A Force to Be Reckoned With: The Effects of Social Media Usage on the Views of
Police Use of Force

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ABSTRACT

Although there is no one agreed upon definition for police use of force, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) defines force as the amount of effort a police officer uses to make a citizen cooperate. Previous literature has suggested that police officers are trained to use force in situations that defend themselves or another citizen. This research examined the effects of social media usage on the views of police use of force. The data for this research were obtained from the 2016 wave of the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. After deleting missing cases, the total sample size consisted of 1,102 individuals. The majority of respondents agreed that it was acceptable for a police officer to strike an adult male citizen in any situation.

On September 13, 2018 Capital Christian Academy High School's football team kneeled during the national anthem (Ortiz 2018). Nestled in Prince George's County, Maryland, the football team was inspired by recent protests of Colin Kaepernick, former player of the San Francisco 49ers. These young athletes wanted to bring awareness to societal problems such as systemic racial inequality and police use of force (Ortiz 2018). One player commented that his generation had a difficult time processing events of police using force because of the accessibility of videos and news headlines social media provides at their fingertips. Each day, these players stated that they watched another video of a black individual being beaten by the police and were subjected to read headlines of these incidents minutes after they occurred (Ortiz 2018).

The concept of police use of force is interpreted by each individual differently and has no formally agreed upon definition. For instance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) defines the use of force as the amount of effort a police officer uses to make a citizen cooperate (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995). Use of excessive force is described as an officer using a disproportionate amount of force during an interaction with a citizen (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995). Deadly or lethal force is defined as the officer being aware that the amount of force they are using may cause harm to the individual (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995). Around 85 percent of white Republicans compared to 44 percent of white Democrats believe that police officers only use lethal force when necessary. On the other hand, 36 percent of black Republicans compared to 20 percent of black Democrats believe that officers use lethal force only when necessary (Ekins 2016). Importantly, police officers are trained to use the least amount of force in situations (National Institute of Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). Research from the National Institute of Justice (NJS) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) show that police use weapons

in about 2.1 percent of arrests; while 80 percent of the time police officers use weaponless use-of-force in situations. Therefore, use of force is acceptable under specific circumstances such as self-defense or when a subject resists an arrest (National Institute of Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999).

The responsibilities of police officers include the protection of citizens, coercion of citizens to abide the laws, and to create relationships with their communities (National Institute of Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999). Regardless of race, U.S. citizens agreed that the top priorities of law enforcement are protecting citizens from crime and investigating crime (Ekins 2016). In addition, while 67 percent of police officers felt that most citizens respected the police, 64 percent of whites, 45 percent of Hispanics, and 34 percent of blacks thought that U.S. citizens do not show enough respect toward officers (Ekins 2016; Morin, Parker, and Stepler 2017). This exemplifies the growing division among racial groups' perceptions of law enforcement officers.

The current perception of police officers has been funneled through social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. After Colin Kaepernick's protest during the national anthem, his Instagram posts were shared an average of 46,553 times each (Rovell 2016). The day after his protest, Kaepernick gained 17,797 new social media followers each day consistently for a week (Rovell 2016). His social media presence has contributed to the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement which aims to "build local power" and "intervene in violence inflicted on black communities by the State" (BLM 2018). This group organizes protests and is based on Twitter by using the hashtag "#blacklivesmatter" (BLM 2018).

Social media movements affect the views of U.S. citizens toward police as exemplified by the young football team from Capital Christian Academy. For example, eight in 10 officers

agreed that their jobs have become even more dangerous since protests like the Black Lives

Matter movement began; while seven in 10 U.S. citizens believe the police officer's job has

become more dangerous in the past five years (Morin, Parker, Stepler, and Mercer 2017). A

recent Gallup poll, published in 2017, showed that U.S. citizens rate of confidence in the police

returned to a national average of 57 percent (Norman 2017). This number significantly decreased

in the years 2013, 2014, and 2015 as movements such as the Black Lives Matters movement

gained popularity (Norman 2017). Although the overall level of confidence in police is currently

rising nationally, it is dropping for those who are liberal, Hispanic, or younger than 35 (Norman

2017). This loss of confidence in police by younger generations and minorities could lead to

future mistrust and conflict between citizens and the police (Norman 2017). By viewing conflicts

between the police and citizens on social media platforms, younger generations may be

influenced by the constant negative headlines. This research examined the effects of social media

use on views of police use of force using data from the 2016 General Social Survey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Police Use of Force

Previous studies have examined the views of police use of force (Gerber 2017; Jefferis,

Buthcer, and Hanley 2011; Lai and Zhao 2010; Novich and Hunt 2017; Rojek, Alpert, and Smith

2010; Thompson and Lee 2004). Terrill and Reisig (2003) define use of force as the actions of an

officer who threatens or physically harms an individual. Novich and Hunt (2017) define

excessive use of force as an officer throwing, slamming, or grabbing individuals. Each officer is

granted the ability to use coercive force to gain citizen cooperation if they are resisting an

officer's commands, but the amount of force should be proportional to the amount of resistance

from the citizen (Gerber and Jackson 2017; Jefferis et al. 2011; Lai and Zhao year; Novich and

Hunt 2017; Terrill and Resisig 2003; Rojek et al. 2010; Thompson and Lee 2004). Rojek et al.

(2010) measured force on different levels based on the interactions between a citizen and a

police officer. They emphasized that the amount of force is usually described from the

perspective of the officer, resulting in a one-sided explanation of reasonable use of force.

Therefore, they contributed to the literature by conducting interviews from both the perspective

of the officers and the citizens to understand the subjectivity of use of force (Rojek et al. 2010).

The findings indicated that the officers who used force almost always saw their acts of force as

reasonable, while the citizens who received the force often felt it to be excessive (Rojek et al.

2010). This study, among others, exemplifies the difficulty in defining use of force (Gerber and

Jackson 2017; Jefferis et al. 2011; Lai and Zhao 2010; Novich and Hunt 2017; Terrill and

Resisig 2003; Rojek et al. 2010; Thompson and Lee 2004).

Social Media Usage and Views of Police Use of Force

Numerous studies define social media as social networking sites that connect individuals

over the internet where individuals can share, create, and consume media from one another

constantly (Bejan, Hickman, Parkin, and Pozo 2018; Eckberg, Densley, and Dexter 2018;

Edgerly 2017; Hermida 2018). Eckberg et al. (2018) found that mainstream media, such as print

newspapers, television, and magazines are using Twitter as a news source. Twitter is a social

media platform created in 2006 in which any individual can create an account to publicly share

their ideas with others (Eckberg et al. 2018). Individuals on social networking platforms were

found to follow accounts that align with their own views thus reflecting their ideology (Eckberg

et al. 2018).

Edgerly (2017) conducted a qualitative study with 21 students and analyzed how they

gather their news. One student stated that Twitter would "tip" them off about breaking news or

current events, but then they would further "investigate" the issue via more reputable sources

like *The New York Times* (Edgerly 2017:369). Bejan et al. (2018) conducted a study between

January 2015 and September 2016 to analyze whether there was a correlation between the

number of police officers killed, citizens shot and killed by officers, and the number of tweets

that included #Blacklivesmatter or the phrase "Black Lives Matter" (Bejan et al. 2018:19). Their

results indicated that as the number of non-white citizens who were shot and killed increased, the

number of officers killed also increased. These results were not affected by the number of tweets

with the phrase or hashtag Black Lives Matter (Bejan et al. 2018).

Social networking platforms allow the user to become a news reporter (Eckberg et al.

2018). As incidents unfold, such as police using force, bystanders can easily catch the incident

via their mobile phones and post it instantly on platforms like Twitter (Eckberg et al 2018). A

researcher from Spain, Hermida (2018), analyzed the aspect of an online user playing the role of

a journalist. Often in the form of a video, online users capture scenes of police officers using

excessive force on citizens and protesters vandalizing property (Hermida 2018). According to

Hermida (2018), the most shared videos on Twitter that fall under "witness videos" are those that

capture scenes of controversial acts of police officers.

Race and Views of Police Use of Force

Carter and Corra (2016) utilized the General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1986-2012

to analyze the relationship between racial resentment and attitudes toward police use of force.

They concluded that individuals who had more racial resentment also gave a higher rate of

approval for police to use force (Carter and Corra 2016). Specifically, this study captured the

views of white respondents in three different time periods that followed a racial incident between

the police and citizens resulting in rioting. The first time period examined attitudes of white

respondents before the shooting of Rodney King and the infamous Los Angeles riots between

1986 to 1991. The second time period analyzed the period after the Los Angeles riots and before

the Cincinnati riots between 1993-2000, while the third time period explored views after the

Cincinnati riots between 2002-2012 (Carter and Corra 2016). The mean scores for the approval

of police use of force increased from time two to time three. This showed that incidents such as

rioting, that made national headlines impacted the attitudes of white towards police use of force

(Carter and Corra 2016).

Thompson and Lee (2004) used data from the 1998 wave of the GSS and found that black

respondents were 71 percent less likely than white respondents to support police use of force.

Additionally, those of mixed-races showed even less support than both blacks and whites for

police use of force (Thompson and Lee 2004). Interestingly, as black respondents gained a

higher income or education status, their support for police use of force in the situation of a

murder suspect increases (Thompson and Lee 2004).

Trahan and Russell (2017) utilized data from the 1972-2012 waves of the GSS. The

findings indicate that individuals did not approve of an officer striking an adult male citizen if he

was using profanity or attempting to escape. The majority of respondent's supported police use

of force when a citizen was attacking the officer. The differences in approval for this last finding

between black and white respondents were 3.1 percent to 8 percent respectively (Trahan and

Russell 2017). The researchers found race was a significant variable in all five scenarios on the

GSS. White individuals were more likely than any other race to approve of a police officer

striking a citizen who used profanity, attempted to escape, or were attacking the police. While

whites were less likely than blacks to support an officer using force against a murder suspect

(Trahan and Russell 2017). This was only true for blacks throughout the 1990s. Overall, these

studies found that more commonly blacks and respondents who identified as mixed-races were less likely to show their support of police use of force in most scenarios outlined in the GSS than white respondents (Carter and Corra 2016; Thompson and Lee 2004; Trahan and Russell 2017).

Sex and Police Use of Force

Gerber and Jackson (2017) found that sex does have a significant effect on the relationship of views of police use of force. The findings indicated that females were more likely than males to approve of police use of force (Gerber and Jackson 2017). Conversely, Trahan and Russell (2017) found that more often males, especially males who identified as conservative, were more likely than females to support an officer using force. Novich and Hunt (2017) conducted a study with young gang members and found that both male and females from their sample described instances of police using excessive force or were treating them with disrespect. Both males and females did not support the idea of police officers using excessive force and still wanted to be treated with respect when being arrested (Novich and Hunt 2017).

Jefferis et al. (2011) collected data from 365 students in an introductory social science course. These students volunteered to complete a survey based on a controversial video they watched of an arrest of a black male from 1995. Compared to females, males were not as likely to view the arrest as illegal or unjust. Males were .54 times as likely as females to think the arrest was unjustified and .51 times as likely to say the situation was illegal (Jefferis et al. 2011). Similarly, the findings of Thompson and Lee (2004) from the 1998 GSS showed that females along with blacks and other minorities were less likely to approve of an officer of hitting a citizen attempting to escape arrest. Most respondents, regardless of race or sex, did not support an officer to use force against an adult male who was a murder suspect or who was using vulgar language (Thompson and Lee 2004). Compared to males, the female's overall approval rating of

an officer striking a citizen in a scenario with no context decreases by 51 percent. Females, along with blacks and minorities, were less likely to approve of a police officer using force in any of the five scenarios on in the 1998 wave of the GSS (Thompson and Lee 2004).

Additions to Literature

This research added to previous literature in several ways. First, it updated the literature by using the most current 2016 data collected from the General Social Survey (GSS), that includes the variable social media usage. Next, using the questions about social media usage from the GSS added to the literature by examining the effects of social media usage on views of police use of force using a representative sample of the U.S. population. Lastly, both sex and race were used as control variables due to the copious amounts of studies previously conducted on the views of police use of force.

HYPOTHESES

H_1: Those who use more social media platforms will be less supportive of police use of force than those who use less social media platforms.

H_2: Those who spend more hours per week on social media platforms will be less supportive of police use of force than those who spend less hours per week on social media platforms.

DATA AND VARIABLES

The data for this research were obtained from the 2016 wave of the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. The GSS is a longitudinal survey distributed biennially on even numbered years. The most recent data comes from the publicly available 2018 wave. This research utilized data from the 2016 wave, instead of the 2018 wave, because it includes the most recent data available that includes the variable social media. To participate, respondents must be United States citizens, English or Spanish speaking, 18 years of age or older, and non-institutionalized. The data are

collected by interviewing the participants in person for 90 minutes and utilizes computer-assisted

personal software for interviewing (CAPI). The GSS uses the NORC National Sample design

which includes a multi-stage stratified, cluster, and probability proportionate to size, full

probability process to obtain a representative sample of the United States population. This

research uses the 2016 cross-sectional sample consisting of 2,867 respondents from across the

United States (Smith, Davern, Freese, and Hout 2018).

Dependent Variable

        The dependent variable for this research was views of police use of force. Views of

police use of force was operationalized using the following question from the 2016 GSS "Are

there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an

adult male citizen?" with answer options yes and no. This variable is then further operationalized

through four more questions. Each question proposes a different scenario between officer and

citizen, if the citizen says vulgar things to the policemen, if the citizen is a suspect in a murder

case, if the citizen is attempting to escape from custody, or if the citizen was attacking the

policemen with his fists. Each scenario asks if it is acceptable for the officer to hit the citizen and

the answer options are yes and no. A police use of force index was created to collapse all police

use of force questions for some of the analyses. The index ranged from 5 showing the least

approval to 10 showing the most approval. The index had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.411, showing

that the index was moderately reliable for measuring views of police use of force.

Independent Variables

        The independent variable for this research was social media usage. This variable was

operationalized using questions from the 2016 GSS. A social media usage index was created to

collapse all social media platforms for some of the analyses. The index ranged from 12

indicating that zero social media platforms were used to 24 indicating that all 12 social media

platforms were used. The index had a Cronbach's Alpha of .538, showing that the index was

moderately reliable for measuring number of social media platforms used. A second social media

usage index was created to collapse the number of hours spent on social media platforms during

the weekdays and the weekends. The index ranged from zero showing zero hours spent on social

media to 48 showing 48 hours spent on social media platforms each week. The index had a

Cronbach's Alpha of .803 which was reliable for measuring the number of hours spent on social

media platform.

ANALYSIS

        After deleting missing cases using listwise deletion the total sample size was 1,099

respondents. Overall, a majority of respondents (75.9 percent) agreed that it was acceptable for

an officer to strike a citizen in any situation. Few respondents (9 percent) agreed that it was

acceptable for a police officer to strike a citizen who used vulgar language, while 89.1 percent of

the sample agreed that it was acceptable for a police officer to hit a citizen who attacked an

officer with their fists. Trahan and Russel (2017) analyzed GSS data from 1972-2012 and found

that a majority of respondents (72.5 percent) approved of an officer striking a citizen in any

situation and 92.6 percent of the sample approved of a police officer striking a citizen who

attacked the police. An index for police use of force was created with a mean of 7.57 and a

standard deviation of 1.00, indicating a moderate amount of support for use of force.

        Social media usage is measured by two variables; the amount of time respondents spent

on social media platforms and the number of social media platforms used. The median time spent

online for both weekdays and weekends was two hours. The largest category of the sample (28.5

percent) spent one hour on social media during weekdays. Similarly, on weekends, most of the

sample (27.0 percent) spent one hour on social media platforms. This is consistent with the

research findings by Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan (2016), which found that the average U.S.

citizen used the internet for one to two hours per weekday and two or more hours on a weekend

day. The median number of social media platforms used by individuals was three, which is

representative of the U.S. population according to the Pew Research Center (Smith and

Anderson 2018). The majority of the respondents (82.8 percent) use Facebook. The most used

platforms following Facebook were Pinterest (39.4 percent), Google platforms (37.7 percent),

and Instagram (33.9percent). Twitter was used by 21.0 percent of the sample. This finding is

consistent with research by Smith and Anderson (2018), who found that in 2018, 73 percent of

respondents used YouTube, 68 percent used Facebook, 35 percent used Instagram, 29 percent

used Pinterest. The least used platforms were Flickr (3.2 percent), Vine (4.8 percent), and

Tumblr (5.5 percent).

        The sample is 76.6 percent white, 15.3 percent black, and 8.1 percent other ethnic/racial

groups. The CIA World Factbook (2018) indicated that the current U.S. population is 76.6

percent white 13.4 percent black and 10 percent other ethnic and racial groups. The sample is

representative of the U.S. population regarding race. The sample is 43.2 percent male and 56.8

percent female. The sample is slightly disproportionate compared to the United States population

of males to females. According to the CIA World Factbook (2018), the U.S. population is 49.2

percent male and 50.8 percent female.

Table 1.
Correlation Matrix of Dependent, Independent, and Control Variables, N= 1,102

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Police Use of Force Index[a]	1.00	.001	-.058	.218***	.112***
(2) Social Media Platforms Index[b]		1.00	.239***	.075*	-.088**
(3) Social Media Hours Index [c]			1.00	-.113**	.043
(4) Race[d]				1.00	.032
(5) Sex[e]					1.00

Note: *=p< .05; **=p< .01; ***=p< .001
[a] Police Use of Force Index is coded 5 = Least Approval, 10 = Most Approval
[b] Social Media Platforms Index is coded as 12 = Uses No Social Media Platforms, 24= Uses All 12 Social Media Platforms
[c] Social Media Hours Index is coded 0 = Zero Hours, 48 = 48 Hours
[d] Race is coded as 1 = White, 0 = Black and Other Racial/Ethnic Groups
[e] Sex is coded as 0 = Female, 1 = Male

Table 1 illustrates the bivariate correlations for views of police use of force, social media usage, sex, and race. There was no relationship between the amount of social media platforms an individual uses and views of police use of force. Additionally, there was no relationship between the number of hours an individual uses social media platforms and their views of police use of force. Therefore, this finding does not support either of the hypotheses that those who use more social media platforms or those who spend more hours on social media platforms will be less supportive of police using force. There was a positive, weak, statistically significant relationship between the police use of force index and race (r= .218***; p=.000). This suggests that white individuals are more supportive of police use of force than non-white individuals. This is also consistent with research by Thompson and Lee (2004) that found that black respondents were less likely than white respondents to support police use of force.

There was a positive, weak, statistically significant relationship between police use of force and sex (r= .112**; p=.000). This shows that males are more supportive of police use of force than females. This is consistent with research from Trahan and Russell (2017) that found males to be more supportive than females of police use of force.

Table 2.1.
Views of Police Use of Force by Social Media Usage (Social Media Platform Focus) (N=1,102)

	Social Media Platform (Percent)		
	Low (n=715)	Medium (n=363)	High (n=24)
Ever Approve of Police Striking Citizen			
Yes	75.0	77.4	85.0
No	25.0	22.6	15.0
Note: χ2= 7.969; p= .788			
Citizen Questioned as Murder Suspect			
Yes	10.1	16.0	22.9
No	89.9	84.0	77.1
Note: χ2= 17.451; p= .133			

Table 2.1 shows the bivariate relationship between two items in the police use of force index and the number of social media platforms used. There were no statistically significant differences between any of the variables. Interestingly there was a substantive difference with one of the variables in table 2.1. There was a 10.3 percentage difference between individuals that have a low amount of social media platforms and a high amount of social media platforms in their support for a police officer striking a citizen who is being questioned as a murder suspect (p=.133). There is no substantive or statistical relationship between individuals that have a low or high number of social media platforms and their support for a police officer to strike a citizen in general.

Table 2.2.
Views of Police Use of Force by Social Media Usage (Hours of Social Media Usage) (N=1,102)

	Hours of Social Media Usage (Percent)		
	Low (n=1,033)	Medium (n=59)	High (n=10)
Ever Approve of Police Striking Citizen			
Yes	78.0	74.9	64.3
No	22.0	25.1	35.7
Note: χ2= 25.197; p= .911			
Citizen Questioned as Murder Suspect			
Yes	13.7	21.8	12.5
No	86.3	78.2	87.5
Note: χ2= 43.953; p= .170			

Table 2.2 shows the bivariate relationship between police use of force and the hours spent on social media platforms. There were no statistically significant relationships between these variables. Interestingly, there was one substantive difference. There was a 13.7 percentage difference between individuals with low and high amount of hours on social media platforms in their support for a police officer striking a citizen in general (p.911). There is no substantive or statistical relationship between individuals that have a low or high amount of hours on social media platforms and their support for a police officer striking a citizen who is being questioned as a murder suspect.

Table 3 shows the regression results of social media usage, race, and sex on views of police use of force. As shown in Model 1 (R^2=.000) zero percent of the variance in views of police use of force being explained by number of social media platforms used.

Table 3

OLS Regression Results of Social Media Usage, Race and Sex on Views of Police Use of Force (N=1,102)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Social Media Platforms	.001		.009	.021
	(.016)		(.017)	(.017)
Social Media Hours		-.009	-.010*	-.008
		(.005)	(.005)	(.005)
Race				.501***
				(.070)
Sex				.224***
				(.060)
R^2	.000	.005	.004	.061

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients
       Standard Error shown in parentheses
        *Relationship significant at the .05 level
      **Relationship significant at the .01 level
    ***Relationship significant at the .001 level
        Consistent with bivariate results in Tables 1 and 2.1, number of social media platforms

used is not statistically significant and the amount of social media platforms an individual uses

does not predict their views of police use of force. As shown in Model 2 (R^2=.005) the number

hours spent on social media platforms explains less than one percent (0.5) of the variance in

views of police use of force. Consistent with bivariate results in Tables 1 and 2.2, number of

hours spent on social media platforms is not statistically significant predictor of views of police

use of force. Consistent with Models 1 and 2, social media usage is not a statistically significant

predictor of views of police use of force in Model 3. Adding the control variables of race and sex

does not change the effect of social media usage, but Model 4 (R^2=.061) is a better predictor of

views of police use of force than Model 3 (R^2=.004). Overall, the full model is the best predictors

of the views of police use of force, explaining 6.1 percent of the variance in views of police use

of force.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

       This research examined the effects of social media usage on views of police use of force.

Previous research has also found that individuals are using social media platforms as their main

news source (Edgerly 2017; Eckberg et al. 2018; Hermida 2018). Additionally, the cultivation

theory claims that the viewer will perceive the world the way it is portrayed in media (Morgan et

al. 2015). The first hypothesis was that those who use more social media platforms will be less

supportive of police use of force than those who use less social media platforms. The second

hypothesis was that those who spend more hours per week on social media platforms will be less

supportive of police use of force than those who spend less hours per week on social media

platforms. While it was also reported that there was no definite relationship between using the

internet to obtain news and support or nonsupport of police use of force (Roche, Pickett, and

Gertz 2016).

       Interestingly there was no relationship between the amount of social media platforms an

individual uses and views of police use of force. Additionally, there was no relationship between

the number of hours an individual uses social media platforms and their views of police use of

force. There were limitations with this research. The most apparent limitation was that the GSS

presents scenarios where an officer is "striking an adult male citizen." This causes limitations

with how a respondent may answer because it excludes females, younger individuals, older

individuals, and other situations. Despite such limitations, there were also strengths to this study.

This research utilized the General Social Survey (GSS), which uses a multi-stage stratified,

cluster, and probability proportionate to size process. Also, the 2016 wave of the GSS was used,

which is the most recent data publicly available that included all the variables used including social media usage.

 This research added to the literature on views of police use of force by using the most recent data, that included the variable social media usage, from a nationally representative sample. It updated the literature on views of police use of force, by using infrequently studied variables. In addition, it updated the limited studies that measured the effect of social media usage on views of police use of force. Future researchers studying this topic could add to this study by using urbanicity and political affiliation as independent or control variables.

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