study by Meier & Nicholson-Crotty (2006) supported the assertion that police departments with higher proportions of female officers tended to file more reports of sexual assault, as well as arrest more individuals involved in sexual assault and rape cases. Moreover, having an adequate representation of female officers promotes diversity and improves community policing (Donohue, 2021). Aside from the roles played by female officers, having female officers in the field comes with profound benefits. Research by Shoub and colleagues (2021) using traffic stop data from Charlotte Police and Florida Highway Patrol showed that female officers make fewer stops than their male counterparts, yet their rates of finding "contraband" is similar to their male colleagues. In effect, there is the argument that female officers foster community building by reducing the amount of racial profiling and racial stops (Shoub et al., 2021). Likewise, researchers agree that increasing the presence of female police officers in law enforcement can facilitate greater openness and reporting among female

victims of rape and sexual assault (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006).

This stems from the fact that female officers have been noted for increasing community trust (McDevitt et al., 2008; Rowe & Ross, 2015). Despite the profound contributions of female officers to the community, women make up only 12% of the police force across local police departments (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Kringen, 2014). While the challenge of enhancing female representation in law enforcement persists, the present media narrative further complicates the situation.

Media influence plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice-related matters (Eschholz et al., 2003; Gerbner et al., 2002). This is partly because the mass media (e.g., television and film) is a significant source of information in society (Dominick, 1978; Dowler, 2002). Existing studies indicate that a significant portion of society gains knowledge about crime and the criminal justice system not through firsthand experience, but through media exposure (Surette, 2007). The world of film and television has long served as a powerful mirror reflecting societal norms, values, and expectations. Within this expansive realm, the portrayal of law enforcement personnel has been a recurring theme, shaping and, in turn, being shaped by public perceptions. According to Nielsen Media's (2023) report, television consumption has not decreased, despite an increase in the number of new media sources like digital recorders, internet connectivity, and social media in addition to standard televisions. However, the (2023) report shows streaming is huge and in 2022 alone "Americans watched 19 million years worth of streaming content" (Nielson, 2023). Additionally, due to the level of convenience technology offers, the realm of mobile streaming enables the average American to watch about 151 hours of television every month (Gandossy, 2009). Likewise, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reports that the average American above 15 years old spends at least 3.9



hours a day watching TV. Out of these numbers, law enforcement content has made up more than 20% of shows over the past 50 years (Hetsroni, 2012; Jones, 2003).

Scholars have discussed media portrayals of policing, particularly women in police, and how it impacts perceptions of police (see, e.g., (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). However, just a handful of studies examined how the portrayal of female officers in film and television impacts the perception of the public. The consensus is that movies and television have a major role in shaping public opinion of law enforcement (Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Surette, 2007). By exploring the multifaceted nature of media influence on public perception, this research fills a void in understanding the connection between media representation of female officers and public perceptions of women in policing. The current study uses a survey administered to college students at UNC Charlotte to offer valuable insights into college students' media consumption and a deeper comprehension of their perceptions of women's roles in policing. This study will also add useful contributions to the discussion on how television and visual storytelling can shape public perceptions and, as a result, influence social change as society navigates a period of increased awareness of gender issues.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Media Representation of Women

#### *Traditional roles*

Feminists have often criticized film producers based on how they stereotypically represent women, such that how women are portrayed in film differs from their actual experiences (Rohman, 2013). There has been some discussion about the portrayal of women in film and TV focusing on one of two extremes: either the Madonna (virginal, mother figure, etc.) or the slut (Chappell & Young, 2017; Sexton, 2008). These conversations bleed into the portrayals of women in police shows since policing historically represents a masculine identity and profession. Rohman (2013) asserts that “the misrepresentation and no representation of women in film are a disadvantage to them” in the sense that the representation of women as sexually validates public perception of patriarchy. Though films sometimes portray positive narratives about women, gender bias will still exist as a result of cultural expectations (Marshment, 1997). While the representation of women often involves defining natural traits, capabilities, societal roles, and limitations as distinctly different from men, Marshment (1997) argues that these definitions are not the true representation of women's experiences and limit the definition of a woman's full potential to traditional roles (i.e., caregivers, wives and mothers) without looking beyond capabilities outside the home. This is often accomplished by assessing women's value based on attractiveness and physical appearance without considering holistically intellectual capabilities as well.

Given real-time examples of how women were traditionally represented in films, Rohman's (2013) paper analyzed *The Stepford Wives* movie. In the 1975 rendition, Joanna, the

protagonist was portrayed as a homemaker with a passion for photography (*Stepford Wives*, 1975). The 1960s popular series *That Girl* caught viewer's attention and aired on ABC between 1966 and 1971. In this context, the storyline underwent a transition from depicting Ann as a housewife engaged in domestic responsibilities to presenting her as a young, self-reliant woman with a job beyond the confines of her home. Moneira (2015) also analyzed the representations of women in television series in a time sequence starting with *I Love Lucy* (1950s) which aired on CBS between 1951 and 1957. In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy is portrayed as a housewife who is assigned to traditional roles of caring for her husband and her home (De Leo, 2018; Moreira, 2015).

Even in the *Barbie* (2023) movie, researchers contend that despite attempts to shift the narrative, the representation of women still emphasized patriarchal themes (Myisha et al., 2023). Myisha and her colleagues pointed out specific scenes in the movie where Barbie was confined to traditional roles. During a visit to the beach, while Ken, Barbie's boyfriend, played volleyball, Barbie took on passive roles such as serving drinks, cheering, and simply observing the game. This reinforces the idea that women are expected to fulfill supportive roles for men rather than actively engaging in the same sports and recreational pursuits. The scene serves as a "visual commentary on entrenched gender stereotypes, highlighting the persisting societal expectations that influence interactions within recreational settings" (Myisha et al., 2023, p. 78). Cocca (2016) found a recurring theme in most television series about women: they are portrayed as caregivers, sexualized, needing more protection, and having more romance and love needs.

### ***Statistical Representation***

In comparison to men, women are typically underrepresented in movies and crime shows (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). In a 2005 study on gender and age portrayal on television, Lauzen

and Dozier (2005) revealed that women aged between 50 to 60 years are less likely to be featured on TV, with the 2014 statistics indicating a range of nearly 3% to 7%. This means that women receive less screen time compared to men. By 2013, women comprised only 15% of protagonists and fewer than 33% of speaking roles in the highest-grossing domestic film (Lauzen, 2015). Though representation of roles had shifted by then, female characters were still frequently depicted as less formal leaders, were constantly younger than their male counterparts, and were twice as likely as male characters to be defined only by a life-related function as opposed to a work-related position (Lauzen, 2015).

### ***Roles Outside the Home***

*The Stepford Wives* (2004) is an example of a film where women were portrayed outside of the usual caregiving roles. The movie, spanning three decades, has a 1975 rendition and one for 2004. The 2004 version portrayed Joanna, the protagonist not merely in the context of domestic responsibilities but presented a more comprehensive view of her character (*Stepford Wives*, 2004). Through both versions, the film illustrates the evolution of women, transcending traditional domestic roles to showcase their potential for professional advancement in the corporate realm (Rohman, 2013).

Likewise, in a thorough analysis of *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022), Sako and Piqueras (2023) give a detailed analysis of how the series portrayed two women. It is a series that introduced themes of aging and friendship, as well as financial freedom and entrepreneurship. Within the series, although both Grace and Frankie have experienced divorce, the narrative goes beyond their failed marriages to highlight their successes in various aspects of life.

Findings from Gauntlett (2002) argued that in the early 2000s, “the feisty, successful and girl power” icons ousted the conventional perceptions of women as solely housewives or low-status workers (p. 247). In the 1960s, the popular series *That Girl* also caught viewer's attention. It aired on ABC between 1966 and 1971. In this context, the storyline underwent a transition from depicting Ann as a housewife engaged in domestic responsibilities to presenting her as a young, self-reliant woman with a job beyond the confines of her home.

When people see a representation of individuals like themselves in the media, it has the power to influence and shape personal identity (Reitz, 2017). Everyday experiences of people are often mirrored through television and movies. According to Moreira (2015), people connect with characters they encounter on screen, using them as models for their behavior, fashion choices and moral values. Televised fictional narratives depict the narratives of their country or society.. What individuals see, hear, and consume through media impacts how media “consumers” perceive reality. The majority of consumers view social reality based on how the media, particularly television and movies, portrays issues related to race, gender, and economic position (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Eschholz et al., 2003).

While it is easy to argue that movie portrayals are just fictional, it has been demonstrated that television and film play an integral role in educating viewers (Albiladi et al., 2018; Qiu, 2017). In other words, movies and television are powerful in educating, informing, and influencing viewer perceptions and we would expect nothing different in reference to policing.

## **2.2 Media Representation of Police**

The media depiction of police is contrasted with both favorable and unfavorable portrayals. According to Dowler and Zawilski (2007), media consumption and public

perceptions of the police are closely related. Television and films serve as educational tools and socialization platforms, providing audiences with exposure to cultural aspects beyond their immediate experiences. Similarly, those with limited interaction with the criminal justice system often rely on media sources to understand crime, offending, sentencing, policing, and related subjects (Deutsch & Cavender, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006). In other words, the public primarily acquires information about crime and justice through media consumption (Ericson et al., 2019; Roberts & Doob, 1990). Crime dramas depict policing predominantly as crime-fighting, often neglecting to showcase the administrative facets of the profession. Research suggests that images of policing from movies and television programs have created heightened public expectations about actual police work (Wilson et al., 2020). For example, the portrayal of the frequency of how crime is solved in policing shows often creates unrealistic expectations among viewers regarding the efficacy and speed of real-life crime-solving (Wilson et al., 2020). This, in turn, leads to dissatisfaction when officers fail to meet the standards depicted by media representations (Perlmutter, 2000). This is partially correct because the primary duty of the police is to reduce crime. Furthermore, police officers are portrayed as heroes and crime fighters, who occasionally resort to bending or breaking the law to achieve their objectives (Surette, 2007). An example of this is evident in *Dirty Harry* (1971), where the protagonist, Harry, a police officer, resorts to unconventional methods to pursue a serial killer, disregarding proper legal procedures. Driven by an intense determination to apprehend the killer, he employs every possible tactic. This is particularly evident in crime dramas where officers deviate from standard procedures.

A significant portion of American television programming is dominated by prime-time crime shows. For instance, by the mid-2000s, the TV show *CSI* was reportedly viewed by up to 40 million people each week (Hughes & Magers, 2007). The extent to which these shows

exaggerate to emulate reality is referred to as the "CSI" effect. Mustafaj & Van den Bulck (2021) refer to it as “the effect that *CSI* and other crime-related shows have on actual legal proceedings.” Consequently, police work is disproportionately showcased on television, contributing to an overrepresentation of the effectiveness with which officers carry out their duties (Wilson et al., 2020).

Police reality series (i.e., a genre of television programming that presents unscripted situations, real-life events, or contests featuring ordinary people rather than professional actors; see; Grumbein & Goodman, 2013) are gaining substantial popularity in television programming, and presenting diverse portrayals of law enforcement. Contrary to potential negative portrayals, other research indicates that these shows often depict the police in a positive light, successfully resolving crimes (Dominick, 1978; Estep & MacDonald, 1984; Kooistra et al., 1998; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Reality television programs, as outlined by Donovan (2016), portray the law-and-order philosophy by depicting the police as intelligent, sensitive, caring, and capable. Doyle (2003) argues that these broadcasts disproportionately focus on acts of violence and crime resolution rates. Other studies suggest that police reality programs often perpetuate prejudices regarding ethnic minorities and criminal activity (Kooistra et al., 1998; Oliver & Armstrong, 2018). According to Surette (2007, p. 108), the overall outcome is a scenario where "crime control is praised, while due process is criticized." The construction of crime and justice in these programs predominantly relies on individual factors contributing to crime, the presumption of guilt for suspects, and the portrayal of an adversarial relationship between different groups.

While numerous studies explore the impact of media portrayal of police officers in news media on public perception, there is limited research on how police representation in film and television influences public perception. Furthermore, while numerous studies focus on the

portrayal of police-in-reality shows, there is a scarcity of research specifically addressing this representation in films, especially for female officers.

### **2.3 Media Representation of Women in Policing**

The portrayal of women in law enforcement in the media has wide-ranging consequences for how society views and defines gender roles. The rising prominence of policewomen in many media forms has paralleled the diversification of law enforcement personnel. According to Wilson & Blackburn (2014), the portrayal of women in the police has a significant impact on public perceptions and attitudes, impacting their views on the role, talents, and validity of women in this field. Women in law enforcement have frequently been portrayed in media narratives through stereotyped representations and confined to restricted roles such as mother figures and officers assigned to sexual assault, rape and domestic violence cases (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018). Policewomen are also portrayed as undercover detectives in sexual contexts often “exploited for their sexual dimensions or used as baits for criminals” (D’acci, 1994, p. 111). Across all forms of media, including television shows and movies, common themes may be observed that either uphold traditional gender roles or treat female officers as objects. These depictions have the potential to influence public opinion, reinforcing existing prejudices and shaping people's perceptions of the competency and acceptability of women in law enforcement professions.

Historically, the media has inadequately portrayed women in police, often associating them with sexual exploits or using them as bait or objects of seduction for criminals (Cox, 2012). In the television show *Police Women of Broward County* on The Learning Channel, the primary protagonists were four female police officers who also fulfilled the roles of moms and wives.



Cox (2012) used textual analysis to analyze the language used to describe the female officers in the show. They discovered that most of the language depicted the women as lures, emphasizing their sexual appeal and frequently provocatively discussing their bodies. In contrast, certain episodes also depicted situations in which female officers conducted police stops and arrests in a manner akin to their male counterparts (Cox, 2012). Concerning how these portrayals impact public perception, Maeder and Corbett (2015) argue that given the ubiquity of crime drama, individuals who extensively watch such shows are likely to shape their perceptions based on the portrayals within these programs. Additionally, Deutsch and Cavender (2008) also assert that as crime shows often present storylines with an “air of authenticity,” viewers may frequently perceive fictional depictions as accurate representations of real-life occurrences within police departments. Not only does the portrayal of women in law enforcement jobs contribute to diversity on television, but it also has a cultural impact, shaping popular perceptions of authority, professionalism, and gender roles (Brooks & Hébert, 2006).

## **2.4 Public Perception of the Police**

There is research evidence indicating that law enforcement agencies derive their authority and legitimacy from the public they serve. Positive perceptions enhance trust and confidence in the police, fostering cooperation and collaboration between law enforcement and the community (Jackson & Bradford, 2010). This trust is crucial for effective crime prevention and solving. Conversely, negative perceptions can lead to distrust, alienation, and even hostility towards law enforcement, undermining their ability to fulfill their duties and maintain public safety (Maguire & Johnson, 2010). Public perceptions of the police are based on citizens’ experiences and thoughts about police *service quality*, *justice* and *legitimacy* (Maguire & Johnson, 2010). Mastrofski (1999) defined the scope for *service quality* with attributes such as attention,

dependability, responsiveness, competence, manners, and fairness to the service-oriented aspects of policing. In further explanation, citizens desire that their experiences and interactions with police officers be characterized by these qualities. Maguire and Johnson (2010) argue that these attributes serve as a traditional pillar by which public perception of the police is measured; negative experiences of people using these measures can negatively impact public perceptions of the police.

Justice theorists link *procedural justice* to how the public perceives the police (Greenberg, 1987). Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the legal process (Lind & Tyler, 1988). When citizens attest to fair procedural justice, it can influence positive perceptions of the police and vice versa. The procedural justice model suggests that if the police fairly handle citizens, it will increase their level of legitimacy which will lead to a positive perception of the police. Likewise, if citizens are treated unfairly, it will lead to chaos and eventually a negative public perception of the police. In effect, if the police portray negative aspects of police procedural justice, based on cultivation theory, it will negatively affect the public (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

Finally, a significant aspect of public perception relates to the notion of *legitimacy*, defined as the inherent quality compelling others to willingly comply with authority, legislation, or an organization's choices and commands (Maguire & Johnson, 2010; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Huo, 2002). The legitimacy of the police is the citizen's ability to accept the authority of law enforcement without any coercion (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Consequently, the way police legitimacy is portrayed in film and television is crucial in shaping public perceptions of the police.

## 2.5 How the Media Influences Public Perceptions of Police

The media serves as the primary source of information on crime and justice for the general public (Ericson et al., 2019; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 2007). Rowman and Littlefield's Handbook of Policing, discussing the impact of media on public perception, posited that while it is uncommon for individuals to believe that news media significantly alters perception, fiction assumes a more significant role in shaping public views (Mustafaj & Van den Bulck, 2021). Typically, individuals spend twice as much time watching TV and films in a day compared to the time spent on news consumption (Donovan & Klahm, 2015). A London study on media and perception found that after watching an episode of *Juliet Bravo* (a widely acclaimed British television police procedural drama in the 1980s that depicted the work of uniformed police officers, with Inspector Jean in a lead role), children's beliefs about male officers' physical capabilities declined (Gunter et al., 1991). Conversely, there was an increase in the perception that male officers enjoyed exerting authority, took pleasure in fighting, and lacked strength. Before the test programs, children perceived male officers as strong and tough, while female officers were seen as vulnerable. However, after viewing the program, more youngsters perceived women officers as possessing strength, influenced by a female officer's commitment to physical fitness. The episode also highlighted a temporary shift in perceptions about male and female officers linked to the program's content.

Contrasting research findings indicate that the portrayal of policing is not one size fits all. While some shows portray the police positively, others also suggest a negative approach (Surette, 2007). While opinions on the portrayal of the police in different forms of media are divided, several scholars support the argument that people's perceptions of the police are shaped by their exposure to media (Huang & Vaughn, 1996; Maguire & Johnson, 2010).

## **Personal Interactions with the Police**

Although previous research has indicated that media portrayal of policing has an impact on public perception of police, there are studies that prove that personal interaction with the police influences public trust in the police. However, trust is subjective based on personal experiences, subjectivity etc. A study by Boda and Medve-Bálin (2017) testing how personal encounters with police affects public perception suggests that while positive personal experiences with the police do not make much difference, negative interactions with police significantly affect perception of police.

## **2.6 Theoretical Perspective**

Although this study does not conduct direct tests of theories, the frameworks provided by cultivation theory and social cognitive theory contribute to our understanding of how extended exposure to media shapes societal perspectives. These theories serve as a foundation for examining how television and film portrayals of policewomen can influence public perceptions.

### ***Cultivation Theory***

According to the cultivation theory, prolonged exposure to media content can mold and cultivate people's views of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The premise focuses on the cumulative effects of repeatedly being exposed to certain media themes and imagery. The main idea posits that individuals who watch television extensively are more likely to adopt perspectives that align with the prevailing narrative conveyed through television messages (Shrum, 2017). The hypothesis mentioned above by Shrum (2017) can be applied to the fact that people who extensively watch policing television shows are likely to adopt perspectives about police based on the content of the shows. Thus, individuals who engage in frequent television

watching are inclined to adopt viewpoints that lean towards the dominant narrative presented by television, particularly leading to more conservative stances on criminal justice matters (Shrum & Lee, 2012). Morgan and Shanahan (2010) note that since 2000, the theory has been the subject of over 500 new articles and over 125 linked publications. As a result, it has been ranked among the top three mass communication theories cited most frequently between 1956 and 2000 (Gerbner et al., 2002; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Cultivation theory comprises two variations: mainstreaming and resonance (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Mosharafa, 2015; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Both variations are separate yet related. Mainstreaming refers to the idea that heavy viewers of television develop a common perception of social reality that aligns with the overall messages and values presented by the media. Mainstreaming occurs when diverse social groups, despite their varied backgrounds, tend to converge in their views and understanding of the world due to consistent exposure to the dominant messages portrayed in the media. The continuous exposure to derogatory and violent depictions shapes this perception (Gerbner et al., 2002; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). In essence, heavy television consumption contributes to a shared, mainstream perspective on societal issues and norms. For example, when people with diverse backgrounds and beliefs, such as liberals and conservatives, watch a considerable amount of crime-related television content, over time, due to the consistent portrayal of law enforcement as effective and justified in their actions, both sets of viewers may develop a shared, mainstream perspective that supports a more authoritarian approach to criminal justice.

Conversely, resonance occurs when a person's personal experiences align with the ideas and concepts promoted by the media, enhancing the cultivation effect (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The theory suggests that individuals who have real-life experiences that mirror the themes and

messages portrayed on television are more likely to be strongly influenced by the media content. For example, if a person who has experienced a wrongful arrest or police brutality regularly watches television shows that depict similar unjust scenarios, the resonance effect would be stronger. The media messages would likely resonate with the individual's own experiences, reinforcing and intensifying the impact of the portrayed themes.

Another important highlight of cultivation theory is the notion of light viewers versus heavy viewers. Those who watch a significant amount of television are more vulnerable to the cultivation effect than people who watch it rarely. This is because avid viewers are more likely to internalize the media's messages and worldviews. When Hammermeister and colleagues (2005) evaluated this notion, the findings demonstrated that watching TV changed the "psychosocial health profile of heavy viewers" among women but had little effect on men (p. 262).

### ***Social Cognitive Theory***

Social cognitive theory (STC) suggests that people acquire new behaviors and information by observing others, which can influence their attitudes, beliefs, and cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986). Social cognitive theory is based on one of the three methods of human operation (i.e., how humans function and interact with their environment), also referred to as emergent interactive theory (Bandura, 1989).

Emergent interactive theory is a psychological paradigm that places a strong emphasis on how behavior develops through imitation and modeling; people are more likely to copy actions that they see in others, particularly if such actions are seen as credible, skillful, or appealing. According to social cognitive theory, people may access knowledge by watching other people and by consuming media. It is also known as observational learning (Hall & Zwarun, 2012). The

theory stipulates that people observe the actions of others and the results of those actions, and if they find those actions satisfying, they can imitate those actions. Per this assumption, the public is likely to form an opinion about police officers and women in law enforcement based on the time they spend consuming policing media by modeling and imitating the content portrayed on their screens.

## **2.7 Current Study**

Following a review of existing literature, numerous studies have delved into the media portrayal of police officers, particularly focusing on the representation of women in law enforcement. Other studies have also delved into literature about the representation of police in crime media and public perception. However, a conspicuous gap exists in understanding the depiction of female police officers in film and television and its consequential impact on public perception. This study seeks to address this gap by utilizing data from an online survey of college students to assess how the media representation of policewomen in film and television influences public perceptions of women in policing.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

### **3.1 Hypothesis**

This thesis adds to the existing literature by improving our understanding of the connection between media representation of policewomen on television and film and how it impacts public perception. The findings will offer valuable insights into media practices, diversity initiatives, and a deeper comprehension of women's roles in policing. To understand how the media representation of policewomen in film and television affects public perceptions of women in policing, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1. Negative portrayal of policewomen in TV and film is associated with negative perceptions of policing.

H2. Negative portrayal of policewomen in TV and film is associated with negative perceptions of policewomen.

### **3.2 Data**

The study employed an anonymous online survey distributed via Qualtrics to UNC Charlotte students in March 2024. With over 36,000 students, UNC Charlotte is the No.1 urban research university in North Carolina and ranked by College Factual as the No. 6 best public university in North Carolina. The acceptance rate stands at 79%, and the student body comprises individuals from 108 countries and 49 states. In the interest of ensuring representation and racial diversity, the student body is categorized as follows: White (60%), Black (17%), Hispanic (9%), Asian (6%), Two or more races (4%), International (2%), and Race Unknown (3%).

There were two methods of recruitment. First, students enrolled in any criminal justice course were targeted for recruitment with the assistance of full-time and part-time criminal justice faculty members. Faculty members were asked to mention the survey in class and via an



announcement on Canvas, and a bulk email was dispatched to a Google group database of students in the criminal justice department. Second, flyers with a QR code linking to the survey were posted in public spaces (e.g., hallways, bathrooms, elevators) in Colvard Hall and Fretwell Hall, where the bulk of criminal justice courses are taught. Both graduate and undergraduate students were invited to participate in the survey. Initially, the target population was students enrolled in at least one criminal justice course, including majors, minors, pre-majors, and students from other programs taking a criminal justice course as an elective. However, the flier could have attracted other people from other departments. The survey dataset indicates that approximately 78% of the respondents are either criminal justice majors, minors, or pre-majors. The survey remained open for 10 days with two email reminders sent to students. The survey included 33 closed-ended questions covering a range of topics, including 1) basic demographics including age, gender, graduate or undergraduate, and major; 2) general media consumption measuring how often they watch TV within a month; 3) viewing habits of television crime shows and films within a month; 4) portrayal of female officers in crime shows; 5) perceptions about policing; 6) perceptions about women in policing; 7) how likely they are to go into law enforcement; and 7) personal interactions with the police. The questions were short and participants only required 5 to 7 minutes to complete the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary, with no course requirement or extra credit offered.

### **3.3 Sample**

The study initially collected data from 194 respondents through Qualtrics. However, 34 cases were excluded due to incomplete responses, resulting in 160 completed surveys available for analysis using SPSS. The exact population size remains uncertain because flyers were utilized for recruitment and it is unknown how many faculty members advertised the survey to

their students; as such, the sampling frame is not clearly defined and calculating a response rate is impossible. Incentives for survey completion (e.g., extra credit) were not used because the Institutional Review Board (IRB) required an alternative extra credit assignment to reduce the likelihood of coercion. An alternative assignment would place additional burden on faculty members, so it was ultimately decided that extra credit as an incentive was not preferable. However, this created a trade-off of a lower sample response.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, including sample demographics, for those who completed the survey. The majority of the respondents were female ( $n = 108$ , 68%). Similarly, the sample is predominantly white ( $n=114$ , 71.3%). There are other demographic variables including Black/African American ( $n = 25$ , 16%) and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity ( $n = 24$ , 15%). The reported age was between 19 and 51 years with a mean age of 22 years. The gender distribution is not surprising because it reflects the current demographic in the Criminal Justice & Criminology department (508 = female, 240 = male).

### **3.4 Measures**

#### ***Dependent Variables***

Two dependent variables were utilized: Perception of policing, and perception of policewomen. Descriptive statistics for these variables are also provided in Table 1. *Perception of police* is a summative scale constructed from three items: Thinking about policing in general, note your level of agreement with the following statements, 1) The police use fair procedures, 2) the police treat people with dignity and respect, 3) the police do their jobs effectively. Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). Factor loadings ranged from 0.85 to 0.89 and Cronbach's alpha was 0.888.

Higher ordinal scale scores on this variable indicate that respondents have a more positive perception of police.

*Perception of policewomen* is a summative scale constructed from three items: Thinking about policing in general, note your level of agreement with the following statements, 1) Policewomen are generally competent, 2) Policewomen often use appropriate levels of physical force, 3) Policewomen treat people more fairly than male officers. Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). Factor loadings ranged from 0.69 to 0.80 and Cronbach's alpha was 0.63. Higher ordinal scale scores on this variable indicate that respondents have a more positive perception of policewomen.

### ***Independent Variable***

The primary independent variable, the *perceived portrayal of women in TV shows and films*, is a summative scale constructed from five items: Participants' level of agreement that policewomen are portrayed as 1) caregivers, 2) sexual bait for criminals, 3) administrative assistants or receptionists, 4) people who bend the rules to get results, and 5) emotional. Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). The items align with stereotypes and traditional gender roles commonly depicted in existing literature about policewomen. For example, portraying policewomen primarily as caregivers is viewed negatively here because it emphasizes their caregiving roles over their roles in law enforcement. Similarly, portraying policewomen as sexual baits for criminals signifies objectification, while depicting them as administrative assistants suggests a limitation to lower-ranking roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. As such, each of these items was worded such that higher scores indicate more negative perceptions of policewomen.

Factor loadings ranged from 0.56 to 0.79 and Cronbach's alpha was 0.72. Higher scores on the variable indicate a more negative perception about how policewomen are portrayed.

### ***Control Variables***

Respondent demographics were included in the analysis. *Age* is a continuous variable and *sex* is a dichotomous variable capturing both male/transgender male and female/transgender female.<sup>1</sup> Race and ethnicity were coded for Black/African Americans and Hispanic/Latino origin (0=not Black/African American, 1=Black/African American; 0=not Hispanic/Latino, 1=Hispanic/Latino). The survey question regarding race was not worded such that each option was mutually exclusive, so respondents were able to select all race categories that apply to them. Because of this, the variable was recoded into a series of dichotomous variables: White, Black/African-American, other, and multiracial. For the descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses, only the Hispanic and Black/African-American race variables were used because there were concerns of low cell size in the other variables. Respondent age distribution ranged primarily between 19 and 24 years old, although one respondent indicated they were 33 years old and another 51 years old.

Other control variables were also included in the analysis. First, respondents were asked if they had any *close friends or family* who are law enforcement officers (0=no, 1=yes). Participants were also asked to rate *how they feel generally about policing* (10-point scale). Higher ordinal scale scores on this measure indicate that participants have more favorable or positive views toward the police. Participants were also asked to indicate how much time they spent watching police-related content: 1) Police-reality shows like *Forensic Files* and *The First 48* (0=Never, 1=Less than once a month, 2=Once a month, 3=Two or three times a month,

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<sup>1</sup> Sex was coded as (0=male/transgender male, 1=female/transgender female).

4=Once or twice a week, 5=Three to four times a week, 6=Daily) and 2) Police procedurals like *Criminal Minds* and *Blue Bloods* (0=Never, 1=Less than once a month, 2=Once a month, 3=Two or three times a month, 4=Once or twice a week, 5=Three to four times a week, 6=Daily). Both of these measures were coded such that higher scores indicate greater viewing frequency.

Respondents were also asked how many police-related films like *Training Day* and *The Other Guys* they had viewed in the last month (0 to 9+). Participants were also asked to indicate if they had recently (within the past year) had any personal contact with the police (0=no, 1=yes), some interaction with the police (0=no, 1=yes), or if friends or family had recently (within the past year) been stopped by the police (0=no, 1=yes).

### **3.5 Analytical Strategy**

The analysis in this study comprises a three-step process. Initially, descriptive statistics were conducted on all variables, offering a comprehensive representation of sample characteristics. Subsequently, a bivariate correlation analysis utilizing Pearson correlation techniques was undertaken to explore the relationship between pairs of variables, independent of other potentially confounding factors. This phase aims to detect any correlations among the independent variables and discern potential relationships between the dependent and independent variables. In the final step, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis was executed to delve deeper into the relationships between independent and dependent variable

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

#### *Dependent variables*

Table 1 indicates that majority of the sample have favorable *perceptions of police*. The mean value is above 10 (range: 3-15), indicating generally favorable perceptions of policing. For *perception of policewomen*, Table 1 shows that respondents have generally positive perceptions of police (mean=11.5, range: 6-15).

#### **Independent Variable**

Regarding *portrayal of policewomen*, Table 2 indicates that more than 50% of the respondents agreed with the items, demonstrating a generally negative portrayal of policewomen in television and film. While most of the respondents indicated a strong agreement about the negative portrayal of policewomen in television and film, approximately 20% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the items.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Variables</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<i>Dependent variables</i>	Perception of police (n=158)	10.41	2.85	3	15
	Perception of policewomen (n=159)	11.53	2.03	6	15
<i>Independent variable</i>	Portrayal of policewomen (n=156)	17.33	3.53	7	25
<i>Control Variables (continuous)</i>	Policing procedurals (n=160)	3.10	2.15	0	6
	Policing related films (n=160)	2.14	1.44	1	9
	Police Reality TV shows (n=160)	3.18	2.07	0	7
	Age	22.10	5.05	19	51
	Positive portrayal of police-citizen relationships	3.24	1.00	1	5
	Policing show's effect on perception	2.79	1.15	1	5
<b>Variables</b>		<b>Frequency</b>		<b>Percent</b>	
<i>Control Variables (dichotomous)</i>	Female	108		67.5%	
	White	114		71.3%	
	Black/African American	25		15.6%	
	Hispanic/Latino	24		15.0%	
	Friends/family in law enforcement	71		44.4%	
	Personal Contact with the police	65		40.6%	
	Friend or family police stop	80		50%	
	Interaction with police	84		50%	

### ***Control Variables***

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that almost half of the sample have had personal contact and some form of interaction with the police in the past year. Also, most respondents (n=71, 44%) have friends or family in law enforcement. Half of the sample have friends and family who have been stopped by the police within the past year. On average, 50% of respondents are frequent viewers of police-reality television shows like *Forensic Files* and *The First 48*, and approximately 16% watch at least four police-related films like *Training Day* in a month. Likewise, 46% of respondents also indicated that they watch police procedurals like *Criminal Minds* and *NCIS* at least once a month. While 18% of respondents indicated that they never watch police-reality shows, approximately 50% of the sample said they hadn't watched any police-related film within the last month.



**Table 2. Descriptive statistics for scale items**

	<i><b>Strongly Disagree</b></i>	<i><b>Somewhat Disagree</b></i>	<i><b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b></i>	<i><b>Somewhat Agree</b></i>	<i><b>Strongly Agree</b></i>
<b>Variables</b>	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
<i><b>Perception of police</b></i>					
Use fair procedures.	10 (6.3%)	22 (13.8%)	23 (14.4%)	88 (55%)	17 (10.6%)
Treat people with dignity	11 (6.9%)	26 (16.3%)	30 (18.8%)	75 (46.9%)	16 (10%)
Do their jobs effectively	8 (5%)	21 (13.1%)	33 (20.6%)	79 (49.4%)	19 (11.9%)
<i><b>Perception of policewomen</b></i>					
Competent	2 (1.3%)	2(1.3%)	18 (11.3%)	64 (40%)	73(45.6%)
Use appropriate levels of force.	4 (2.2%)	8 (4.5%)	63 (35.2%)	60 (33.5%)	24 (13.4%)
Treat people more fairly than male officers.	2 (1.1%)	13 (7.3%)	57 (31.8%)	50 (27.9)	37 (20.7%)
<i><b>Perceived portrayal of policewomen</b></i>					
Caregivers	3 (1.7%)	16 (8.9%)	25 (14%)	88 (49.2%)	26 (14.5%)
Sexual bait for criminals	7 (3.9%)	20 (11.2%)	26 (14.5%)	65 (36.3%)	39 (21.8%)
Administrative assistants/ receptionists	7 (14%)	24 (13.4%)	30 (16.8%)	67 (37.4%)	29 (16.2%)
People who bend the rules to get results	17 (9.5%)	46 (25.7%)	53 (29.6%)	35 (19.6%)	7 (3.9%)
Emotional	6 (3.4%)	25 (14%)	32 (17.9%)	74 (41.4%)	21 (11.7%)

Note: Frequencies do not total to sample size due to system missing or incomplete survey response

## 4.2 Bivariate Correlation

The second stage of analysis was to conduct a bivariate correlation. This was used to determine the linkage or co-occurrence between continuous variables. In particular, a correlation test was conducted to check if there was any relationship between perceptions of police, perceptions of policewomen, and perceived portrayal of policewomen. Subsequently, other non-continuous variables were also included in the correlation table. The following hypotheses were tested;

H1: Negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/Film is associated with negative perceptions of policing.

H2: Negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/Film is associated with negative perceptions of policewomen.

Overall, the findings from the correlation tests indicate there is no statistical relationship between the negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/film and perceptions of police. Also, based on the results, negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/film and negative perceptions of policewomen are not associated statistically. Although Pearson's correlation does not indicate any significant relationship between dependent and independent variables, it is pointing out some significant relationships between the dichotomous variables. For instance, age demonstrates a weak positive correlation ( $r = 0.163, p < 0.05$ ) with viewing perceptions of police (POP), which may imply that older individuals may have more favorable views about the police. Additionally, there is a significant but weak positive correlation ( $r = 0.197, p < 0.05$ ) between gender (female) and media portrayal of police. This indicates that females perceive more negative images from television shows and films. Again, there is a weak, negative correlation ( $r = -0.199, p < 0.05$ ) between

Black/African American and perception of policewomen. Similarly, a weak, negative correlation also exists between Hispanic ethnicity and perception of policewomen ( $r=-0.207$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This means that both Blacks/African-Americans and Hispanics have more negative perceptions of policewomen compared to those who are not Black/African-American or not Hispanic (respectively). While the main variables of interest are not significant, we are moving on with the regression because some of the control variables were relevant and we would like to see what else is playing a role here since they are still theoretically correlate.

**Table 3. Correlation Matrix**

		POP	PPW	MP	Age	PP	PRS	PF	MPP	PS	Black	Hispanic	Female
<i>Dependent</i>	POP	—											
	PPW	0.347	—										
<i>Independent</i>	MP	-0.105	-0.040	—									
<i>Control</i>	Age	0.163*	-0.006	-0.090	—								
	PP	0.033	0.093	0.130	-0.049	—							
	PRS	0.006	0.142	0.034	-0.058	0.611**	—						
	PF	0.065	0.143	0.041	0.125	0.295**	0.390**	—					
	MPP	0.126	-0.032	-0.024	0.014	0.142	0.077	-0.023	—				
	PS	-0.103	-0.074	0.073	-0.014	0.125	0.147	0.124	-0.023	—			
	Black	-0.263	-0.199*	-0.065	-0.023	0.227**	0.211**	0.041	0.035	0.078	—		
	Hispanic	-0.008	-0.207**	-0.095	-0.052	-0.151	-0.062	-0.018	-0.048	-0.031	-0.133	—	
	Female	-0.118	0.042	0.197*	-0.149	0.209*	0.216**	0.059	0.076	-0.053	0.057	-0.080	—

Note. N=160 POP=Perception of police, PPW=Perception of policewomen, MP=Media portrayal of policewomen, PP= Police television shows, PRS= Police reality shows PF=Police-related films, MPP= Media portrayal of a police-citizen relationship, PS=Policing shows' effect of citizen's view

\*\*p < 0.01: \* p < 0.05 (2-tailed).

### 4.3 Regression

Given that the two dependent variables were continuous measures, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression has been selected to determine the relative impact of the independent variable on the dependent variables while controlling for age, race, sex and other confounding effects. Two regressions were conducted, corresponding to each dependent variable.

#### *Perception of Police*

The first hypothesis explored the effects of media portrayal of policewomen in TV/film on public perception of police using ordinary least squares regression (see Table 4). Results indicate that the model was significant ( $F = 2.076, p < 0.05$ ). It is important to note that the R-squared value for the model was relatively low (0.161), indicating that the model explains only 16% of the variance in perception of police.

Table 4 shows that the primary independent variable, media portrayal of policewomen, did not have a significant impact on participants' perception of police. However, some demographics had a significant impact. For example, Black/African Americans tend to have more negative perceptions of police when controlling for the effects of other variables ( $b = -2.149, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, Table 4 indicated a positive significant relationship between perception of police and positive description of police-citizen relationships in television shows and films. This indicates when respondents agree that police-citizen relationships are positively portrayed in television and film, it has a positive impact on their perception of police ( $b = 0.526, p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4. OLS Regression Analysis Model of Perception of Police (N=142)**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>beta</b>	<b>t</b>
Portrayal of policewomen	-0.062	0.070	-0.076	-0.893
Personal contact with police	0.328	0.487	0.057	0.673
Friend or family police stop	-0.497	0.489	-0.088	-1.017
Interaction with the police	0.067	0.472	0.012	0.142
Police procedurals	0.59	0.118	0.045	0.498
Police-related films	0.179	0.168	0.092	1.068
Police-citizen relationship	0.526	0.232	0.188	2.267*
Policing shows' effect on participant view	-0.115	0.202	-0.047	-0.566
Female/Transgender Female	-0.516	0.554	-0.080	-0.932
Age	0.051	0.051	0.086	1.006
Hispanic/Latino	-0.473	0.652	-0.61	-0.726
Black or African American	-2.149	0.642	-0.285	-3.347**
Constant	9.651	2.144		4.501***
R2(adjust)	0.161(0.083)			
F-value	2.076*			

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ***Perception of policewomen***

The second hypothesis assumes that negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/film is associated with negative perception of policewomen. Thus, the effects of media portrayal of policewomen in TV/film on public perception of policewomen were examined using ordinary least squares regression (see Table 5). The model was significant ( $F = 2.649^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the R-square value explained nearly 20 percent of the variance in perception of policewomen. Table 5 shows that the primary independent variable, media portrayal of policewomen is negatively associated with perception of policewomen, but this association is not statistically significant. However, demographics have a significant impact. For example, Black/African Americans tend

to have more negative perceptions of policewomen when controlling for the effects of other variables effects of other variables ( $b = -1.497, p < 0.001$ ). Also, Hispanics/ Latinos tend to have less favorable perceptions of policewomen when controlling for the effects of other variables ( $b = -1.581, p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 5. OLS Regression Analysis Model of Perception of Policewomen (N=143)**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>beta</b>	<b>t</b>
Portrayal of policewomen	-0.049	0.049	-0.083	-0.998
Personal contact with police	0.177	0.339	0.043	0.522
Friend or family police stop	-0.434	0.340	-0.107	-1.276
Interaction with the police	0.281	0.329	0.069	0.853
Police procedurals	0.083	0.083	0.089	1.007
Police-related films	0.160	0.117	0.115	1.367
Police-citizenship relationship	-0.033	0.162	-0.017	-0.205
Policing shows' effect on participant view	-0.218	0.142	-0.124	-1.537
Female	-0.110	0.387	-0.024	-0.284
Age	-0.026	0.036	-0.060	-0.724
Black or African American	-1.497	0.450	-0.276	-3.328**
Hispanic/Latino	-1.581	0.447	-0.287	-3.535***
Constant	14.099	1.500		9.402***
R2(adjust)		0.195(0.122)		
F-value		2.649**		

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Primary Findings

Prior research has indicated that there have been several government initiatives aimed at increasing female representation within the police force; however, accomplishing this objective has proven challenging, despite the implementation of various strategies (Walby & Joshua, 2021). Despite various factors contributing to this underrepresentation, how female officers are portrayed in the media (e.g., Television and film) can potentially influence public perceptions, affecting aspirations to join the police force and overall views on women's capabilities in law enforcement. Media influence plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice-related matters (Eschholz et al., 2003; Gerbner et al., 2002). This is partly because the mass media (e.g., television and film) is a significant source of information in society (Dominick, 1978; Dowler, 2002). Existing studies indicate that a significant portion of society gains knowledge about crime and the criminal justice system not through firsthand experience, but through media exposure (Surette, 2007). Scholars have discussed media portrayals of policing, particularly women in police, and how it impacts perceptions of police (see, e.g., (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). However, just a handful of studies examined how the portrayal of policewomen in film and television impacts the perception of the public. The consensus is that movies and television have a major role in shaping public opinion of law enforcement (Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Surette, 2007). By exploring the multifaceted nature of media influence on public perception, this research fills a void in understanding the connection between media representation of policewomen and public perceptions of police. To do so, the study used OLS regression to assess two hypotheses: 1) Negative portrayal of

policewomen in TV/Film is associated with negative perception of policing, and 2) Negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/Film is associated with negative perception of policewomen.

Analyses showed that neither hypothesis was supported. This is quite surprising because prior research suggests that media influence plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice-related matters (Eschholz et al., 2003; Gerbner et al., 2002). Existing literature also suggests that mass media (e.g., television and film) is a significant source of information in society (Dominick, 1978; Dowler, 2002). Thinking about the factors that could have contributed to a non-significant relationship between media portrayal and public perception of policing, both the sample and sample size could be contributing factors. The sample for this study was primarily (78%) criminal justice students who may have had exposure to information on crime and justice-related matters. They could be considered “experts” in the field who do not necessarily need television shows and films to form their perceptions about police and policewomen. This is because the Criminal Justice department offers coursework that could directly shape their perceptions of the subject matter, such as media and crime or policing classes. Also, a larger sample size may have made a difference in the significance of the dependent and independent variables.

### ***Race/Ethnicity***

Race/ethnicity had some impact on both models. Hispanics/Latinos and Blacks/African Americans had less favorable perceptions of both policewomen and police. These findings highlight how crucial diversity is for police departments, especially when it comes to increasing representation of Black/African American and Hispanic minorities. A Bureau of Justice Statistics report indicates that in 2020, only 11.6% of police officers at the state level were black with Hispanics totaling 14.2% (Goodison, 2022). While they do not give specific numbers for female

officers, it can be inferred that minority female officers are relatively few. Introducing new recruitment methods to make policing attractive to minority females is crucial because while there are few women in policing, studies have documented female officers' significant roles in the community (e.g., being assigned to investigate sex or child crime cases or serving on community-policing units). A study by Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006) supported the assertion that police departments with higher proportions of female officers tended to file more reports of sexual assault, as well as arrest more individuals involved in sexual assault and rape cases. Moreover, some evidence suggests having an adequate representation of female officers promotes diversity and improves community policing (Donohue, 2021). Additionally, strengthening the police/citizen relationship, particularly in minority communities may help communities form better perceptions about the police.

### ***Police Citizen Relationship***

Positive portrayal of police-citizen relationships in TV and film has a positive impact on participant's perception of policing. Interestingly, when participants perceived how police-citizen relationships were positively portrayed in television and film, they were more likely to have positive perceptions of the police. By implication, when media portray a positive police-citizen relationship, individuals who watch television and film have more positive perceptions of the police. This finding uncovered a surprising aspect of the sample: while negative portrayals did not notably influence their perception, positive portrayals *did* have an impact. Prior studies suggest that negative personal interactions carry more weight in shaping perception than positive ones (Boda & Medve-Bálin, 2017), but this study's results suggest that a positive portrayal of police positively affects perception more than a negative portrayal.

In conclusion, the regression results suggested there is not enough evidence to accept or

reject the hypotheses above. However, even though media portrayal of police has no influence on participant's perceptions of police and policewomen other demographic factors such as race and ethnicity may play a more significant role in individuals' perception of policing and policewomen within this field. Furthermore, a positive portrayal of police-citizen relationships in TV and film has a positive impact on participant's perceptions. These findings underscore the importance of considering diverse factors when examining individual perceptions of police

## **5.2 Limitations**

Like all research, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was drawn from students enrolled in criminal justice courses. Consequently, participants in the sample may view police differently, thus the findings may have limited generalizability to the wider university population or college students generally. The composition of the sample was influenced by various constraints including time, financial limitations, and lack of incentives. Specifically, financial constraints precluded the provision of monetary incentives, which limited the sample to one department rather than the wider university population. This was mitigated by posting flyers in Colvard Hall and Fretwell Hall as a different means of recruitment. Additionally, the selection of criminal justice students was motivated by the logistical advantage of faculty support in encouraging student participation. Even still, the number of respondents was relatively low. Future research endeavors should consider offering incentives to enhance response rates and expanding the sample to include students from other majors.

Second, the survey relied on self-reported data, which is susceptible to social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may provide responses that they perceive as socially acceptable or may inaccurately recall their media consumption habits or perceptions. Despite these inherent biases, the exploratory nature of the research mitigates this concern.

Third, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time. Consequently, this design choice constrains the ability to establish causal relationships between variables and does not accommodate changes in perceptions over time. While the exigencies of time precluded the possibility of conducting a longitudinal study for this study, future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to elucidate changes in perception over time. This would be particularly useful to track changes in perceptions of students as they progress through criminal justice courses, which could provide valuable feedback to the department as to the effectiveness of coursework in countering media-related stereotypes.

Fourth, the survey included two open-ended questions, but responses provided limited value. The utility of a survey design and being mindful of length for the purpose of enhancing the sample size necessarily limits the depth of understanding of individuals' true opinions regarding the impact of media representation on perceptions of policewomen and police generally. Future research should employ mixed-methods or qualitative approaches to offer a more comprehensive representation of participants' perceptions.

Finally, the measurement validity of variables, particularly about the perception of police and policewomen, may be compromised by measurement error. The utilization of Likert scales and composite measures may not fully encapsulate the nuanced complexities of individuals' attitudes and perceptions, indicating a potential limitation in the precision of measurement instruments utilized in the study.

### **5.3 Policy Implications**

While media portrayal did not emerge as a significant predictor of perceptions in this study, the importance of accurate and balanced representation of law enforcement in media

remains. Increasing the proportion of female writers, producers, and directors can have a huge impact on combating negative stereotypes.

Additionally, the race effect persisted even when accounting for media. Both Blacks/African-Americans and Hispanics do not appear to distinguish policewomen as a group from police as an institution, and have similar negative perceptions about both. The findings show that increasing the representation of women would potentially aid in enhancing police/citizen relations. It also demonstrates the need for diversity and inclusion initiatives within law enforcement agencies. There are already hiring initiatives in place, such as the 30x30 Initiative, so policymakers should prioritize efforts to recruit and retain officers from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds to improve trust and legitimacy and build stronger relationships among communities of color. However, the unintended implication is that diversity initiatives may not have the direct and immediate effects that are intended, so diversity initiatives should be approached with intention and care.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Low representation of women in policing has been a long-time problem that is still being solved in the police department across the United States and many other countries in the world. The United States has programs like the 30 x 30 initiative (a program to increase representation of police recruit classes to 30% by 2030), which has been initiated to help combat the situation. Aside from that, the media hasn't been particularly helpful in the narratives about policewomen and the media has been found to be pivotal when it comes to people's perception about the police. This study aimed to find out the relationship between negative media representation of policewomen and public perception of police. Additionally, the relationship between negative portrayal and its impact on perception of policewomen was also examined.

Some key takeaways from this study can guide future research. First, there is no significant relationship between negative portrayal of policewomen in television and film and perception of police. While empirical evidence and various theories emphasize the media's role in shaping public perception of policewomen and policing, our findings suggest that its influence may be limited. However, race and ethnicity has a significant impact on the way people perceive the police. The results of the study show that African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics have more negative perceptions of police compared to Whites. It can be implied that socio/demographic factors may play a more pivotal role in building people's perception of police. Additionally, though there is no significant relationship between negative portrayal of police and perception, the study shows that positive portrayal in television and film can help police-citizen relationships. One recommendation from the study is to expand the scope of media representation from just television and film to other media outlets as well to be able to get a more comprehensive overview of media portrayal and perception. Also, results from the survey

indicate that the sample that were interviewed do not watch much television so samples from other population groups can produce distinct relationships between portrayal of police women and police perception.



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