



Chinese police image in official media and public perception: Narratives, convergences, and gaps



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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to explore the degree of alignment between the police image constructed by Chinese state media and public perception, filling a significant gap in current research on the legitimacy of Chinese policing. Employing an inductive qualitative design based on the Gioia methodology and grounded theory coding techniques, the study analyzed 324 news reports published by major state media outlets between August 2024 and August 2025, as well as in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese residents. The analysis identifies seven aggregate dimensions in each dataset and demonstrates both convergence and divergence between media representations and public perceptions. While official media predominantly portray the police as justice guardians, public servants, and dedicated, morally upright professionals, citizens also emphasize the ordinariness of police officers, their exercise of power, and the presence of bureaucratic or crisis-related issues. These findings reveal a symbolic legitimacy gap between idealized narratives and lived experiences. The study contributes empirically grounded evidence on police image formation in contemporary China and provides practical implications for narrowing perceptual divides. It highlights the importance of balanced media communication, enhanced procedural fairness, and participatory public engagement to strengthen the credibility and social embeddedness of police work. By integrating institutional narratives with experiential perspectives, the research offers actionable recommendations for building a more trusted and resonant police image.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by bridging the gap between institutional narratives and public perception. It uses a new estimation methodology, the Gioia approach, to analyze dual-source data. The paper's primary contribution is identifying a "symbolic legitimacy gap" where official heroism diverges from citizens' pragmatic expectations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Police are a core institution of the state, bearing the heavy responsibility of maintaining order, enforcing the law, and exercising legitimate coercive power (Miller, 2023; Sanders & Young, 2012). Since most citizens rarely interact directly with the police, their perceptions of the police are largely influenced by media presentations and public discourse, which in turn affect their expectations, feelings, and evaluations of the police's legitimacy (Vaitkevičiūtė & Dobržinskienė, 2022; Xiao, Coppin, & Van Bavel, 2016).

From the perspective of image theory, police image refers to a set of cognitive and emotional beliefs that individuals hold about the police, which guide their expectations of police behavior (Vila, James, & James, 2018). Hong

(2015) divides police image into three levels: the real image presented in practice, the media image constructed through reports, and the public image formed through direct and indirect experience. This study focuses on the latter two because they are easier to track in empirical research.

China's situation is quite unique, with official media playing a significant role in agenda-setting, and public oversight of the police increasing amidst rapid social change. While research on police legitimacy is growing, systematic empirical comparisons between the state-constructed media image and citizens' own perceptions remain scarce. Existing studies typically examine either media portrayals or public attitudes, rarely analyzing how the two interact and what differences exist (Kang, 2015; Wang, Liu, & Liang, 2020; Wei, 2014). This research gap limits our understanding of how institutional narratives and lived experiences jointly shape police legitimacy.

To fill this gap, this study examines the aspects of "convergence" and "discord." "Convergence" refers to the degree of alignment between media portrayals and public perception in terms of content and tone, while "discord" refers to the areas where significant differences exist. Building upon this, this study further explores the "cognitive gap," that is, the systemic difference between the idealized representation of the institution and the public's evaluation based on their own practical experience.

Using an inductive qualitative design combining media text analysis and semi-structured interviews, this study aims to develop a data-driven account of how the Chinese police are imagined across institutional and public domains. Guided by these aims, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is the image of the Chinese police constructed in official media?
2. How do members of the public perceive and interpret the image of the police?
3. In what ways do media-constructed images and public perceptions converge or diverge?
4. How can we narrow the cognitive gap, enhance trust, and cultivate a more compelling police image?

This study adds new insights to existing literature by systematically comparing the state-constructed police image with the public's perception of the police. The study employs a novel assessment method, combining media text analysis with inductive qualitative interviews. This research is also one of the few studies to explore the gap in the image of the Chinese police. The main contribution of this paper lies in discovering the discrepancy between symbolic narratives and the public's lived experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Media Representations and Public Attitudes Toward the Police

The role of the media in shaping attitudes toward law enforcement has often been underemphasized in policing research. Malone and Dammert (2021) note that trust in the police is grounded not only in personal experiences and observations but also in beliefs and expectations. Because most citizens have limited direct contact with the police Turner and Shum (2025) mediated information becomes a central source from which they infer what the police are like. This is especially salient given the substantial increase in crime-related media content over the last three decades.

Internationally, empirical studies on public views of the police have largely focused on evaluative dimensions such as satisfaction (Bolger, Lytle, & Bolger, 2021; Merenda, Trent, Rinke, & Buchanan, 2021; Paoline & Gau, 2020) attitudes (Dai, 2021; Karim, 2020), confidence (Choi, Yim, & Hicks, 2020; Hu, Dai, DeValve, & Lejeune, 2020; Rosenberger & Dierenfeldt, 2022) and trust (Cao, 2015; Lee, Cao, Kim, & Woo, 2019; Pryce & Chenane, 2021). Many surveys examine whether public perceptions are predominantly positive or negative (Avdija, 2010; Schreurs, Kerstholt, de Vries, & Giebels, 2018). This body of work has identified systematic variation in perceptions of the police across social groups, including differences by race (O'Connor, 2010; Slocum & Wiley, 2018), income (Vitro, Clark, Sherman, Heitzeg, & Hicks, 2022), age (Chow, 2011; Leroux & McShane, 2017), gender (Hitchens, Miller, Payne, Sun, & Castillo, 2023; Piccirillo, 2024) and place of residence (Myhill & Bradford, 2012; Wang & Sun, 2020).

This series of international studies unanimously points out that public perception of the police is the result of both direct and indirect experiences. Direct contact, such as the presence of police at traffic stops or public events,

has a significant impact on public attitudes (Hinds, 2009; Lim & Lee, 2021). Indirect experiences, especially those disseminated through mass media, also play a crucial role (Asad & Zia, 2025). Negative media coverage of police-public conflicts often leads to a more critical view of the police (Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2003); conversely, continuous communication between police agencies and the public, including through social media, can have a positive impact on public attitudes (Kyprianides et al., 2022).

Despite this growing attention to mediated experiences, few studies have directly examined whether the police image promoted by the media aligns with the image perceived by the public. Most research treats media exposure as an explanatory variable for attitudes such as trust or satisfaction, rather than as a site where specific image dimensions of the police are constructed and potentially contested. This gap is particularly pronounced in the Chinese context.

2.2. Empirical Studies on Police Image in China

While the international academic community has conducted extensive research on media presentation, public attitudes, and police legitimacy within various democratic contexts, related research in China has been more fragmented and largely based on institutional considerations. Research on police image in China remains relatively limited and often leans more towards theoretical or normative than empirical analysis (Huang & Wang, 2021). Existing research primarily focuses on conceptual discussions of police image construction, policy-oriented recommendations, or empirical analyses from single sources, with relatively little attention paid to a systematic comparison between media narratives and public perception.

Li (2015) study is one of the earliest and most systematic empirical analyses of the image of police officers in Chinese media. Using appraisal theory and a corpus of Chinese media language, Li examined adjectives, adverbs, and verbs frequently used with "police" or "police officer," focusing on work attitude, professional competence, and functional activities. While this study provides valuable insights into the implicit portrayal of police in the media, it did not incorporate the public perspective or assess the degree of alignment between the media-constructed image and public perception.

Beyond media-focused work, Chinese scholarship on police image has mostly examined citizens' attitudes towards the police in general terms, such as levels of satisfaction, trust, or perceived legitimacy, or discussed police image construction at a conceptual level. Several studies have approached police image from a normative or policy-oriented perspective, offering recommendations for improving the police image, highlighting the role of media communication, and proposing methodological steps for image-building (Han, 2022; Liu, 2019; Wang, 2021). While these contributions are important, they often lack systematic empirical grounding or rely on single data sources.

A small number of empirical studies have begun to explore how different groups in China perceive the police. For instance, Xu and Han (2019) used the word-association method, based on the activation diffusion model, to examine the police image from the perspectives of college students and police officers. By identifying high-frequency words, Xu and Han (2019) analysed how different groups describe the police. However, such approaches capture only relatively general or abstract descriptors and make it difficult to obtain more nuanced and contextually embedded images of the police in the public mind.

Overall, compared with the extensive international literature on police satisfaction, trust, and confidence, Chinese research still lacks empirically grounded studies that simultaneously examine media portrayals and citizens' perceptions. In particular, no study has yet conducted a systematic comparative analysis of the police image deliberately constructed by official media and the police image as perceived by citizens. The present study seeks to address this gap.

2.3. Methods for Exploring Police Image: Surveys, Word Association, and Qualitative Approaches

Methodological approaches to police image research also differ markedly between international and Chinese scholarship. In much of the international literature, large-scale surveys remain the dominant strategy. These studies

commonly rely on standardized measures of satisfaction, trust, or legitimacy, which allow for statistical comparison across populations and national contexts. While analytically efficient, such instruments often conceptualize “the police” as a relatively homogeneous object, offering limited leverage for unpacking the internal dimensions, symbolic meanings, or narrative elements that collectively shape police image.

To address these limitations, some researchers have turned to word-association techniques in order to capture more immediate and less constrained public responses. Rus, Ratiu, Vonas, and Baban (2013) for example, analysed 1,026 statements from Romanian citizens and identified “safety” as the central organizational image of the police. Similar approaches have been applied in the Chinese context. Xu and Han (2019) employed word-association methods to extract high-frequency descriptors across different social groups. Although effective in highlighting salient attributes, these techniques tend to privilege frequency over interpretation, resulting primarily in decontextualized keyword clusters rather than analytically rich accounts of how meanings are produced, negotiated, and embedded in specific social contexts.

In response to the limitations of survey-based and word-association approaches, a number of scholars have adopted qualitative research designs. Mathura (2022) for instance, employed semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore citizens’ perceptions of police roles and functions within a specific national context. Rather than reducing perceptions to isolated descriptors, this approach demonstrates how qualitative methods are particularly effective in capturing context-dependent interpretations, ambivalent evaluations, and the reasoning processes through which citizens make sense of police authority and everyday encounters. Such insights highlight dimensions of meaning-making that are often overlooked or flattened in questionnaire-based instruments and keyword-driven or frequency-oriented analytical techniques.

Considered together, this body of methodological work points to the value of combining different types of data and analytical strategies. Rather than privileging a single method, a more nuanced understanding of police image appears to depend on triangulating structured measurements with interpretive, context-sensitive evidence.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Based on international and Chinese academic research, this study employs a conceptual framework to conceptualize the image of the police as a multi-layered structure formed through the interaction between institutional presentation and public perception. Previous research has highlighted how official media emphasize normative roles such as upholding justice, public service, dedication, and professional competence, while empirical research reveals additional dimensions related to authority, ordinariness, and institutional risks. Synthesizing these research directions, this framework distinguishes between the symbolic image construction in official media and the formation of the experiential image among the public, focusing on the degree of convergence and divergence between the two. This framework directly provides the basis for the analytical dimensions identified in the results section and also lays the conceptual foundation for examining the cognitive gap between contemporary Chinese media narratives and the public's understanding of policing.

3. METHODS

3.1. Media Data Collection

This study first examined how the image of the police was constructed in official media reports. Baidu News was used as the search portal because it is one of the most widely used Chinese-language news aggregators and indexes a broad range of national and provincial news outlets. In the advanced search interface, the following criteria were specified: (1) the mandatory keyword was set to “police”, and at least one of the additional keywords “image” or “China” had to appear in the text; (2) the time period for the search results was restricted to news reports published between 1 August 2024 to 31 August 2025; and (3) the query terms were allowed to appear anywhere on the web page rather than only in the headline.

To ensure that the analysis focused on official media constructions, only reports issued by recognised official news organisations, such as central and provincial Party-state media and public security authorities, were included. Commercial entertainment outlets, personal blogs, non-official local news portals, and “soft news” items without clear sourcing were excluded.

The initial search returned 384 news items. After the Baidu News system automatically removed exact duplicates, 364 reports remained. The author then manually reviewed all items and excluded articles with different headlines but reporting the same event, as well as reports that did not contain substantive descriptions relevant to the police image. This procedure resulted in a final corpus of 324 news reports for analysis. These reports covered a wide range of policing activities, including crime control, public order maintenance, and community service, and provided rich material for examination

3.2. Interview Sampling and Data Collection

To capture citizens’ perceptions of the police image, the study also employed semi-structured interviews with members of the public. Given the specific online environment in China, it is difficult to obtain complete and authentic views solely from comments or posts on mainstream social media. Moreover, the image that individuals hold of the police is a mental construct formed through experiences and socialisation, encompassing both cognitive and emotional components. Prior expectations derived from earlier encounters with the police influence how subsequent events are interpreted and evaluated (Augoustinos & Walker, 1996). Semi-structured interviews, therefore, offered an appropriate way to elicit participants’ experiences, judgements, and feelings in greater depth.

In line with recommendations on qualitative sample sizes (Boddy, 2016), 30 Chinese citizens were interviewed about their overall image of the police in China. A non-probability qualitative sampling strategy was adopted to achieve variation in gender, age, educational background, and region. Participants were recruited through an online announcement and subsequent snowball sampling, which helped reach residents from different parts of the country. All participants were Chinese citizens, provided written informed consent, and voluntarily took part in the study. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee under reference number UMREC_2650. Table 1 presents the sample distribution. It explores how official media constructs the image of the Chinese police.

Table 1. Distributions of the sample.

Item	Category	Number	Proportion
Gender	Male	15	50%
	Female	15	50%
Age	Under 25 years old	6	20%
	26 to 45 years old	13	43.3%
	Over 45 years old	11	36.6%
Educational background	College degree and below	5	16.7%
	Undergraduate	14	46.7%
	Master's degree and above	6	20%
Area	South	12	40%
	North	8	26.7%
	Central	10	33.3%

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and convenient locations agreed upon with the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. An interview guide was used that focused on three main aspects: (1) participants’ overall impressions of the police; (2) their current image of the police and how it has formed or changed; and (3) their information sources and concrete experiences with the police. The core open-ended questions are summarised in Table 2.

Interviews prioritised allowing participants to express their thoughts with minimal interruption so as to capture their genuine views and feelings. Interviewers took detailed notes during the conversations, and all interviews were

audio-recorded with participants' permission. The notes and recordings were subsequently checked against each other to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the qualitative data.

Table 2. Outline for semi-structured interview.

Serial number	Open-ended question
1	Please tell me in detail what you think of the police.
2	How would you describe the current image of the police in your mind?
3	From where do you usually learn news about the police? Please recall one or two examples and tell me how you judged them at the time.
4	Have you had any direct contact with the police? How did you feel about these encounters?

3.3. Data analysis

As with all qualitative research, the researcher's stance can influence the interpretation of politically sensitive topics. As a researcher educated in China but conducting this study within an international academic framework, I am familiar with both the institutional environment of police work and the normative expectations implied in official discourse. This dual perspective provides valuable contextual insights but may also affect the interpretation of media narratives and interview transcripts. To mitigate the influence of personal, cultural, or political assumptions, the analysis process strictly followed a data-driven coding procedure, with explicit documentation of analytical decisions and peer review throughout. While these reflective practices cannot eliminate subjectivity, they help ensure that interpretations are based on empirical materials, rather than the researcher's preconceived notions.

This study adopts an inductive analytic approach, drawing on the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) together with classic grounded theory techniques (Glaser, 1978; Jia & Heng, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to develop a data-driven dimensional structure of police image. In contrast to earlier Chinese studies that relied mainly on media corpus statistics (e.g., collocation patterns or adjective frequencies) or single-source analyses of public attitudes, this study integrates official media texts and semi-structured interviews within a unified analytical framework.

This dual-source inductive strategy allows concepts and relationships to emerge from the data rather than testing predefined models, enabling the analysis to move beyond isolated descriptions and examine the alignment or divergence between institutional narratives and lived experience. Consistent with the iterative logic of the Gioia et al. (2013) method and grounded theory, all media reports and interview transcripts were treated as textual data and analysed through continuous comparison, theoretical abstraction, and cross-source triangulation. This approach facilitates the identification of convergences, divergences, and cognitive gaps between media representations and public perceptions that have received limited systematic attention in prior research.

In the first-order, informant-centred stage, the data were examined sentence by sentence. Text segments describing police portrayals or perceptions were assigned descriptive codes closely reflecting the language used in media reports or by interviewees. These first-order codes captured concrete expressions, evaluations, and narratives related to police image. Through ongoing comparison, similar codes were grouped, merged, and refined, allowing preliminary first-order concepts to emerge across both official media discourse and citizens' accounts.

In the second-order, theory-centred stage, the analysis shifted from informant terms to researcher interpretation. First-order concepts were compared with each other and with the original data to develop more abstract explanatory categories. Related concepts were then clustered into second-order themes, capturing broader patterns in media constructions of police image and public perceptions. To enhance analytic reliability, two researchers independently coded portions of the data and resolved discrepancies through discussion. Regular peer review and analytic memos were used to maintain consistency and transparency throughout the coding process.

Subsequently, the relationships among the second-order themes were examined to derive higher-level aggregate dimensions that reflected the core dimensions of the police image in this study. These aggregate dimensions provided

an integrated, theoretically meaningful structure for comparing official media constructions and citizens' perceptions. Coding and refinement continued until no substantively new first-order concepts or second-order themes appeared, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached. To ensure validity, emerging findings were cross-checked against representative excerpts and re-evaluated in light of the broader literature on police image and legitimacy. The final data structure, linking first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions for both the media and interview data, is presented in Figure 1. It offers a visual summary of how the police image is constructed at different levels of abstraction and provides the basis for the findings reported in the next section.

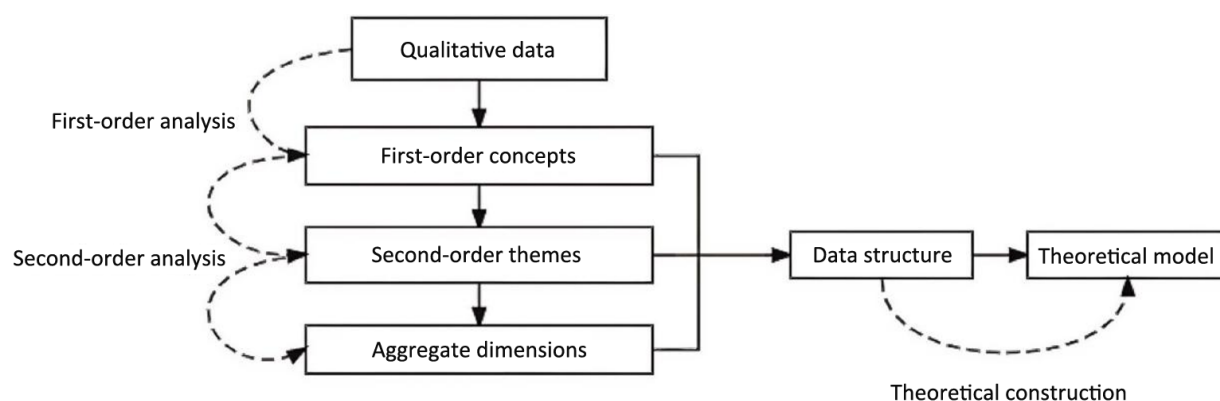


Figure 1. Data analysis flowchart.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Presentation of Police Image in Official Media

Based on the analysis of 324 news reports, seven aggregate dimensions of the police image were identified in official media discourse (see Figure 2): justice guardian, public servant, willingness to dedicate, integrity, patriotism, respect for one's career, good character, and professionalism. Overall, official media consistently portray the police as protectors of public security and social order, dedicated public servants who endure hardship and risk, and morally upright professionals characterised by loyalty, discipline, and competence.

The word-frequency analysis provides additional support for these patterns. All reports were processed using a software-assisted text-mining workflow in R (quanteda and tidytext). The corpus was cleaned by removing Chinese stop-words, punctuation, duplicate characters, and non-semantic particles, and term frequencies were normalised by total token count to ensure comparability across texts of different lengths. As shown in Table 3, high-frequency terms such as "secure," "public security," "safety," "attack," "enforce the law," "justice," "service," and "loyal" correspond closely to the justice guardian and public servant dimensions, indicating that these roles are the most salient themes in official media representations. This preprocessing step ensures that observed frequency patterns reflect substantive thematic emphasis rather than artefacts of text length or grammatical noise.

Table 3. Word frequency reported by official media.

Vocabulary	Secure	Attack	Public security	Epidemic situation	People
Proportion	65%	56%	45%	44%	39%
Vocabulary	Safety	Maintenance	Enforce the law	Justice	Promote
Proportion	38%	37%	33%	33%	33%
Vocabulary	Service	Spirit	Loyal	Outstanding	Advanced
Proportion	33%	30%	30%	29%	28%
Vocabulary	Be on duty	Guard	Persistence	Construct	Patrol
Proportion	27%	27%	26%	23%	22%

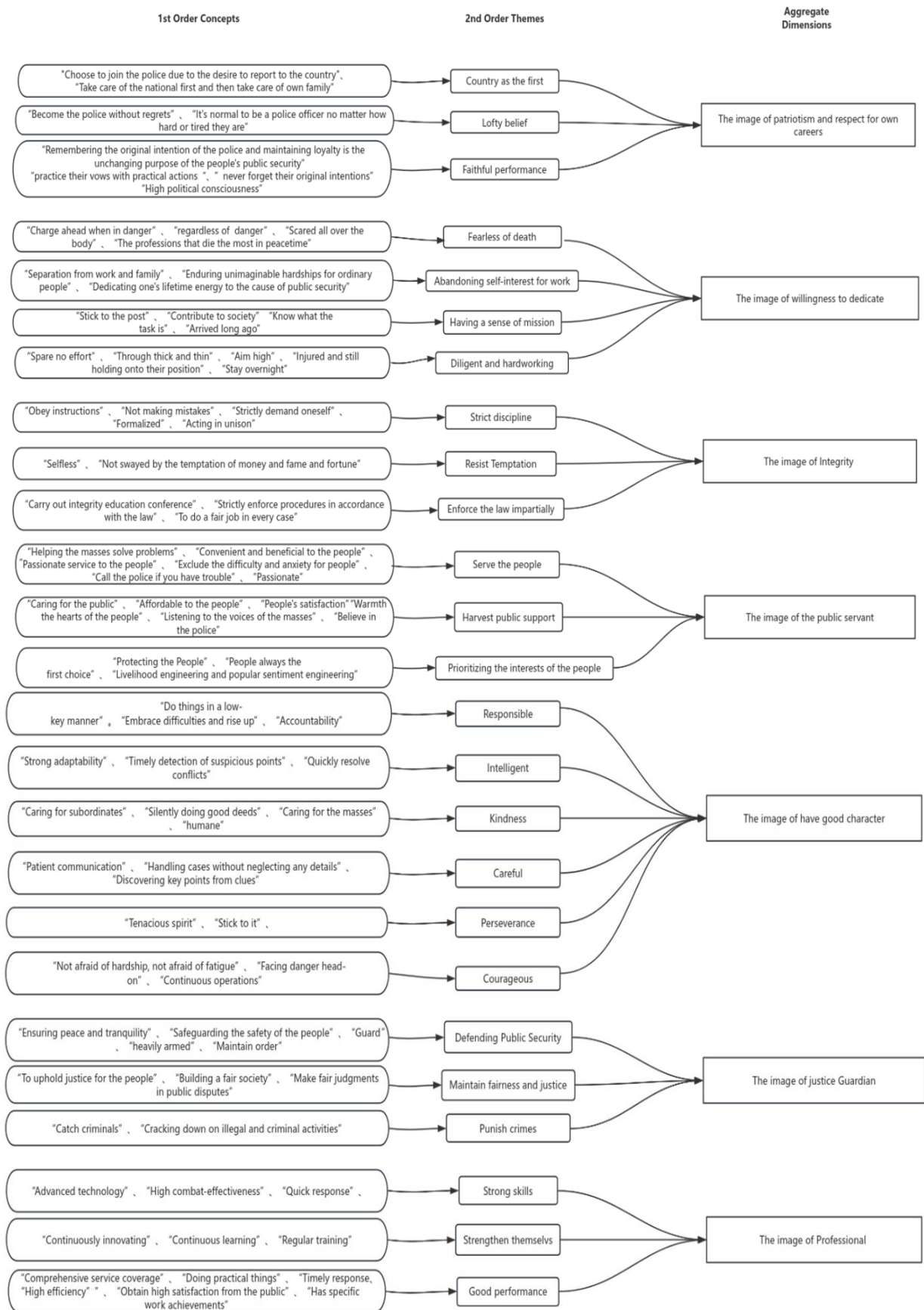


Figure 2. Presentation of the Police Image in Official Media.

4.2. Presentation of Police Image in Public Perception

The analysis of interview data reveals a more complex and multi-layered image of the police in public perception. As shown in Figure 3, seven aggregate dimensions were identified: justice guardian, public servant, dedicated, majestic, ordinary people, having power, and having a crisis.

On the positive side, citizens also describe the police as justice guardians who “ensure peace and tranquillity”, “safeguard the safety of the people”, and “crack down on illegal and criminal activities”. One interviewee commented:

“Seeing the police out there makes me feel safe that they are protecting us.” (INT3)

Similarly, the public servant image is salient. Many participants emphasised that when they encounter problems, they naturally think of turning to the police:

“I have seen the slogan ‘Serve the people’ since I was a child, and if there is a problem, go to the police, so now when I encounter a problem, I think of the police first.” (INT11)

A third shared dimension is dedication. Interviewees frequently mentioned that officers “sacrifice at work”, “are busy day after day”, and have a “tough profession”. However, unlike the “uncomplaining” mentality emphasized in official narratives, the public primarily views dedication as an objective fact; the work is hard, long, and dangerous, and does not necessarily imbue it with a heroic motive.

Beyond these shared perceptions, the public also developed some unique views. First, police officers are often seen as authoritative or awe-inspiring figures. Descriptions such as “unsmiling,” “serious,” and “giving a sense of superiority” reflect a social distance and a certain aura of authority. Second, many respondents described police officers as ordinary people. Those with personal contact or acquaintance with police officers emphasized that police are “just doing an ordinary job” and “not as noble as portrayed”:

“I know one or two friends who are police officers. They’re just ordinary people, not that noble... They just happen to be in this job, and their work involves solving these problems.” (INT 4)

Some participants explicitly stated that it’s more reasonable to view police as professionals rather than idealized heroes, and warned that excessively high moral expectations could backfire:

“If you assign them too many connotations or specific positive qualities, once they fail to meet my expectations, I feel they’re not a real police officer in my eyes.” (INT 1)

Third, the public is strongly concerned about the power possessed by the police, both formal law enforcement powers and symbolic authority. Respondents pointed out that the police “have a lot of power,” are “symbols of privilege,” and can “command the public.” For some, this power is reassuring, but for others, it raises concerns:

“For example, if I encounter trouble and the police can’t meet my needs, I feel they’re abusing their power. Why do the police have so much power?” (INT 30)

Fourth, citizens also construct an image of a crisis surrounding the police. This dimension includes perceptions of corruption, inadequate work, and dissatisfaction during contact. Participants mentioned “corrupt officials arrested”, “uneven quality”, “low efficiency”, and “formalism” in handling cases. Negative experiences in everyday encounters, such as perceived rudeness, low efficiency, or the need for personal connections to solve problems, feed into this crisis image:

“When I was applying for a residence permit, the policeman seemed to be deliberately trying to embarrass me, and his efficiency was relatively low.” (INT27).

“I feel that the whole police bureaucracy is relatively heavy... Sometimes I see that people around me give money to get things done, which shows that the police force is corrupt.” (INT7).

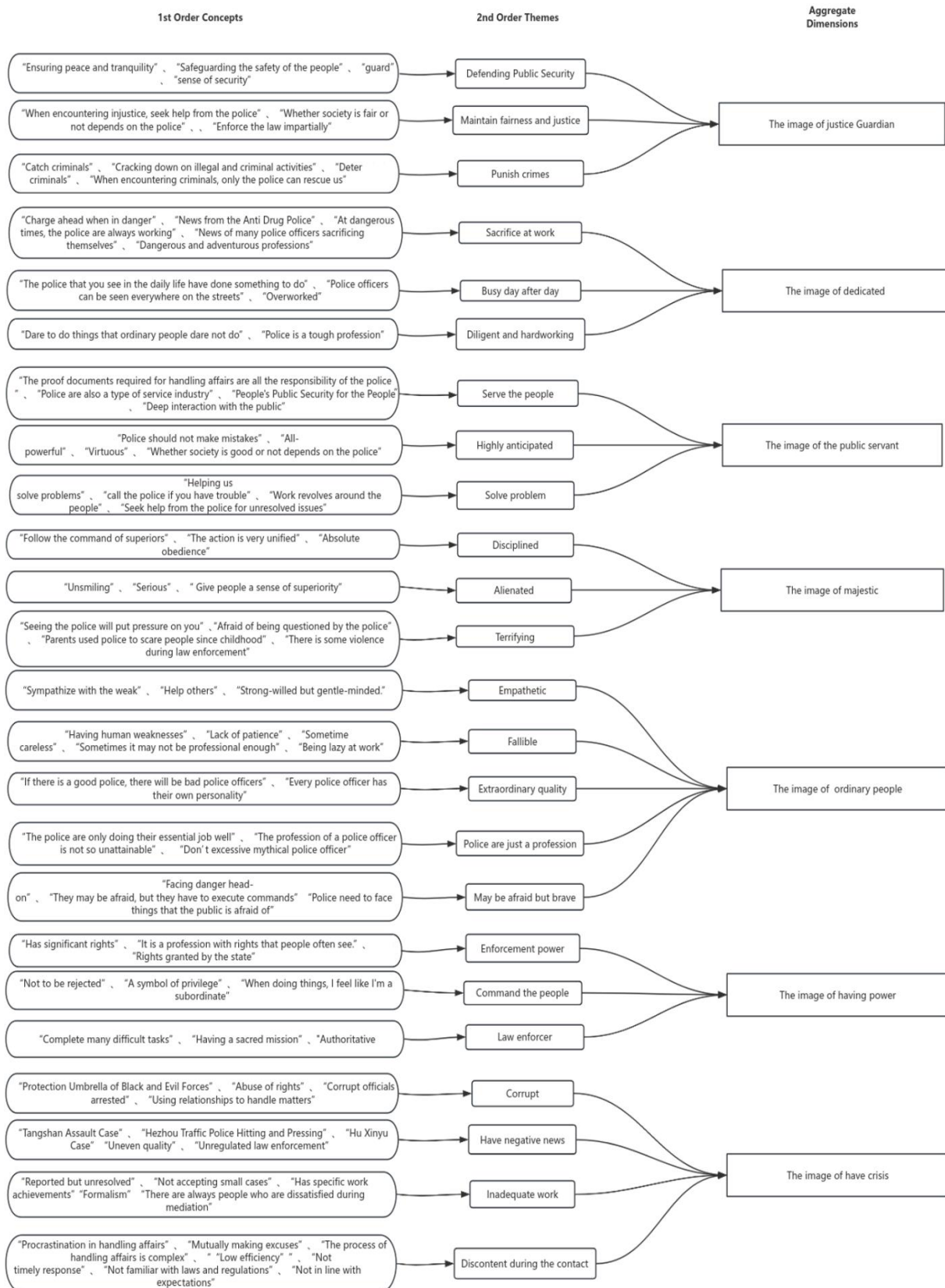


Figure 3. Presentation of the Police Image that the public perceived.

4.3. Convergences and Divergences Between Media and Public Images

A comparison of the two data sets (Figure 4) shows that three aggregate dimensions, justice guardian, public servant, and dedication, are shared by both official media representations and public perceptions.

Four dimensions appear only in the official media data: integrity, patriotism, respect for one's career, good character, and professionalism.

Four dimensions appear only in the public data: majestic, ordinary people, having power, and having a crisis.

These overlaps and differences provide the basis for the analysis developed in the discussion section.

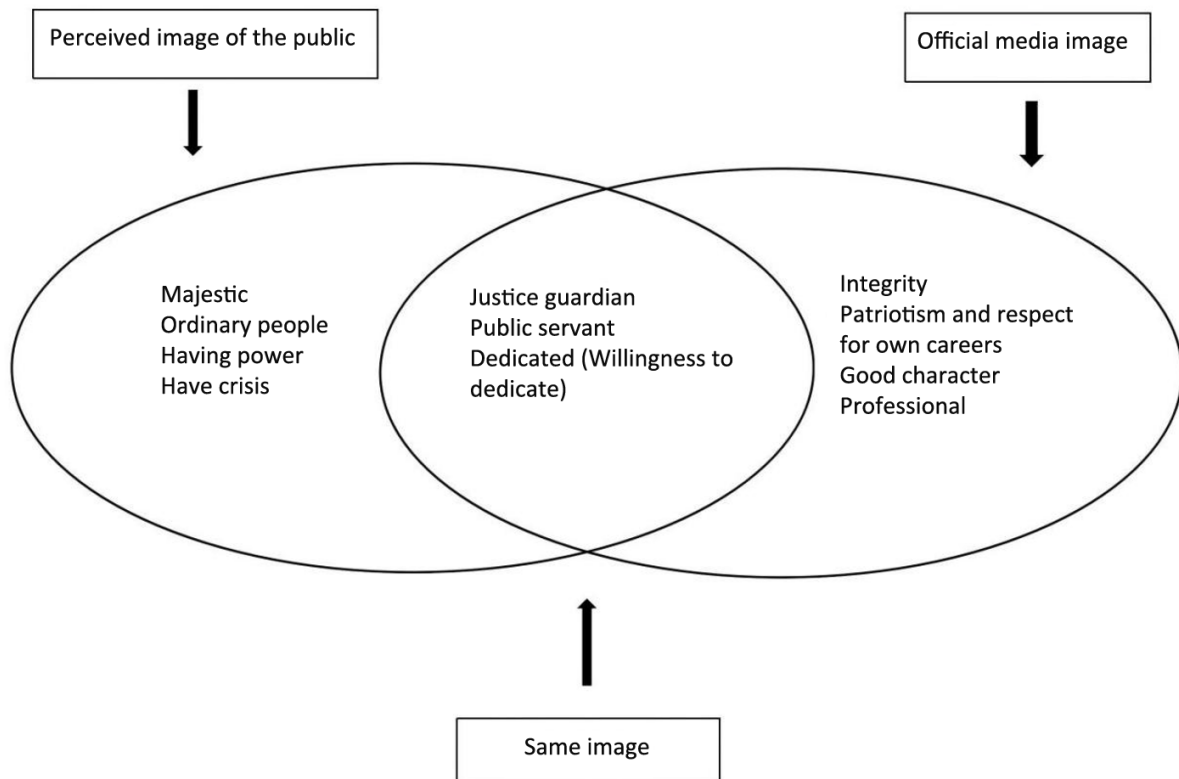


Figure 4. Comparison of the police image reported by official media and the police image perceived by the public.

5. DISCUSSION

This study compared how the image of the Chinese police is constructed in official media and how it is perceived by citizens. Analysis of the two data sets revealed seven aggregate dimensions in each, three of which, justice, guardianship, public service, and dedication, were common to both, while others diverged. Official media framed the police as morally exemplary figures, emphasising integrity, patriotism, respect for one's career, good character, and professionalism. In contrast, citizens portrayed the police not only as justice guardians and dedicated public servants but also as powerful yet ordinary individuals who exercise authority and face crises and risks. Notably, the public perception included two related but analytically distinct dimensions: “majestic,” referring to the symbolic and affective aura projected by officers, such as seriousness, distance, and formality in appearance and behaviour, and “having power,” which denotes the substantive institutional authority the police possess to influence procedures, outcomes, and citizens' experiences. The overlap between institutional and public perspectives indicates that core normative expectations about policing, protecting justice, ensuring safety, and serving the people have been effectively communicated through official channels, establishing a symbolic basis for legitimacy. At the same time, the divergences, particularly regarding perceptions of authority and crisis, expose a gap between idealised representation and lived experience, where everyday encounters produce ambivalence, scrutiny, and critical reflection.

The findings indicate that official media consistently advance a narrative emphasizing police heroism and collectivism, portraying officers as disciplined, selfless, and morally upright public servants. This representation is closely aligned with the ideological orientation of state communication, foregrounding institutional integrity and moral authority. However, when citizens' everyday encounters with the police diverge from this idealized portrayal, the gap between narrative and experience may generate distance rather than identification.

By contrast, participants' accounts reveal a more pragmatic and multidimensional view of the police, describing officers as professionals operating under bureaucratic constraints, human limitations, and situational pressures. Although many respondents acknowledged police dedication, they also reported dissatisfaction related to inefficiency, rudeness, or perceived authoritarian practices. Consistent with prior research, these evaluations were shaped primarily by direct experience, with negative encounters exerting a disproportionate influence on overall attitudes (Lim & Lee, 2021). Even isolated instances of procedural unfairness or discourteous behaviour were described as having lasting effects on perceptions of police legitimacy.

This asymmetry between idealized images and critical perceptions of reality is evident in various societies. Previous research has shown that unpleasant encounters, bureaucratic rigidity, and perceived abuse of power are key causes of damaged images (Awan, Brookes, Powell, & Stanwell, 2019; Onyango, 2022). Consistent with these findings, participants in this study attributed their dissatisfaction to what they described as excessive formality, lack of responsiveness, and limited transparency in policing. These perceptions have gradually shaped a "crisis image" of the police, where the agency is perceived as both authoritative and vulnerable. The contrast between the moralizing, heroic discourse propagated by the media and the pragmatic, sometimes disillusioned, evaluations from the public reflects a phenomenon that can be termed the "symbolic legitimacy gap": the state articulates what the police should represent, while the public judges them based on their own experiences.

Bridging this cognitive gap requires a recalibration of both police representation and everyday interaction with the public. First, official communication would benefit from a more balanced and humanized narrative that combines professionalism with realism. Presenting police officers as competent yet ordinary actors operating within complex social constraints may foster empathy and enhance credibility. By contrast, overly idealized portrayals risk appearing detached from everyday experience and may generate disappointment or cynicism when expectations are unmet. Media coverage that acknowledges operational challenges, ethical dilemmas, and ongoing institutional reforms is therefore more likely to support a resilient and believable police image.

Second, consistent with research on satisfaction and legitimacy (Gurinskaya & Nalla, 2020; Moreira, Nunes, & Ferreira, 2015), the findings highlight procedural fairness, effectiveness, and civility as three central pillars of image credibility. Improvements in these areas, through training, supervision, and clearer behavioural standards, are likely to exert a more durable influence on public trust than symbolic or image-driven campaigns alone. Third, the analysis underscores the importance of participatory and sustained communication. Public perceptions of policing should be addressed as an ongoing process rather than a crisis-driven response. Mechanisms such as regular citizen surveys, community consultation, and accessible complaint channels can function as early indicators of emerging dissatisfaction and facilitate institutional learning. Encouraging two-way interaction helps frame the police as a responsive public institution rather than a distant authority, echoing Baber and McMaster (2016) argument that public attitudes are shaped cumulatively through everyday experience.

In summary, the findings address all four research questions. Official media constructs a coherent yet idealized image of the police (RQ1), whereas public perceptions grounded in daily encounters are more complex and ambivalent (RQ2). Although convergence exists around core values, discrepancies emerge from misalignments between symbolic representation and routine interaction (RQ3). Bridging this gap requires coordination between image construction, institutional fairness, and continuous participatory engagement (RQ4). On this basis, the study proposes a dialogical model of police image formation that links top-down symbolic communication with bottom-up experiential feedback, recognizing legitimacy as an outcome of sustained interaction shaped by fairness, empathy, and communication.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study compared official media representations of the Chinese police with citizens' perceptions based on 324 news reports and 30 interviews. Three shared dimensions, justice, guardianship, public service, and dedication, demonstrate partial alignment between institutional narratives and lived experience, while divergences related to

ordinariness, discretionary authority, and bureaucratic inefficiencies reveal persistent perceptual gaps. These findings suggest that police image in China is jointly shaped by state-led communication and everyday encounters, making balanced, realistic representation essential for strengthening legitimacy.

Practically, aligning idealised portrayals with routine policing realities requires enhanced procedural fairness, civility, and transparency, supported by long-term public engagement rather than reactive crisis communication. More authentic, participatory communication strategies may help transform symbolic trust into experiential trust.

This study has several limitations. The qualitative sample, while diverse, is not completely representative, and future work could employ larger or stratified samples. The media corpus includes only official outlets; incorporating commercial or social media would broaden the scope. The timeframe captures a specific period, and longitudinal designs could track shifts in police image over time. Interview data may also be influenced by social desirability when discussing sensitive topics. Future studies could use anonymous surveys, vignette-based methods, or mixed approaches to mitigate bias and deepen understanding of how police images are constructed and contested.

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