



**Police misconduct and social media: perceptions of aspiring future police officers**

Journal:	<i>Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning</i>
Manuscript ID	HESWBL-08-2023-0214.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Social media, Work-based learning, Technology enhanced learning

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

## Abstract

### Purpose

The research aimed to explore the perceptions of aspiring future police officers studying at a university in relation to the actions to be taken with regards to typical posts on social media by a fictitious off and on-duty police officer. This in turn would inform future police workforce requirements.

### Design/methodology/approach

Policing students who expressed their aspirations as future police officers were recruited. A total of 99 students studying the College of Policing licensed Professional Policing Degree at the University of South Wales, took part in Hydra Immersive Simulations to ascertain their perception of social media posts by a fictitious serving police officer. The students were asked to rate the appropriateness of the social media posts as groups, and as individuals.

### Findings

The findings suggest that, whilst the majority of students identified misconduct issues in the social media posts, the response to how the fictitious police officer should be dealt with varied. In addition, it would appear that there may be a need for those involved in policing education to reinforce, in an ongoing basis, knowledge of the College of Policing Code of Ethics, misconduct rules, regulations and increase awareness of unacceptable social media posts.

### Originality

Limited research has been conducted in relation to the College of Policing licensed higher education programme, the professional policing degree (PPD), equipping aspiring police officers to successfully join the service and influence the cultural change.

### Research limitations/implications

The research was conducted with professional policing degree students from one university.

### Practical implications

It is important to reinforce The College of Policing Code of Ethics, expected professional standards and an understanding of what constitutes unacceptable social media posts

1  
2  
3 throughout the education of aspiring police officers. As this has the potential, if recruited, to  
4 impact on the service.  
5  
6  
7

8 Research paper  
9

### 10 11 **Key words**

12 Social media; technology-enhanced learning; work-based learning.  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18

### 19 **Introduction**

20 The police service across England and Wales consists of 145,000 police officers, 100,000  
21 police staff, designated officers, and volunteers. This total workforce requires ongoing  
22 professional development as well as comprehensive initial education and training of new  
23 recruits.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

29 The learning focus of attention for the service has been towards the higher educational  
30 programmes of the police constable degree apprenticeship (PCDA) and degree holder entry  
31 programme (DHEP) as initial education and training for newly employed police officer  
32 recruits. However, research on the ability of the higher education taught programme for  
33 aspiring police officers, was licensed through the College of Policing, the professional  
34 policing degree (PPD). This aimed to develop aspiring police officers' knowledge,  
35 understanding and behaviours to enable them to successfully join the service and influence  
36 the cultural change aspired to within the workplace, has received limited attention.  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43

44 Sutherland and Ho (2017) discuss how many undergraduate students in their research across  
45 academic disciplines expressed the need for student proficiency in the use of social media. It  
46 included the participants who were interested in learning what is acceptable social media  
47 practice within the workplace. The current research has specifically focused on the  
48 perceptions of PPD students of social media posts as to whether, if employed, they were  
49 acceptable or required action to be taken.  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55

56 A recent report into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police  
57 service by Baroness Louise Casey (Casey, 2023) highlighted the use of social media  
58 platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. These social media platforms are often used as a  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 vehicle by which, some existing police officers circulate racist, homophobic, and sexist  
4 messages between officers and between officers and members of the public.  
5  
6  
7

8  
9 The Casey report comes in the wake of the publication of the findings of Operation Hotton  
10 (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2022), which again identified discrimination,  
11 misogyny, and harassment and bullying including racist and sexist comments, shared via  
12 social media amongst officers based at Charing Cross police station. Not that this conduct is  
13 only seen in the Metropolitan Police service, it has been reported that forces across the  
14 country have experienced officers' mis-using social media platforms. With similar misuse  
15 reported overseas, such as in the USA (Goldsmith, 2015).  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21

22 The IOPC reports that inappropriate WhatsApp messages have been sent by police officers  
23 from such police forces as the Civil Nuclear Constabulary and Norfolk constabulary amongst  
24 others as well as the Metropolitan police (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2022).  
25 Clearly, there appears to be a culture amongst some police officers that it is acceptable to  
26 engage in such behaviour and language, even though it may undermine individuals trust in  
27 the police by the community at large and affect the legitimacy of the service. As Goldsmith  
28 (2015) discusses, such career changing and damaging disclosures, recorded using social  
29 media, can occur when officers are both on and off-duty.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 Given the rise in technology, and the influence this will have on the future police workforce  
39 in England and Wales, the police service is increasing its adoption and use of digital  
40 technologies (National Police Chiefs' Council and Association of Police and Crime  
41 Commissioners, n.d.). As such, this research explores the question of how the perceptions of  
42 aspiring police officers currently undertaking the licensed professional police degree view the  
43 inappropriateness or not of social media posts. Such findings may be insightful for police  
44 leaders and those writing future policy and guidance. This will also assist in informing the  
45 ongoing review of the suite of work-based higher education learning programmes for new  
46 and serving police officers.  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

### **Social media and police misconduct**

Social media is the phrase used to define a group of computer-mediated and open-sourced networking platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X (formally known as Twitter), WhatsApp, and YouTube. Individuals who engage with these platforms often utilise them daily and most use them multiple times a day (Pew, 2018). The words ‘social’ and ‘media’ have different meanings, such as ‘social’ referring to the interactions between one person and another, including sharing and receiving information. The word ‘media’ refers to main areas of mass communication, which traditionally refers to TV, Radio, and newspapers collectively. Putting the two terms together form a similar meaning and refers to ‘web-based’ communication tools that are used by members of the public to share content or converse with each other.

Social media, therefore, are platforms that encourage and facilitate communication, interaction, and the creation and circulation of content within virtual communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), Sutherland and Ho (2017) discuss how such transferrable social media skills are expected from graduates by many employers. Unlike the main sources of media that are distributed mainly to the masses, social media are distributed via a system of participation, often “many-to-many” communication where the audiences consist of the producers in large numbers, and often “user-generated content” (Albrechtslund, 2008; Benkler, 2006). Further to this, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, are considered public, open communication social media platforms, that allows large groups of individuals to freely convey their thoughts and ideas to each other. However, social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Snapchat are mostly used as private, communication social media platforms that are primarily used between smaller, and more personal groups of individuals (Karapanos et al., 2015).

Sutherland and Ho (2017) identify that there are billions of social media users worldwide, with technological advances keeping pace with smartphone developments. The technologies of social media are universal, and for ‘younger generations’, appear to be taking over the mass media as a main source of information (Jewkes et al., 2015). This has led to the point of media representations now shaping what it is that we think, therefore becoming “socially thinkable” (Welch, Fenwick, and Roberts, 1998; Bhagat and Kim, 2023). shaping the way issues are developed and interpreted (Durant, 2010). According to Chaudhary (2023) social media can offer a variety of knowledge and tools, which allows younger generations to keep

1  
2  
3 up to date with current affairs and discover new viewpoints and concepts. It can also allow  
4 peers to connect to each other, allowing them to share work, ideas, and complete tasks  
5 together. However, social media can also be harmful, causing anxiety, despair, and low self-  
6 esteem, especially if they have been exposed to content that is violent, sexual, and promotes  
7 unrealistic body images. Further to this, addiction to social media and technology can lead to  
8 decreased work performance and poorer social skills.  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14

15 Social media is composed of a relaxed network of users that extend and mediate social  
16 interactions. The openness and interactivity of social media not only ensures what content can  
17 be widely distributed, but also encourages different trends of connections. For example, X is  
18 mainly led by the hashtag (#) or (@) mentions, which are also used on other social media  
19 platforms, and promote connectedness around various topics of similar interest between its  
20 audiences, which allows for claims making, community-building and collective action  
21 (Castells, 2013; Delanty, 2006).  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

29 Due to the nature of social media platforms, it may sometimes be in certain circumstances  
30 that individuals post comments online that that they would not normally make via more  
31 'formal' methods of communication, such as the workplace email system. It is important to  
32 understand privacy when using social media, as this can directly influence the way in which  
33 social misuse can take place. Even though social media can be very useful for supporting and  
34 enhancing the level of communication between employees, the result of using social media  
35 inappropriately can lead to an employee being suspended or dismissed. Therefore, it is  
36 important that organisations make it clear to their employees that the use of social media is  
37 something that has be done with care and professionalism, following a social media policy.  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45

46 The statistics for the number of police officers using social media is not available, although it  
47 is feasible to assume that it is quite comparable to usage by the public. Whilst there has been  
48 a significant number of police oversight bodies that have suggested that social media is a  
49 threat and can undermine police integrity (HMIC, 2011; HMIC, 2012; Victoria, 2013), social  
50 media has also been proclaimed as a way of generating openness, transparency, and citizen  
51 participation in public policing (Bullock, 2018). For example, Mols and Pridmore (2019)  
52 discuss the adoption of social media by Dutch citizens to aid the police in crime prevention  
53 activities. However, there has been systematic pressure on police forces to ensure that they  
54 demonstrate professionalism when using social media, and do not engage in activities online  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 that could be construed as police misconduct. The Metropolitan Police Service Professional  
4 Standards Department review social media to identify if anyone in that service had  
5 committed an offence or acted in an inappropriate manner (Dick, 2020).  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 11 **Police Misconduct**

12  
13 Police officers are the gatekeepers of formal social control and are not only responsible for  
14 enforcing laws and protecting the public but are also relied upon to represent order and  
15 justice in society. However, there are some police officers who abuse this power and  
16 responsibility, becoming corrupt and engaging in various types of misconduct (Wolfe and  
17 Piquero, 2011; Sweeting, et al., 2021). The phrase police misconduct has been used in several  
18 ways to describe many different actions including inappropriate sexual comments, sexual  
19 activity with vulnerable victims (Sweeting, et al., 2021), drug use and selling, physical  
20 violence, protection of illegal activity, insubordination, and avoidance of fulfilling a duty  
21 (Chappell and Piquero, 2004). According to the College of Policing (2017) misconduct is  
22 generally defined as unacceptable or improper behaviour. When referring to police officers,  
23 misconduct is also defined as a breach of the Standards of Professional Behaviour set out in  
24 Schedule 2 to the Conduct Regulations. Although new recruits and those aspiring for  
25 promotion receive training regarding discrimination, challenging and reporting inappropriate  
26 behaviour (Dick, 2020), such misconduct by officers understandably has a negative effect  
27 upon the way the public perceive the police.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42

### 43 **Impact on trust and legitimacy**

44 Confidence in the police across the USA appears to have declined with highly publicised  
45 instances of police misconduct and the use of force against members of the public (Pew,  
46 2014). There is also evidence that support trends to decrease along with increased exposure to  
47 media reports of police misconduct, regardless of the incident itself (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004;  
48 Miller and Davis, 2008). Misconduct can, it would appear, impact negatively upon police  
49 legitimacy.  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55

56 In a similar way, the Independent Office of Police Conduct (2022b) report how recent high-  
57 profile cases have reduced confidence in the police service across England and Wales.

58 According to the professional body for the police service, The College of Policing's Code of  
59



1  
2  
3 Ethics (2014), those in policing in England and Wales must always adhere to the expected  
4 standards of professional behaviour and guidance on their use of social media. For example,  
5 police officers must use social media responsibly and safely, ensuring nothing is published  
6 online that could be perceived by anyone as discriminatory, abusive, oppressive, harassing,  
7 bullying, victimising, offensive or otherwise against the principles of policing (ibid). Dick  
8 (2020) acknowledges the impact poor performance or training can have on dealing with  
9 incidents, reflecting that the service should learn from such incidents in order to improve  
10 future performance, through the provision of the learning required to provide the service  
11 expected by communities.  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19

20 Goldsmith (2015) describes how there have been attempts across countries such as Australia,  
21 UK, USA and New Zealand to both educate and introduce policies across the policing  
22 workforce highlighting the risks associated with social media behaviour. In recent years, a  
23 number of investigations into police officers use of social media has come to the fore. The  
24 Independent Office for Police Conduct (2021) report that numerous police officers have  
25 engaged with social media to share offensive material. The kind of material shared was  
26 related to racial, sexist, and other discriminatory comments, including photographing crime  
27 scenes, and using that information to contact the victims for sexual activity. Cases discussed  
28 by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (2021) included, for example, police officers  
29 with the Metropolitan Police Service in 2020, receiving final written warnings for gross  
30 misconduct due to the sharing of private messages via social media that contained offensive  
31 material. In 2020, the IOPC investigated a case of misconduct that led to a hearing that would  
32 have resulted in a Warwickshire PCSO being dismissed for gross misconduct, (although the  
33 PCSO resigned first), the officer had made inappropriate contact via social media with a  
34 burglary victim after he had visited her home to provide crime prevention advice. In another  
35 case in 2020, a Kent police officer who described searching women as “good fun” posted  
36 crime scene photos on WhatsApp and was dismissed after an investigation. In 2019, a police  
37 officer resigned from the Cheshire Constabulary due to evidence showing contact via social  
38 media to the members of the public who they met during the course of their duties to pursue a  
39 personal relationship with each of them.  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55

56 Such is the apparent extent of the problem across the country, and in particular the  
57 Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), that Operation Hutton (Independent Office for Police  
58 Conduct (IOPC)., 2022) was established. Operation Hutton was a series of nine linked  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 independent investigations concerning serving police officers from the MPS. Most officers  
4 held the rank of police constable and were predominantly based at Charing Cross Police  
5 Station. The majority of the officers worked on teams formed to deal with high levels of  
6 public disorder, theft, touting, drug dealing and violence in the West End. It was discovered  
7 disconcerting behavioural themes about the attitudes and behaviour of police officers that ran  
8 through the investigations including:  
9  
10  
11  
12

- 13 • Bullying and aggressive behaviour
  - 14 • ‘Banter’ used to excuse oppressive and offensive behaviours
  - 15 • Discrimination
  - 16 • A toxic masculinity, misogyny, and sexual harassment
  - 17 • Challenging and reporting improper conduct
- 18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26 Many of the discoveries of the Hutton report were based around the use of social media  
27 platforms by police and staff and were not dissimilar in nature to those highlighted in the  
28 independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan  
29 Police Service (Casey, 2023). Other discoveries of the Hutton report included inappropriate  
30 messaging between police and the public via social media, such remarks related to sexism  
31 and homophobia. Further to this, it highlighted a need to reestablish culture and standards, a  
32 improve on the lack of supervision and poor leadership.  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 Clearly, the policing workforces’ use of social media can pose problems in policing  
41 organisation now and potentially in the future. Social media being used as a means by which  
42 police officers can express both solidarity and alternate views to the mainstream ideas  
43 (Brewer, 2022). Therefore, it is important that the potential future workforce, perhaps  
44 recruited from those learners studying the PPD in one of over 45 universities across England  
45 and Wales, are at least educated as to what is deemed to be acceptable, and more importantly  
46 unacceptable use of social media by all members of the police. This would add to the findings  
47 of Sutherland and Ho (2017) who report that the majority of undergraduates in their research  
48 reported that proficiency in the use of social media would be beneficial for their professional  
49 development.  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

### **The Policing Vision 2025/2030**

The Policing Vision 2025 sets out a plan to transform policing in the light of increased threats such as austerity measures, increased use of technology and other demands from an increasingly diverse and complex society (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council, 2015). Specific areas which are discussed within this important document are shown below:

- Local policing
- Specialist Capabilities
- Workforce
- Digital policing
- Joined up business delivery.

(ibid.).

The 2025 plan has recently been augmented by the Policing Vision 2030 (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, College of Policing, and the National Police Chiefs Council, n.d.), which also raises the importance within policing of other aspects such as inclusivity, fairness, zero tolerance to discrimination and the requirement for digital literacy.

Like any organisation the police service is reliant upon its employees to carry out its function efficiently and effectively. Therefore, the workforce needs to be one which is professional, and equipped with skills to enable it to face up to future challenges. As a result, as police work becomes more specialised and the manner in which crime is committed changes, new technologies will present new questions in terms of community safety and criminal opportunities. The police will need to ensure that they are able to identify the skills and knowledge base of future police officers and specialists required to address these challenges. New technology is changing how the police operate, with social media use being both a challenge and an opportunity for policing (PwC, 2018).

### **The College of Policing licensed professional policing degree**

As part of the professionalisation agenda for policing in England and Wales, the College of Policing professional policing degree (PPD) was developed for traditional university students who aspire to join the police service but have not yet been recruited. These degrees in policing are licensed, validated and to a limited extent quality assured by the College of Policing as part of the Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF). The PEQF was introduced in 2018 aiming to encourage partnerships between police forces and higher education to establish minimum educational levels for new police officers. The PPD is licensed to be taught in over 45 universities and higher education colleges across England and Wales, students study full or part-time for this degree before applying to join their chosen force as a new recruit. The PPD is a professional academic knowledge-based programme, based on the national curriculum for the role of a police officer. The programme covers a range of topics specific to policing such as the role of the police officer, the Code of Ethics, policing communities, public protection, criminal law, intelligence and investigations, digital enabled crime, and evidence-based policing, along with broader graduate level learning such as communication skills, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, and research methods.

The concept of the PPD is that if recruited as a police officer, the knowledge, understanding and transferable graduate skills learnt during the degree can be developed in policing practice and assessed within the police force, resulting in significantly reduced time spent in education and training, with the new recruit becoming a 'deployable resource' far more quickly. However, successful achievement of the degree does not guarantee recruitment as a new police officer.

With such transferrable knowledge and skills developed during the PPD, graduates may also consider a career across a range of staff roles in policing or the wider law enforcement/criminal justice sectors. It is with students undertaking a licensed PPD being delivered by a university in England and Wales, that the respondents for this research were recruited.

## **Methodology**

Hydra Immersive Simulation System.

Based on the central ethos of safe learning, the Hydra Immersive Simulation System (HISS) was designed by Crego (1996) as a unique high fidelity training tool enabling real time critical decision making (Eyre et al., 2008, p. 40). Safe learning is understood as A key stage in the development of this system and the methodology was the Stephen Lawrence murder (Macpherson, 1999), which highlighted a need for a new and novel way of testing strategic and critical decision-making skills of senior investigating officers. This tragedy highlighted a need for multi-agency/disciplinary approaches to such incidents and as a result, Hydra simulations have now assisted in the training and development of police officers, fire officers, military personnel, health care professionals and academics in the United Kingdom and internationally.

Hydra simulations are often complex, highly immersive, micro-world experiences that require real world practitioners and students to deal with a variety of issues or problems. These simulations are designed to replicate environments or situations that could take place in the real world and can run for a few hours, days or even weeks. For example, how participants/students respond to major incidents and critical incidents would traditionally be tested within such an environment. Furthermore, testing the rigor of internal workplace policy, such as harassment, dignity at work and complaints, would also be conducted. The HISS is a safe learning environment where key decisions can be made, discussed, and recorded without any real consequence in the outside world.

## **Sample**

A total of ninety-nine (n=99) students studying the PPD at a single university took part in the Hydra simulation exercise.

## **Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

### **Inclusion criteria**

All participants were purposively sampled and included if they were existing police students at the University of South Wales and aspired to becoming police officers in the future.

### **Exclusion criteria**

1  
2  
3 Participants were not included if they were not existing police students or aspired to being  
4 police officers in the future.  
5  
6  
7

### 8 **Procedure**

9  
10 The data were collected using the Hydra Immersive Simulation System. Popular across  
11 policing and utilised by a number of universities, Hydra simulations are conducted within  
12 purpose built, immersive learning environments and are typically comprised of several  
13 stages.  
14  
15

16 Exercises typically begin in a plenary room where participants receive information about the  
17 exercise (who they represent and their roles) and instruction on how to use the technology  
18 within the suite. Participants/students then enter the syndicate rooms where they wait for the  
19 exercise to begin. Information in the form of text, audio (radio messages, phone calls), video  
20 (news broadcasts, talking head clips) and documents (intelligence profiles, email  
21 conversations) are presented to the syndicate rooms via the Hydra user interface displayed on  
22 the large monitors in the syndicate rooms. Participants are typically presented with timed  
23 tasks (via a printer or on screen) and are expected to complete these using the electronic  
24 decision logs contained within the Hydra user interface. Participants periodically return to the  
25 plenary room where their decisions and rationales are discussed openly with subject matter  
26 experts. Throughout an exercise, subject matter experts and technologists operate from the  
27 control room and monitor participants via CCTV software.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

39 For this research, in this exercise, a fictional social media profile called “Chirper” was  
40 created. This fictional platform was constructed in a similar format to other mainstream  
41 popular social platforms. In this profile, imagery such as the Chirper logo and pictures used  
42 in the posts, were downloaded from copyright free websites such as Pexels.com and  
43 Pixabay.com. The simulation began with a PowerPoint slide being presented to groups of  
44 students, who in turn, were asked to attend the plenary room. The students were asked to  
45 attend in these sessions in groups, to encourage discussion and facilitate in providing group  
46 feedback, as well as individual feedback, to the scenarios presented. This slide contained  
47 contextual information about the scenario, and individual tasks related to the image. The use  
48 of the images rather than text was based upon the belief that using images is more likely to  
49 generate information, trigger memory and evoke multi layered responses that other methods.  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 In terms of theoretical approach to the use of this methodology, it is similar to many  
4 precedents. Utilising a case study design, this research focused upon particular students in a  
5 particular university as in studies by Khan (2011, 2014). This approach involves detailed and  
6 intensive analysis of a single issue (Bryman 2021), in this case misuse of social media by a  
7 police officer.  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14

### 15 **Ethics**

16 Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University Ethics committee and all  
17 participants signed a student agreement to take part using their anonymised individual  
18 feedback and group-based decision logs.  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## Results

### Post 1 - School visit

The first post the students were shown related to a school visit by an on-duty police officer. Whilst the post was positive in terms of the visit, it contained an obvious sexist reference to the teacher along with a photograph of the teacher in question in the classroom with children, who it would appear did not sign any consent forms for their images to be used.



All 99 students were shown the above social media post written by a serving police officer. They were then given three main options to consider as action in response to seeing this media post as in Table 1:

Table 1. Responses to social media post 1.

Options	Student responses
This is satisfactory	26.5% (26)
Issue an informal verbal warning	62.5% (62)
Formal disciplinary action required.	11% (11)
Total	100% (99)



1  
2  
3 Notably, slightly over 26% of students thought this was a satisfactory social media post  
4 despite the obvious sexist reference and other considerations. However, the remaining  
5 students stated that some form of sanction was required, albeit the vast majority favoured  
6 informal verbal warning rather than formal disciplinary action. Students were asked to  
7 explain why they chose each category of response and typical responses can be seen below.  
8  
9 In terms of supporting a satisfactory response no student completed a feedback section for  
10 this response, probably believing that it was not required as it was considered satisfactory.  
11  
12 However, there were several responses explaining why some students believed this was an  
13 informal warning approach, mainly identifying inappropriate and sexist language along with  
14 confidentiality and they use of children in the photograph. A selection of these can be seen  
15 below:  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 *'Comments made towards teacher is inappropriate and unprofessional. Gives a perception*  
25 *that he is not there for the community but only for their own interests for personal gain.'*

26 *'Inappropriate language about the teacher should not have posted a picture of the school*  
27 *children on his personal account. He mentions the school he was at.'*

28  
29  
30  
31  
32 Those who suggested a more formal disciplinary approach wrote similar comments regarding  
33 the unprofessional and degrading language utilised:

34 *'Unprofessional comment regarding the teacher, shows the children clearly alongside what*  
35 *school and class they attend.'*

36 *'Degrading language towards teacher Photos of children without parental consent'*

## 37 38 39 40 41 42 **Post 2 - Transgender issues**

43 The second post and image related to a comedic reference to transgender issues and can be  
44 seen below.  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



Again, 99 students viewed the social media post and were asked their views on what if any action they would sanction on the writer. Student responses in Table 2:

**Table 2. Transgender issues**

Options	Student responses
This is satisfactory	15% (15)
Issue an informal verbal warning	36.5% (36)
Formal disciplinary action required.	48.5% (48)
Total	100% (99)

Only 15% of students believed this was satisfactory to publish online by an off-duty police officer. However, the formal disciplinary approach was favoured by the majority of students, having identified inappropriate transgender and homophobic traits in the comments. In addition, many identified the perceived damage these comments could achieve to the image of the police and the damage to public trust in policing. A selection of these comments can be seen below:

*'Comes across as homophobic, transphobic, and anti-religion which is not appropriate for anyone to express let alone a police officer.'*

1  
2  
3 *'This is a homophobic comment which make the police look like they condone homophobia in*  
4 *the workplace.'*

5  
6 *'Can be seen as offensive to someone's religious beliefs and homophobic with the quote "God*  
7 *created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve". This also paints the police in a bad image, with*  
8 *people potentially thinking that the police are homophobic.'*  
9  
10  
11  
12

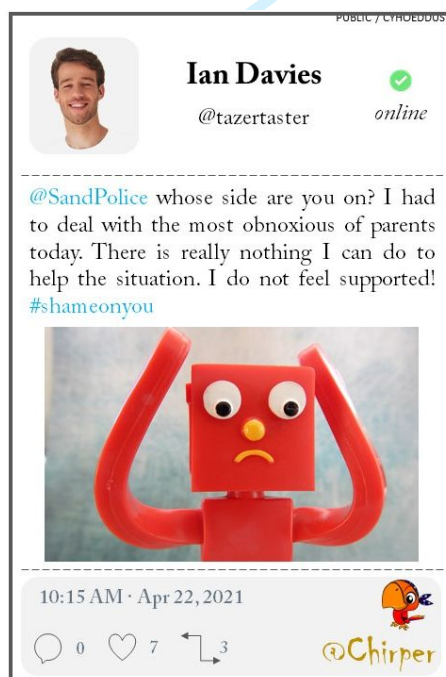
13 Respondents who believe that an informal warning would be appropriate provided some  
14 responses for their choice:

15  
16  
17  
18 *'Publicly posting what can be seen as a homophobic joke, which can cause gay people fear of*  
19 *going to the police.'*

20  
21 *'Unprofessional, does not reflect Code or police values, paints police force in a bad light.'*  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26

### 27 **Post 3 - Working with the public**

28 The third post related to having deal with people that the on-duty police officer did not like.  
29 Here the officer refers to people as obnoxious, feels helpless and unsupported.  
30  
31  
32  
33



58 Again, 99 students viewed the social media post and were asked their views on what if any  
59 action they would sanction to the writer. Table 3 illustrates responses:  
60

**Table 3. Working with the public**

Options	Student responses
This is satisfactory	8% (8)
Issue an informal verbal warning	44.5% (44)
Formal disciplinary action required.	47.5% (47)
Total	100% (99)

Again, the majority of respondents believed some form of action was necessary with a fairly even split between an informal verbal approach and formal disciplinary action. Those who believed a formal disciplinary approach was necessary based their decisions around dealing with internal matters confidentiality 'in house'. In addition, it was identified that these comments could have a negative aspect upon trust and legitimacy in policing:

*'Shouldn't be posting internal issues at work on social media, those issues should be brought up privately with another senior member of staff and reposted in the right way.'*

*'Formal disciplinary action required. I would say don't comment about the cases which you are working on. Repercussions on the police would be that this post shows they don't support their officers in the time of need and the public could become involved in this case.'*

*'Sheds a bad light on the police by using their account to complain. This could create a bad reputation for the force and as a result lose public trust and support.'*

Those who suggested that an informal warning would be appropriate suggested similar reasons for their choice of action:

*'Should be discussed privately not on social media.'*

*'Don't want to ruin police reputation, should have been handled internally.'*

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of aspiring potential future police officers concerning the gravity of several typical posts on social media by off and on-duty police officers in three areas, namely sexist comments, issues around transgender and dealing with the public. It is of course acknowledged that not all of those 99 students who took part in this exercise and research would eventually become police officers. However, this research

1  
2  
3 did not set out to provide definitive answers to the current problems associated with police  
4 use of social media and misconduct issues.  
5  
6  
7

8 All three social media posts contained enough material to clearly illustrate that, The College  
9 of Policing Code of Ethics (2014) had been contravened and indeed a breach of police  
10 conduct had been involved. Indeed, the majority of students highlighted this. In the school  
11 visit post however, 26% of respondents believed that there was nothing wrong with the post,  
12 which in itself is quite worrying and worthy of note.  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17

18 However, it was in the manner in which the person who posted these messages should have  
19 been dealt with that we saw a difference of opinion, although again, the school visit post  
20 produced an increased number of responses to an informal approach than expected. It may be  
21 that the school visit post, rooted in sexism, was not as impactful upon respondents for a  
22 variety of reasons including being overshadowed by the fact that children were included in  
23 the photograph, which became the focus of the response. The post making fun of transgender  
24 issues led to 85% of students seeking some kind of formal or informal action, perhaps  
25 illustrating a change in attitudes and one that, if employed within policing, may impact on the  
26 negative aspects of police occupational culture discussed by Reiner (2010). Similarly, the  
27 'working with the public' post mostly received responses requiring action, respondents being  
28 fairly evenly split between formal and informal. What comes across clearly though, is that  
29 many students thought that such issues raised by the post should be dealt with internally  
30 rather than shared externally. Further research would need to explore the impact of such  
31 internal resolutions on sustaining cultural norms. This could involve an expansion of the  
32 current methodology, including longitudinal studies of individuals who have been dealt with  
33 by internal methods, to explore whether or not these resolutions are actually effective in  
34 dealing with negative cultural norms in an effective manner.  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49

50 Encouragingly, the responses to the mock social media posts, in the main, illustrate that the  
51 majority of PPD students in the study understand the need to address misuse of social media  
52 posts by police officers. This would benefit from further investigation to include other  
53 universities. The outcomes do however suggest that the majority of the PPD students in the  
54 study have an understanding of what constitutes misuse of social media by police officers,  
55 perhaps a glimmer of light for future police officers impacting on change within the service.  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 However, there is also some cause for concern as there appears a minority who did not  
4 recognise misconduct in each of the cases presented to them. As a result, there may be a need  
5 to reinforce The Code of Ethics and standards of professional behaviour expected on and off-  
6 duty throughout the PPD. There are numerous case studies which can be used to illustrate the  
7 point.  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 Recommendations.

13  
14 Clearly, the use of social media by police officers and staff can pose many problems for  
15 leaders and managers in the policing organisation, now and potentially in the future as new  
16 recruits join the service. Therefore, it is recommended that police leaders anticipate that the  
17 projected future workforce may need to have their knowledge of the misuse of social media  
18 reinforced to prevent such issues as reported in the Casey report.  
19  
20  
21

22  
23 In addition, it is recommended that police leaders and managers ensure that new police  
24 recruits are fully cognisant of misconduct rules and regulations, and also aware of the  
25 consequences of such activities as misuse of social media posting.  
26

27  
28 It is further recommended that those responsible for the education of the future police  
29 workforce in England and Wales, such as universities, include in their educational  
30 programmes, sufficient awareness and knowledge to enable students to understand the  
31 consequences of misuse of social media and its negative impact upon police trust and  
32 legitimacy.  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## References

Albrechtslund, A. (2008). Online social networking as participatory surveillance. *First Monday*.

Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council. (2015). *Policing Vision 2025*. [online]. [https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/policing\\_vision\\_2025.pdf](https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/policing_vision_2025.pdf). Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council, (n.d.). *Policing Vision 2030*. [online]. <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2023-03/Policing%20Vision%202030.pdf>. Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

Benkler, Y. (2006) *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230.

Bhagat, S., & Kim, D. J. (2023). Examining users' news sharing behaviour on social media: role of perception of online civic engagement and dual social influences. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 42(8), 1194-1215.

Brewer, C. (2022). r/ProtectandServe: an exploration of the virtual canteen culture regarding police misconduct, *Policing and Society*, 32 (10), pp. 1193-1208, DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2022.2029434

Bryman (2021). *Social Research Methods*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Bullock, K. (2018). The police use of social media: Transformation or normalisation? *Social Policy and Society*, 17(2), 245-258.

Casey, Baroness. (2023), *An Independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan police Service*, available at [Baroness Casey Review \(met.police.uk\)](https://www.met.police.uk/baroness-casey-review). Accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

Castells, M. (2013). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Chaudhary, S. G., & Scholar, P. H. D. (2023). Pros and Cons of Mass Media and Its Impact on Adolescent.

Chappell, A. T., & Piquero, A. R. (2004). Applying social learning theory to police misconduct. *Deviant behaviour*, 25(2), 89-108.

College of Policing. (2014). *Code of Ethics: A Code of Practice for the Principles*



1  
2  
3 *and Standards of Professional Behaviour for the Policing Profession of England and Wales*  
4 [online]. [https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-02/code\\_of\\_ethics.pdf](https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-02/code_of_ethics.pdf). Accessed  
5 on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2023.  
6  
7

8 College of Policing. (2017). Guidance on outcomes in police misconduct proceedings.  
9 Retrieved from: [https://www.app.college.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MIsconduct-](https://www.app.college.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MIsconduct-C621I0617_Guidance-on-outcomes-in-police-misconduct-proceedings_12.10.17.pdf)  
10 [C621I0617\\_Guidance-on-outcomes-in-police-misconduct-proceedings\\_12.10.17.pdf](https://www.app.college.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MIsconduct-C621I0617_Guidance-on-outcomes-in-police-misconduct-proceedings_12.10.17.pdf).  
11 Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022.  
12  
13

14  
15  
16 Crego, J.P., (1996). Critical Incident Management – Engendering experience through  
17 simulation, PhD thesis, University of Salford.  
18

19  
20 Crego, J., & Spinks, T. (1997). Critical Incident Management Simulation. In R. Flin, E.  
21 Salas, M.Strub, & L. Martin (Eds.), *Decision making under stress*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate.  
22

23  
24 Dick, C. (2020). Written evidence submitted by Dame Cressida Dick DBE QPM,  
25 Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service (MAC0051). [online].  
26 [https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/force-content/met/about-](https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/force-content/met/about-us/stride/macpherson-hasc-commissioner-letter-december-2020.pdf)  
27 [us/stride/macpherson-hasc-commissioner-letter-december-2020.pdf](https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/force-content/met/about-us/stride/macpherson-hasc-commissioner-letter-december-2020.pdf). Accessed on 8th July  
28 2023.  
29  
30

31  
32 Delanty, G. (2006). The cosmopolitan imagination: Critical cosmopolitanism and social  
33 theory. *The British journal of sociology*, 57(1), 25-47.  
34

35  
36 Dowler, K., & Zawilski, V. (2007). Public perceptions of police misconduct and  
37 discrimination: Examining the impact of media consumption. *Journal of criminal*  
38 *justice*, 35(2), 193-203.  
39

40  
41 Durant, A. (2010). *Meaning in the media: Discourse, controversy and debate*. Cambridge  
42 University Press.  
43

44  
45 Eyre, M., Crego, J., & Alison, L. (2008). Electronic debriefs and simulations as descriptive  
46 methods for defining the critical incident landscape. In L. Alison & J. Crego (Eds.), *Policing*  
47 *critical incidents* (pp. 24–53). Cullompton, UK: Willan, Icson, R. V., & Haggerty, K. D.  
48 (1997). *Policing the risk society*.  
49

50  
51 Goldsmith, A. (2015). Disgracebook policing: social media and the rise of police indiscretion,  
52 *Policing and Society*, 25:3, pp. 249-267, DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2013.864653  
53

54  
55 HMIC, 2011. *Without fear or favour: a review of police relationships*. London: HMIC  
56

57  
58 HMIC, 2012. *Revisiting police relationships: a progress report*. London: HMIC.  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). (2021). IOPC warns officers about  
4 inappropriate social media use. Available at: [https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/news/iopc-](https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/news/iopc-warns-officers-about-inappropriate-social-media-use)  
5 [warns-officers-about-inappropriate-social-media-use](https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/news/iopc-warns-officers-about-inappropriate-social-media-use). Accessed on 11th July 2023.  
6  
7

8 Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). (2022). Operation Hutton Learning report -  
9 January 2022.pdf ([policeconduct.gov.uk](https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk)). Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023.  
10  
11

12 Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). (2022b). *IOPC Public Perceptions Tracker*  
13 *Summary Report, Waves 5.1 – 5.3*. [online].  
14 [https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/statistics/IOPC\\_Yonder\\_Pub](https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/statistics/IOPC_Yonder_Public_Perceptions_Tracker_Annual_Summary_Report_2021_22_Final.pdf)  
15 [lic\\_Perceptions\\_Tracker\\_Annual\\_Summary\\_Report\\_2021\\_22\\_Final.pdf](https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/statistics/IOPC_Yonder_Public_Perceptions_Tracker_Annual_Summary_Report_2021_22_Final.pdf). Accessed on 11th  
16 July 2023.  
17  
18

19  
20 Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social  
21 norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of  
22 violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9977), pp. 1580-1589.  
23  
24

25 Karapanos, E., Teixeira, P., & Gouveia, R. (2016). Need fulfillment and experiences on  
26 social media: A case on Facebook and WhatsApp. *Computers in human behavior*, 55, 888-  
27 897.  
28  
29

30  
31 Khan, S., (2011), *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Pauls School*, Princeton,  
32 N.J., Princeton University Press.  
33  
34

35 Khan, S., (2014), *The Science of Everyday Life* in S. Khan and D.R Fisher (Eds), *The*  
36 *Practice of research: How Social Scientists Answer their Questions*, New York: Oxford  
37 University Press.  
38  
39

40 Macpherson, W., (1999), *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, London, HMSO.  
41  
42

43 Miller, J., & Davis, R. C. (2008). Unpacking public attitudes to the police: Contrasting  
44 perceptions of misconduct with traditional measures of satisfaction. *International Journal of*  
45 *Police Science & Management*, 10(1), 9-22.  
46  
47

48 Mols, A., & Pridmore, J. (2019). When Citizens Are "Actually Doing Police Work": The  
49 Blurring of Boundaries in WhatsApp Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Groups in The  
50 Netherlands. *Surveillance & Society*, 17 (3/4), pp. 272-287.  
51 <https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index>  
52  
53

54 National Police Chiefs' Council and Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, (n.d.).  
55 *National Policing Digital Strategy. Digital Data and Technology Strategy 2020-2030*.  
56 [online]. [https://pds.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/National-Policing-Digital-](https://pds.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/National-Policing-Digital-Strategy-2020-2030.pdf)  
57 [Strategy-2020-2030.pdf](https://pds.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/National-Policing-Digital-Strategy-2020-2030.pdf). Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2023.  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Pew Research Centre. (2014). Few Say Police Forces Nationally Do Well in Treating Races  
4 Equally. *Pew Research Centre/USA Today Survey*, [online]. [https:// www.people-](https://www.people-press.org/2014/08/25/few-say-police-forces-nationally-do-well-in-treating-races-equally/)  
5 [press.org/2014/08/25/few-say-police-forces-nationally-do-well-in](https://www.people-press.org/2014/08/25/few-say-police-forces-nationally-do-well-in-treating-races-equally/) -treating-races-equally/  
6 Accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2023.  
7  
8

9  
10 Pew Research Centre (2018) Social media use in 2018. Available at:  
11 <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-usein-2018>. Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023.  
12

13  
14 Reiner, R. (2010) *the Politics of the Police*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press.  
15

16  
17 PwC, (2018) *Policing in a networked world*, available at [pwc-policing-in-a-networked-](#)  
18 [world.pdf](#). Accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2023.  
19

20  
21  
22 Sutherland, K. and Ho, S. (2017), Undergraduate perceptions of social media proficiency and  
23 graduate employability: A pilot study, *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 7  
24 (3), pp. 261-274. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-02-2017-0018>  
25

26  
27 Sweeting, F., Arabaci-Hills, P. and Cole, T. (2021). Outcomes of Police Sexual Misconduct  
28 in the UK, *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 15, (2), pp. 1339–1351,  
29 <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paaa052>  
30

31  
32 Victoria, 2013. Issues paper: social media and law enforcement. Melbourne: Commissioner  
33 for Law Enforcement Data Security.  
34

35  
36 Welch, M., Fenwick, M., & Roberts, M. (1998). State managers, intellectuals, and the media:  
37 A content analysis of ideology in experts' quotes in feature newspaper articles on  
38 crime. *Justice quarterly*, 15(2), 219-241.  
39

40  
41 Wolfe, S. E., & Piquero, A. R. (2011). Organizational justice and police  
42 misconduct. *Criminal justice and behaviour*, 38(4), 332-353.  
43

44  
45 Weitzer, R., & Tuch, S. A. (2004). Race and perceptions of police misconduct. *Social*  
46 *problems*, 51(3), 305-325.  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60