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The digital turn in police image work: determinants of adoption, use and perceived effectiveness of social media communications in forces in England & Wales

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines police use of social media platforms in England and Wales. Based on a novel linked dataset consisting of survey data from 38 forces, police Twitter communications from all 43 forces, and qualitative interviews with corporate communications staff, analysis shows variation in patterns of adoption and usage, and perceptions of effectiveness by a range of organisational and policy factors. Drawing on the notion of 'image work', the findings indicate that police communications have gone through significant changes over the past decade, shifting from professionalisation to the digitalisation of police image work. The paper concludes that while police forces continueto be cautious about fully adopting social media, digital channels are becoming increasingly central for operational policing and enhancing customer service-related duties.

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Introduction

Traditional media has historically shaped public perceptions of crime. However, social media platforms have become the primary source of information in recent years. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and TikTok have transformed public sector communication, particularly in policing. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, making social media an essential tool for civic engagement and supplementing in-person interactions. Police social media practice has become more routine and has begun to supplement and, in some cases, replace, in-person interactions in demanding periods (Hu et al. 2021).

This paper examines social media communications in police forces in England and Wales using a mixed-methods approach. It draws on a national survey, six months of tweets, and qualitative interviews collected concurrently. This triangulation offers insights into adoption, use, and perceived effectiveness of social media in shaping police image work, the public reconstruction of policing in relation to authority, change, and social order (Mawby 2002a, Reiner 2007). A substantial body of research has examined police use of social media, particularly in relation to transparency, engagement, and legitimacy. However, much of this work has focused on individual forces, specific platforms, or single methods, most commonly content analysis of social media posts. There remains limited comparative evidence that brings together organisational context, communication outputs, and practitioner perspectives across police forces in both England and Wales. In particular, few studies link force-level

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survey data with large-scale social media datasets and qualitative accounts from communications professionals to examine how digital communications are understood and mobilised as part of police image work. This paper contributes to police communications research in four ways. First, it offers a comparative, mixed-methods analysis of police social media use across England and Wales, extending empirical coverage beyond studies focused solely on England or on individual forces. Second, it links organisational survey data with a national dataset of police Twitter communications, enabling analysis of how structural, geographical, and policy factors shape patterns of adoption and use across forces. Third, it differentiates types of police social media communication by organisational characteristics, moving beyond descriptive accounts of content to examine how image work is operationalised in practice. Fourth, drawing on qualitative interviews with corporate communications staff, the paper advances Mawby's image work thesis by identifying a contemporary 'digital turn' in police image work, in which social media has become central to how forces construct authority, visibility, and legitimacy. Taken together, these contributions shift the focus from whether police use social media to how and why digital platforms are integrated into professionalised image work, and how this varies across organisational and policy contexts.

Police social media adoption

A research report from England and Wales indicates that Facebook (42%) continues to be the platform most frequently used by the public to seek information on police responses to crime, followed by newspapers (21%), leaflets (25%), Twitter (20%), television (8%) and radio (6%) (HMICFRS 2018). More recent data from Ofcom (2024a) suggest that social media continues to dominate news consumption, with 52% of UK adults using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), TikTok, and Instagram as key sources. Furthermore, Ofcom (2024b) reports that over half of adults who engage with local media do so via social media, reinforcing the shift towards digital platforms for local news consumption. These findings indicate that while traditional media remain relevant, the public is increasingly turning to social media for timely and direct information on police responses to crime.

Although social media gained importance, police adoption in England and Wales was gradual. Around 2008, few forces used platforms such as Twitter or Facebook in England and Wales, citing reputational risks as a barrier (Crump 2011, Goldsmith 2013), consistent with diffusion of innovations theory, which links adoption to organisational size and resources (Rogers 2003). By 2011, all forces had a presence on at least one major platform. The 2011[1] riots marked a turning point, with police followings growing rapidly; the Metropolitan Police's Twitter account, for example, rose from 2900 to over 34,000 followers between June and August (Procter et al. 2013), reflecting changing public access to crime and policing information (Ball and Lewis 2011). Following the 2011 riots, police forces began to reassess the role of social media, acknowledging its potential as a supplementary tool for communication and public engagement during periods of disorder.

Post-riots, social media practices varied. Denef et al. (2013) observed that the Metropolitan Police employed a formal, one-way approach, while Greater Manchester Police engaged directly with the public, blending generic and targeted messaging. These contrasts illustrate the distinction between one-way broadcasting and two-way interaction (Procter et al. 2013) and point to the potential influence of force size, as differences in organisational scale, resources, and risk management practices may shape the degree to which forces engage interactively with the public on social media. Mergel's framework for interpreting social media interactions in the public sector (2012; 2013) categorises public sector social media into four types: push, pull, network, and transactional. Push delivers one-way announcements without expecting responses; pull, while also largely one-way, seeks community input via reports, hashtags, or feedback. Network communication fosters two-way engagement and community building, strengthening trust. Transactional communication facilitates practical interactions, such as crime reporting or signposting services. Applying this framework to policing demonstrates the diversity of content and strategic objectives, showing how forces can inform, engage, build relationships, and deliver services through social media.

Studies of police social media use internationally provide further insight. Research on American police departments found that most social media activity is aligned with push, pull, and network communications, often reactive rather than part of a formal strategy (Meijer and Thaens 2013). In Canada, O'Connor (2015) observed similar trends, with little transactional content. Conversely, Australian police demonstrated more substantive engagement, frequently interacting with the public on crime prevention, updates, and operational matters (Lee and McGovern 2013). Overall, push strategies dominate police social media activity, with pull and network approaches less common and transactional communication rare. The literature (Bullock et al. 2023) also points to contrasts in rural versus urban policing (Mulrooney et al. 2024), where community context and digital connectivity shape how communication strategies are experienced and perceived.

In England and Wales, police forces predominantly use social media for one-way broadcasting, particularly on Twitter and Facebook (Lieberman et al. 2013, Bullock 2017). However, the style of this broadcasting has evolved, becoming clearer, more transparent, and engaging to build public trust and confidence (Merry et al. 2012). For instance, research on Dorset Police found that detailed, informative tweets were more effective than brief, less substantive messages (Fernandez et al. 2015). This emphasis on broadcasting aligns with the recommendation of the now-defunct National Policing Improvement Agency to use Twitter for rapid news dissemination, even ahead of mainstream media coverage (NPIA 2010).

Direct communication through social media allows police forces to control their messaging, reducing reliance on traditional media. Bullock et al. (2020) identified key benefits: visibility, editability, and association. Visibility enhances police presence in digital spaces, particularly when physical or traditional media visibility is limited. Editability enables precise control over messaging, target audiences, and content presentation, mitigating risks of media distortion. Association helps build connections between police, communities, the media, and stakeholders, strengthening credibility and expanding reach. These factors offer greater control over public image compared to conventional media relations.

Social media also supports operational activities. In the US, it has aided public contributions to investigations, crowd management, and crisis response (Meijer and Thaens 2013). Some Canadian forces solicit intelligence via social media during incidents (O'Connor 2015). In England and Wales, however, police tweets before and after COVID-19 contained limited operational content (Nikolovska et al. 2020). Jungblut et al. (2022) studied German police use during crises, distinguishing community-level from organisational-level incidents. They found police favour unidirectional communication for community crises, but adopt dialogic approaches in organisational crises to manage reputational concerns. This indicates that studies of police social media must consider resources, crisis type, platform affordances, and internal constraints. While social media improves visibility, public relations, speed, and cost-efficiency, its strategic use remains uneven across forces (Heverin and Zach 2010, Meijer and Thaens 2013, Meijer and Torenvlied 2014).

Limited transactional engagement in England and Wales points to untapped potential. Institutional supports, including formal policies, guidelines, and training, are likely key to adoption and perceived value. Heywood and Cartwright (2025) tested how crime type and offender demographics affect public engagement with police Facebook appeals. They found crime type to be influential, while demographics had little effect, suggesting appeal content and framing matter more than offender characteristics. Walsh et al. (2022) analysed Canadian newspaper coverage from 2005 to 2020, finding police social media framed favourably, emphasising crime prevention, intelligence, and control. Together, these studies show how appeal content and media framing shape public expectations of police social media.

Police image work

The College of Policing (2014) stated that 'an online presence in a modern world is as important as traditional policing methods such as walking the beat'. Police image work, or how forces present

themselves positively, involves reconstructing policing in relation to conflict, authority, change, and social order (Reiner 2007). It is vital at all levels, from frontline officers to communications staff (Bullock 2016). Mawby (2002b) notes that image work includes identity management, media and public relations, marketing, and other initiatives shaping public perceptions. New media formats, particularly social media, offer greater control over image and more direct engagement with the public (Bullock 2016).

Police image work is predominantly managed through corporate communications departments. These teams handle media relations, publish content on official websites, run campaigns and events, manage social media accounts, and foster relationships between the police and the public (Leishman and Mason 2003, Lee and McGovern 2014, Schneider 2016). Their primary aim is to maintain a positive public image of policing, often relying on the expertise of civilian professionals, including communication officers, marketing specialists, press agents, and corporate branding experts (Mawby 2001).

Mawby (2002b) outlined four historical stages of police image work, providing a framework for understanding how police forces have managed public perception over time. It is important to note, however, that these phases are based on the United Kingdom context, and both the timing and characteristics of each stage may differ in other jurisdictions due to variations in policing structures, media landscapes, and public expectations:

(1) Informal Image Work (1829–1919) – Early, unstructured efforts to shape public perception.
(2) Emergent Public Relations (1919–1972) – The development of more formal public relations practices.
(3) Embedding Public Relations (1972–1987) – The integration of public relations into routine police functions.
(4) Professionalisation of Police Image Work (1987 onwards) – The establishment of dedicated communications professionals within police organisations.

Technological advancements have arguably led to a fifth stage, described in this paper as 'the digital turn in police image work', driven by the widespread adoption of open-source online communication tools. This shift became particularly evident following the 2011 England riots when social media played a critical role in police communication with communities, the media, and other stakeholders (Procter et al. 2013). Initially, social media and websites were viewed as experimental tools rather than core components of image work (Mawby 2010b). However, recent studies indicate a significant change, with some police forces now relying almost entirely on social media to manage their public image (O'Connor 2015, Bullock 2016).

Although a substantial body of scholarship now exists on police use of social media (e.g. Schneider 2016, Bullock et al. 2020), comparative empirical research covering all forces in England and Wales remains limited. Police image work is widely recognised as an important aspect of organisational practice, yet it has received relatively little empirical study, particularly in relation to how digital technologies are integrated into communication strategies. In practice, communications professionals play a central role, with each force maintaining a department responsible for public relations, media engagement and social media management. Understanding how these departments operate and deploy digital tools is increasingly important given the growing public reliance on online platforms for information about policing. Over time, these departments have become more professionalised, reflecting the replacement of traditional press officers, often warranted police officers, with skilled civilian specialists (Ericson et al. 1991, Chermak and Weiss 2005, Mawby 2010a).

This study focuses on police communications departments and the corporate social media profiles they manage. By examining their actions, roles, and perceptions within the context of a digital society, this paper aims to shed light on how these departments contribute to the accomplishment of police image work.

Hypotheses

Drawing on the evolving role of social media in police communications, this study proposes three interrelated hypotheses that align with the introduction and literature review, particularly concerning police image work and the strategic adoption of digital platforms.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Larger police forces post a higher volume and greater variety of social media content than smaller forces. Their larger staffing resources, including dedicated communications teams, enable more consistent and diverse public engagement. Professionalised image work in larger forces supports both one-way information dissemination and two-way interaction.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Urban police forces perceive social media as more effective for public engagement and information dissemination than rural forces. Higher population density and greater digital connectivity in urban areas enhance reach, while the rural–urban digital divide limits online impact, shaping perceptions of social media's role in fostering community relations and supporting police image work.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Forces with formal social media policies use social media more frequently and perceive it as more effective in achieving policing objectives. Policies provide strategic direction, content guidelines, and training, promoting professionalised, consistent, and high-quality social media activity that supports public trust and image work.

Smaller and rural police forces often rely on traditional, face-to-face community engagement, drawing on local knowledge and long-standing relationships (Donnermeyer 2020, Wooff 2022). Resource constraints, including limited personnel and budgets, can deprioritise social media, reinforcing reliance on conventional channels. The digital divide further restricts access to technology and training, reducing social media's perceived utility for public engagement (Van Dijk 2017).

Conversely, formal social media policies increase both the frequency and quality of online interactions. They guide operational practices and signal institutional commitment, supporting resource allocation for dedicated social media roles and training (Crump 2011, Schneider 2016). Forces with comprehensive policies adopt a proactive online presence, using social media for meaningful two-way communication that reinforces police legitimacy and image work (Heverin and Zach 2010, Lieberman et al. 2013).

These hypotheses collectively aim to unpack the organisational, geographical, and policy-related factors that shape police social media practices in England and Wales, offering insights into the complex dynamics of digital communication within contemporary policing.

Data and methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey, social media, and interview data to examine the adoption, use, and perceived effectiveness of social media across police forces in England and Wales. By triangulating communications departments strategies, communication outputs, and practitioner perspectives, this design provides a comprehensive understanding of how police forces manage digital communications. The survey data offer insights into the structural and policy contexts of communications departments, the social media platforms employed, and perceptions of effectiveness. Social media data allow for an analysis of actual communication practices and content types, while interviews with communications professionals provide depth and context to understand the challenges and rationales behind strategic decisions. Together, these data sources enable a robust exploration of both the organisational and practical dimensions of police social media use, situating empirical findings within the broader discussion of police image work.

In 2018, an online survey was distributed to all 43 police corporate communications departments to investigate organisational factors, with a focus on departmental structure, policy adoption, and perceptions of social media effectiveness. Thirty-eight forces responded, yielding an 88.2% response rate. The survey included 21 closed-ended questions in multiple-choice and Likert-scale formats and was administered via Qualtrics. Data collected covered communications department composition,

social media adoption and use, community targeting, policy adoption, and perceptions of effectiveness. Force size was based on officer strength (Allen and Zayed 2019) and classified as small (<1350 officers), medium (1351–2850), or large (>2851). Force area classifications followed Aust and Simmons (2002), categorised as 'somewhat/mostly urban', 'middling', and 'somewhat/mostly rural'.

While survey data capture organisational context, analysing social media content and frequency provides insight into how forces communicate online. Facebook and Twitter are the most relevant platforms for studying police social media use (Crump 2011). Twitter, functioning as the de facto channel for organisational updates and breaking news, was selected for this study. Using the 'statuses/user_timeline' endpoint, up to 3,200 historical tweets per account were collected. To ensure comparability, the main Twitter handles of all 43 police forces were included. Neighbourhood teams, specialist units, and individual officer accounts were excluded due to research capacity constraints.

The statistical software R was used to create a script extracting all original tweets posted by forces between 21 February and 21 August 2018. Quote retweets were excluded, as these do not represent content produced by corporate communications departments, but replies to users were retained to capture networking and transactional interactions. The script collected 53,551 tweets, a substantially larger sample than previous studies, which typically analysed between 300 and 7000 posts (Denef et al. 2013, Lieberman et al. 2013, Panagiotopoulos et al. 2014, O'Connor 2015, Ferguson and Soave 2020). This represents the largest comparative Twitter dataset for the 43 police forces in England and Wales at the time of writing.

Tweets were manually coded to identify the types of communications published by police forces on their main accounts.[2] Coding began openly to establish general content categories. Once recurring patterns were identified, tweets were classified using Mergel's (2013) framework: Informational, Operational, Transactional, and Interactional (see Figure 1 for categories and subcategories). Informational tweets ('push') aim to increase transparency and build trust through information sharing. Operational tweets ('pull') seek community input to support policing activities. Transactional tweets enhance online service delivery, while Interactional tweets foster two-way engagement to build networks, collaboration, and public satisfaction.

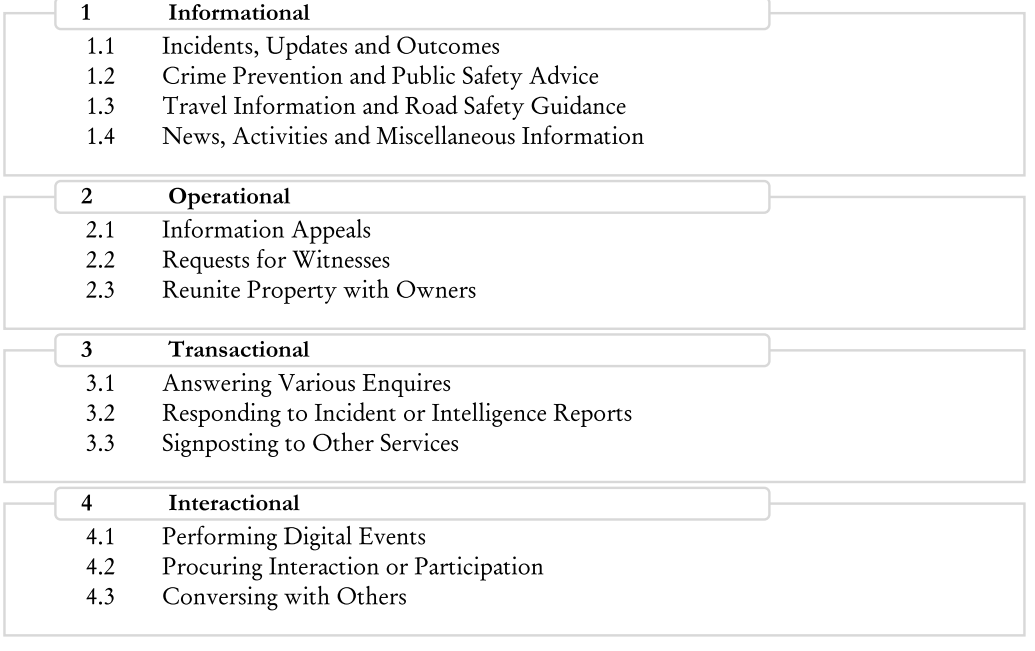

Figure 1. Mergel's (2013) interaction framework with police Twitter content categories.

To examine how organisational factors relate to actual social media practices, survey and tweet data were combined, enabling analysis of whether departmental characteristics predict differences in tweeting behaviour. This was achieved by mapping the tweet content categories for each police force to the survey data as count variables. To compare tweeting practices and organisational size, tweets from all 43 police forces were included, representing a census. For the subsequent negative binomial regression analysis, the social media data were reduced to the 38 forces that completed the survey. In total, the number of tweets added to the linked dataset was $N = 53{,}551$, (informational $n = 31{,}854$; operational $n = 8{,}509$; transactional $n = 7{,}309$; and interactional $n = 5{,}879$). At the time of writing, existing research on police social media communications has not compared tweeting practices by way of data linking to a national survey (O'Connor 2015, Kudla and Parnaby 2018, Nikolovska et al. 2020).

To complement the quantitative analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with communications professionals to explore the rationale behind social media practices. Of the 38 forces that completed the survey, 24 participated in the interview stage, representing 55% of all 43 corporate communications departments. In 2018, participants included one communications professional per force, with 5 from smaller, 12 from medium, and 7 from larger forces. Ten interviews were conducted in person at police headquarters, with the remainder by phone. Interviewees were Heads of Communications, Press Officers, and Digital Engagement Managers. Before each interview, participants provided signed consent. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a guide covering social media adoption, media relationships, and the opportunities and challenges of digital communications. Transcripts were thematically coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, supported by NVivo. Initial codes were derived from the data and refined against key literature themes, enabling systematic comparison while remaining open to unexpected insights.

Quantitative modelling

A mixed modelling approach was used to examine the hypothesised relationships between organisational factors and social media outputs, enabling analysis of both ordinal and count dependent variables. Ordinal regression was applied to survey items on perceived effectiveness, while negative binomial regression modelled Twitter frequency data. Negative binomial regression was chosen due to the skewed distribution and over-dispersion of social media counts, where the conditional variance exceeds the mean (Osgood 2000). This method is commonly used in studies of tweet frequency as it accounts for Poisson-like skewness and over-dispersion. Although the study achieved an 88.2% response rate, sample size still requires caution. Small samples can reduce statistical power and reliability, and subgroup analyses may produce small cell sizes. To address this, variables such as force size and rural/urban classification were carefully coded to maintain sufficient subgroup totals for robust estimates across all models.

Given the non-random nature of the sample and its near-census coverage (38 of 43 forces), inferential statistics were not reported. Instead, the analysis focuses on the direction of relationships and the magnitude of effect sizes. To ensure the robustness of the models, checks for multicollinearity were conducted. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were examined, with all variables falling within acceptable thresholds, indicating that multicollinearity did not pose a significant concern. This step helped confirm the stability and reliability of the regression coefficients across the models.

Although the inclusion of multiple predictors alongside a modest sample required careful consideration, several measures enhanced model robustness. Negative binomial regression addressed the over-dispersion common in social media count data, while careful variable coding maintained sufficient subgroup sizes for reliable estimates. Multicollinearity was assessed using VIFs, all within acceptable ranges, confirming model stability. Emphasising effect sizes rather than statistical significance reduced the risk of overfitting, and near-census coverage of forces strengthened generalisability. These methods provide a comprehensive view of police social media use, linking organisational context, outputs, and practitioner perspectives.

The findings are presented in three parts, reflecting the data sources. First, descriptive survey and Twitter results highlight patterns of adoption and use across forces. Second, regression analyses explore the relationships between organisational factors and social media practices. Third, qualitative interviews offer explanatory insights and contextualise the quantitative findings within existing literature. This sequencing allows each data source to address the hypotheses while recognising the complementary strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Findings

Survey and social media posts

This section presents descriptive findings from the survey and Twitter dataset, providing a baseline of social media adoption and use across forces and directly addressing Hypothesis 1 on organisational size and resources. Table 1 shows sample descriptives. Forces in England and Wales typically operate 5 to 6 social media platforms. Twitter and Facebook are used by all forces (100%), followed by Instagram and YouTube (92.1%) and LinkedIn (78.9%). Less commonly used platforms include Snapchat (36.8%), Flickr (34.2%), Pinterest (13.2%), Tumblr (5.3%), and Tinder (2.6%). Larger forces generally maintain a greater social media presence, while smaller forces are less likely to have dedicated staff. Thirty-three forces (86.8%) reported having a social media policy, with little variation by size, and 32 forces (84.2%) indicated they actively target communications to specific audiences.

The top five aims for using social media in policing were public engagement (89.5%), increasing public confidence and trust (78.9%), providing public reassurance (76.3%), preventing and detecting crime (63.2%), and conducting campaigns and events (55.3%). Respondents reported the most frequent type of content types published was appeals for information and witnesses (89.5%), followed by campaigns and digital events (50.0%), local and specialist policing activities (42.2%), police force news (42.2%), crime prevention and safety advice (26.3%) and information about incidents (21.1%).

Table 2 summarises the Twitter data collected from all 43 forces over a six-month period. There is a clear difference in the total tweets posted by police force size. The mean rank scores indicated that the smaller sized police forces (mean rank = 15.96) tended to post less on Twitter, followed by larger sized police forces (mean rank = 24.42), and medium sized police forces posting most frequently (mean rank = 25.31). Out of the four main content categories, 'Transactional' communications showed the greatest variation by police force size. The mean rank scores show smaller sized forces (mean rank = 15.61) tend to post fewer transactional tweets, followed by larger sized forces (mean rank = 22.00), then medium sized forces (mean rank = 27.59) who post the most. The subcategory 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes' also showed high variance by police force size, with smaller sized forces (mean rank = 14.71) least likely to post, followed by medium sized forces (mean rank = 23.16), and larger sized forces (mean rank = 28.42) tending to post the most.

'Responding to incident or intelligence reports' also showed large variance by police force size, with smaller sized forces (mean rank = 15.03) less unlikely to respond to incidents or intelligence, followed by larger sized forces (mean rank = 21.42), then medium sized forces (mean rank = 28.56). Finally, 'Signposting to other services' also showed large variance, with the greatest disparity between smaller and medium sized forces.

The linked dataset enabled an analysis of police force characteristics in relation to tweet content categories (see Tables 3 and 4). Holding all other factors constant, smaller police forces were significantly less likely to post content such as 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes', 'Information appeals', and 'Responding to incident or intelligence reports'. Specifically, smaller forces were less likely to post this content by a factor of 1.9 compared to larger forces, likely due to having fewer resources. Similarly, the results revealed that medium sized forces were also significantly less likely to post 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes', with a factor of 1.4. However, they were significantly more likely to post 'Requests for witnesses' and 'Responding to incident or intelligence reports', by factors of 1.86

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Independent variables	Coding	N/M	%/SD	%
Communications staff	1 = 1–10	7	18.4	45.5
	2 = 11–25	25	65.8	54.5
	3 = 26+	6	15.8	0.0
Social media staff	1 = 1–10	16	42.1	63.6
	2 = 11–25	19	50.0	36.4
	3 = 26+	3	7.9	0.0
Number of social media platforms	Scale (1 to 10 platforms)	5.55	1.37	
Social media platforms used	1 = Twitter	38	100	100
	2 = Facebook	38	100	100
	3 = Instagram	35	92.1	72.7
	4 = YouTube	35	92.1	90.9
	5 = LinkedIn	30	78.9	63.6
	6 = Snapchat	14	36.8	18.2
	7 = Flickr	13	34.2	18.2
	8 = Pinterest	5	13.2	9.1
	9 = TumbIr	2	5.3	0.0
	10 = Tinder	1	2.6	0.0
Local policing Twitter accounts	1 = 1–10	8	21.1	27.3
	2 = 11–25	17	44.7	54.5
	3 = 26+	13	34.2	18.2
Specialist policing Twitter accounts	1 = 1–6	16	42.1	27.3
	2 = 7–12	12	31.6	45.5
	3 = 13+	10	26.3	27.3
Police officer Twitter accounts	1 = 1–29	23	60.5	63.6
	2 = 30–59	7	18.4	18.2
	3 = 60+	8	21.1	18.2
Police force Facebook pages	1 = 1–6	16	42.1	45.5
	2 = 7–12	4	10.5	9.1
	3 = 13+	18	47.4	45.5
Target communications	0 = No	6	15.8	27.3
	1 = Yes	32	84.2	72.7
Have a social media policy	0 = No	5	13.2	9.1
	1 = Yes	33	86.8	90.9
Approves social media accounts	1 = Head of Communications	9	23.7	45.5
	2 = Digital/Social Media lead	22	57.9	45.5
	3 = Chain of command	4	10.5	0.0
	4 = Approval not required	3	7.9	9.1
Receives social media training	1 = Communications department	31	81.6	72.7
	2 = Local policing teams	31	81.6	72.7
	3 = Specialist policing teams	28	73.7	81.8
	4 = Police officers	32	84.2	81.8
	5 = Special constables	30	78.9	72.7
	6 = Police community support officers	32	84.2	81.8
	7 = Other police staff	29	76.3	72.7
	8 = No training provided	5	13.2	18.2
Aims of using social media	1 = Public engagement	34	89.5	90.9
	2 = Informing public about priorities and services	11	28.9	45.5
	3 = Preventing and detecting crime	24	63.2	54.5
	4 = Promoting local and specialist policing activities	19	50.0	45.5
	5 = Increasing public confidence and trust	30	78.9	72.7
	6 = Conducting campaigns and events	21	55.3	54.5
	7 = Providing public reassurance	29	76.3	72.7
	8 = Informing the public about incidents	13	34.2	54.5
	9 = Distributing news about police force	14	36.8	45.5
	10 = Expanding visibility of the police force	11	28.9	27.3
	11 = Publicising police force less formally	13	34.2	18.2
Frequently published content	1 = Information about incidents	8	21.1	18.2
	2 = Appeals for information and witnesses	34	89.5	81.8
	3 = Crime prevention and safety advice	10	26.3	18.2
	4 = Campaigns and digital events	19	50.0	36.4
	5 = Local and specialist policing activities	16	42.1	45.5
	6 = Police force news	16	42.1	45.5

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Independent variables	Coding	N/M	%/SD	%
Content type with best engagement	1 = Text	11	28.9	9.1
	2 = Images	36	94.7	90.9
	3 = Videos	32	84.2	81.8
	4 = Polls	5	13.2	9.1
Area classification	1 = Somewhat/Mostly Rural	9	23.7	36.4
	2 = Middling	14	36.8	45.5
	3 = Somewhat/Mostly Urban	15	39.5	18.2

$N = 38$ police forces across England and Wales.

Table 2. Categories of Twitter posts by police force size.

				Police force size		
	N	*M*	SD	Smaller	Medium	Larger
Informational Tweets Total	31,854	740.79	339.38	19.04	21.75	25.50
Incidents, updates, and outcomes	7,940	184.65	134.94	14.71	23.16	28.42
Crime prevention and public safety advice	7,206	167.58	153.34	21.86	21.19	23.15
Travel information and road safety guidance	4,421	102.81	99.62	23.04	24.88	17.35
News, activities, and misc. information	12,287	285.74	182.02	20.32	22.38	23.35
Operational Tweets Total	8,509	197.88	182.65	18.07	24.00	23.77
Appeals for information	6,074	141.26	169.50	15.14	25.78	24.73
Requests for witnesses	2,299	53.47	50.88	22.68	24.47	18.23
Reunite property with owners	136	3.16	2.87	18.43	26.56	20.23
Transactional Tweets Total	7,309	169.98	182.73	15.61	27.59	22.00
Answering various enquiries	4,663	108.44	114.79	16.36	26.78	22.19
Responding to incident/intelligence reports	2,210	51.40	62.35	15.04	28.56	21.42
Signposting to other services	436	10.14	15.29	16.07	27.53	21.58
Interactional Tweets Total	5,879	136.72	142.98	20.64	24.88	19.92
Performing digital events	1,889	43.93	115.99	20.11	24.97	20.38
Procuring collaboration or participation	1,787	41.56	33.46	20.11	23.03	22.77
Conversing with others	2,203	51.23	47.60	20.57	26.88	17.54
Police Tweets Total	53,551	1245.37	534.65	15.96	25.31	24.42

and 2.18 respectively, compared to larger forces. This suggests that while medium sized forces may share fewer general updates, they tend to focus more on specific appeals and responses to incidents.

When looking at the area classification variable, using the somewhat/mostly urban as the reference category, somewhat/mostly rural was negatively related with the content types 'Crime prevention and public safety advice', effect size 1.50, 'Information appeals', effect size 1.58, 'Requests for witnesses', effect size 1.90, and 'Responding to incident or intelligence reports' with an effect size of 2.50. However, the middling area classifications were positively associated with the 'Requests for witnesses' tweets with an effect size of 1.74. These results highlight some variation in content dissemination based on force area type. Somewhat/mostly rural appear to be the most reluctant in posting a wide variety of social media content. With the examination of communications staffing levels, forces with 11–25 and 26 + staff appear to be significantly associated with 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes' positively, with 1.47 and 2.00 effect sizes. Similarly, the 11–25 staff grouping positively linked with 'Crime prevention and public safety advice' with an effect size of 1.72. These results indicate that compared to the 1–10 reference group, the two informational content types listed tend to be posted more via larger staffing teams.

When considering the numbers of social media accounts within police forces, those with 1–10 local Twitter accounts show a significant negative association with 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes', effect size 1.56, and 'Information appeals' tweets, effect size 2.94. However, intriguingly, the 1–10 local account group is significantly positively linked with 'Crime prevention and public safety advice' content. In addition, the 11–25 local account group has a positive involvement with the 'Performing digital events' dependent variable compared with the 26+ reference group by a factor of 4.96. Moving onto specialist account groups, forces with either 7–12 and 13+ were

Table 3. Negative binomial regression predicting 'informational' and 'interactional' content.

	Incidents, updates, and outcomes		Crime prevention & public safety advice		Performing digital events	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Police force size						
Smaller	−0.40	0.66	−0.06	0.93	−1.44	0.23
Medium	−0.30	0.73	0.03	1.03	−0.27	0.75
(Ref: Larger)						
Area classification						
Somewhat/Mostly Rural	0.01	1.00	−0.39	0.67	−0.09	0.91
Middling	−0.21	0.80	−0.13	0.87	0.44	1.56
(Ref: Somewhat/Mostly Urban)						
Target communications	0.29	1.34	−0.16	0.84	−0.04	0.95
Have a social media policy	−0.66	0.51	0.24	1.28	−1.02	0.35
Number of social media platforms	−0.08	0.91	−0.08	0.91	−0.20	0.81
Communications staff (Ref: 1–10)						
11–25	0.38	1.47	−0.53	0.58	−0.43	0.65
26+	0.69	2.00	−0.11	0.88	−0.48	0.61
Local Twitter accounts (Ref: 26+)						
1–10	−0.43	0.64	0.47	1.61	0.12	1.13
11–25	−0.19	0.82	0.22	1.25	1.60	4.96
Specialist Twitter accounts (Ref: 1–6)						
7–12	0.63	1.89	−0.25	0.77	1.32	3.75
13+	0.45	1.57	0.75	2.13	3.24	25.71
Officer Twitter accounts (Ref: 1–29)						
30–59	−0.05	0.95	−0.34	0.71	−0.82	0.43
60+	0.46	1.59	−0.35	0.70	−2.34	0.09
Constant	5.62		5.61		4.34	
Model fit						
−2 log-likelihood	46.84		36.95		28.60	
df	15		15		15	
sig.	0.001		0.001		0.018	
N =	38		38		38	

significantly positively connected to the 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes', 'Crime prevention and public safety advice', and 'Performing digital events' with large effect sizes when compared to the reference category. In addition to these three categories, 7–12 specialist accounts were significantly positively associated with 'Information appeals' tweets, and the same for 13+ specialist accounts with 'Responding to incident or intelligence reports' compared to the 1–6 reference group by a factor of 1.43 and 3.65 respectively.

The results for individual police officer accounts show that the 60+ group has a positive association with 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes', effect size 1.59, 'Information appeals', effect size 1.93, and 'Requests for witnesses', effect size 4.48. However, the 60+ group also had negative associations with the content categories 'Crime prevention and public safety advice', effect size 1.42, 'Performing digital events', effect size 11.11, and 'Responding to incident or intelligence reports', effect size 3.65, when compared to 1–29 reference grouping. In all, there is a slight trend when examining the predictions of different account types, as the results show that police forces with a greater number of local, specialist and officer accounts on Twitter are more likely to post informational and operational tweets in contrast to interactional and transactional content. In addition, the targeting communications independent variable was significant in having a negative association with 'Requests for witnesses' tweets by a factor of 2.04, while having a social media policy also significantly negatively predicted the 'Incidents, updates, and outcomes' content by a factor of 1.96. The last variable measured within the model was the number of social media platforms. The outcomes from the regression show that using a greater number of social media platforms has a significant negative connection to both 'Information appeals' and 'Responding to incident or intelligence reports' content categories with effect scores of 1.28 and 1.35.

Table 4. Negative binomial regression predicting 'operational' and 'transactional' content.

	Information appeals		Requests for witnesses		Responding to incident or intelligence reports	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Police force size						
Smaller	−0.62	0.53	0.42	1.53	−0.95	0.38
Medium	−0.05	0.95	0.62	1.86	0.78	2.18
(Ref: Larger)						
Area classification						
Somewhat/Mostly Rural	−0.45	0.63	−0.64	0.52	−0.90	0.40
Middling	−0.16	0.85	0.55	1.74	0.28	1.33
(Ref: Somewhat/Mostly Urban)						
Target communications	−0.11	0.89	−0.69	0.49	0.28	1.33
Have a social media policy	−0.25	0.77	0.04	1.04	−0.32	0.71
Number of social media platforms	−0.23	0.78	−0.25	0.77	−0.29	0.74
Communications staff (Ref: 1–10)						
11–25	−0.01	0.99	0.32	1.38	0.74	2.10
26+	0.22	1.24	0.61	1.85	1.07	2.93
Local Twitter accounts (Ref: 26+)						
1–10	−1.06	0.34	−0.57	0.56	−0.09	0.90
11–25	−0.25	0.77	0.38	1.47	0.29	1.33
Specialist Twitter accounts (Ref: 1–6)						
7–12	0.36	1.43	0.41	1.51	−0.01	0.99
13+	0.28	1.32	0.60	1.82	1.29	3.65
Officer Twitter accounts (Ref: 1–29)						
30–59	0.13	1.14	0.66	1.94	−1.76	0.17
60+	0.66	1.93	1.50	4.48	−1.12	0.32
Constant	6.59		4.13		4.71	
Model fit						
−2 log-likelihood	32.85		32.46		34.80	
df	15		15		15	
sig.	0.005		0.006		0.003	
N =	38		38		38	

Perceptions of social media effectiveness

Here we focus on perceptions of effectiveness captured through the survey, linking force size and geographical context to reported views of social media's value. These results are particularly relevant to Hypotheses 2 and 3. Table 5 shows responses to the effectiveness of social media platforms across different functionality items. Respondents perceivedsocial media platforms to be most effective for increasing public interactions ($M = 4.11$), appealing for information ($M = 4.05$), and conducting campaigns and events ($M = 3.79$), and least effective for publishing policing activities ($M = 3.61$), providing reassurance to the public ($M = 3.58$), and crime prevention information ($M = 3.18$), indicating respondents felt that two-way communications were most effective. Medium and larger forces tended to view all types of social media use as more effective than smaller forces. For smaller forces, social media was seen as most effective for communicating crime prevention information ($M = 13.73$), and least effective for increasing interactions with the public ($M = 10.77$). For medium sized forces, publishing policing activities was perceived as most effective ($M = 24.97$), while

Table 5. Effectiveness of social media platforms between police force size groups.

	Sample total		Police force size		
	M	SD	Smaller	Medium	Larger
Effectiveness for increasing public interactions	4.11	0.98	10.77	23.41	22.55
Effectiveness for conducting campaigns and events	3.79	0.74	12.73	22.56	21.82
Effectiveness for information appeals	4.05	0.86	11.73	22.41	23.05
Effectiveness for providing reassurance to the public	3.58	0.91	12.09	24.91	19.05
Effectiveness for crime prevention information	3.18	0.89	13.73	23.09	20.05
Effectiveness for publishing policing activities	3.61	0.71	12.55	24.97	18.50

Table 6. Ordinal regression predicting the effectiveness of social media platforms.

	Effectiveness for increasing public interactions		Effectiveness for information appeals		Effectiveness for publishing policing activities	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Police force size (Ref: Larger)						
Smaller	−0.72	0.48	−2.31	0.09	−1.30	0.27
Medium	3.86	47.91	1.47	4.37	3.70	40.65
Area classification (Ref: Somewhat/Mostly Urban)						
Somewhat/Mostly Rural	−4.07	0.01	−0.78	0.45	−0.40	0.66
Middling	−0.23	0.79	1.16	3.19	0.13	1.14
Have a social media policy	3.01	20.42	2.51	12.29	2.35	10.54
Number of social media platforms	0.75	2.11	0.55	1.74	−0.48	0.61
Communications staff (Ref: 1–10)						
11–25	−0.32	0.72	−0.43	0.64	1.67	5.34
26+	0.33	1.39	−0.41	0.66	2.63	12.57
Local Twitter accounts (Ref: 26+)						
1–10	−0.41	0.65	−1.81	0.16	−0.43	0.64
11–25	1.78	5.93	−2.38	0.09	1.22	3.40
Specialist Twitter accounts (Ref: 1–6)						
7–12	2.56	13.02	2.95	19.15	2.48	12.03
13+	−2.46	0.08	−1.33	0.26	0.97	2.65
Officer Twitter accounts (Ref: 1–29)						
30–59	3.50	33.22	2.31	10.12	0.57	1.77
60+	1.76	5.81	1.34	3.85	1.36	3.91
Model fit						
−2 log-likelihood	32.74		33.10		33.66	
df	15		15		15	
sig.	0.005		0.005		0.004	
N =	38		38		38	
Pseudo R^2	0.63		0.64		0.66	

appeals for information were viewed as least effective ($M = 22.41$). For large forces, appeals for information were viewed as most effective ($M = 23.05$), while publishing policing activities was viewed as least effective ($M = 18.50$).

Table 6 presents the effect size estimations from three ordinal regression models fit to the following 'Effectiveness … ' items: increasing public interactions, information appeals, and publishing policing activities.[3] Confirming the bivariate analysis, compared to the larger sized police force reference category, medium sized police forces were far more likely to consider social media effective for all three activities, while smaller police forces were less likely. Holding all other factors constant, compared to urban based police forces, rural police forces tended to view social media as less effective for all three effectiveness items, while forces located in middling regions found appeals for information and publishing policing activities on social media as more effective. Having a social media policy within police forces was also positively associated with perceived effectiveness in social media use across all three dependent variables, with large effect sizes for all three models.

Interviews

The final part of the findings draws on qualitative interviews with communications staff. These accounts provide explanatory depth, illustrating how practitioners interpret the role of social media in image work and helping to contextualise the quantitative patterns. Given the exploratory nature of these data, the analysis also engages more explicitly with existing literature.

From novelty to essential

Consistent with previous research, a clear theme emerged that police use of social media has evolved from a novelty to a core element of corporate communications. Respondents noted that

police no longer rely on traditional media to disseminate information; instead, media increasingly depend on police social channels for timely updates. As one participant observed, 'They need us more than we need them, and it used to be we needed them more than they needed us' (Karen, Larger Force, Interview 16). This shift grants police greater control over information presented to communities, moving away from traditional communication processes (O'Connor and Zaidi 2020). However, it has also strained relationships with the media. A participant from a smaller force explained,

> We have had a few disputes with the media because they were always the first people we would contact, we needed them, but we don't need them as much anymore. They have become a little bit sort of 'Where are we getting our information from?' … 'Why is it going on to Facebook first?' (Kelly, Smaller Force, Interview 18)

The existing literature supports this view, noting that without police cooperation, the media often struggle to access accurate information (Chibnall 1977, Chermak 1995). This dynamic can create tension within the police-media relationship, tipping the power towards the police. Nonetheless, as Goldsmith (2010) warns, it only takes one incident on social media, through 'new visibility', meaning the heightened scrutiny created by ubiquitous recording, sharing, and circulation of police activities online, to impact police legitimacy and shift the power back to the media. Most respondents, however, valued the ability to be the primary publishers of police content, as this allowed them to present the 'facts' directly to their communities. For instance, Harrison from a larger police force notes that: 'Social media allows us to publish the facts and the truth of the case as we know up to that point, or any particular subject, rather than have it spun' (Harrison, Larger Force, Interview 13).

Controlling the 'facts' removes the media's opportunity to immediately put a spin on a press release, a continual concern for the police given the prevalence of sensational clickbait articles (Mawby 2010b). This capacity allows police forces to share more relevant crime information and corporate messaging, rather than the severe and dramatic stories often preferred by the press, which can support community policing by highlighting the lower-level problems that matter to residents (Skogan 2006). However, it is important to recognise that police public relations is a form of news-making and attempts to 'control the facts' closely resembling the framing practices used by journalists, raising questions about neutrality and agenda-setting.

Another prominent subtheme from the interviews was the immediacy and reach of social media. Some respondents related this immediacy to sustaining an authoritative police voice. Karen from a larger police force noted, 'The reach of the people who have chosen to follow you, the power of algorithms within social media and the way information is shared is very valuable to policing' (Karen, Larger Force, Interview 16). This aligns with the findings of Lee and McGovern (2013), who argue that public relations help promote the police voice, shaping their image and legitimising their position of control. As Elliot from a medium sized police force explains, 'We have got a real, authentic and authoritative voice on these social media channels, that people take on board, so that makes a big difference' (Elliot, Medium Force, Interview 22).

Avenue of opportunities

A broad theme emerged highlighting the expanding opportunities generated by police uptake of social media in England and Wales. What began as a supplementary tool has now become essential for extending communication reach and enhancing image work, in line with ideas noted in the literature (Mulrooney et al. 2024). Nicole from a larger police force highlighted this challenge:

> We only hit the audiences that support us already, and we very rarely go beyond that. In an appeal where something horrible or tragic has happened, you will get people who don't support the police sharing it. But, on the sort of crime prevention level or promoting trust, we can do an amazing campaign promoting some work we are doing around theft or any crime, and it goes down well with our Facebook audience. However, it's not getting any interaction from the audiences who don't trust the police, which is who we need to connect to the most. (Nicole, Larger Force, Interview 5)

A key aspect of police social media activity is promoting force initiatives and campaigns as part of image work (Mawby 2002b, p. 316). Images and videos play a central role, helping the public engage with content. Some forces have in-house video teams to produce professional material (Lee and McGovern 2014). Videos are particularly effective at conveying the emotional impact of crime, which static print campaigns struggle to achieve. Nicole described a campaign on illegal mobile phone use while driving:

> We did a video with the family saying exactly what had happened on the day and released dash cam footage to tell the full story. When you are on your mobile phone, you think it is okay, but then they have to look at a video of a family that has suffered because of someone else's mistake. That video was seen by 7,000,000 people, and it was also televised. Without a video, you can't get that level of emotion from a statement given to the press. (Nicole, Larger Force, Interview 5)

Similarly, live streaming functions on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok offer new engagement opportunities. These tools extend image work beyond small in-person events, enabling broader police-community consultation (Mawby 2002a, p. 174). Kathryn from a medium-sized force highlighted this benefit: 'Live video then takes public meetings which are held in one location and makes them go further, so it enables those who can't get out the house, they can have a voice and listen to what's going on' (Kathryn, Medium Force, Interview 7).

The value of using live streaming is evident in the responses police receive. 'When we use Facebook Live and we give people live real-time insights into what we're doing or something that's happening, we get fantastic responses' (Ryan, Larger Force, Interview 15). Live streaming adds a new dimension to social media's role in assisting with the image projection capabilities of police forces. It creates opportunities for police to show real segments of their work, somewhat akin to constructed television portrayals that display the glossy crime-fighting illustrations of policing (Leishman and Mason 2003). While not all police live streaming depicts policing in a glossy manner, several forces encourage local and specialist teams to engage in this content to illustrate police work in real-time.

Social media further increases police visibility and transparency. Many respondents highlighted increased visibility as a key benefit: 'It gives us the visibility, which when accompanied by physical visibility and engagement, amplifies that' (Kathryn, Medium Force, Interview 7). Multiple social media accounts allow broader public access to information about police activities, particularly when work is not directly observable: 'Social media gives us the opportunity to show what our officers are doing if it is not being seen by the public; we can promote the good work that they are doing in the community teams' (Victoria, Smaller Force, Interview 1). Another participant noted, 'As visibility of police officers on the street decreases because of budget cuts, we can kind of make up by increasing their visibility online, by creating more accounts and making sure we cover a wide geographical area' (Jessica, Medium Force, Interview 23).

Challenges of operation

The previous themes highlighted the shift in police use of social media from a novelty to an essential tool, and the new opportunities this presents for communication and public engagement. The final overarching theme examines the challenges of operating in this landscape. Given the open and visible nature of social platforms, policing organisations must demonstrate authenticity through authority, identity, engagement and transparency (Gilpin et al. 2010). These imperatives are especially pertinent in less-connected rural settings, where building meaningful relationships and responsive engagement remains a key element of effective policing (Mulrooney et al. 2024): 'For transparency purposes, we are a very open police force, and we put a lot out there in terms of what we get up to, what we get right, and what we don't get quite as right' (Gregory, Medium Force, Interview 21). Social media facilitates novel opportunities for police forces to be increasingly transparent (Bullock et al. 2020). For example, the public can now communicate directly with senior police officers more straightforwardly within digital environments: 'In terms of transparency, you can send a tweet to the Chief, and he will reply to you. It makes our job difficult sometimes, but that is the

level of transparency you would never have before' (Allison, Larger Force, Interview 19). The active presence of senior officers on social media platforms grants the public greater access to segments of the police force that were previously difficult to connect with due to their lack of engagement on social media.

Community policing seeks to humanise the police by fostering meaningful relationships with the public (Goldstein 1987). Respondents highlighted that social media has become a powerful tool for presenting the police in a more 'human' way, marking a shift from early one-way, formal communications. As one participant explained, 'I think previously, we were very … corporate. We have started to introduce a bit more humanisation to the tweets, depending on the nature of what we're delivering' (Danielle, Medium Force, Interview 12).

The idea of showing the 'human face' of the police in image work is long established, forming a key part of police mandates (Mawby 2002a, p. 118). Social media, however, enables forces to showcase this humanity on a larger scale. As one participant noted, 'I think it has put a massive human face on policing and an immediate face on policing, and the ability to tell the truth as we see it straight from the horse's mouth' (Mark, Larger Force, Interview 2). Communicating in a human manner on social media can make the public more receptive and trusting of the police (Denef et al. 2012, p. 25).

Key respondents repeatedly highlighted that managing social media work alongside their other responsibilities was a 'tough ask'. Kelly from a smaller police force described their role as 'omnicompetent communications and engagement specialists' who handle a variety of tasks (Kelly, Smaller Force, Interview 18). This multifaceted role is indicative of the increasing demands on police officers to not only perform their traditional duties but also manage the growing need for effective digital communication.

Research by Bullock et al. (2020) underscores the necessity for dedicated social media staff within police forces. The ability to maintain a robust online presence is crucial for contemporary policing, yet many forces struggle with limited resources. Gregory from a medium sized police force echoed this sentiment, noting that even reasonably sized teams desire more staff to bolster their digital services: 'Really it is that resourcing side of things that is the biggest problem for us […] It's getting more hands-on and using it more effectively' (Gregory, Medium Force, Interview 21).

A significant challenge within digital communities is monitoring public comments on police content. Corporate communications staff must ensure that police profiles remain free from harmful or toxic comments that could damage the police image or the broader community. Gregory highlighted the importance of this responsibility: 'We try to make sure that we are actively monitoring and engaging with the community about what is appropriate and what isn't appropriate on our pages' (Gregory, Medium Force, Interview 20).

Despite these efforts, there are often insufficient resources to monitor every post on digital platforms thoroughly. Harrison from a larger police force pointed out the limitations they face: 'If people are being incredibly racist, or actually committing a hate crime on our post, we can't allow that to stand but we also do not have the resources to go after everyone' (Harrison, Larger Force, Interview 13). This highlights a critical gap in the capacity of police forces to manage their digital presence effectively, despite recognising its importance.

The academic literature supports these findings, indicating that while social media can significantly enhance police transparency and community engagement (Bullock et al. 2020), it also requires substantial investment in resources and personnel. Without adequate support, police forces may struggle to leverage social media's full potential, impacting their ability to maintain a positive public image and effectively engage with their communities.

Discussion

The study's findings indicate that smaller and rural police forces are less likely to engage in frequent social media posting, particularly in two-way transactional and interactional communications. This supports the hypothesis (H1) that these forces would show a negative association with active

social media use compared to medium and larger urban forces. Several factors contribute to this trend, including reliance on traditional communication methods, resource constraints, and the digital divide. Smaller forces often depend on long-standing, face-to-face interactions within their communities, which can be more effective than digital approaches in these contexts (Donnermeyer 2020). Limited access to digital tools and training in rural areas further reduces social media use (Van Dijk 2017), while resource pressures mean that operational duties are prioritised over maintaining an active online presence (Mawby 2010b). These findings align with the literature, which notes that smaller forces focus on immediate policing rather than digital engagement (Wooff 2022).

The analysis supports the second hypothesis (H2), showing that police forces with formal social media policies are more likely to post frequently across all content types, particularly in two-way communications. Policies provide clear guidance and strategic direction, enhancing the consistency and effectiveness of social media use. They often include officer training, which increases confidence and competence in managing online interactions (Schneider 2016). The presence of a policy also signals institutional support, enabling better resource allocation, including dedicated social media personnel (Lieberman et al. 2013). This structured approach allows forces not only to disseminate information but also to engage meaningfully with the public, fostering trust and positive relationships (Heverin and Zach 2010). Literature supports these findings, showing that well-supported social media initiatives are critical for effective digital communication and public engagement (Mergel 2012; 2013). The study further highlights how institutional support through policies can mitigate risks and enhance the benefits of social media in police image work (Crump 2011, Bullock et al. 2020).

The findings for the third hypothesis (H3) show that smaller and rural police forces perceive social media as less effective for increasing public interactions, soliciting information, and sharing policing activities compared to other forces. This perception reflects their reliance on traditional communication methods, based on long-standing face-to-face interactions that work well within their communities (Donnermeyer 2020). Limited resources and the digital divide further reduce both reliance on and confidence in social media (Van Dijk 2017). In contrast, medium and larger forces view social media as a valuable tool for enhancing public engagement and disseminating information efficiently. These forces recognise its potential to reach wider audiences quickly, supporting both operational activities and community engagement (Lee and McGovern 2013, Meijer and Thaens 2013). The differing perceptions highlight variations in capability and strategic priorities across forces, consistent with literature on digital policing and community engagement (Bullock 2017, Nikolovska et al. 2020).

These findings highlight the double-edged nature of digital image work. While social media can enhance transparency, immediacy, and the humanisation of policing through direct engagement, it also strengthens institutional capacity to shape and curate narratives, often resembling journalistic framing practices (Mawby 2010a, Crump 2011). This control over information raises questions about whether digital platforms truly expand democratic accountability or simply refine existing image management strategies (Chermak and Weiss 2005). Critics argue that despite enabling two-way communication, the power imbalance remains largely with the police, who control what is shared, how it is framed, and whose voices are amplified (Schneider 2016). Consequently, the potential benefits for community trust may be tempered by the risk that social media serves primarily to reinforce organisational legitimacy rather than genuine accountability.

Limitations

This study provides a comprehensive examination of police social media use in England and Wales but has several limitations. Data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic and Twitter's rebranding to X, both of which likely altered social media dynamics. The pandemic in particular may have increased police reliance on social media for community engagement, information sharing, and operational communication, meaning the findings may not fully reflect current practices. The study also excluded neighbourhood policing teams, specialist units, and individual officer accounts due to research capacity constraints, omitting content that may reveal

community-specific or operational engagement. Finally, the focus was primarily on Twitter, as a key platform for emergency communications. Other platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok may show different usage patterns and impacts. Future research should adopt a broader platform approach to better understand police social media strategies.

Conclusion

This study makes several significant contributions to the existing literature on police image work. It highlights the shift from traditional media to digital platforms, building on Mawby's (2002a) stages of police image work and suggesting a potential new phase referred to as 'the digital turn in police image work'. The findings demonstrate how social media, particularly platforms like Twitter, has become integral to police communication strategies, enabling forces to bypass traditional media channels and directly shape their narratives. This development provides police forces with greater control over their public image, supporting transparency and public trust, as noted by Bullock et al. (2020).

The study presents empirical evidence of the varied adoption and use of social media across police forces of different sizes and geographical contexts. This variation reflects the challenges and opportunities identified in previous research, such as the need for tailored communication approaches that account for resource limitations and the specific characteristics of local communities (Mawby 2010b, Donnermeyer 2020). By linking survey data with social media activity, the study offers a nuanced perspective on how organisational and policy factors shape the effectiveness of police social media engagement, contributing to the broader discussion on digital communication within the public sector (Mergel 2013).

Insights into the perceptions of police communication staff regarding the effectiveness of social media further enrich the academic discourse on the practical application of digital tools in policing. The study highlights the importance of institutional support, staff training, and strategic policies in maximising the benefits of social media, as suggested by Crump (2011) and Lieberman et al. (2013). Additionally, the qualitative findings reveal tensions between maintaining control over the police narrative and engaging meaningfully with diverse community groups, reflecting concerns raised by Goldsmith (2010) about the balance of power in police-media relations.

Overall, the study advances understanding of police image work in the digital era, emphasising the pivotal role of social media in shaping public perceptions and building community trust. It also calls for further research into the evolving relationship between traditional and digital communication strategies in policing, particularly in light of the post-pandemic shift towards greater reliance on online platforms.

Notes

1. The 2011 riots in England were a series of widespread disturbances across several English cities, triggered by the police shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, and characterised by large-scale disorder, arson, looting, and confrontations with police over several days in August 2011.
2. Two people coded the police tweets, one coding the full sample while the other a smaller random sample (5400, or 10.8%, spread evenly across all categories) to identify any inconsistency. The inter-coder test results showed an acceptable 5,138 agreements and 262 disagreements, with Krippendorff's alpha statistic of 0.945 indicating a consistent application of the coding structure (Lombard et al. 2002).
3. Model diagnostics indicated a poor fit to the other effectiveness items and these items were leftout of the regression analysis.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Arron Cullen:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Matthew L. Williams:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

Data access statement

Information on the data underpinning this publication, including access details, can be found in the Cardiff University Research Data Repository at https://doi.org/10.17035/cardiff.31099837.

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