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# Delivering Culturally Competent and Equitable Police Services Via Social Media: Assessing Two Way Dialogue between Police Agencies and Vulnerable Citizens

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## Abstract

Social media is quickly becoming one of the most important media outlets for police departments; it provides them with the opportunity to engage in two-way dialogue with citizens. This direct line of communication can help build trust and legitimacy among racial minorities and other vulnerable groups with whom relationships are strained. However, little is known about the presence of cultural competency, legitimacy and social equity content in these exchanges. This research assesses these issues through an examination of Facebook interactive exchanges between citizens and police departments. The results reveal two key findings. First, vulnerable citizens' comments and questions are more likely to raise concerns about agencies commitment to delivering culturally competent and socially equitable services. Next, agencies ignore, or rarely respond to, inquiries raising cultural and equity concerns. These findings highlight the need for future exploration of the use of social media accounts by police departments.

**Key Words:** Cultural competence; Legitimacy; Social equity; Police agencies; Racial minorities; Social media; Facebook; Racism

## Points for Practitioners:

- Social media is a viable tool to expand and modernize coproduction, community policing, and to connect with technologically savvy citizens.
- Public sector agencies can utilize social media to promote their commitment to cultural competency, equity, and legitimacy.
- Police agencies can use social media to foster meaningful dialog and build trust among racial minorities and other vulnerable groups with whom relationships are strained

The expanded use of social media among vulnerable racial and socioeconomic groups has caused policymakers and administrators to reimagine notions of public service and citizen engagement. Cultural competency, and its accompanying tenants, has attempted to facilitate this process by broadening public servants understanding of racial minorities and how administrators use social media and other mechanisms to enhance two-way communication with citizens. In the field of public safety, culturally competent social media strategies have become increasingly important as policing entities utilize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other mediums to not only dispense information, but also engage in conversations altering

perceptions and strained relationships with ethnic minorities. While the significance of such dialogue has been duly noted, efforts to assess it have been scant and problematic.

Previous studies (Huang et al., 2017; Dia et al., 2016; Liberman et al., 2013; Heverin and Zach, 2010; Crump, 2011) have largely targeted sizable metropolitan areas and neglected to include cultural and equity content (Brainard and Edlin, 2015; Grimmelikhuijzen and Meijer, 2015; Brainard and Mills, 2011). Hu, Rodgers, and Lovrich (2018) noted such shortfalls in the literature and posited, “the study of police use of social media remains quite limited” (p. 2). This coincided with Brainard and Edlin’s (2015) finding that “little research exists to inform us how social media is or can be used to connect users across settings” (p. 729). It also bolsters concerns regarding the miniscule amount of research focusing on police entities’ use of social media to demonstrate an awareness of socioeconomic differences in communities and “counteract negative images of police in the mainstream media” (Sever, Elg, and Ellis, 2018, 6).

Recently, such concerns have been intensified as COVID-19 has negatively impacted traditional forms of communication. Two-way communication via social media has become increasingly important during the dual (justice and healthcare) pandemics associated with the summer of 2020. Minority and impoverished communities have become particularly vulnerable as they are three-times more likely to be affected by the virus. Social media has been critical in helping to raise awareness of these issues and highlighting the need to ensure these citizens are receiving socially equitable and culturally competent public services.

Given the salience of these issues, the current research assesses the prevalence of cultural and equity content in the social media exchanges between citizens and police departments. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: (1) ‘Does online communication demonstrate agencies provide citizen-centered, culturally competent and socially equitable services?’ (2) ‘Are vulnerable citizens more likely to raise equity and cultural competency concerns than others?’ The assessment of these issues will not only add to our understanding of cultural awareness and social equity, but also contribute to the discussion of police agencies’ use of social media in different environmental contexts and its implications for public trust.

Two dependent variables are used to effectively evaluate these issues: (1) *citizens’ posts to police raising concerns regarding the delivery of culturally competent services* and (2) *citizen’s post indicating issues involving legitimacy or equity*. Each measure is assessed through a content analysis of citizens’ comments and inquires on police Facebook pages. This review will better inform assessments of police agencies’ social media strategies and the effective use of social media in the public arena more broadly.

The article begins with a discussion of the importance of cultural awareness regarding police social media use. This is followed by a discussion of the independent and dependent variables which are included in the methodology section. The findings include results of the analysis and the final section of the article links these findings to previous literature and includes future implications for the field of public administration.

## Review of Literature

Cultural competency and social equity advance the notion that public organizations should deliver services in a manner that is fair, just and mindful that citizens' cultural beliefs may differ from the administrator providing the service (Weimer and Zemrani, 2017; Rice, 2011; Norman-Major and Gooden, 2012; Frederickson, 1990). The pursuance of this goal requires public administrators to be cognizant of environmental and cultural differences within communities and adapt service delivery strategies to accommodate them (Wyatt-Nichol and Antwi-Boasiako, 2008; Rice, 2007; Hurdle, 2002; Geron, 2002). During the 1990s, the Reinventing Government Movement promoted this idea by urging public sector entities to view citizens as customers to be satisfied. Public administrators were required to transition beyond traditional 'one size fits all' service models and adopt coproduction processes addressing historical and cultural differences which hampered equal access to services (Ho, 2002). The New Public Management Movement built upon these ideas and aimed to aid these reforms by urging agencies to utilize technology to meaningfully include vulnerable citizens in the administrative process. Additionally, it encouraged agencies to incorporate and track performance data which ensured citizens were served in an efficient and effective manner (Traummuller and Lenk, 1996).

While the reforms purported to include and better serve citizens, implementation tactics proved problematic. Organizational conservers, who were committed to traditionalistic practices, hampered and stagnated the use of emerging technologies enhancing access to underserved populations (Merton, 2003; Downs, 1964). The successful use of the internet, social media, and other engagement tactics found in the market sector were not replicated well in the public arena (Charbonneau and Riccucci, 2008). These precluded agencies' abilities to enhance trust and legitimacy through technological interactive exchanges with vulnerable citizens (Charbonneau and Riccucci, 2008; Traummuller and Lenk, 1996). Social relationships were further impacted by New Public Management's lack of cultural awareness in its infusion of technology into agency operations as a means to enhance managers' access to performance data. Much of the data failed to include measures promoting social equity and cultural awareness (Charbonneau and Riccucci, 2008). This resulted in lower levels of citizen trust due to employees overemphasizing outcome measures while minimizing the significance of fairness, compassion, empathy and other process measures (Brunet, 2006; Jennings, 2005).

Numerous social equity scholars expressed concerns regarding the reforms' negative implications for public service and engagement with vulnerable citizens (Rosenbaum, Maskaly, Lawrence, Enciso, Christoff, and Posick, 2016; Shane, 2010; Fletcher, 2014; Rice, 2011; Eterno and Silverman, 2012; Glaser, 2006; Charbonneau and Riccucci, 2008; Traummuller and Lenk, 1996; Frederickson, 1990). In the field of public safety, the concerns were actualized through uses of performance measures and technology undervaluing the significance of historical biases in service delivery. Crime measures such as the number of arrests, tickets produced and percentage of successful prosecutions contributed to racial profiling, mass incarceration and a disproportional issuance of warrants in over-policed African American and Hispanic communities (Smith, Rokek, Petrocelli, and Withrow, 2017;

Weitzer and Tuch, 2004; Onyekwuluje and Murty, 1995). Managers use of performance tracking software, such as CompStat, aided the process by causing fearful officers to falsify crime reports, issue unwarranted summonses and use more aggressive policing tactics in minority communities (Hall, 2017; Giacalone and Vitale, 2017; Eterno and Silverman, 2012). Collier's (2001) assessment of the New Public Management reforms led him to posit when police officers believe their performance is assessed solely by the numbers, they "may be tempted to give less regard to human rights issues" (p.37).

New Public Service was introduced as an alternative reform movement and sought to temper citizens' equity and trust concerns by reemphasizing cultural competency. Its proponents supported the notion that service quality can be enhanced through processes promoting: (1) transparency, (2) meaningful dialogue with vulnerable citizens and (3) culturally appropriate communication strategies (Fletcher, 2014; Rice, 2011; Rice, 2007; Colvin and Goh, 2006; Pino, 2001; King and Stivers, 1998; McKnight, 1995). In 2010, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and US Department of Justice supported and expanded these theories in policing by partnering to create the Center for Social Media as a means of providing law enforcement agencies support in building their capacity to use social media to strengthen relationships in local communities and improve service delivery (Rodgers, 2016; IACP, 2015). Culturally competent social media strategies were purported to be particularly useful in communicating with African American and Latino residents who engage at high rates through social media (Khalife, 2017; Edwards, 2016; Krogstad, 2015; Smith, 2014; Davis, Alves, and Sklansky, 2014). It also presented the opportunity to enhance responsiveness, gain access and build trust among younger persons, citizens with language barriers and others who were less likely to engage through traditional processes (Khalife, 2017; Edwards, 2016; Krogstad, 2015; Smith, 2014; Davis, Alves, and Sklansky, 2014; Rosenbaum et al., 2011; Becton et al., 2005; Hogg, 1993; Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006).

Police agencies across the country expanded interactive exchanges with citizens through social media. However, the quality and success of the interactions is somewhat unclear. Oftentimes, social media guidelines have been voluntary and lack the administrative fortitude to ensure widespread implementation. The resulting outcome has been a lack of uniformity and consistency in the development of culturally appropriate social media strategies. Unlike the required commitment to the development and use of crime measures, oversight entities have not invested in the creation of universal assessment measures for social media use (Stanko and Bradford, 2009; Fielding and Innes, 2006; Skogan, 1976). The absence of such measures has complicated assessments of the quality of equity content and types of cultural issues presented in interactive exchanges with citizens. Grimmelikhuijzen and Meijer (2015) noted the difficulty of documenting such issues through police Twitter use. The emphasis on information pushes has produced inconclusive findings regarding citizens' perceptions of procedural fairness and legitimacy through interactive exchanges. Kudla and Parnaby's (2018) examination of Twitter accounts resulted in similar findings. Police agencies use of the medium was traditionalistic; officers more frequently communicated with colleagues and sympathetic citizens than individuals who were critical of their actions. Social media use to document and address citizens' equity concerns and other sensitive topics were less apparent (Kudla and Parnaby, 2018).

Heverin and Zach (2010) validated the challenges of examining interactive Twitter exchanges with citizens. Police agency's infrequent use of social media along with their decisions to release sizable amounts of information highlighting shootings, stabbings, accidents, arrest, abductions and other measures included in traditional police reporting undermined their efforts to build trust and legitimacy among citizens (Heverin and Zach, 2010). This was particularly true for entities entrenched in routines based on formalized policies, hierarchies and centralization (Meijer and Thaens, 2013). Agencies more committed to openness, decentralized citizen input and cultural awareness tended to adopt more inclusive social media strategies. Meijer and Thaens's (2013) work found US policing entities were more inclined to fall in the former category demonstrating commitment to traditionalistic approaches to social media use.

Similar assessment limitations are found among studies of police websites and Facebook. Rosenbaum et al. (2011) noted police agencies granted citizens access to contact them via social media. Yet efforts to better understand citizens' needs and build legitimacy through this contact was uncertain as a dismal 2-percent of the agencies studied allowed citizens to provide feedback or post comments. The authors neglected to discuss the content of citizens' post and their implications for the presence of socially equitable services (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Brainard and McNutt (2010) exploratory analysis of police sponsored online discussion boards highlighted internal challenges to meaningful two-way dialogue between citizens and police officers. Administrators encountered resistance from traditionalistic officers reluctant to engage in online interactive exchange with citizens. Those participating responded to citizens in negative or defensive manners, appeared to be disinterested, uninvolved or replied in a traditional bureaucratic tone. This curtailed the agency's ability to gain insight on citizens' needs and service experiences. Brainard and Mill's (2011) follow up assessment of officer fairness on police discussion boards did not directly include cultural or equity measures but alluded to their importance with the notation that online responses from officers should demonstrate empathy for citizens and show the desire to "understand how and why residents act and react the way they do and demonstrate that understanding in word use" (Brainard and Derrick-Mills, 2011, 407). Similarly, Brainard and Edlin (2015) assessment of police agencies social media use in ten large racially diverse cities noted variations among photo, video and citizen comments. However, the content analysis neglected to include cultural and equity measures.

Additional assessments of Facebook contents have also neglected to investigate the presence of sensitive cultural and equity content in information sent by and to the agency but have added to the descriptive understanding of social media use. Lieberman, Koetzle, and Sakiyama's (2013) examination of police Facebook post indicated efforts to enhance community and public relations as a primary reason for agencies establishing Facebook presences. This was found to be particularly true for agencies with less frequent posting. They were more likely to post public relations information and residents of the cities tended to respond favorably to direct communication post (Lieberman et al., 2013). Hu, Rodgers, and Lovrich (2018) suggested Facebook has great potential for police agencies to directly engage with hard to reach citizens. However, the dismal use and analysis of citizens' Facebook comments and other interactive mechanism complicated the ability to assess social

media effectiveness. Other broad-based studies highlight the use of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets to dispense information regarding crime, crime prevention, events, traffic updates and announcements (Huang et al., 2017; Dia et al., 2016; Liberman et al., 2013; Heverin and Zach, 2010; Crump, 2011) while avoiding collaborative problem solving and meaningful two-way communication that might build trust, alter the perceptions of racial minorities and mend the strained relationships with these communities (Dia et al., 2016; Grimmelikhuisen and Meijer, 2015; Brainard and McNutt, 2010).

If police agencies underutilize the interactive capabilities of social media, they limit their ability to expand and modernize community policing and connect with technologically savvy citizens who do not engage through traditional means. It also limits the ability assess perceptions of equity among citizens, particularly among vulnerable racial and economic groups in which, many of whom are frequent users of social media. Strategically incorporating social media techniques and measures will allow agencies to better understand and respond to these citizens and ultimately build legitimacy. Naz (2014) alluded to the importance of such interactions positing e-Word-of-Mouth has increased in presence and significance over time (Fakharyan and Elyasi, 2012; Chu and Kim, 2011). Face-to-face interactions are being replaced with social networks (Ho and Dempsey, 2010). Public agencies must learn to better navigate this landscape or encounter the negative repercussions of being excluded from broader community conversations.

The following discussion outlines this study's efforts to contribute to the literature by assessing police agencies commitment to providing culturally aware and equitable services. It performs a content analysis of citizens' comments and queries to police agencies through Facebook. The assessment of this content allows the research to expand on previous studies by utilizing social media data to gain insight on citizens' perceptions of the delivery of equitable policing services. Such an analysis advances beyond traditionalistic approaches emphasizing police 'informational pushes' to highlight valuable information 'pulled' from the public through their post to police agencies. By expanding the analysis to include informational pulls, agencies are granted inexpensive access to evidence that can build coproduction relationships with citizens, enhance their reputations, and gain access to timely information on pertinent issues impeding relationships with hard to reach and underserved citizens. Additionally, assessing demographic variations will offer insight on whether vulnerable citizens are utilizing social media to communicate equity and cultural concerns to police.

## Research Methods and Variables

Building on previous works assessing police agencies' use of social media (Hu et al., 2018; Liberman et al., 2013; Brainard and Edlin, 2015), this study assesses the presence of cultural and equity content in policing by analyzing citizens' comments on the Facebook pages of 13 police departments in Southeast Michigan<sup>1</sup>. Each department receives guidance

<sup>1</sup> Cities include: Hamtramck, Highland Park, River Rouge, Southfield, Muskegon Heights, Jackson, Inkster, Benton Harbor, Oak Park, Harper Woods, Ecorse, Pontiac, and Royal Oaks

and oversight from the Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards (MCOLES). MCOLES advocates Facebook as an effective social media tool to personalize interactions with citizens, provide a platform for community input and improve the overall perception of the agency by residents. It particularly encourages agencies to capitalize on Facebook's ability to demonstrate cultural awareness and provide a direct link to meaningfully engage with citizens who have been traditionally disconnected and underserved (MCOLES, 2017).

The study's purposeful sample targets Southeastern Michigan cities because of the regions' diversity, sizable population of racial minorities, economically vulnerable residents and controversial police actions involving the treatment of these citizens (Daniels, 2016). The majority of cities are located in the Metro-Detroit area and do not have populations exceeding 75,000 residents. These cities were chosen because they are more reflective of the size of the average American city than previous studies targeting large metropolitan police agencies (Heverin and Zach, 2010; Brainard and McNutt, 2010). Unlike many police entities, these cities also allow citizens to engage in two-way dialogue with agency personnel through a Facebook "Review" tab or thumbnail. The thumbnail is listed among the primary Facebook homepage tabs which include: home, about, photos, reviews, events and videos. Comments listed in the review section capture citizens' comments and questions regarding service quality and engagement with officers. The analysis of these comments and exchanges provide meaningful insight about citizens' perceptions of the delivery of culturally competent and equitable services. The data was collected between July 1, 2019 and June 1, 2020. Because Facebook allows the user to organize comments by date of posting, all review sections were examined and updated to capture new comment on June 1, 2020. This resulted in a total of 372 responses included in the sample. The coding scheme for hypotheses and dependent and independent measures are discussed below.

### *Dependent Variables*

Issues of legitimacy often serve as measures of fairness and equity in police engagement strategies. This study's interpretation of social equity in policing services includes legitimacy through social media by encapsulates Suchman (1995) and Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer's (2015) definition of the term. Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (574). Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2015) add perceptions of procedural fairness is important to legitimacy and equity. This includes citizens believing the procedures are fair, positive, demonstrate respect toward them and provide them with a meaningful voice (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2015). The current research captures these elements by coding comments and queries from citizens regarding police actions they perceive as unbecoming, unprofessional or unfair with the value of one. All other comments are coded as zero. Examples of comments and questions raising equity/legitimacy concerns include those noting the failure of the police to act when called, inequality in the treatment of citizens, excessive use of force, exhibiting behavior violating a citizen's civil rights, violating department or public policy and failure to follow through or complete administrative task

involving public service. In order to assess the reliability of the coding scheme, approximately 40 undergraduate students enrolled in a political science research and writing course examined comments posted in the cities under study. Utilizing Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer's (2015) definition, student determined whether individual comments raised legitimacy and equity concerns. The resulting outcome indicated agreement on approximately 94 percent of the items included. A second analysis by two tenured professors with doctorate degrees in Public Administration and knowledge of cultural competence and social equity literature resulted in similar classifications with nearly 100 percent agreement.

The use of negative cultural code words serves as a measure of cultural competence by assessing citizens' reference to officer's lack of awareness of, or disrespect toward, individuals or groups of individuals based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability and social standing. Examples of negative code words include: comments referencing citizens feeling profiled because of race, comments capturing perceptions of poor treatment due to disability status, comments referring to the actions of an officer or the agency as racist, comments noting the lack of racial diversity on the force and any negative comment in which citizen directly highlighted words denoting one of the aforementioned groups. All comments including cultural code words were assigned a value of one. All other comments and questions were coded as zero.

**Hypotheses.** Five demographic variables and hypothesis are included to assess perceptions of cultural awareness and equity in policing service through social media. They include race, gender, agency funding, social media presence and racial composition of community. Hypothesis one states, '*Racial minorities are more likely to raise equity and cultural competence concerns regarding policing services compared to whites.*' Racial divides and the concerns for cultural dynamics in policing are documented throughout history (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). Parker, Onyekwuluje and Murty (1995) noted perceptions of law enforcement vary by cultural patterns and institutional characteristics. Racial minorities are more likely than whites to view the police negatively. The distance between the two groups is further exacerbated by history and the use of officer discretion. Sigelman et al. (1997) added knowledge and exposure to evidence of past police misconduct causes racial minorities to be more suspicious of the police than their white counterparts.

Facebook does not officially collect race or ethnicity data. It does allow users to post profile pictures and include content regarding their racial identity. In this study, information about respondents' race was gathered through a visual and a content assessment of Facebook profiles. Respondents were either coded as one for minority or zero for white. Respondents for which race was not evident or difficult to determine were excluded from the analysis. The absence of a direct measure of racial identity through Facebook is noted as a limitation of this study.

Hypothesis two states, '*Women are more likely to raise equity and cultural competence concerns regarding policing services compared to men.*' Research highlighting gender differences in perception of police is somewhat unclear (Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum, 2003). Some studies suggest there is no relationship between gender and perceptions (Campbell and Schuman, 1972; Hindelang, 1974; Garofalo, 1977). Others note positive

perceptions for men and women (Corraei et al., 1996; Cao et al., 1996). More pointed assessments of race and gender difference in police perceptions suggest African American women were notable more likely to assign a negative rating for the police through social media than other demographic groups (Patrick and Rollins, 2019). In this study, information regarding respondents' gender was gathered through citizens' Facebook profiles. Each Facebook user voluntarily reports his or her gender. Respondents self-identifying as female were coded as one. Those self-identifying as male were coded as zero. Respondents for which gender could not be determine were excluded from the analysis.

Hypothesis three states, *'Residents of cities with understaffed police agencies are more likely to raise equity and cultural competence concerns regarding police agencies compared to others.'* A growing body of research has noted the impact of declining resources on both the size of police forces and its implications for service quality, fairness and equity (Wexler, 2019). Smaller staffs, hiring freezes, fewer new positions, higher attrition rates and longer work hours has been associated with increases in ethics violations, use of force incidents, citizens' complaints and increased biased treatment against racial minorities (Anderson, Heineccius, Neidhart, and Leary, 2017; James, 2018; Maciag, 2017; Bell, Virden, Lewis, and Cassidy, 2015; Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, and Grammich, 2010). Staff capacity is defined as the number of police officers per 10,000 residents. Data for this variable was taken from annual FBI: Uniform Crime Reports.

Hypothesis four states, *'Residents of cities with a greater community policing presence on social media are less likely to raise equity and cultural competence concerns regarding policing services compared to those in other cities.'* Mastrofski (2006) noted community policing has been found to enhance police legitimacy and confidence among citizens. Griffith (2005) added evidence of community policing and information sharing through social media helps to increase transparency and accountability between the agency and citizens. Increased access to evidence of community policing through social media should lead to more positive perceptions of the police by citizens (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Community policing presence on social media is defined as organized evidence of the agency's effort to highlight community policing endeavors through Facebook. This includes: providing an event tab granting citizens easy access to a listing of agency sponsored community events, a video tab including footage of social events and unsolved crimes and a photo tab including photo albums of community events and employee highlights acknowledging exemplary officers. Facebook pages including two of the three tabs were coded as one. All others were coded as zero. It is important to note all Facebook pages included a photo tab. However, agencies varied in their use of events and video tabs. Some agencies used one or both while others used neither.

Hypothesis five states, *'Resident of cities with less diversity, i.e. larger populations of white citizens, are less likely to raise equity and cultural competence concerns regarding policing services compared to those in other cities.'* Research has shown involuntary contact with police through traffic stops and other techniques associated with over policing neighborhoods increase the probability that citizens will view police negatively (Dean, 1980; Decker, 1981). Neighborhoods with large populations of racial minorities are more likely to be over policed than others. Schuck and Rosenbaum's (2005) assessment of the

neighborhood impact on policing views reveal racial differences in neighborhood policing views. Black and Latino respondents exhibited a more negative view of neighborhood policing than Whites. The authors suggest higher crime rates and more aggressive policing tactics in these communities may contribute to differences in perceptions (Schuck and Rosenbaum, 2005). Racial composition, defined as the percentage of White residents, for each city was taken from the US Census Bureau.

Because each dependent variable is dichotomous, binary logistic regression is used to assess relationships between the dependent and independent variables. A specification check of each equation was completed. The variance inflation factor and tolerance statistic revealed that multicollinearity was not a problem for the following equations:

$$Y_1, \text{ and } Y_2 = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6$$

Where,

$Y_1$  = Equity Concerns About Police (1=yes, 0=no)

$Y_2$  = Cultural Competence Concerns (1=lack of cultural awareness/competency, 0=all other)

$X_1$  = Citizen Race (1=Minority, 0=Caucasian)

$X_2$  = Citizen Gender (1=Female, 0=Male)

$X_3$  = Staffing Capacity (number of police officers per 10,000 residents)

$X_4$  = Social Media Investment or Development (1=multiple forms of information sharing via Facebook, 0= only one form of information sharing)

$X_5$  = City Racial Composition (Percentage of City Caucasian Residents)

## Findings

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

| Variable                               | Mean    | Standard Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | N Size |
|--|---------|--------------------|---------|---------|--------|
| Gender                                 | .4793   | .50026             | 0       | 1       | 363    |
| Race                                   | .3084   | .46248             | 0       | 1       | 347    |
| % of Population White                  | 52.1464 | 30.08133           | 5.90    | 90.20   | 373    |
| Police per 10,000 residents            | 14.2901 | 14.2901            | 8.34    | 24.24   | 369    |
| Equity Issues Raised                   | .3700   | .48345             | 0       | 1       | 373    |
| Cultural Competence Issue Raised       | .1823   | .38661             | 0       | 1       | 373    |
| Community Policing Presence            | .6702   | .47076             | 0       | 1       | 373    |
| Positive/Negative Comment (1=positive) | .3581   | .48011             | 0       | 1       | 363    |

The assessment of exchanges between citizens and police agencies through Facebook reveal notable findings. Approximately 37-percent of comments raise equity and legitimacy concerns regarding the use of authority, respect shown for citizens, racial and class differences in service quality and other areas of importance to delivering socially equitable services. The presence of comments raising cultural competency concerns is slightly lower with nearly 20-percent of comments including a reference to officers' lack of cultural awareness. The most common among cultural awareness references were elements tied to race. Numerous comments referred to actions taken by police personnel as racist or discriminatory. Citizens expressed concern that either they, or someone within their community, were targeted or experienced mistreated because of their racial or ethnic identity. Citizens in one majority-minority city posted disparaging comments regarding the Floyd Dent Case in which a white male officer was convicted in the brutal beating of an African American citizen during a traffic stop.

Citizens in a majority white city left similar comments after cell phone footage of several white male officers surrounding a young African-American male because a white female complained he looked at her too long. Several citizens responded with comments and the hashtag Emmet Till-alluding to the infamous 1955 death of a 14-year-old African-American boy at the hands of white men for supposedly whistling at a white woman. Approximately 9-percent of comments were contributed by citizens expressing despair due to demeaning or humiliating treatment they received from police personnel during the process of engagement and service delivery. The comments vary in level of despondent treatment. Examples include: minority citizens indicating humiliating and hostile treatment from officers reacting as if they were immediately guilty if a white citizen complained, an African-American mother reporting despair when finding the car of her child who was missing for 19 days and being turned away twice by the city police, a citizen including a comment and cell phone picture of an officer placing a plastic grocery bag over the head of an African-American arrestee and a disable citizen feeling belittled by officers engaging in a dismissive and hostile manner as she sought help at the precinct.

Official response levels to citizens' comments and questions are somewhat dismal with approximately 12-percent of comments receiving some form of response. This aligns with Rosenbaum et al.'s (2011) notation that less than 2-percent of police social media post are designed to elicit two-way dialogue or feedback from citizens. Additionally, it coincides with Lieberman et al.'s (2013) finding that even fewer citizen post (less than one percent) received a response or comment the agency. Many of the responses provided in the current study were often traditionalistic in nature and did not invoke two-way dialogue. In some instances, responding officers challenged citizens' views and urged them to alter their comment and the assigned numerical rating or score because it negatively impacted the agency's reputation.

Some responses demonstrated effort to meaningfully engage with citizens and enhance the agency's reputation as officers assisted citizens seeking information about impounded vehicles and questions regarding agency paperwork. The citizens expressed praise and gratitude for the timely assistance. Sensitive queries about officers speeding through traffic lights with no sirens or similar aggressive driving were met with unkind remarks from the

agency. The traditionalistic nature and quality of the limited responses align with studies noting officers and the larger segment of bureaucrats do not always respond well to criticisms from citizens lacking complete information. Experience and awareness of these informational deficiencies require a more tempered response (Brainard and Derrick-Mills, 2011). Hundreds of citizens could potentially read the exchange and alter their perceptions of the agency.

Approximately 67-percent of citizens participating in Facebook discussions were residents of cities attempting to increase their web presence and demonstrate a commitment to community policing by displaying evidence of community partnerships through other means on Facebook. Examples include event announcements for Coffee with a Cop, youth programs, social events sponsored by other city agencies, safety tips, crime alerts, simulated traffic stops on how to engage with an officer, agency personnel activities and similar elements.

### *Logistic Models*

**Table 2.** Probability of Police Legitimacy Concern

| Indep. Variables             | B      | Stand. Error | Wald      | Exp(B) |
|------------------------------|--------|--------------|-----------|--------|
| Race                         | 1.340  | .273         | 24.131*   | 3.819  |
| % of White Residence         | .000   | .006         | .001      | 1.000  |
| Police Officers Per Resident | -.115  | .043         | 7.152**   | .891   |
| Gender                       | .115   | .259         | .197      | 1.122  |
| Comm. Policing Presence      | -1.525 | .363         | 17.637*** | .218   |
| Constant                     |        | 1.551        |           |        |
| Nagelkerke R Square          |        | .281         |           |        |
| Chi Square                   |        | 20.736***    |           |        |
| Sample Size                  |        | 341          |           |        |

Note. +p<.10, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

**Table 3.** Assessing Cultural Awareness Through the Citizens' Cultural Awareness Concerns

| Indep. Variables             | B      | Stand. Error | Wald      | Exp(B) |
|------------------------------|--------|--------------|-----------|--------|
| Race                         | 1.183  | .334         | 12.568*** | 3.264  |
| % of White Residence         | .018   | .008         | 4.615*    | 1.018  |
| Police Officers Per Resident | -.131  | .077         | 2.918+    | 1.018  |
| Gender                       | .205   | .325         | .400      | .877   |
| Comm. Policing Presence      | -1.241 | .484         | 6.583**   | 1.228  |
| Constant                     |        | -.707        |           |        |
| Nagelkerke R Square          |        | .331         |           |        |
| Chi Square                   |        | 113.184***   |           |        |
| Sample Size                  |        | 341          |           |        |

Note. +p<.10, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Tables two and three highlight variations among the remarks of different demographic groups within the sample. The results indicate support for the research hypothesis that residents of cities in which police agencies demonstrate a greater commitment to community policing through social media would be less likely to raise social equity and cultural awareness concerns. Residents of cities exposed to greater information on police activities regarding social events, crime information, foot patrols and other forms of community policing were .289 times less likely to post comments highlighting cultural awareness concerns about police actions than others. They were also .363 times less likely to post comments questioning the delivery of socially equitable services. Such a finding offers support to research noting the positive impact of community policing and engagement. By decentralizing police control and connecting with citizens through processes cognizant of the importance of bottom-up approaches, agencies can alter perceptions and repair relationships with racial minorities and the broader community (Williams and Murphy, 1990). Displaying the information through social media allows vulnerable citizens that do not engage through traditional means to gain access to evidence of police efforts to meaningfully include citizens in the process and address their concerns. The significance of more positive feedback among residents of cities with evidence of community engagement through social media is bolstered by Rosenbaum et al.'s (2011) notation that police departments with a greater emphasis on community policing were more likely to have websites displaying community policing efforts than those placing less emphasis on community policing efforts. The mere act of displaying community engagement evidence in a manner easily accessed by a broad array of citizens may demonstrate these agencies' commitment to building legitimacy within the community and contribute to less negative feedback from citizens.

The racial hypothesis stating minorities are more likely to raise social equity and cultural awareness concerns compared to whites is supported. Racial minorities were significantly more likely to raise concerns regarding police services. They were 3.819 times more probable than whites to leave Facebook comments or questions raising equity concerns and 1.183 times more likely to leave post regarding agency actors' lack of cultural awareness. The variations among racial groups not only supports the research hypothesis but also aligns with previous literature noting disparities in both the perceptions and treatment of minority citizens by law enforcement officers. Additional analysis of minority respondents indicates those residing in cities with fewer minorities were notably more prone to raise equity concerns and include the use of words highlighting discriminatory treatment and other disparities in officers use of discretionary authority than minority residents of cities with higher percentages of minorities. Racial minorities residing in cities with less police resources were slightly more likely to highlight a lack of access to culturally competent services in their discussion than minority residents of cities with more appropriate officer to citizen ratios. Additionally, minority women were more likely than their male counterparts to raise equity concerns. The relationship's statistical significance is the only model in which statistically different gender variations are identified.

Support for hypothesis three's statement that 'Residents of cities in which police agencies are understaffed are more likely to raise equity and cultural competency concerns' is also found. The odds ratio for equity (.891) and cultural competency concerns (.877)

indicate a greater probability of citizens raising these concerns in cities where the ratio of police officers per residents is lower. The lack of funding impacts the agencies' abilities to attract and retain officers and creates an environment where workers may encounter longer work hours, lower salaries, higher levels of stress and greater work expectations. Oftentimes, this can increase concerns regarding fairness and equity in such environments and place the most vulnerable citizens at a disadvantage, especially in environments where employees' evaluations include the achievement of predetermined performance measures similar to those found in police departments across the country. For example, budgetary issues in Highland Park, Michigan resulted in the police department averaging 8.34 officers per 10,000 residents. The salary for these employees was significantly below market standard. During the last seven years, the agency has been plagued with cultural and equity concerns including: a lawsuit regarding the wrongful arrest of a same-sex couple in a public setting, outrage of over Facebook evidence displaying officers hitting and kicking a handcuffed African American suspect, federal lawsuits involving the mistreatment of Arab immigrants and multiple investigations of corrupt officers. The concerns for fairness and equity through lawsuits and other forms of grievance are expressed in citizens' comments to police via Facebook. The agencies staffing issues are also evident in their infrequent postings and updates on social media. Similarly, in the City of Inkster, Michigan there were 10.68 officers per 10,000 residents. Internal allegations of suspects being beaten while handcuffed, officers falsifying overtime time sheets and stealing cash from citizens and FBI investigations for corruption culminated in court proceeding where evidence of officers sending racist text during work hours and brutally beating an unarmed African American citizen resulted in an officer being convicted of misconduct and assault and sentenced to prison. Citizens' concerns regarding some of these and other response issues influenced by lack of personnel were expressed in their comments and questions to police.

The assessment of equity concerns failed to produce statistically significant finding and support hypothesis five stating- 'As the percentage of white residents increases the likelihood of citizens raising concerns regarding the delivery of socially equitable and culturally competent policing services will decrease.' However, analysis of cultural competency perceptions yielded significant finding contradicting our research hypothesis. Residents of cities with larger white populations were more likely to include cultural awareness issues in their messages to police. These findings, though important, should be interpreted with caution. One of the study's selection caveats for majority white cities was the presence of highly-publicized incidents involved questionable actions regarding police treatment of citizens and possible violations of their civil rights. In one predominately white city, a white female complained that a young African American male looked at her suspiciously as he waited for a parking space. The young man was quickly surrounded by white officers in cruisers and questioned about his decision to look at the woman to see if she planned to vacate her parking spot in the full restaurant parking area. Sensitivity to cases such as this may have impacted citizens' dialogue.

## Discussion & Research Implications

Social media provides public organizations a valuable and inexpensive means to engage with citizens. The analysis of citizens' post to police agencies via Facebook produced several important findings. First, the development of universal standards, goals and measures regarding the use of social media will aid agencies in their quest to better utilize these mechanisms to connect with constituents. Oversight entities, such as MCOLES, encourage police organizations to utilize Facebook and other social mediums. However, they neglect to include guidelines on best practices, measures to track strengths and weaknesses of its use and long-term goals and objectives. As a result, many public entities have not kept pace with the creative measures and techniques nonprofit and private sectors entities use to engage citizens. They instead adopt traditionalistic and symbolic approaches to policing when using social media. This approach limits their ability to enhance relations with citizens, particularly those whom relationships have historically suffered. This is apparent in the agencies under study as many of them have a small number of followers and limited shares of their Facebook post when compared to other community entities. This impacts the amount of information received through efforts allowing citizens to directly leave post for the agency through a review tab and comment section of their page. Furthermore, it highlights the need for additional social media outreach strategies.

Additionally, the analysis of the data provided via social media warrants future attention. Previous studies have been limited in the assessment of information received from citizens via social media (Kudla and Parnaby, 2018; Huang et al., 2017; Dia et al., 2016; Liberman et al., 2013; Brainard and McNutt, 2010). Presently, no public administration research has incorporated social equity and cultural competency measures into assessments of police social media use. The critical need to address this shortfall has become increasingly necessary due to transitions in communication.

COVID-19 has required agencies to limit face-to-face interactions and expand social media use. As citizens' use of the outlet grows, agencies must ensure communication and services provided are cognizant of cultural differences within the community and offered in a manner that ensures fairness. This will require administrators to incorporate equity measures into the development of future policies guiding social media use. The absence of clear cultural competency and equity measures, objectives and benchmarks will result in the continuation of problems exacerbated by the New Public Management Movement's failure to adequately consider process measures. Our assessment of citizens' communicated concerns via social media highlights this shortfall and demonstrates the need for more equitable and culturally competent police services.

The research found that citizens do raise equity and cultural concerns in their social media communication with police departments. Nearly 40-percent of citizens' post included references to social inequity in service delivery. Approximately 20-percent highlighted the need to revisit employees' commitment to demonstrating cultural competence when servicing citizens. Access to this information can inform training and other forms of information released via social media. For example, Inkster received a great deal of social media criticism regarding its lack of cultural awareness and equity when serving citizens. This led the new

police chief to incorporate the feedback into a response and mandate policy changes; he required all officers to undergo cultural awareness and bias training. News of this training and other efforts to demonstrate cultural awareness in service delivery were frequently released through Facebook. Notable changes in the quality of responses received from citizens followed.

Our development of hypotheses testing whether vulnerable citizens were more likely to raise social equity and cultural competency concerns via social media than others produced results aligning with previous equity studies. Similar to Weitzer and Tuch (2004) and Onyekwuluje and Murty (1995), the output reveal racial minorities were more likely to raise such concerns. Residents of cities with fewer resources or officers were also more likely to raise concerns than other residents. Additionally, citizens residing in cities demonstrating a commitment to engaging in proactive community policing via social media were less likely to raise social equity concerns. Support for each hypothesis and congruency with previous literature indicate interactions captured through social media maybe somewhat reflective of reality. It also creates the opportunity to incorporate the information into more effective social media and general engagement strategies for the agencies.

## Conclusion

Assessments of police agencies use of social media must expand to incorporate cultural and equity measures. The absence of such measures limits the ability to assess the delivery of culturally competent services and build legitimacy among citizens. This assessment of citizens' comments and queries through Facebook reveals that social media can offer insight on citizens' views regarding the delivery of culturally competent and legitimate service delivery. Vulnerable citizens were more likely to express concerns regarding cultural, legitimacy and equity issues. Unfortunately, the majority of these sensitive queries failed to receive an official response from agency personnel. By neglecting to respond, agencies can cause citizens to feel ignored or marginalized (Jones and De Guzman, 2010), thereby decreasing public trust and the probability that they will desire to continue communicate via social media (Brainard and Edlins, 2015). Agency's must engage in a two-way discussion or they will risk further damage to their reputation. The lack of correspondence in the current cities raises questions regarding whether the use of Facebook is symbolic or a meaningful effort to expand beyond ineffective traditionalistic engagement tactics. Continued exploration regarding the need for more culturally aware and equitable services and social media communication is warranted.

Future efforts to assess two-way dialogue with citizens through social media must also seek techniques to overcome data limitation and manipulation. Oftentimes, more experienced police agencies use social media to push information out rather than pulling it in by allowing citizens to leave comments and queries. The absence of this engagement protects the agency from the exposure of organizational weakness, public ridicule by despondent citizens, and more formal complaints due to inactivity. However, it inhibits the ability to build meaningful relationships with populations who feel underserved and disconnected from the agency. When this occurs, the agency forgoes its opportunity to better manage its reputation and build the

necessary connections to assist in reducing crime rates and distrust of agency personnel. Additionally, it also complicates assessment efforts. Researchers must continue to engage these challenges and utilize social media to explore cultural and equity issues in manners similar to the examination of other important public administration concepts.

Social media is quickly becoming one of the most important media outlets for police departments. The personnel responsible for maintaining the accounts wield considerable control over what comments will be allowed to remain posted and which will be removed from the site. This not only have implications for what citizens view, respond to and their perception of the agency, but also how researcher study social media content. If comments critical of the agencies' commitment to culturally competent and socially equitable services are removed, it further hampers the ability to study these issues through social media. Such issues might be minimized through oversight directives outlining uniform practices regarding social media.

Also future studies of two-way dialogue should explore the management of social media accounts. Some agencies have easily identifiable personnel responsible for social media management while others are less structured. This has implications for the quality of the content posted and timeliness of the responses citizens receive. Officers, or qualified personnel, cognizant of cultural differences within the community and how to convey or engage these differences through words and images may serve as a better resource in social media management.

Lastly, the digital divide must be considered as agencies expand engagement through social media. According to the Federal Communication Commission approximately 21 million Americans do have access to the internet (Winslow, 2019). Rural, minority, and impoverished citizens are among those most likely to not have access. Cell phones have contributed to addressing the issue. However, impoverished Black and Hispanic users are likely to have their services interrupted due to an inability to pay (Perrin and Turner, 2019). Policymakers must find ways to continue to bridge the divide or these citizens will potentially be excluded from social engagement and encounter limited access to service delivery.

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