



Evidence based social media use: An exploratory UK investigation into residents' perceptions of police Facebook use

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ABSTRACT:

Social media is an integral part of modern society and used by billions of people worldwide. In a policing context, police services are starting to use social media platforms to interact with their communities. However, academic literature is lagging regarding the effectiveness of police use of social media. The purpose of this study is to gather public perceptions regarding the police's use of social media particularly the use of Facebook.

The study administered a cross sectional survey recruiting participants who are policed by one of the larger police services in England and Wales. 294 respondents completed the survey providing their views on their police service's use of social media.

The results of the present study provide overwhelming support for the police's use of social media by the public with most respondents actively following their local police service's social media accounts. The study additionally provides a number of important findings in relation to the preferences of the public with regards to their police service's use of Facebook.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

The findings presented here provide police services with an insight into how to implement an evidenced based approach to their social media activity.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

The present study takes an alternative approach to understanding the effectiveness of police social media use by simply asking residents, an approach not used in this area of policing research to date.

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Evidence based social media use: An exploratory UK investigation into residents' perceptions of police Facebook use**Abstract*****Purpose***

Social media is an integral part of modern society and used by billions of people worldwide. In a policing context, police services are starting to use social media platforms to interact with their communities. However, academic literature is lagging regarding the effectiveness of police use of social media. The purpose of this study is to gather public perceptions regarding the police's use of social media particularly the use of Facebook.

Methodology

The study administered a cross sectional survey recruiting participants who are policed by one of the larger police services in England and Wales. 294 respondents completed the survey providing their views on their police service's use of social media.

Findings

The results of the present study provide overwhelming support for the police's use of social media by the public with most respondents actively following their local police service's social media accounts. The study additionally provides a number of important findings in relation to the preferences of the public with regards to their police service's use of Facebook.

Practical implications

The findings presented here provide police services with an insight into how to implement an evidenced based approach to their social media activity.

Originality

The present study takes an alternative approach to understanding the effectiveness of police social media use by simply asking residents, an approach not used in this area of policing research to date.

***Keywords:* Public perceptions, police, social media, Facebook, survey, evidence based**

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Introduction

Prior to the introduction of social media, communication with the public relied upon traditional news outlets and community meetings. Today, communication is far easier whereby police services have a direct channel of communication through social media (Chermak & Weiss, 2006). Arguably, the police now have access to the public at any time (Libberman et al., 2013) to alert them to ongoing incidents or pertinent news. As a result, police use of social media has significantly increased according to yearly surveys produced by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) with 81% of police departments using some form of social media when surveyed in 2010 rising to 94% in the latest published data (IACP, 2010; 2015). The data collected by the IACP outlines that the most used platform by policing organisations worldwide is Facebook (IACP, 2015), which indeed reflects the publics' social media preferences (Statista, 2018).

McGovern and Lee (2010) suggest that police media usage tends to fall under two themes, (1) managing the public in relation 'self-governance' or (2) the management of police reputation. McGovern and Lee (2012) demonstrate these themes empirically through interviews with Public Relation Directors of an Australian police organisations. In their research, McGovern and Lee (2012) demonstrate two main objectives as attested by their participants, the first being to produce positive images of policing and the second to reduce the dangers to communities through education (i.e. crime prevention). As such, it can be argued that social media serves both a PR function and an operational purpose, although the use of social media is likely to differ by policing organisation and across the continent.

Kim et al (2017) revealed that 89 % of policing organisations in the United States who were surveyed attested that they deployed social media for community relations and 59% attested they used social media for operational policing. In the UK context, Bullok (2018) suggests that considerable pressure is placed upon policing organisations to facilitate transparency and citizen engagement within policing practices. Traditionally, constabularies would utilise community meetings to deliver such engagement, however, these meetings proved to be ineffective due to issues such as poor attendance, unrepresentative demographic of attendees, and lack of opportunity for engagement due to the facilitation (Bullok, 2018). Notably the move to social media has afforded policing organisations the opportunity to

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3 avoid the caveats of traditional community meetings and engage with their audience (Bullok,
4 2018) by capturing the opinions, perceptions, and needs of their communities.
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8 The increase in social media use by police organisations demonstrates an increase in
9 community policing strategies. Community policing is argued to support citizens in taking
10 accountability for crime prevention at a local level whilst ensuring policing and public
11 priorities are aligned (Manning, 1991). Community policing approaches have been a priority
12 in England and Wales in recent years to improve key metrics in relation to promoting trust
13 and confidence in the police (Crump, 2011). However, the extent to which the police use
14 social media under the principles of a community policing strategy has been questioned.
15 Research to date exploring police social media usage tends to demonstrate that
16 communication has not been a two-way process (Brainard and McNutt, 2010; Crump, 2011;
17 Lieberman et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Beshears, Beshears & Bond,
18 2019). For example, Crump (2011) reviewed the actions of UK police on Twitter and
19 suggested that the police's use of Twitter was most successfully used as a one-way
20 communication strategy only and there was very little evidence of open communication
21 between citizens and the police. However, simply using social media as an announcement
22 platform is not fully utilising social media.
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36 Deneff, Kaptein, Bayeri, and Ramirez, (2012) identify a number of benefits of utilising
37 twitter effectively during the 2011 London Riots. Such benefits include: a *source of*
38 *information of criminal information, having a voice, to push information, to leverage the*
39 *wisdom of the crowd, to interact with the public, for community policing, to show the human*
40 *side of policing, to support police IT infrastructure, and finally for efficient policing* (Deneff
41 et al., 2012). Despite the numerous benefits identified by Deneff and colleagues (2012),
42 generic use of social media (as outlined above) tends to be deployed as an announcement
43 platform. It is also important to outline at this stage that police social media use can be both
44 formal and informal, whereby formal refers to social media content managed by relevant
45 employees within a policing organisation and as such take into account bureaucratic
46 considerations. Whereas informal social media activity refers to individual employees
47 utilising social media in the course of their duties. Furthermore, it is important to
48 acknowledge that for all of the benefits of social media use by the police there are also
49 limitations but these are mainly associated with informal social media activity. Goldsmith
50 (2015) thoroughly describes some of the negative issues associated with police social media
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3 activity, which range from vulnerability to harassment, undermining the criminal justice
4 process, and the production of inaccurate information. All of the aforementioned limitations
5 have the propensity to be disastrous for maintaining and improving PR, which academic
6 research has evidenced to be the main objective of police social media use
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12 With the knowledge that the police tend to use social media as a communication
13 device it is important to understand what types of content the police communicate. Utilising a
14 content analysis of police Facebook posts within North America it has been demonstrated
15 that the content of police Facebook posts can be divided into 11 categories (Lieberman et al.,
16 2013). Of the 11 categories, Facebook posts containing information in relation to crimes
17 were the most used (49.4%), followed by posts in relation to: public relations (31%),
18 information about officer injuries (3.7%), alerts (3.5%), crime prevention and community
19 safety tips (3.0%), driving under the influence (1.7%), missing persons (1.6%), direction to
20 services (1.3%), other posts (4.1%), and posts that could not be categorised (0.7%). A further
21 interesting facet to Lieberman and colleagues (2013) article explores the publics' responses to
22 such posts through analyses of 'likes' given to each post and the number of comments per
23 post. Lieberman and colleagues demonstrate that the pattern of public interaction did not
24 relate to the categories of Facebook posts that were most often deployed by the police.
25 Libberman et al's (2013) findings thus evidence a mismatch with regards to what the public
26 favour and what the police post. In addition to Libberman and colleagues (2013),
27 vandeVelde, Meijer, and Homburg, (2015) demonstrate utilising Twitter analysis that the user
28 and message tweeted are important in regards to what is re-tweeted and what is not.
29 Understanding the police's use of social media has been a topic of academic exploration but
30 has primarily been limited to describing the actions of the police on social media as opposed
31 to evaluating the effectiveness of such actions (Hu, Rodgers & Lovrich, 2018).
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48 Understanding public preferences to police use of social media is certainly important
49 and it is argued here that due to police organisations reluctance to utilise social media as a
50 two-way communication tool it is crucial to understand public preferences to their posts.
51 Primarily, the effective use of social media can build community relations and in turn
52 promote confidence in the police, whilst improving residents' experience of the police (Hu,
53 Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018). Furthermore, should police services post social media content
54 that reflects the publics' interest this in turn will lead to increased numbers of followers and
55 as a result the messages deployed will reach a greater audience. Certainly, increasing the size
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of the audience is important as it allows forces to reach intended sections of the public. Whether that be, youths to broadcast campaigns to reduce knife crime or residents of a particular post code to provide crime prevention warnings due to recent burglaries. Understanding public preferences is a crucial area of research and police services would be encouraged to take an evidence-based approach to social media usage.

Evidence Based Policing (EBP) according to the father of EBP Laurence Sherman (2013, pg 383) centres around three principles.

- '1. Police should conduct and apply good research to target scarce resources on predictable concentrations of harm from crime and disorder.*
- 2. Once police choose their high-priority targets, they should review or conduct tests of police methods to help choose what works best to reduce harm.*
- 3. Once police agencies use research to target their tested practices, they should generate and use internal evidence to track the daily delivery and effects of those practices, including public perceptions of police legitimacy.'*

The third strategic principle is the most relevant here for implementing an EBP approach to social media usage. To date, academic research suggests numerous benefits of utilising social media but according to literature policing organisations tend to only utilise social media to communicate with the public as opposed to engage with the public (e.g. Beshears, Beshears & Bond, 2019). Therefore, it is argued that police services should take an EBP approach to ensure that their social media posts are effective, with regards to achieving their PR objectives. Indeed, what classes as effective will differ across policing organisations but generally if social media is being used as a PR exercise and the posts being published are not well received by the public then the social media activity would be fruitless in relation to improving the public image of the constabulary. However, literature to date has not been prolific and thus implementing EBP approaches to social media usage is not a particularly easy feat for the police.

So what do we know about public preferences of police social media usage? A recent analysis of social media preferences by the public originates from North America. Hu,

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3 Rodgers and Lovrich (2018) conducted an analysis of 7,116 Facebook postings originating
4 from 14 police services. The findings from this study utilising a content analysis
5 demonstrated similar results to earlier research by Liberman and colleagues (2013) whereby
6 the most used category of posting was the least liked by the public (Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich,
7 2018). Postings involving police personnel and police – public relations were the most
8 favoured (Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018). Finally, Hu and colleagues (2008) demonstrate
9 that the use of imagery significantly resulted in the public engaging with social media
10 postings as opposed to the use of a hyperlink. Indeed, the findings reported here provide a
11 good indication of some of the public preferences and the authors conclude that despite
12 greater use of social media this does not necessarily equate to success as many postings
13 produce little to no effect (Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018). Beshears, Beshears and Bond
14 (2019) in a small qualitative research in North America asked 30 residents about their lived
15 experience of their police organisation’s use of social media. The results indicated that
16 residents wanted to see more two-way communication and that they perceived their police
17 organisation’s use of social media as a self- promotion exercise whilst pushing information as
18 opposed to community engagement.

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Alongside academic papers written in this area, in the UK context police personnel being tasked with utilising social media might also seek guidance from the College of Policing (COP). However, the guidance although useful for maintaining standards does not provide an evidence based approach to what is likely to work to improve community engagement. The COP (2020) guidance sets out the principles of effective social media usage, however, such guidance provides very generic ‘dos and don’ts’ as opposed to guidance on the content of posts. As such research exploring public perceptions is imperative to allow forces to deploy social media with success, however, there is a paucity of research and to the authors’ knowledge, there is no research originating from the UK. Furthermore, published literature tends to utilise a content analysis methodology (Liberman et al., 2013; Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018), therefore, inferring public preferences from their observable responses (likes, comments, and shares). Secondly, much of the research originates on a macro level (e.g. Liberman et al., 2013; Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018) and it is argued that the preferences of residents within differing police forces are likely to differ. Consequently, the present study seeks to bridge the gap within literature, if we’re interested in the preferences of the public, why not simply ask them? The present study offers a cross

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sectional survey investigating the preferences of residents policed by one large UK police service in relation to formal Facebook usage.

Method

Participants

Residents policed by a large police service in the North of England who used social media were the target population. In order to recruit an appropriate sample that represented the residents a purposive sampling procedure was utilised. Prior to commencing participant recruitment, a list was compiled of all post codes and their corresponding areas across the county studied. Where possible the researchers then used this list to locate a community Facebook group which corresponded with each postcode area. After locating a community group on Facebook, the researchers placed an advertisement for participants, whereby participants could simply click the URL within the advertisement to take part. This sampling method was utilised in order to access residents from across the county as opposed to just one Town or City. This was deemed to be the most important consideration as different areas of the county have various different formal Facebook accounts for their local policing teams. In total this resulted in 442 participants taking part within the study of which 294 participants completed the survey (66.5%). The sample comprised of 249 females and 45 males with an average age of 41.7 ($SD=15.0$). At the time of the study 9.3% were in full time work, 19.4% in part time work, 11.9% were retired, 8.8% were students, 9.5% were unemployed, and 1.0% were in voluntary positions. With regards to ethnicity 95% of participants identified as white British with the remaining participants representing BME groups.

Procedure

After deciding to take part in the research, participants were directed to the survey which was hosted by *esurvey creator* where participants were displayed with the study's information sheet. After reading the information sheet participants were required to complete an electronic consent form prior to completing several questions capturing their demographic information. Participants were then surveyed utilising Likert scales to capture their experience and perceptions of their police service on Facebook followed by further Likert scales designed to capture how participants would like their police service to use Facebook. The order of questions and items used within each scale were randomised in order to reduce any order effects.

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Analysis

Descriptive statistics were utilised to explore the data using IBM SPSS statistics.

Results

The first area under investigation sought to understand the samples' current social media activity in relation to their local police service. 95% of participants had seen Facebook posts published by their local police force. However, only 70% of participants actively follow their local police service on Facebook. To understand why individuals do not follow the police on Facebook the participants who stated this was the case were asked why (n=88). Regarding, why residents do not actively follow their local police service on Facebook, 47% outlined it was due to the content not being relevant or of interest to them, 35% indicated that they were unsure and did not have a particular reason for not following the police, 11% held the view that the police should not be using Facebook, and 7% simply did not know that they could follow the police on Facebook. The implications of the findings regarding why individuals do not follow the police are indeed important and will be discussed.

The next area under investigation within the results section relates to those residents who do actively follow their police on social media (n=206). In order to measure the effectiveness of social media as a method of interacting with the local community the respondents were firstly asked whether following the police has changed their view/opinion on the police service within their area. 38% of those who followed their local police service outlined that since following their local police service on social media this has influenced or changed their opinion regarding the police service. Following this all participants who currently followed their local police service were asked whether following their local police service on social media has had a positive or negative effect on how they viewed the service. 86% of respondents outlined that the police service's Facebook activity has had a positive effect on their perceptions of the police service with the remaining 14% attesting it had a negative effect.

The next area to be explored relates to the residents' perception of their local police service's Facebook usage. Participants were asked to rate using five point Likert scales which area of content they are most attracted to. Displayed in table one are the nine types of content

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3 postings that were categorised by the research team from the police service's social media
4 activity. Respondents were most attracted to posts that related to 'live' crime such as ongoing
5 events and missing person appeals and are least attracted to posts about police dogs/ horses
6 followed by viral videos. Indeed, these findings provide the start of an evidence basis for how
7 the police might be able to better engage with their social media followers.
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TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

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17 Following on from what postings respondents are most attracted to, residents were
18 asked what they would like to see more of regarding the police's activity on Facebook. As
19 can be seen in table two the content that residents would like to see more of directly reflects
20 the content that they attested to be most attracted to. Although expected, the results provide
21 further evidence regarding the content of postings that are likely to engage the public.
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TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE

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31 A further area of interest within the present study was to determine what types of
32 posts the public are most likely to share (i.e. reposting the police's post to their Facebook
33 network). Table three outlines the percentage of people who would be willing to share each
34 area of content. As can be seen there are only two types of police Facebook posts that the
35 majority of respondents would be likely to share with their own social networks. Again, these
36 areas reflect the two areas most favoured by the public; posts relating to live incidents and
37 missing person appeals.
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TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE

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49 The respondents of the present study were also asked regarding the types of crimes
50 that they would like to see additional coverage on by their local police service. Displayed in
51 table four are the results in relation to this aspect of the study. The most favoured crime type
52 was property offences followed by anti-social behaviour. Indeed, it might be interpreted that
53 the types of criminal activity the public would like to see covered more relate to offences that
54 directly affect them and their area. It is worth acknowledging that 50% of participants
55 indicated that there were no further offences they would like additional coverage on. As a
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3 result, this suggests that half of the participants in the present study thought the coverage on
4 offences by their local police service on Facebook was sufficient and did not want anything
5 further.
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TABLE FOUR ABOUT HERE

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13 The final area of focus relates to participants' perceptions of police Facebook use in
14 general. In order to capture the public opinion of police and Facebook use, participants were
15 required to use a Likert scale to indicate their agreement to eight statements that are displayed
16 in table five. As can be seen from the responses displayed in table five, the public within the
17 present study generally perceive social media use by the police to be a useful and effective
18 platform for the police to communicate with the local community. In general, the responses
19 displayed demonstrate support for the police and their current use of Facebook. However, the
20 perceptions exhibited present the police with some avenues for improving their social media
21 use. For example, the results would suggest that using their Facebook platforms to listen to
22 the public might be an avenue for greater development. On the whole, table five outlines the
23 positive impact and support that the use of social media receives by the public.
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TABLE FIVE ABOUT HERE

Discussion

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40 The present study provides an important contribution to academic literature regarding
41 formal police social media use. This is achieved by taking an alternative approach to studying
42 police social media usage than what has been used within previous papers (e.g. Hu, Rodgers,
43 & Lovrich, 2018). The findings reported here provide an important insight into how the
44 public view police on social media and the overwhelming response is that police social media
45 use is positive and their use of social media is generally perceived as effective. Although,
46 this does not suggest that there is no room for improvement in how to better engage with
47 local communities using social media. Improving the effectiveness of social media usage is
48 important due to literature outlining the positive impact it can have for confidence ratings in
49 the police (Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018). The findings reported in this study suggest that
50 by taking an EBP approach to social media by using the findings of specific studies this can
51 improve the effectiveness of police services' social media posts in relation to achieving their
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PR objectives, which has been argued to be the main objective for using social media (McGovern and Lee, 2012; Kim et al, 2017)

The findings outlined in this study suggest that the majority of the public who took part in this research were likely to be following their local police service on Facebook. Just under a third of participants did not follow their local police service and this is the first area for discussion. By asking participants why this was the case it became apparent that the overwhelming majority of those who did not follow the police on social media might be easily encouraged to do so. Only 11% held the view that the police should not be using Facebook with the remaining residents either not knowing that they could, had no reason for not following, or the content not being of interest/relevant to them. With regards to the latter, the present methodology provides a way to ensure that content is relevant and the findings of the present study can go some way in ensuring that the content is appropriate. However, for the former two reasons the police may wish to employ campaigns to increase their followers as the reasons attested in the present study would suggest the police may simply increase their followers by advertising the importance of their social media accounts. Furthermore, employing NUDGE psychology approaches that have been increasingly adopted and proven to be useful in policing contexts (Roach et al., 2017; Roach et al., 2019) might be a useful methodology for increasing social media followers. After all, by increasing the audience associated with police social media accounts allows for greater effectiveness in relation to the second objective of police social media use (McGovern & Lee, 2012) by communicating operational messages to a larger range of the community.

The research methodology utilised in this study did not examine the use of the police service's social media postings in relation to the number of times a particular type of post was used by the police. However, previous literature suggests that the types of posts typically most used by the police are the least effective with regards to what the community want (Lieberman et al., 2013; Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018). The findings revealed here provide a strong indication with regards to what the public would like to see on police social media channels and this information certainly could be used by the police service studied by this paper to fine tune their social media postings to their community. In the present study, it was clear that the public were most interested in content relating to what can be described as 'live' crimes whereby incidents are ongoing. This indeed supports previous literature which outlines that social media post effectiveness differs depending on your audience (Dai et al.,

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3 2017; Ruddell and Jones, 2013) and thus taking an EBP approach is further supported.
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5 However, it must be clearly stated that the results of the present paper should not be
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7 uniformly applied to all police social media accounts, the results are specific to communities
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9 policed by one large police service. The adoption of such approach within police practice to
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11 understand the needs and wants of their community is argued to be important and can
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13 certainly improve the efficiency of their social media use. As result, police services should
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15 undertake similar internal research as outlined in this paper to improve the effectiveness of
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17 their operational social media usage.

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19 The final area to be discussed is in relation to the broader sense of police social media
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21 use. The present paper is the first to the authors' knowledge to provide an insight into how a
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23 local U.K. community view the use of social media by their police services. The present
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25 study provides a positive picture with respondents indicating that the police using social
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27 media is positive and it has provided them with a different picture of their police service and
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29 the work they do. Furthermore, the present study provides further evidence that social media
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31 use facilitates greater confidence in the police with respondents outlining, that viewing the
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33 police on social media has changed their opinion of their police service. In general, the
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35 respondents here perceive social media as a good form of communication and in general
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37 social media is viewed positively. Should police services take an EBP approach to their social
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39 media usage whereby they employ metrics (similar to those in table 5) to ensure their social
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41 media use is effective, then greater community relations can be built, greater levels of
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43 confidence can be achieved, larger audiences can be reached, and as such their social media
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45 usage particularly as PR exercise will be more effective.

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47 This study aimed to demonstrate the strength of taking an evidence-based approach to
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49 social media use. As a result, there are a number of limitations that must be acknowledged.
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51 Firstly, the sample included due to the recruitment strategy is not representative of all
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53 demographics in relation to the county. Future research would be encouraged to take a
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55 stratified approach to sampling to ensure that the demographic representation included within
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57 the present study matches the demographic of the policed area. Furthermore, future research
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59 may wish to use an alternative approach to gain a thorough understanding of residents'
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insight into what the community would like to see. Having said this, this paper provides

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important insights into the potential of social media use by the police alongside a way forward for police services to improve their social media activity.

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Table 1. What posts are the public most attracted to?

Content of posts	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Updates on incidents happening now	4.56	0.7
Crime or missing person appeals	4.31	0.93
Police helping community posts	4.00	1.04
Crime prevention advice	3.87	1.1
Traffic updates	3.72	1.31
Insights into police work	3.61	1.14
Court case updates	3.28	1.4
Viral videos related to crime	3.23	1.3
Posts about police dogs/ horses	2.28	1.36
1= Not very attracted to this type of post	N= 206	
5= Very attracted to this post type of post		

Table 2. What posts do the public want to see more of?

Content of posts	<i>Yes</i>
Updates on incidents happening now	96%
Crime or missing person appeals	90%
Police helping community posts	78%
Crime prevention advice	77%
Traffic updates	74%
Insights into police work	68%
Court case updates	54%
Viral videos related to crime	50%
Posts about police dogs/ horses	32%
	N=206

Table 3. What posts are the public likely to share?

Content of posts	Yes
Updates on incidents happening now	77%
Crime or missing person appeals	75%
Police helping community posts	28%
Crime prevention advice	40%
Traffic updates	47%
Insights into police work	16%
Court case updates	15%
Viral videos related to crime	25%
Posts about police dogs/ horses	14%
	N=206

Table 4. Types of offences the public would like to see further coverage on

Type of offence	%
NA	50%
Property offences	21%
Anti- social behaviour	6%
Violent crimes	5%
Sexual crimes	3%
Drug offences	2%
Missing persons	1%
Other	12%
	N=196

Table 5. General perception of social media in relation to policing

Perception	M	SD
Facebook is a waste of police time	1.65	1.03
Facebook is an effective method of communication	4.17	1.11
The police post helpful and interesting content	3.77	1.07
Facebook is a way for the police to listen to me	3.11	1.32
Facebook assures me that the police are doing productive/relevant work	3.54	1.23
The police post the updates I want to see	3.43	1.13
The police post regular updates on current events and local crime	3.44	1.07
The police post irrelevant content	2.16	1.25
1= Strongly disagree		N=206
5= Strongly agree		