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Justifying Force: Police Procedurals and the Normalization of Violence

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Abstract

Much like the CSI effect in forensic crime dramas, portrayals of law enforcement in crime media can potentially skew a viewer's perception of what the profession actually entails. Many studies address the depiction of law enforcement in the media, but few solely examine the use of force by television police officers, and the impact this may have on frequent viewers. In an era of calls for accountability over growing attention towards police brutality and misconduct, the media as an influencer has the potential to play a role in how real-world instances of brutality are perceived, and more importantly, how it is justified. This paper serves to analyze the portrayal of use of force and normalization of violence in popular police procedurals and how characters within the context justify their use of force. Using a content analysis, a full season of the shows *Chicago PD*, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and *Blue Bloods* were analyzed for the use of force by law enforcement against persons of interest. The portrayal of force was found to be, in a majority of cases, justified or considered necessary. Consequences for actions were few and far between, rarely lasting beyond the scene. As crime drama viewers were not surveyed as part of this study, the impact of a positive, justified portrayal of the use of force and excessive force can only be speculated. However, accompanying literature demonstrates the portrayal of excessive force as a necessity plays a role in viewers justifying real-world instances of police use of force.

Introduction

Nielsen ratings have consistently ranked crime dramas in the top 20 most popular television dramas, proving to be a major source of entertainment for cable viewers since the 1960's hit *Dragnet* (Donovan and Klahm 2015; Kappelere and Potter 2018). Crime dramas are recognized as fictionalized media which depict some form of the criminal justice system, oftentimes dramatized or over-exaggerated. The subgenre of police procedurals has risen in popularity, in which the daily work and lives of precinct officers is depicted. These shows portray officers who are presented with a case each episode they work to solve, involving interrogations, arrests, convictions, and the occasional use of force or excessive force throughout. Officers in these shows may use force when dealing with suspects for a multitude of reasons: they instinctively believe the suspect is the perpetrator, the suspect is noncompliant, or to add overall themes of drama, action, and intensity to the show.

Excessive force, while controversial when utilized by real-world law enforcement, is an added element of action to crime dramas and reality-based crime shows. Due to the presence of force throughout a majority of popular crime dramas, it is worthwhile to examine what these portrayals entail: how they are framed within an episode, and ultimately how they are perceived by viewers. In addition to this, the cues that establish if the use of force to the degree it is shown is acceptable and justified, or considered an abuse of power helps to distinguish the role force plays overall. This study seeks to analyze how the force is portrayed in police procedurals. As a result, this literature may aid in better understanding the role police procedurals play in the depiction of the use of force, and ultimately how this may impact viewers.

<u>Literature Analysis</u>

Police Portrayals in Crime Dramas

Crime dramas are arguably one of the most watched genres in terms of cable television, with an overwhelming number of viewers unfluctuating throughout the past several decades (Briggs, Rader, and Rhineberger-Dunn 2017; Arntfield 2011; Donovan and Klahm, 2015). Throughout its evolution, crime dramas and police procedurals have consistently depicted officers as heroes of their community who solve new crimes with each episode. Television officers and detectives, however, have not always been noble: Andy Sipowicz of *NYPD Blue* and the various officers of *The Wire* saw the ushering in of the bad cop subgenre of police procedurals (Sargent 2012). Officers such as Sipowicz used excessive force frequently as a tool in their investigations, an added component to be used as entertainment in their respective shows.

The use of force becomes an anticipated facet of these shows. In *The Wire*, violence and excessive force are recurring themes which play a significant role in the morality of characters. Force is predominantly used against victims deemed deserving of it, framing violent acts as justifiable (Masur and McAdams 2019). This is common in most portrayals of force in crime dramas, whether they be fictionalized or reality-based (Color of Change and The USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center 2020; Masur and McAdams 2019; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Donovan and Klahm 2015; Sargent 2012). Despite frequent portrayals of violence and brutality, the audience is given a variety of reasons for the justification of force, such as a noncompliant or hostile suspect, or the frustrations of a detective trying to keep their city safe.

When observing a character using force objectively, it may be difficult to justify their actions against the suspect or person of interest. In order to combat this, shows provide viewers with background knowledge beyond justification for the immediate action. Initially by establishing a character as a protagonist, the character is framed as having their actions justified as the viewer is watching through their lens, and thus better understanding their motives (Schubert 2017). Backstories meant to establish empathy enable viewers to pardon their actions as a result, as well as to establish familiarity with a character. In some cases, an offending officer who receives the support of the audience may be regarded as an anti-hero. Defined as a "morally flawed character", the character is framed to be justified in their actions, with the show allowing the viewer to connect with them despite their flaws through their background story, narration, or overall role they play (Schubert 2017:25). The viewer finds themself rooting for a character they have attached themself to, despite the excessive force they may use or violence they create.

Myths and Realities

While crime dramas depict a lifestyle characterized by excitement and constant action, most notably through documentary-style filming of *COPS* and *Live PD*, this is not the case for the character's real-life counterparts. However, if television executives chose to run a show that realistically portrayed police officers, "it would go off the air due to poor ratings" (Kappeler and Potter 2018:273). On average, an officer on television—be it in documentary format or fictional crime drama—experiences more time involved in crime-fighting throughout the course of one episode than an actual officer may experience their entire time working in their precinct. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations Universal Crime Report (2016), in 2015, 505,681 violent crimes had been

reported, and over 628,000 people were working that year as police officers. What this shows is less than one violent crime per police officer had been reported that year (Kappeler and Potter 2018). Despite frequent portrayal, the use of force is not employed by officers nearly as often as suggested in crime dramas (Boivin, Gendron, Faubert, and Poulin 2017). This further shows how little "action" police officers, on average, see while on the job.

A popular claim used to defend an officer's use of force is that the profession is incredibly dangerous, as police can be involved with violent offenders. Said claim is usually made after there is a reported incident of an officer using excessive force on a suspect (Gallagher 2018). The reality, however, is officers are much less likely to be put in extreme danger or killed on the job than crime dramas would suggest. Kappeler and Potter (2018) state: "[police officers are] many times more likely to commit suicide than to be killed by a criminal" (Fleetwood 2015; 2018:279). This is because, on average, police officers do not see as much action as media depictions of the job would lead people to believe. While the job itself is not free of any kind of danger, on average, police officers are not at the risk many have come to believe as a result of frequent viewing of crime dramas and crime-related media centered on law enforcement (Kappeler and Potter 2018).

Media Impact on Viewers

In the realm of crime-related media, fictionalized television shows have shown to not have as great of an impact on viewers as news media and reality-based crime dramas, with experiences with law enforcement proving to be more influential when determining one's attitude towards law enforcement (Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Dowler and

Zawilski 2007, Van den Bulck, Dirikx, and Gelders 2013). Researchers have instead noticed that while fictional portrayals do not affect overall attitude, they do play a part in how viewers interpret the use of force and misconduct. In a study to determine viewer perceptions of misconduct in crime media, Dowler and Zawilski (2007:194), found frequent crime media consumers who were consistently exposed to excessive force had an "increased belief in the frequency of police misconduct".

This was consistent with a study done by Boivin et al. (2017) in which participants were exposed to fictionalized videos of police brutality. The videos did not change participant's attitudes towards police, but exposed participants were more likely to believe officers engaged in higher rates of the use of force compared to participants who were not shown the video. In addition to this, both the experimental group and the control group did not condemn the officers involved and found justification for their actions. Boivin et al. (2017) note this may be a result of participants believing the use of force is a necessary tool when apprehending suspects.

To analyze how the portrayal of the use of force impacted frequent crime drama viewers, Donovan and Klahm (2015) conducted a content analysis on three separate crime dramas: *The Mentalist, Criminal Minds* and *NCIS*. From watching one season (23-25 episodes) of each show, officers were portrayed "frequently [engaging] in force" (2015:1275). Force was portrayed as necessary, as the perpetrators often were hostile, resistant, or posed a danger to the life of the officer. Donovan and Klahm (2015) suggest this exposure to the use of force by television officers may make viewers more likely to believe the use of force is justified. They explain: "The casual use of civil rights

violations with no repercussions may prime the viewers to believe that this is how policing is and 'should' be done" (Donovan and Klahm 2015:1264).

In most instances of excessive force being used, the action is framed to support the officer using force against the suspect, justifying the action by depicting the suspect as a threat to the officer's life and leaving them with no choice but to use force. The conclusion viewers reach is despite these violations being made, the end justifies the means, making the use of force warranted. Donovan and Klahm (2015:1271) found while watching crime dramas had "no effect on perceptions regarding the degree to which the police actually use force", nearly 79% of viewers perceived use of force as justified while making arrests. These results are consistent with Boivin et. al (2017) and Dowler and Zawilski (2007), as participants in each study believed force was more frequently used by officers, and in most cases, justified.

The justification of the use of force in crime dramas is just as prevalent as the use of force itself. Multiple studies and content analyses note the use of force as being framed as a necessity in dealing with offenders, who are often portrayed as hostile (Color of Change et al. 2020; Van den Bulck, Dirikx, and Gelders 2013; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Boivin et al. 2017; Color of Change et al. 2020). Officers in crime dramas are also shown to be successful in solving cases. This depiction often suggests an officer's use of force aided in the solving of a case. Despite the excessive use of force, officers are rarely shown in a negative light; their desire to make the community they serve safer outweighs any violence they may have caused. This ultimately solidifies the narrative that the ends justify the means in crime dramas, further justifying the use of force.

Race is a significant factor in how a viewer can be impacted by entertainment media consumption. Several studies have found people of color, especially Black people, are less likely to have their attitudes on law enforcement impacted from viewing crime dramas (Donovan and Klahm 2015; Callanan and Rosenberger 2011; Dowler and Zawilski 2007). White civilians and nonwhite civilians have significantly different views, attitudes and encounters with law enforcement as a result of how law enforcement has historically treated people of color (Alexander, 2010). In a study conducted on the influence of crime-related media and viewers attitudes towards law enforcement, authors Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) found that race was a significant factor in determining how a viewer would be impacted by frequent crime media consumption. Black participants were found to have a lower opinion of law enforcement compared to white participants, and white participants demonstrated having a greater impact on attitudes towards police after frequent viewing of crime-related media. This is consistent with the findings of Dowler and Zawilski (2007) and Donovan and Klahm (2015).

This is most likely due to a combination of factors. Police portrayals in crime-related media, more so reality-based crime dramas and fictional crime dramas, are almost always positive. Law enforcement benefits from positive portrayal as it is believed to raise public trust, as well as aid in solving cases by communicating details to the public (Van den Bulck, Dirikx, and Gelders 2013; Rantatalo 2016; Cooke and Sturges 2009; Boivin et al. 2017). Although fictionalized crime dramas have shown to have little effect in changing attitudes towards law enforcement, their persistence in portraying officers as everyday heroes continues to contribute to a positive portrayal.

Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) state that, despite positive portrayals, communities and people of color have historically had negative interactions with officers. They note officers regularly employed "aggressive tactics and violations of civil rights" against communities of color under the guise of fighting the War on Drugs in the 1990's. Racial profiling and targeted practices and sweeps against these communities further worked to establish a "history of suspicion and mistrust" against law enforcement (Callanan and Rosenberger 2011:183). Beyond the War on Drugs, historical accounts of the Civil Rights Movement and the Jim Crow era have noted the systemic racism which permeates the U.S. criminal justice system and ultimately has created an entirely different experience for people of color, especially Black people (Alexander 2010). As a result, this history has a greater impact on people of color than portrayals in various media on overall attitudes. White people, who did not experience this treatment or did not to the same degree as people of color, do not have this history acting as a buffer. The likelihood that their attitudes towards law enforcement will be more positive as a result of consuming a form of crime-based media is therefore higher than people of color.

Ultimately, these studies demonstrate that crime-related media, specifically crime dramas, can play a role in a viewer's relationship with real-world counterparts of what they observe on television. Unlike cultivation theory, which suggests viewers who consistently watch crime dramas will be impacted by them in some fashion, viewers may use the media they consume to justify previously held opinions or attitudes (Coenen and Van den Bulck 2016; Brown, Lauricella, Douai, and Zaidi 2012). When consistently consuming crime dramas, in which the use of force is depicted and justified in near equal

amounts, the viewer may use this media to further validate their beliefs and reinforce the idea that all force is justified when utilized by law enforcement.

Public Sphere Theory

After analyzing the data presented and recognizing how sensationalized law enforcement is in crime drama and its impact on viewers, Habermas's (1989) theory of the public sphere can be applied to assess how public opinion is formed. The public sphere itself is a "realm accessible to all citizens in which 'the activities of the state could be confronted and subjected to criticism,'" this ideally would allow the public then to examine, criticize, and understand better the state or interest groups at hand— in this case, police officers and the criminal justice system (Mawby 2010). Habermas (1989:175) argues a transformation of the public sphere has taken place, in which private organizations disguised as representatives for the public invade the sphere. This creates tension amongst the public and in result hinders any critical debate from taking place, yet still maintaining the facade of a space only populated by the public.

It can be argued that the media, whether news or entertainment, has done this successfully through opinion management. "Sectional interests" refers to interests of the state or media; this serves as the basis of shaping public opinion within this sphere to "motivate conformity". In this context, conformity means to comply with the general attitudes and beliefs held within the public sphere to form public opinion. Habermas (1989:241) defines "public opinion" as "people's attitudes on an issue when they are members of the same social group". Law enforcement and media outlets have long held a symbiotic relationship, used in part for the benefit of both parties (Coenen and Van den Bulck 2016; Van den Bulck, Dirikx, and Gelders 2013; Rantatalo 2016; Cooke and

Sturges 2009). It is possible that the media acts as a motivator of conformity by introducing positive portrayals of law enforcement, despite displays of excessive force of violence, to the public sphere. This hinders critical debate as a private institution is considered to be more powerful than the individual, and their sectional interests may be projected onto the public for the purpose of conformity. This would prove to be beneficial to law enforcement as an individual body as it works to boost public morale and trust, even in the case of officers being portrayed in an objectively negative light.

This conformity can be seen when viewers of crime dramas make claims such as "being a police officer puts one at risk of immediate danger" or when viewers draw their overall knowledge of and opinions about the criminal justice system from crime-related media. By using various forms of media, the society within the public sphere can be manipulated or swayed to believe what the "interest group" prefers, with conformity being the preferred opinion. "Interest group" in this context is the general authority or more specifically law enforcement, and to whom Habermas (1989) refers to as the bourgeois class. The preferred opinion of law enforcement then, in this case, would be that police officers can do no wrong even when using excessive force— as many assume they are justified, resulting from their character counterparts on television being justified when using force and often exempt from repercussions.

Methods

Sampling

Using a purposive sampling method, the sample consisted of one season from three police procedural shows, approximately 22-23 episodes each. *Chicago PD*, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit,* and *Blue Bloods* were selected based on popularity

amongst currently airing crime dramas (TV Series Finale 2020a; TV Series Finale 2020b; TV Series Finale 2020c). Crime dramas which did not follow the everyday experience and cases of law enforcement were excluded from selection, as were any reality-based crime dramas. Individual seasons of selected shows were determined after pilot testing the first 14 episodes from seasons in order to find seasons with the most data available to be coded. Purposive sampling was necessary for this study as consistent results were achieved through the analysis of significant amounts of data. Season 3 of *Chicago PD*, 10 of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, and 1 of *Blue Bloods* were then selected (TV Guide 2020a; TV Guide 2020b; TV Guide 2020c). Episodes were accessed through the streaming services Prime Video and Hulu. Only episodes within the chosen season were analyzed. Each episode was viewed in complete at least once, with many episodes re-watched for accuracy in coding.

Coding

In order to analyze the use of force and the role it plays in police procedurals, every individual instance of force and excessive force were recorded. This could mean an entire scene in which an officer uses force against a Person of Interest (POI) is regarded in multiple sections. Instances of physical or verbal force were at times separated by dialogue between characters or other non-force related actions. Coding these instances as individual rather than collective allowed for a more accurate dataset. Individual scenes were analyzed and coded accordingly to the actions taken by both the officer and POI.

The following themes were identified: the force that took place, the justification of the act, the presence of any consequence and its impact, the guilt or innocence of the POI, and the success of the episode investigation. Within each theme, there were several

sub-categories. For force, the level of severity was coded as excessive or non-excessive; how these two categories differentiate are discussed below. It was then noted if the action was physical force, verbal force, a nonverbal threat, or a combination of these codes. Further codes were used to narrow down the act, by noting if a tool or weapon was used, such as a rifle, taser, car, or other foreign object. Abusive language and threats were recorded alongside general verbal force, as well as codes for hitting, kicking, rough handling, joint manipulation, and the rough application of handcuffs. If the POI was fatally wounded, the death was coded.

The justification of each instance was then coded. Justifications were separated by how the justification was framed for the viewer: acknowledged, implied, or no justification present. Reasons for justification included the implied guilt of the POI, seeking information or interrogating, in defense of a perceived threat, evading officers, and whether the POI was armed. The demeanor of the POI, if relevant, was included as well; hostile, non compliant, non civil, or undercover POIs were coded. Furthermore, if the instance of force or violence was framed as necessary to the audience, it was coded as such.

Should a consequence be administered in response to an officer's use of force, the consequence was analyzed and coded. The rank or role of the person administering the consequence was recorded, including a code for a public response—in all three shows, the role of the general public was considered an influential body that could impact how the officer's use of force is perceived. The purpose of coding the rank of the person administering the consequence was to demonstrate severity: in cases in which an above-ranking officer administered a consequence, it was considered more significant and

severe than one delivered by someone of a lower rank. The meaningfulness of the consequence was coded as a verbal reprimand, physically removing the officer from the scene, if their job was impacted, and how if it was. A code for unknown consequence was included if the implication of a consequence was vague or continued past the end of the coded season.

Following these three themes, each episode was recorded for their clearance rate. If the episode ended with the perpetrator caught and convicted, the case was considered successful. If the perpetrator was identified to viewers but no formal justice was brought, this was recorded as well. The purpose of this code is to be used to understand how the use of force can potentially play into how a case is solved. Lastly, the scene was coded to determine if the POI receiving force was proven to be guilty, innocent, undercover, or was not guilty but associated with the guilty party. This was done to determine the validity of the officer's actions, and examine the difference between an officer using force against both innocent and guilty parties.

Data Analysis & Discussion

Results

Table 1	Chicago PD	Law and Order SVU	Blue Bloods	Total
Force Type Used				
Physical	67.8	50.9	64.5	61.7
Verbal	19.8	36.8	27.1	27.4
Nonverbal Threat	12.4	12.3	8.4	10.9
Justification Present?				
Implied Justification	82.4	93.3	95.7	90.2
Verbal Justification	6.9	1.1	0	2.8
No Justification	10.8	5.6	4.3	7
Consequences Administered?				
Yes	9.8	6.7	6.5	7.6
No	87.3	86.7	93.5	89.2
Undercover	0.9	6.7	0	2.5
Unknown	2	0	0	0.6
Was Force Necessary?				
Yes	59	84.4	86	77.2
No	41	15.6	14	22.8
Episode Clearance Rate	91.3	95.5	100	95.5
Guilt Status of Force Victim				
Guilty	67.6	56.7	68.8	64.3
Associated	19.6	15.5	20.4	18.5
Innocent	10.9	20	10.7	13.8
Undercover	1	4.4	0	1.8
Unknown	1	3.3	0	1.4
Was Force Deadly?				
Lethal	10.8	1.1	5.4	6
Non Lethal	89.2	98.9	94.6	94

Table 1 displays percentages of main themes broken down per show and overall percentage

Criminal justice scholars have debated how to properly define "force" and understand what exactly constitutes it, resulting in a variety of definitions (Donovan and Klahm 2015). In this study, "use of force" will be defined as when the actions of an officer causes physical or emotional harm in the process of identifying, apprehending, questioning or any other interaction with a suspect or perpetrator. Table 1 exhibits the data collected from the content analysis, displaying each major category analyzed: Force, Justification, Consequences, Guilt Status, and Clearance Rate.
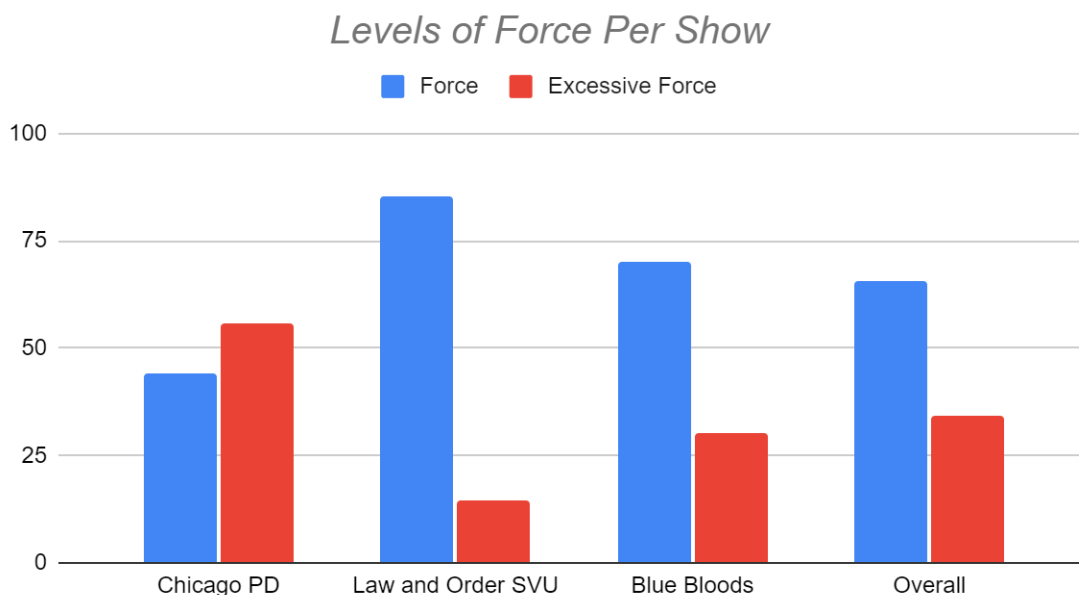
Force

Table 3

Table 2 displays the levels of force per show in percentages

A total of 285 instances of force or excessive force were recorded from the sample (n=67), with only one episode not containing any force. *Chicago PD* contained 102 instances, *Law and Order: SVU* contained 90 instances, and *Blue Bloods* contained 93 instances. Four of the 285 counts were implied instances which happened off screen, and 17 of the 285 instances were lethal. Persons of Interest were predominantly white (74.3%) men (92.2%), and officers involved were predominantly white (84.6%) men (85.3%) as well. All shows were more likely to portray the use of force over excessive force (34.4%), with an overall 65.6% of the use of force portrayed. *Chicago PD* had the highest rate of excessive force used (55.9%), making it the only show coded with a higher rate of excessive force than standard force used. All three shows portrayed physical force more than verbal force (27.4%) and nonverbal threats (10.9%), with an overall distribution of 61.7% physical force portrayal.

The use of force and excessive force was examined as separate entities. This was done to categorize the severity of officers actions; many times throughout the coded episodes, force was used for a variety of reasons, yet was not considered "excessive" by the coding standards. Excessive force was recognized as an officer going well outside what was considered necessary to apprehend, diffuse, restrain, or otherwise interact with a person of interest. An example of the separation of the use of force and excessive force is as follows: an officer who is interrogating a suspect begins to use threatening language in order to extract a confession. This use of force escalates to excessive force when the officer begins to physically assault the suspect whether out of frustration, to gain information, or other factors.

Chicago PD stands as an outlier when coding for excessive force, and is worth examining on why this may be. While the general argument of supplying entertainment and intensity to a show can be applied, there is some truth rooted in the portrayal of excessive force at the hands of Chicago police. In 2016, the University of Chicago organized the Chicago Torture Archive, compiling documents, transcripts, and other forms of evidence pertaining to the torture of suspects by Chicago police from 1972-1991, otherwise known as the Burge Case (Lantigua-Williams 2016). Over 100 individuals, predominantly Black men, were tortured in order to gain false confessions, witness statements, and prevent others from speaking out against the brutality that took place under the command of Detective and later Commander John Burge. While it is unsure if the frequent depiction of excessive force in *Chicago PD* is tied to the dark history of police brutality in Chicago, the overall perception of violence between officers

and suspects is heightened. This can possibly be attributed to the association between crime, violence, and the city of Chicago (Metz, 2016).

When looking at scenes of excessive force objectively, it can be difficult to sympathize with the offending officer as they brutalize a suspect. For regular viewers, however, the anti-hero phenomenon can explain their fascination with protagonists who frequently resort to violent measures (Schubert 2017). A *Chicago PD* scene in particular shows Sgt. Voight beat a suspect with an iron poker and pushed the end of it into his chest, while a scene from *Law and Order: SVU* shows Det. Stabler besides a brutalized and bloodied man he had beaten only minutes before. Their acts are considered appropriate in the context of the scene: Sgt. Voight is searching for the whereabouts of a sex trafficker to save a man's daughter, while Det. Stabler fought with a pedophile to have a photo of his daughter taken down from a child pornography website. When paired with the officer's reasoning, acts of brutality become digestible, and protagonists who engage in violence become the anti-hero-- their actions or morality are questionable, but the audience's established connection to the character and the context of the scene allows them to accept their actions.
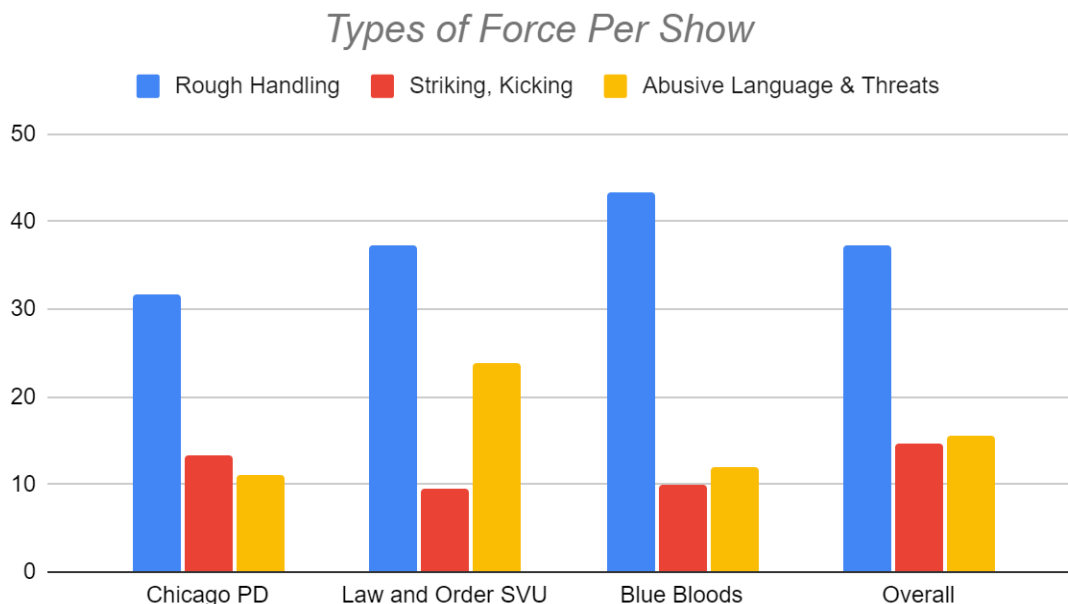
Table 3

Table 3 displays the top three most frequent types of force per show and overall frequency in percentages

While types of force varied amongst each episode, the most common types of force used were consistent for all three shows. Rough handling, which includes forcing the POI's body against a surface and aggressively pushing the POI, was the most common type with 167 counts (43.3%). Striking, punching, and kicking were also frequent, with 50 counts (11.1%) throughout each season. Verbal abuse and threats were recorded at 67 instances (15%), with an additional 26 instances (5.7%) of verbal force. Officers frequently used objects when employing force, such as rifles (26 counts), cars (3 counts), knives (2 counts), tasers (1 count), and foreign objects such as crowbars (11 counts).

Each show portrayed rough handling more than any other portrayal of force. This was done through an array of actions, most notably by aggressively moving the POI, shoving their body against a surface, or pushing the POI into or onto a surface. The action itself can be intended by the officer to cause harm to the POI in an attempt to intimidate

the individual, control the individual, or express the officer's frustration towards them. Rough handling, in some instances, can come across as more subtle; the use of rough handling was often treated as normal arresting procedure, even if harm towards the suspect is explicitly indicated.

Verbal force, though not as frequent as physical force, played a significant role in the portrayal of force. In situations where officers could not utilize physical force to progress through their case, verbal force was found to be just as effective. Verbal threats and abusive language were second in frequency for each show, followed by general verbal force. While each use of verbal force—threats, abusive language, and general force—was used with the intent to cause harm or meet a goal, each category was distinct in how it was utilized. Abusive language was often used in cases where an officer has a personal tie to the victim(s) or case itself, with language solely meant to insult, demean, or intimidate. An example from *Law and Order: SVU* season 10, episode 2 demonstrates this:

> *Det. Stabler:* You're a steaming bag of crap that I would love to shove down a hole.
> *POI:* I'm not the enemy. I look but don't touch […] I can't change who I am, I was born this way.
> *Det. Stabler:* No one's born a deviant.

The purpose of this exchange was to intimidate a known pedophile in order to gain information on a suspect. The character Det. Stabler, the officer involved, is known in the show to treat pedophiles harshly due to his personal concerns over his own children. A combination of the intent to retrieve information coupled with the officer's personal bias led to Det. Stabler's use of abusive language towards the POI. Because the show has established Det. Stabler's attitude towards pedophiles, his behavior and

language are normalized and accepted. This is reinforced by his partner, Det. Benson, not reprimanding him or acknowledging his language (Law and Order: Special Victims Unit 10.2).

Threats are similar to abusive language in how it is used to extract information or intimidate a POI. Where abusive language has a more demeaning or aggressive tone, threats are used with the express and specific purpose of forcing the POI to comply. Whether this is to provide information or comply with an officer's demands, it is considered a useful tool in situations where cooperation is not given freely. Out of the three shows, *Law and Order: SVU* had the highest count of threats used, accounting for 16.6% of all force used in the show. General verbal force, the third category of verbal force, was coded separately from abusive language and threats due to its delivery. Certain instances of verbal force would occur in which no explicitly degrading or insulting language was used when interacting with the POI, nor were any explicit threats made to them. These instances of verbal force still suggested the officer in question intended to cause harm to some degree that would coerce the POI to comply with the officer, most commonly through aggressive tone. General verbal force represented 5.7% of uses of force amongst all three shows, totalling to 20.7% of all portrayals of force when combined with abusive language and threats.

Of the 285 counts of force, 36 (10.9%) were nonverbal threats, many of which were conducted with a secondary instrument. Nonverbal threats in this study are regarded as physical actions that do not directly harm the POI, but suggest the potential for force used against them. Much like verbal threats, nonverbal threats were used to coerce a POI to comply with an investigation, usually through intimidation. The frequent use of

secondary instruments was included to portray severity, such as with crowbars, live wires, furniture, and rifles. Rifles were most common (5.6%) to be used alongside a nonverbal threat due to their constant availability to officers and clear message for the potential for violence.

The frequency of force portrayed in each show was shown not to be excessive or overly violent, with rough handling being the most prevalent type of force. Despite not being considered "excessive" in this study, it is still worth analyzing. Force and misconduct were at many times hard to distinguish and portrayed as subtle, making it difficult for the viewer to fully understand exactly what they were witnessing. In many cases it was easy to determine force was being used, however the exact fashion (such as pushing, roughly holding on them, shoving against a wall) was done subtly or with less attention drawn to the action, so as to imply it was a normal procedure and not a violation of the POI's civil rights. These types of force were the least likely to receive any recognition because they are meant to be perceived as not worthy of recognition. This is significant as it further works to normalize force to the viewer. Just as more excessive or violent forms of force are portrayed and considered normal, so is subtly incorporating instances of force into the narrative.

Justification

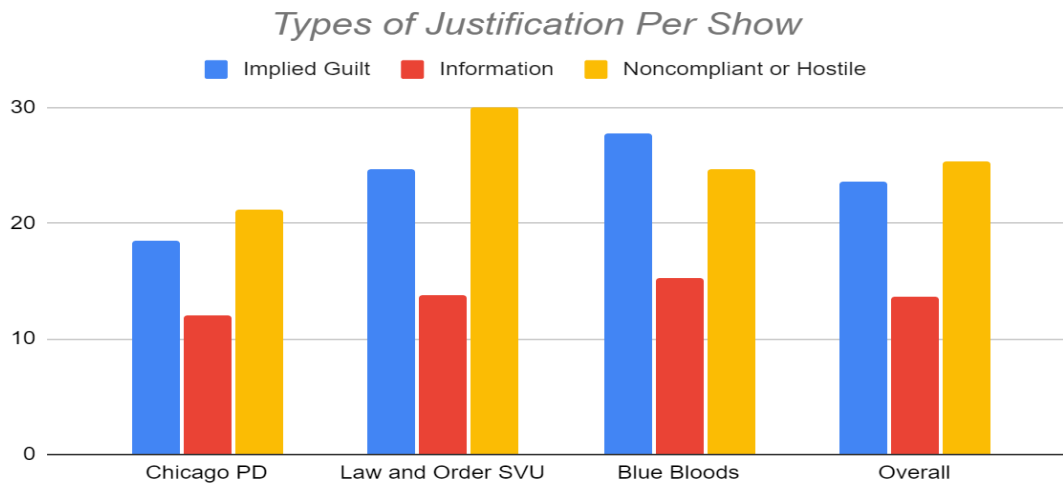**Types of Justification Per Show**

Table 4

Table 4 displays the three most frequent justifications used per show and overall frequency in percentages

In this study, justification was viewed as equally important to the act of force as it represents if the action is considered acceptable, as well as the proposed reaction of the viewer. Justification for the use of force or excessive force is what frames the action itself, whether in a positive or negative light, and even more so, if an officer is "good" or "bad" for resorting to force in order to be effective. The portrayal of justification also demonstrated how the executive team of each show approached the topics of police violence and use of force. Showrunners are an extension of the product they create, and the elements they include can be a combination of what they believe viewers want to see as well as what they believe is appropriate for the scene (Color of Change Hollywood and The USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center 2020). This further contributes to the framing of force, and suggests to the viewer what is and is not acceptable.

In each show, justifications were overwhelmingly present and almost always implied, with an overall justification rate of 93%. For the justification to be implied, the

viewer must have been given the tools necessary to understand why an officer would resort to force. This could have been established over the course of the episode or moments before the act occurs. Triggers for force could include a noncompliant or hostile POI, the implication or established knowledge of guilt, interrogating a POI, and evading arrest. Less frequently was the verbal acknowledgement and justification of force, which was most common if the use of force was lethal or a job-impacting consequence was administered. Throughout all three shows, force was verbally acknowledged and justified 2.8% of the time, most commonly in *Chicago PD* (6.9%). Table 4 displays the top frequencies of justification amongst all three shows.

Occasionally, there was no justification for force used. In these instances, officers would use force unprovoked, or when little to no established reason was provided to the viewer before the act took place. It is most likely that these instances were used for the viewer's entertainment but were often framed as acceptable and warranted despite no reason given. POI's who received force with no justification were often non-violent or compliant, but were in some way related to the case-- this alone provided reasoning for officers to use force. *Chicago PD* had the highest rate of no justifications given (10.8%), with all shows having an overall rate of 7%.

The necessity of the use of force was also analyzed for this study. Justification and necessity are intertwined, as the use of force can be justified through established factors, yet still be ruled as not necessary. An example of this is during an interaction between a detective and suspect in *Blue Bloods*; Det. Reagan approaches a suspect who he believes is guilty (Blue Bloods 1.17). The victim had served in the military, as did Det. Reagan, and so he becomes personally involved in the case. When approaching the

suspect, Det. Reagan becomes aggressive: he is verbally abusive, hits the suspect, and shoves him against a wall until other patrol officers come to stop him. Even though it has been established to the audience that this case has a personal stake for Det. Reagan due to his military connections, the reactions by surrounding officers by forcibly removing him and reprimanding him indicate this interaction was not only not justified but not necessary as well. Overall, most instances of force were portrayed as and perceived to be justified (77.2%). Table 1 shows *Chicago PD* portrayed the most unnecessary force (41%), almost 30% higher than either other show.

Of all the reasons for justification, implied guilt of the POI by the officer was the most commonly used (20.9%). Implied guilt could mean either the suspicion by an officer, as well as the demonstrated guilt of the POI that had yet to be proven in a court of law. Acting off of suspicions of guilt was common throughout all three shows, even when guilt had not been firmly established to the audience. This theme was reflected in a conversation between two detectives in *Law and Order: SVU*:

> ***Det. Tutuola:*** Sounds like you've already decided he's guilty.
> ***Det. Benson:*** 'Cause that's how it looks.

The conversation does not go beyond this, and the suspect in question is revealed to be innocent (Law and Order: Special Victims Unit 10.9). Despite being wrong, the intuition of an officer is rarely questioned by both characters and, as a result, viewers. The second most common justifying factor is information gathering (15.3%). Many instances of force occur within an interrogation room or while officers are investigating and interviewing possible suspects. In these scenarios, it is common for POI's to resist questioning to protect themselves or others, resulting in officers using force to extract information.

Force use has ranged from verbal threats to physically assaulting the POI in an attempt to gather information.

POI's who were hostile (5.6%) or noncompliant (5.1%) were frequent victims of force, as attitude towards the officers was shown to be an indicator of whether they felt force was necessary in the moment. Aggressive, aloof, or rude POI's were often subject to both physical and verbal force as their attitude was viewed as in relation to their guilt status. Despite this, POI's who were compliant or civil (10.2%) still had force used against them throughout each show. In these cases, compliant POI's may have already been established as guilty or determined as such by the officer involved.

Justification often went hand-in-hand with the use of force, serving to validate or encourage an officer to use force. As a result, force was perceived as understandable, necessary, and at times, satisfying for the viewer to watch. When a POI was noncompliant and/or insulting an officer, a resulting assault to the POI was framed as well-deserved and is meant to be enjoyed by the viewer. Because the viewer is observing interactions through the lens of the officer, the anticipated perception is for the audience member to become frustrated with the noncompliant POI as well. This frames the force used as positive, making the action acceptable to the viewer. Emotions, background knowledge, and the intuition of officers all play into the justification of the use of force, allowing both the viewer to accept the force that has been used, and for the show to perpetuate the normalization of force used against POI's.

Consequences

The presence of consequences for the use of force was rarely seen while analyzing each season. Overall, there were 22 (6.6%) consequences for all episodes

coded. The three seasons had an overwhelming number of cases with no consequences, totalling 254 cases (89.1%) in which no consequences were administered for the use of force, as shown in Table 1. *Chicago PD* had the highest rate of consequences, with 9.8% of cases resulting in some form of consequence for the officer(s) involved. *Blue Bloods* had the lowest rate of consequences, with 6.5%. When consequences were administered, the majority were given by either an officer of the same ranking (43.5%) or by a higher-ranking officer (43.5%). In almost half (47.1%) of the consequences, the offending officer was given a verbal reprimand for their actions. Only 14.7% of the time were officer's jobs directly impacted; this would result in an investigation into the act of force, the suspension of an officer, or demoting the officer for a short period of time. In every case in which an officer's job was impacted, the issue was resolved within one to three episodes and the officer resumed their duties.

A lack of consequences does not mean the force used was more justifiable or less damaging than any other. In terms of types of force used, all three shows had relatively similar results in rates of physical force and verbal force used. However their difference in consequences demonstrates how force is regarded and portrayed in the show overall. *Blue Bloods*, despite having only 6 explicit consequences for force, was shown to have similar levels of physical force compared to *Chicago PD* and *Law and Order: SVU*. *Blue Bloods* was also shown to have the lowest rate of unnecessary uses of force. Low rates of consequences and unnecessary uses of force alone may suggest to viewers that the officers portrayed are more justified in using force, and that the use of force was an aid in solving cases. But because this show has similar rates of overall physical force and various types of force used when compared to *Chicago PD* and *Law and Order: SVU*, it

can be argued that *Blue Bloods* frames the use of force in most cases as a necessity to solving and fighting crime beyond the show's platform. Even more so, it may suggest force, being a necessity, is not deserving of consequence unless an officer is grossly misusing their power.

Guilt, Innocence, & Clearances

The guilt or innocence status of a POI is significant to this study as it establishes validity to an officer's use of force. When a POI is confirmed to be guilty, the use of force against them immediately becomes warranted, suggesting to the viewer they deserved force or excessive force to be used against them. For 64% of cases, the POI is determined to be guilty, with 19% percent of cases of force used against a POI who is not explicitly guilty, but is associated with the guilty person(s). Of all instances of force analyzed, 39 cases (14%) were against an innocent person, and of the 39 cases only four of which did the offending officer receive a consequence. Several of the cases in which the POI was revealed to be innocent, force against them is still justified to the viewers. This is often seen in the POI evading arrest or questioning, or becoming hostile due to fear of becoming involved in a crime unrelated to them. Regardless of the POI's innocence, their refusal to cooperate despite the clear stress they are under acts as a justification for force to be used against them. This establishes the narrative that if they were innocent, they would have nothing to be afraid of and cooperate with officers. Factors such as illegal immigration, prior convictions, or fear of incarceration can play into the POI's attitude, which can hinder the officer's search for answers.

In cases where an officer received a consequence, 81% of POI's were discovered to be guilty. When an officer is reprimanded for using force against what turns out to be a

guilty POI, the guilt undermines the consequence and invalidates any warranted criticism of the officer. In addition to this, it inadvertently criticizes the idea of those against the use of force, by implying that force was revealed to be necessary. An episode of *Chicago PD* exemplifies this idea, in which an officer shot a suspect who she believed attempted to shoot and kill her patrol partner (Chicago PD 3.21). For the majority of the episode, she receives public backlash, becomes involved in an investigation into her shooting, and is suspended from her position. The POI is framed as a victim of police brutality, playing on current events and mirroring real-life cases of police shootings and brutality. It is revealed later in the episode the POI had been guilty all along, extinguishing any real criticisms of police brutality and police involved shootings—both within the context of the show, as well as real-life events due to its mirroring.

Furthermore, the clearance rate of each season is significant to this study as it portrays the general efficiency of officers in each police procedural. In *Blue Bloods*, each case is solved and the suspect is either shown to be convicted or implied, producing a 100% clearance rate. *Law and Order: SVU* had solved 95.5% of cases which resulted in a guilty conviction, and *Chicago PD* had solved 91.3% of cases. Cases which were not considered "solved" had only missed a formal conviction; in several cases, the officers had established the guilty suspect, however due to extraneous circumstances, they never went to trial. If the coding for clearance rate was solely dependent on if the officer(s) solved a case, regardless of trial outcome, each season would have a clearance rate of 100%. Should a show have a high rate of the use of force against guilty POI's, as well as a high clearance rate, this can establish to viewers that the use of force is at times necessary in solving a crime, moving forward in a case, or dealing with a suspect.

Discussion

Crime dramas would not be nearly as popular or lucrative if they did not portray law enforcement as dangerous and action-filled, as opposed to the average experience of an American police officer. As a result, these shows often rely on scripted violence for entertainment. It can be inferred that the use of force in crime dramas at statistically higher levels than used by real-world officers contributes to a crime drama's popularity. Force, when used, almost always carries a justification. This can be seen when the suspect is violent, hostile, armed, and a direct danger to the officer and others. Police procedurals commonly depict a violent suspect giving the protagonist officer no choice but to react with force. Media portrayals of officers rarely portray them as unnecessarily violent, unless they exist within the subgenre of the "bad cop" trope. Consistently portraying the justification of an officer's actions regardless of the demeanor of the suspect aids in reinforcing the idea that police officers are constantly putting themselves in some form of danger in exchange of keeping their city safe, thus serving to justify the use of force. Rarely was force found not to be justified; in the case where it wasn't, lasting consequences were uncommon.

Despite historical and modern accounts of the connection between race and police brutality, fictional crime dramas rarely address this connection or portray it (Alexander 2010). As noted from the content analysis, officers utilizing force and those receiving it were both predominantly white men. Although young men of color, especially Black men, are significantly more likely to be victimized by police brutality, this is not accurately depicted (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019). The Color of Change et al.

(2020) report notes this can be a result of several factors, beginning with the writers room. Fictionalized crime dramas are predominantly written, directed, and produced by white men, and inevitably their perspectives on law enforcement as white men bleed into their storytelling. Of the shows analyzed in this study, *Blue Bloods* had all white writers during their 2019 season. *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* was found to have over 90% of white writers, of which 70% of which were male (Color of Change et al. 2020). *Chicago PD* was found to have approximately 90% of white writers for the same season.

Not accurately portraying the systemic racism in law enforcement that impacts people of color creates a reality in each show in which people of color do not experience racism within the criminal justice system (Color of Change et al. 2020). While this can be seen as hopeful towards an equal justice system, it suggests that the predominantly white showrunners avoid the topic in general as it can create controversy. Instead, occasional episodes focus on these topics in an effort to appear relevant. These episodes often invalidate genuine critique of police use of force, framing those seeking accountability as an adversary to law enforcement. Fictional officers who use force are framed as guilty, only to be proven right by the end of the episode. This narrative further emphasizes force is justified no matter how excessive when used by law enforcement. By producing topical episodes, these shows are choosing to engage in the conversation of police accountability and brutality. These episodes ultimately perpetuates the idea that force is a necessary component of police work, while simultaneously disregarding systemic racism in law enforcement and invalidating the experiences of the people of color who have had negative experiences with police officers.

Officers in crime dramas frequently act on gut instincts and assume guilt before it has been established, whether to the officer or to the viewer. This can be problematic as each show demonstrates that officers who act on their gut and assume guilt end up being right in the end, establishing trust between the officer and the viewer that the officer's intuition is rarely wrong. When an officer uses force against an innocent suspect, the issue is often glossed over and not acknowledged—essentially brushing the officers misjudgement under the rug. When shows have high instances of officers using implied guilt to use force against what turns out to be a guilty suspect, as well as high clearance rates, this suggests to viewers force is necessary in solving cases or moving forward in them. In addition, it suggests high clearance rates are partially due to officers using force in order to be more efficient in solving a case. The lack of consequences despite the acknowledgement of an officers use of force as well as success in solving cases serves to normalize police violence and the use of force as an everyday facet of the job.

Conclusion

Crime dramas and their many sub-genres are made to entertain its viewers, taking professions, themes and events that are based on reality and dramatizing them for entertainment. However, its origin and the ideas used are the closest to reality crime dramas come to. The criminal justice system is often over exaggerated and incorrectly depicted in crime dramas for the sake of entertainment. Violence used for entertainment has shown to increase a show's popularity—or, not significant enough of a deterrent from watching. Force and brutality were found to be frequent, almost always accompanied by a justification to make an officer's actions excusable. Ultimately, the message this sends to viewers is an officer's intuition is rarely wrong, and when they choose to use force to

any degree, the viewer should trust that these actions will lead to a case being solved. Though this study can only go as far as to analyze how force is portrayed and justified, it is clear through additional research and literature that the normalization and justification of force does not remain within the bounds of entertainment, and has the ability to impact its viewers.

Limitations

A major limitation of this research is that it is only a content analysis, and as such only the portrayal of the use of force and excessive force could be studied. If a quantitative methodology such as surveying viewers was included alongside the content analysis, the explicit analysis of how crime dramas and entertainment media impact viewer's opinions on the use of force could be provided. As a result of this limitation, I am only able to form conclusions based on past, separate research and literature as well as my own results. In addition to this, I can only speculate what the impact of the justification of force and normalization of violence is, instead of drawing conclusions based on specific survey responses aligned with analysis findings.

A second limitation of this research is the variety of media coded. While crime dramas have proven to be popular, they have also shown to have the least significant impact on attitudes toward law enforcement and its many facets to viewers. Compared to newsroom media and reality-based crime dramas, viewers can distinguish crime dramas and their portrayals as fictionalized, and in most cases, do not accept crime drama portrayals as immediate fact. Newsroom media and reality-based crime dramas, however, are considered by viewers to be more realistic and accurate in their portrayals, as they are not scripted shows. As the analysis of crime news media is already a popular area of

research, it would be worthwhile to study reality-based crime dramas alongside entertainment media. If a reality-based show such as *COPS* or *Live PD* were included in the research, a broader perspective of the crime drama genre would have been achieved.

Possible Solutions

It is unrealistic for these shows to be taken off the air, as they are extremely popular with large fanbases. If any change in how force is portrayed is to happen, it must begin behind the scenes. Popular police procedurals are predominantly written, directed, and produced by white men, which some authors have concluded is a significant factor into why force is so often portrayed as necessary and justified (Color of Change et al. 2020). By incorporating significantly more diversity behind the scenes at a consistent rate, it is possible to change how narratives are written and framed. Furthermore, many police procedurals include an officer on site to consult regarding the accuracy in portraying law enforcement. However, there is rarely, if ever, an advocate for victims of police brutality or otherwise holding a social position opposite to that of police to offer counter-perspectives (Metz 2020). Introducing more voices to provide the victim's perspective may change in how the viewer perceives the situation in which force was used, and potentially sympathize with the victim rather than the officer.

Future Research

Future research should continue to focus on the portrayal of force in other police procedurals, crime dramas, and crime-related entertainment media. Similar to Donovan and Klahm's (2015) study, qualitative studies should be conducted alongside content analysis to examine how frequent crime drama viewers are impacted by the shows they watch, with a specific focus on the use of force and violence. As mentioned previously,

including reality-based crime dramas or conducting research solely focusing on reality-based crime dramas would also contribute significantly in examining how the portrayal of force impacts viewers. Reality-based crime dramas have been shown to have a greater impact on overall attitudes towards law enforcement and beliefs regarding the use of force amongst viewers due to its perceived realism. Adding to the literature on this topic would help to further understand the many aspects of reality-based crime dramas and how consumers are impacted by overall viewership. Furthermore, similar to the Color of Change et al. (2020) study, future research should pay attention to the production team of each show, such as the racial and gender makeup of writers, directors, and producers.

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