


RAPID COMMUNICATION



Public perceptions of police officers who wear pins or patches on their uniform

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ABSTRACT

Questions surrounding the display of pins and patches by police officers are receiving tremendous attention in Canada. However, no known research has explored how such accessories may impact public perceptions. To inform this discussion, we examined how 524 Canadians perceived an officer wearing various pins and patches. Participants rated eight photographs of the officer, once without any pins or patches and once when wearing each of the seven different pins or patches, on nine items (e.g., approachable, calm, competent). The results suggest that, compared to when wearing no pin or patch, the officer was perceived more positively when wearing the Breast Cancer Awareness pin, a Poppy, or the Gay Pride patch, but more negatively when wearing the Black Lives Matter or Punisher patch. We observed no significant effect for the Fallen Officer pin or the Thin Blue Line patch. We discuss our results with respect to research, policy, and practice.

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Questions surrounding the display of pins and patches by police officers are receiving tremendous public and political attention in Canada. Debates surrounding particular pins and patches (e.g., the Punisher patch¹ and the Thin Blue Line patch²) have permeated town halls, police board meetings, council chambers, and executive offices across the nation, with conversations continuing even as we write this article (e.g., Steacy, 2022; The Canadian Press, 2022; Toy, 2022; Weichel, 2022). Critiques of these pins and patches often stem from concerns about the public's perception of what they symbolise, particularly when worn by police.

In response to these concerns, many police services in Canada have banned the display of certain pins and patches. For example, a Toronto police officer was ordered to remove a Punisher patch from his uniform, which he faced disciplinary action for wearing (Westoll, 2020). Numerous police services have also banned their officers from wearing the Thin Blue Line patch, including Canada's national police force, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, whose membership reacted with much contention to the decision (Quan, 2020). Resulting conversations about these types of pins and patches have forced police services to revisit their dress and department policies, but such services currently have little data to rely on when formulating policy decisions.

Research has confirmed that officer appearance can influence public perceptions of the police. For example, uniform colour, style, condition, and accoutrements have all been recently examined and shown to have a powerful impact on how the public views officers (e.g., with respect to approachability, friendliness, trustworthiness, competency, professionalism, etc.; Blaskovits et al.,

2022; Jenkins et al., 2021; Simpson & Sandrin, 2022; Simpson & Sargeant, 2022; Simpson, 2017, 2020; Thielgen et al., 2020). However, no research that we are aware of has explored how the pins and patches that some officers may wear on their uniform might impact public perceptions.

Compared to uniform colour or style, certain pins and patches might have an even greater impact on public perceptions of police officer qualities. Unlike standard-issue uniforms and equipment, which are generally distributed by organisations and worn by all officers, wearing pins and patches often reflect personal choices by officers to include the symbol on their uniform. Much like accoutrements, pins and patches might act as ‘signals of intent’ and be an important means by which police officers ‘nonverbally communicate their philosophies and intentions to the public’ (Simpson, 2020, p. 243).³ By visibly displaying a pin or patch on their uniform, the officer may be implying their support for the cause behind the pin or patch. Depending upon the cause, and/or how the public perceives that cause, the pin or patch could change how the public perceives the officer. The current study set out to explore this untested hypothesis.

As part of this rapid communication, we first describe our methods and materials. Next, we describe our results, with attention to potential differences in participants’ perceptions of an officer when wearing versus not wearing various pins and patches. Finally, we discuss our results with respect to research, policy, and practice.

Methods

Participants

The participant sample consisted of 524 individuals recruited through a Qualtrics panel, which was set up to collect a representative sample of Canadians. The sample included nearly equal proportions of female (51.3%) and male (48.5%) participants, with 0.2% of participants preferring not to disclose their gender. The average age of participants was 47.64 years ($SD = 17.2$). The majority of participants identified as White (76.1%). The remaining participants identified as East Asian (6.3%), South Asian (5.0%), Black (4.0%), another group (6.8%), or preferred not to answer (1.7%). The large majority of participants self-reported that they resided in an urban (79.6%) versus a rural (20.4%) area. With respect to political affiliation, 31.3% of the sample identified as Liberal, 21.9% identified as Conservative, 16.0% identified as a New Democrat, 20.4% identified as having no political affiliation, and the remaining participants affiliated with another Canadian political party (5.5%) or preferred not to answer the question (4.8%).

Materials

Participants were presented with eight photographs of an officer wearing various pins and patches (see Figure 1). These included: a control photograph (no pin or patch), a Black Lives Matter patch, a Thin Blue Line patch, a Breast Cancer Awareness pin, a Fallen Officer pin, a Poppy, a Gay Pride patch, and a Punisher patch. The pin or patch was located in the same place on the officer (over the heart) in each photograph. A magnified version of the pin or patch was also included in the top-left corner of the photograph to ensure that the details of the pin or patch could be seen by participants. Ensuring that participants were able to see the pin or patch was a particular concern given that the study could be completed on hand-held devices, meaning that the photographs could be quite small. The same White, male officer was used in each photograph to control for any effects that officer age, gender, or race could have on the results (the source photograph was obtained from a public search engine).

Participants were asked to rate each photograph on nine items using 5-point scales, ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree.’ Each scale corresponded to an item that could be used to describe the pictured officer. These items included: (1) approachable, (2) calm, (3) competent, (4) fair, (5) honest, (6) kind, (7) likely to act respectfully, (8) worthy of respect, and (9) suitable for the



Figure 1. Photographic stimuli used in the current study. *The actual photographs in the study were presented in colour and can be accessed here: [https://osf.io/agqu2/].*

policing profession. The selection of these items was based on three considerations: (1) their relevance to current police practices and philosophies, (2) similar outcomes used in past research (e.g., Simpson & Sargeant, 2022), and (3) our understanding of the reasons why some patches are being banned (e.g., that members of the public do not view officers who wear them as being suitable for the policing profession; Westoll, 2020).

Procedure

The study received ethics clearance from Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (Clearance #117612). The entire study was conducted online using Qualtrics. Data collection took place between 10 August 2022 and 21 August 2022.⁴ Participants were first presented with an informed consent form. As part of this consent form, participants were told that they would be presented with photographs of an officer wearing various pins and patches and that they would be asked to rate those photographs on various scales. Those who consented were then presented with the eight photographs in Figure 1 in random order. Following each photograph, participants were asked to rate the photograph on the nine items highlighted above. For each photograph, these items were presented in random order. After the last ratings were provided,⁵ participants were presented with a debriefing form and thanked for their participation.

Analytic strategy

Consistent with recent research (e.g., Simpson & Sargeant, 2022), and given our within-subject design, we employed a series of *t*-tests to test for differences in participants' perceptions of the officer. Ratings of each photograph of the officer wearing a pin or patch were compared against

ratings of the control photograph (i.e., no pin or patch). All scales were centred around 0 (i.e., 'Strongly Disagree' = -2 and 'Strongly Agree' = 2) and all tests were assessed against the $p < 0.05$ standard.

Results

As seen in Table 1, the results of the analyses are clear. Relative to when wearing no pin or patch, the officer was rated more positively across the items when wearing the Breast Cancer Awareness pin or the Poppy. The officer was also rated more positively when wearing the Gay Pride patch (although the differences for items related to competency and suitability for the policing profession did not reach statistical significance). In contrast, the officer was rated more negatively across the items when wearing the Black Lives Matter patch or Punisher patch relative to when wearing no pin or patch. We observed no differences in perceptions of the officer when wearing the Fallen Officer pin or the Thin Blue Line patch (except for a very marginal difference for approachability for the latter). Importantly, some variation across items for even the same pin or patch was also observed. For example, when wearing the Breast Cancer Awareness pin or the Gay Pride patch, participants exhibited the greatest differences from the control values in their ratings for 'approachable' and 'kind'. Another noteworthy finding is that the greatest differences from the control values for the Black Lives Matter patch and the Punisher patch were associated with ratings for 'suitability for the policing profession'.

Table 1. Results of t-tests comparing participants' ratings of the officer when wearing pins or patches to the control photograph.

	Approachable	Calm	Competent	Fair	Honest	Kind	Likely to act respectfully	Worthy of respect	Suitable for policing
Control	0.54	0.61	0.64	0.51	0.49	0.44	0.61	0.72	0.68
Thin Blue Line	0.62	0.63	0.69	0.51	0.52	0.52	0.66	0.77	0.75
Difference from control	0.09*	0.02	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.07	0.04	0.05	0.07
Black Lives Matter	0.33	0.42	0.50	0.35	0.37	0.28	0.40	0.54	0.38
Difference from control	0.20***	0.19***	0.14**	0.17***	0.12**	0.16***	0.21***	0.18***	0.30***
Breast Cancer	0.84	0.86	0.79	0.74	0.69	0.76	0.86	0.94	0.83
Difference from control	0.31***	0.25***	0.15***	0.23***	0.20***	0.32***	0.25***	0.22***	0.15***
Fallen Officer	0.58	0.62	0.65	0.53	0.52	0.47	0.61	0.75	0.72
Difference from control	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.03
Poppy	0.89	0.86	0.88	0.79	0.80	0.76	0.96	1.04	0.98
Difference from control	0.35***	0.25***	0.23***	0.28***	0.31***	0.32***	0.34***	0.32***	0.30***
Gay Pride	0.81	0.78	0.70	0.71	0.65	0.72	0.84	0.82	0.73
Difference from control	0.27***	0.17***	0.06	0.20***	0.16***	0.28***	0.23***	0.10*	0.05
Punisher	-0.05	0.11	0.16	0.00	0.07	-0.05	0.01	0.09	0.00
Difference from control	0.59***	0.50***	0.48***	0.51***	0.41***	0.49***	0.61***	0.63***	0.68***

Differences are calculated via raw means, so any perceived discrepancies are the result of rounding.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

We were also interested in how various demographic variables related to participant ratings, and so we conducted exploratory analyses to examine this issue. These analyses suggest that, for certain qualities, younger participants sometimes viewed the officer wearing the Thin Blue Line patch more negatively than participants in some of the older age groups. These analyses also suggest that younger participants sometimes viewed the officer wearing the Black Lives Matter patch more positively than participants in some of the older age groups. In addition, for certain qualities, participants who identified as Liberal sometimes viewed the officer wearing the Gay Pride patch more positively than participants who identified as Conservative. No other obvious demographic trends were observed with respect to participant ratings.

Discussion

As part of the present research, we contribute to broader discussions surrounding the pins and patches sometimes worn by police by empirically assessing the perceptual effects of various pins and patches among a large sample of Canadians. Our analyses, which compared participants' ratings of photographs of a uniformed officer with and without each pin or patch, revealed several important findings. For example, whereas the display of the Breast Cancer Awareness pin, the Poppy, and the Gay Pride patch all exhibited positive perceptual effects, the display of the Black Lives Matter patch and Punisher patch exhibited negative perceptual effects. The display of the Thin Blue Line patch and the Fallen Officer pin exhibited no significant perceptual effects (except for one marginally significant effect for the former).

In addition, variation across item ratings was observed for certain pins and patches, potentially signalling the specific qualities that these symbols are associated with, and how this translates into perceptions of police officers who wear these accessories. For example, people likely associate the Gay Pride patch with qualities like acceptance and inclusivity, which may make officers who wear this patch seem particularly approachable and kind. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter patch and the Punisher patch may be seen as divisive. This may run counter to public expectations that police officers treat every citizen the same, leading people to see officers who wear these patches as being less suitable for the policing profession.

When parsed by participant characteristics, we also found that the effects of some pins and patches varied by participant group (although participants generally exhibited positive perceptions of the pictured officer). For example, younger participants sometimes reported more negative perceptions of the officer when wearing the Thin Blue Line patch and more positive perceptions of the officer when wearing the Black Lives Matter patch than older participants, and participants who identified as Liberal sometimes reported more positive perceptions of the officer when wearing the Gay Pride patch than participants who identified as Conservative. These findings reflect the complexity of factoring public opinion into a police organisation's dress and deportment policies: it is unlikely that a diverse public will ever be entirely satisfied with the appearance of all police officers at all times.

Although we do not have the necessary data to uncover the exact mechanism underpinning the perceptual effects we observed, we suspect that it may be similar to that of accoutrements. As argued in the Introduction, visibly wearing a pin or patch may imply support by the officer for the cause that the pin or patch represents. Depending upon how the public perceives that cause, the pin or patch could change how citizens perceive the officer.⁶ The fact that the pins and patches were enlarged in the photographs that participants saw might have made these causes particularly salient. This might be referred to as the 'cause alignment' explanation, such that the more closely aligned one's own views are with the cause that the pin or patch represents, the more positive one's perceptions of the wearing officer will be.

Other explanations for the observed perceptual effects may also exist. For example, a 'police conformity' explanation may have some value. It might be that wearing certain pins or patches has become 'what is expected' or 'the right thing to do' for public servants, and officers may be viewed

more favourably when wearing these symbols because they are simply conforming to wider societal expectations and values (rather than actively supporting these causes).⁷ Alternatively, a ‘stereotype congruency’ explanation may have some merit, whereby positive officer ratings are determined largely by the degree to which the photograph of the officer, and the pin or patch they are wearing, matches the observer’s stereotype of what a police officer *should* look like. Finally, as alluded to in Footnote 4, a ‘saliency’ explanation also seems plausible. It might be that perceptions of police officers wearing certain pins or patches are influenced by how salient relevant issues are in the minds of the public when they are observing those officers. For example, exposure to widespread news coverage of police controversies, such as officers wearing the Punisher patch, may lead people to react more negatively to officers wearing these symbols, especially during the time of that news coverage. Widespread awareness campaigns (e.g., Breast Cancer Awareness Month) or other significant events (e.g., Remembrance Day) may have a similar impact.

Future research studies will have to be designed to further explore these potential explanations. Detailed qualitative feedback from participants will likely be a critical part of those studies, and potentially the use of other self-report measures to assess participants’ views, expectations, values, stereotypes, and awareness of relevant issues. Such studies would extend the current research in useful directions and add to the growing body of literature that indicates that officer appearance can significantly affect public perceptions of the police.

Study limitations

Our results are not without complications, both in terms of substance and methodology. For example, it is possible that not all participants were familiar with each of the pins and patches that we presented during the study or their associated causes (we did not assess familiarity as part of the study’s paradigm). If participants were unfamiliar with a particular pin or patch, perhaps one should not expect the pin or patch to impact their perceptions of officers. Of course, this is likely to be true of the broader public as well, and therefore the results from this study might generalise to other Canadians who interact with police officers and are unfamiliar with some of the pins and patches examined in this study. This rationale could help explain both differences in the significance and magnitude of effects for some pins and patches, but not others. For instance, some pins and patches, like the Poppy, the Breast Cancer Awareness pin, and the Gay Pride patch, may be familiar to more people than other pins and patches, like the Fallen Officer pin or even the Thin Blue Line patch (although this latter patch is arguably salient in current public discourse). To account for this potential explanation, we suggest that future researchers explicitly assess participant familiarity with each pin and patch under investigation when examining their perceptual effects.

Similar to other laboratory-style designs, the external validity of our paradigm may also have been limited. We used the same officer in all eight photographs to increase internal validity, and asked participants to rate each photograph using only a small number of items. In the future, it would be useful to examine how officer age, gender, and race may influence the results, and ask participants to rate the officers on a broader range of personal qualities. We also presented our stimuli without context and/or interactional elements that would otherwise be present in more naturalistic settings and might be important (Bennell et al., 2022). This may also limit the generalisability of our study. That being said, this methodology is similar to other relevant research and informed by studies that have shown that assessments based on first impressions (i.e., made in the absence of context or interactions) are often persistent and can predict post-context/interaction evaluations (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). This suggests that the type of assessments made in the current study might predict one’s long-term views toward officers, but our study design precludes us from making that determination.

The actual method of presentation of the pins and patches also created some challenges. Depending upon screen size, it could have been difficult for participants to visually detect and

then interpret the pin or patch on the officer's uniform if *only* presented on the uniform (i.e., they are quite small proportional to the size of the officer). To alleviate this issue, we presented a magnified version of the pin or patch in the top-left corner of each photograph. Although this magnified image alleviated the detection issue, it may have artificially enhanced the salience of the pin or patch, and what it represents (i.e., the underlying cause). It will be important in the future to replicate this study without emphasising the pin or patch to determine if people even notice the pins and patches that officers sometimes wear, and, if so, how they influence their perceptions. We also acknowledge that the pins and patches were only ever positioned on the officer's shirt in the upper left chest and note that sometimes they could be presented elsewhere on the uniform, including on a load-bearing vest. It will be important for research to continue unpacking the perceptual effects that may be induced by pins and patches to determine what factors influence how officers are perceived.

Finally, while our sample was relatively large and representative of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2022), the number of participants representing certain racialised groups was small. In future research, larger sub-samples of participants from various racialised communities should be collected to better understand how members of these communities perceive the various pins and patches that we explored in the current study. Indigenous and Black people in particular should receive focus given that they often report especially low levels of trust and confidence in the police (Cao, 2014; Ibrahim, 2020; Samuels-Wortley, 2021; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2009).

Conclusion

Policing continues to be the subject of much scrutiny. Recently, this scrutiny has expanded to include the pins and patches that officers sometimes wear while in uniform. In light of the significant attention that these pins and patches have received, and continue to receive, in both public and political discourse, it is important for research to inform opinions, decisions, and policies. By conducting this study, we offer insights into public perceptions of seven different pins and patches sometimes worn by police officers. While the limitations discussed above prevent us from drawing any strong conclusions about whether police officers should, or should not, wear the pins or patches we explored, we hope that future work, which addresses the shortcomings of our research, continues to explore these questions. Such research will allow for defensible, evidence-based decisions to be made by police services and their oversight bodies about what is worn on an officer's uniform.

Notes

1. The Punisher patch typically consists of a skull, which originates from a fictional Marvel comic book character, Frank Castle. Castle is also known as The Punisher, a violent vigilante seeking justice for the murder of his family. The patch also often includes the phrase, 'Make no mistake, I am the sheepdog'. This is often interpreted as a pro-police slogan and refers to the view held by some officers that they protect the sheep (i.e., the public) from the wolves that intend to harm them.
2. In Canada, the Thin Blue Line patch consists of a blue horizontal line running through a monochromatic Canadian flag. Although officers often indicate that they wear the patch in memory of fellow officers who have lost their lives, some members of the public see the patch as a white supremacist symbol or a rebuttal to the Black Lives Matter movement. For more discussion of the Thin Blue Line, see Wall (2020).
3. Simpson and Sandrin (2022) raised a similar argument for the police's use of personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. These dates are important to consider because they coincided with important events which could have impacted the results of this study. For example, the timing of the study overlapped with news coverage related to the banning of the Thin Blue Line patch by various Canadian police services, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the deaths of police officers in the United States and Canada. The study also coincided with various Pride events, which may have been salient depending upon where participants resided. We do not believe the study coincided with other significant events, including the banning of the Punisher patch in

Toronto (September 2020), Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October 2022), Black History Month (February 2022), or Remembrance Day (November 11, 2022).

5. Participants also completed the Police Legitimacy Scale (Tankebe et al., 2016), although we did not analyze the data from this scale as part of the present analyses.
6. It is also possible that the *cause* represented by the pin or patch is of secondary importance in some cases. The *imagery* contained in some of the pins and patches could also be driving the perceptual effects (e.g., the upraised fist in the Black Lives Matter patch or the skull in the Punisher patch).
7. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this possibility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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