

The dynamic nature of police legitimacy on social media

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Abstract

In 2012, Bottoms and Tankebe put forward the notion that the legitimacy of criminal justice agencies is in flux and resembles an ongoing conversation between 'power-holders' and their 'audience'. However, their dialogic approach has yet to be studied in empirical research in a policing and social media context. This paper provides an original contribution to their framework and illustrates the dynamic nature of police legitimacy on social media. Extensive fieldwork was carried out in Scotland and involved observation (n=134 hours) and semi-structured interviews (n=40) with police officers and civilian staff with social media duties, and focus groups with citizens (n=22). The research findings show that police legitimacy on social media is dynamic and has four key dimensions. Firstly, police officers and civilian staff cultivate their own sense of self-legitimacy on social media in accordance with the credibility of police information and their expertise in policing. Secondly, police officers and civilian staff communicate their legitimacy to citizens on social media drawing on formal and informal styles. Thirdly, citizens make assessments about police legitimacy on social media in connection to how they understand face-to-face encounters with the police, as the police themselves internalise these judgements. Fourthly, when citizens challenge police legitimacy on social media, officers and civilian staff reconstruct and at times reassert their legitimacy.

Introduction

Legitimacy continues to be a focal point in much-policing research. Existing research shows that when citizens accept and justify police legitimacy in terms of the right of the police to authority, they will comply with the law (Tyler [2011](#), Mazerolle *et al.* [2013](#)). In practice, this means that citizens will cooperate during encounters with officers, and that they will give assistance to the police when requested. Recently, Bottoms and Tankebe ([2012](#)) put forward a 'dialogic approach'. This posits that legitimacy in criminal justice resembles an ongoing conversation between power-holders and their audience. In a policing context, Bottoms and Tankebe's theorising likens police officers as power-holders and citizens as their audience. According to Bottoms and Tankebe ([2012](#)) power-holders will cultivate and justify their legitimacy to themselves, before then responding to judgements made by their audience. In turn, the authors view legitimacy in criminal justice as changing over time. To understand this process, they argue that researchers must understand how legitimacy is understood both inside the organisation by police employees and outside by citizens. In doing this, they contend that it will be possible to capture the ongoing dialogue between the police and citizens on the right of the police to authority.

The need to revisit Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) dialogic approach is necessary given the growth of social media over the last decade and because their theorising has yet to be studied in a policing and social media context. Since the mid-2000s, Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have increased in popularity and have attracted

a considerable number of registered users on their sites. In 2020, it was reported that there were an estimated 3.6 billion users worldwide registered to social media platforms (Statista [2021](#)). At the same time, police services have invested more time and effort into using social media platforms to engage with citizens. In doing this, they have sought to assist police activity, and to enhance the police reputation (Crump [2011](#), Schneider [2014](#)). Police services have attempted to manage their reputation by controlling access to social media platforms (Bullock [2018](#)) as officers at times fear being criticised within the organisation when they share personal beliefs on Twitter (Hesketh and Williams [2017](#)). The need to promote the reputation of the police online has been considered in relation to the rise of 'citizen journalism' in recent years and involves people creating and sharing their own stories and narratives about the police on social media platforms (Cooke and Sturges [2009](#), O'Connor [2017](#), Walsh and O'Connor [2019](#)). These developments linked to the construction of police legitimacy on social media by the police and citizens again illustrate the importance of reconsidering Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) dialogic approach.

Drawing on Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) theorising, this paper outlines the dynamic nature of police legitimacy on social media and demonstrates how legitimacy is understood both within the police organisation by officers and civilian staff (involved in media and corporate roles) and outside by citizens. Firstly, police officers and staff are shown to have a strong sense of their self-legitimacy on social media. They justify their self-legitimacy according to the accuracy associated with police information and their expertise in policing. As well as this, the feature of fake news on social media reinforces their sense of authority. Secondly, officers and staff put forward their claims on social media by communicating about police practices and police authority using either formal or informal styles. Thirdly, citizens make judgements about police legitimacy on social media and either accept or challenge police authority, as, at the same time, police officers and staff internalise these opinions. Fourthly, officers and staff reconstruct their legitimacy online when this is challenged by citizens and at times respond to these rejections. This is a significant contribution to Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) dialogic approach because it shows that the police continually seek legitimacy from citizens and attempt to maintain this over time on social media. Yet, the research findings also show that citizens construct their perceptions of police legitimacy on social media in accordance with the role and function of the police in the physical world. Therefore, despite police attempts to manage their legitimacy on social media and coupled with the ever-expanding digitalisation of policing more broadly, it is policing in the real world that at present shapes police legitimacy online.

The following section sets out Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) dialogic approach in more detail and applies their theorising to a policing context. Specific attention is given to the relational aspects of police legitimacy proposed by Bottoms and Tankebe. This includes how legitimacy is understood and negotiated between power-holders and their audience. Next, the methodology and methods utilised as part of the study are described in more detail. Afterwards, the paper unpacks four key dimensions of police legitimacy on social media using the research findings from the study outlined in the previous paragraph. Taken together, police legitimacy on social media is considered in relation to police perspectives on cultivating legitimacy, communicating legitimacy, and reconstructing legitimacy, and citizen assessments of police legitimacy. The discussion chapter illustrates the significance of these research findings in connection to Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) dialogic approach, and the digitalisation of policing more broadly.

A 'dialogic approach' to police legitimacy

Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) 'dialogic approach to legitimacy in criminal justice' offers an important starting point. Although the authors discuss legitimacy across the criminal justice system, this paper focuses on how a 'dialogic approach' applies specifically to a policing context. Bullock *et al.* (2020) discuss dialogue from a community policing outlook and in terms of the exchange of information between the police and citizens. Whereas, 'dialogic' in this paper is used to convey how legitimacy continually shifts between police and citizen claims. This follows Bottoms and Tankebe's argument that the legitimacy of criminal justice agencies is generated from a series of ongoing conversations about authority between 'power-holders' and their 'audience'. This connects to their definition of legitimacy, adhered to in this paper, that considers how power-holders and their audience assess and justify the right of power-holders to use authority. In policing, those inside the police organisation are considered power-holders on account of the range of powers officers have. This will include senior and junior positions who have varying degrees of power within the organisation. Citizens on the other hand make up their 'audience'. They argue that power-holders make claims about their legitimacy to citizens and in response, citizens will accept and contest police legitimacy over time. The police themselves will internalise these judgments made by citizens and will put forward revised claims for their legitimacy. In this sense, police legitimacy connects to citizen's continuing assessments about police legitimacy. These considerations are significant given 'the dual and interactive character of legitimacy, which necessarily involves both power-holders and audiences, has been largely neglected' in research (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012, p. 119). In order to understand this process, the authors call for researchers to understand how legitimacy is understood both inside criminal justice organisations by 'power-holders' and outside by their 'audience'.

Internally, Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue that it is important to acknowledge how people working in the criminal justice system understand their own legitimacy. Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) refer to this as 'power-holder legitimacy'. This denotes 'the cultivation of self-confidence in the moral rightness of power-holders' authority' (p. 154). According to the authors, power-holders continually justify their legitimacy to both themselves and their audience in order to validate their role in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, they will revise their claims to legitimacy on account of their audiences' responses. In a policing context, this highlights the need to understand how police employees comprehend and justify their legitimacy and right-to-rule over citizens. Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) theorising points to Sklansky's (2005, p. 1829) earlier proposition that aside from encounters between the police and citizens it is also necessary to focus on 'the various internal policies and procedures that wind up shaping who the police are'. Bradford and Quinton (2014) refer to this as 'self-legitimacy' as this also centres on police officers' confidence in their own legitimacy. For Bradford and Quinton (2014) it is important to recognise how internal and organisational dynamics within the police impact on how officers engage externally with citizens. Their study shows that officers who have a strong police identity and feel that they are treated fairly by their organisation have a greater sense of their own legitimacy. These officers are also more likely to champion democratic policing principles linked to respecting people's rights.

In addition to considering how power-holders cultivate their own sense of legitimacy, Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue that it is also important to understand 'audience legitimacy'. This follows much of the existing research on police legitimacy that has studied citizens' perceptions of the police (see for example Mazerolle et al., 2013). For Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) this means exploring how people form their perceptions of criminal justice agencies and how they judge power-holder legitimacy. In a policing context, this involves understanding citizens' assessments of police legitimacy and the right of the police to use authority. According to the authors, these opinions will in turn shape how officers assert and at times adjust and reassert their own claims to legitimacy. Congruence according to Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) is when power-holders and their audience accept police claims to legitimacy. Incongruence is when power-holders have a strong sense of internal legitimacy, however their audience refuses to accept this. According to the authors, this can then lead to 'disconnected power-holder' legitimacy whereby power-holders themselves fail to recognise citizens' perceptions and expectations that might be at odds with officers' own beliefs.

For the authors, police legitimacy will be judged in different ways and will include for example people's attitudes of the ability of the police to tackle crime and procedural justice (how fair the police are perceived to be during encounters with citizens). These ideas have been studied in existing policing research in connections to people's attitudes of instrumental and normative models of policing. The first, an instrumental model, contends that legitimacy is granted when the police are effective in tackling crime as well as reducing risk, and when the police also distribute services and resources justly across society (Sunshine and Taylor 2003, Bradford and Myhill 2015). In relation to police social media practices, this would mean communicating police effectiveness in combatting crime and providing people with reassurance and safety. Support for the police communicating instrumental content has been found in research by Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2015). The researchers examined the impact of police use of Twitter on citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy in a Dutch context using a large-scale survey ($n=4492$). They found that police legitimacy was strengthened slightly when the police communicated cases that showed they had tackled crime. The second, a normative model of policing, suggests that the police gain legitimacy when police action is seen as moral and citizens are treated fairly (Tyler 1990, Bradford *et al.* 2015). At the heart of a normative model on social media is the idea that citizens feel that they are treated fairly and believe that they can interact with the police online (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015).

While existing studies on policing and social media have examined police and citizen perspectives separately, the current study sheds light on the interplay between them with a specific focus on police and citizen judgements about police legitimacy. In doing so, the study provides an empirical contribution to Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) 'dialogic approach' to legitimacy in a policing and social media context. The data gathered by the study shows that the police seek legitimacy from citizens on social media and attempt to uphold this over time. Despite these attempts by the police, citizens assess police legitimacy on social media in relation to how they view the role and function of the police in the physical world.

Methods

The study involved researching with police officers, police staff, and citizens in Scotland. 'Police staff' is used herein to refer to non-sworn police employees and for this study included police employees with media and corporate roles involved in police social media practices. Fieldwork was carried out by the author of this paper between November 2016 and September 2017 in three case study locations: Drumauld, Inchloch, and Police Scotland's Central Communications. These place names along with personal names in this paper have been pseudonymised in order to preserve anonymity. Drumauld is largely urban and is in the central belt of Scotland (an area that covers much of Scotland's population). Inchloch, on the other hand is a predominantly rural area and is located out with the central belt. Both police and citizen perspectives were captured in Inchloch and Drumauld. The third site, Central Communications, is also located in the Central belt of Scotland and included only police staff with Corporate roles. Few differences were found between case study locations. Instead, participants discussed police legitimacy and social media in the same ways (as is discussed in more detail later).

The study used predominantly qualitative methods to capture how people inside and outside of the police organisation construct their perceptions of police legitimacy. Specifically, the research questions were:

- (1) How is social media understood and utilised within the police in Scotland?
- (2) How is police use of social media understood by citizens?
- (3) How does police use of social media tie in with crime control and police legitimacy?

Police legitimacy unfolded as the central focus in the study, as participants' stories and narratives during fieldwork centred on police authority. Altogether, 134 hours of participant observation and 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers and staff. The central aim of participant observation was to understand how social media fits into everyday policing. This involved observing staff and officers' daily routines and identifying how and when social media was utilised. Interviews were then carried out with officers and staff to further explore key themes generated from observation. Above all, each interview centred on why and how social media was used by the police. Since observation was largely used to inform interviews, much of the data reported in this paper refers to interviews with officers and staff. Participants were selected on account of their policing role, with a variety of policing functions captured, including officers and staff working in for example social media, traditional media, community policing, and response policing. 11 police staff and 29 police officers took part in the interviews. 15 participants were female and 25 were male. Police officers who took part in the study varied in rank up to the level of Superintendent.

Police social media practices in Scotland operated on the national and local level when the study was carried out. On the national level, police staff in Central Communications set national guidance and directives for social media across Police Scotland. They worked with officers and staff in each of the 13 divisions in Scotland to ensure national priorities were met. These police staff in Central Communications also oversaw the national Police Scotland social media accounts. On the divisional level, officers and staff connected to each division operated the divisional and local social media accounts covering their area. However, social media was

arranged differently within each of the divisions included in the study. In Inchloch, the police staff in the regional media department played a significant role in overseeing police social media practices for the divisional and local accounts. Here, access to social media channels for officers was sanctioned by police staff in the media department. Police officers in Inchloch would also at times seek prior approval for social media posts by these staff. In Drumauld, the regional media department played less of a role, and instead, social media was governed by a select few officers in the division. These officers communicated much of the content on the divisional and local social media accounts. They also made decisions about how social media was used and which officers had access. These arrangements are significant because they connect to how officers and staff viewed their role and authority within the police on social media. This idea is developed in the next section in relation to perceptions of self-legitimacy amongst officers and staff.

A further four focus groups were carried out with citizens in Inchloch ($n = 11$) and Drumauld ($n=11$). Nine citizens involved in focus groups were female and 13 were male, and all participants in the study were over 18 years of age. The number of participants in each focus group varied between four and seven. Citizens were recruited from local groups and organisations operating in Inchloch and Drumauld. Combined, this included: a residents' association, an outdoor sports group, a local fire service, and a community safety group. The focus group method was chosen in order to understand how people accept and contest police practices on social media as part of a group. During each focus group, participants were shown images and videos of police social media content from across Scotland, although the name of the account was concealed. Participants use of swear words are also reported verbatim in this paper to accurately show what they said. Data was transcribed and then thematically coded using the qualitative software NVivo.

Perceptions of self-legitimacy on social media amongst police officers and staff

To start with, the ways in which police officers and staff defined legitimacy connected to Bottoms and Tankebe's ([2012](#)) definition. They did so by recognising and justifying their right to authority. Both elements form the basis of Bottoms and Tankebe's definition of legitimacy that necessarily involves police officials recognising and justifying their own sense of authority. This also ties in with their notion of power-holder legitimacy, that resembles the 'cultivation of self-confidence' by police officers in their own legitimacy (p. 154). While the focus of this paper is not to assess if police declarations to legitimacy are well-founded, the following shows how police officers and staff in the current study were found to justify their self-legitimacy in two ways.

Firstly, they put forward claims that officers and staff have superior knowledge about policing, crime, and disorder. For them, this meant that content and information shared by the police on social media is factual and accurate. This connects to Hall et al's. ([2013](#)) argument that in relation to the news media, the police are the 'primary definers' of crime and criminal justice. In doing so, police spokespersons according to Hall et al. ([2013](#)) play a pivotal role in sharing their interpretations, and in turn, they have the power to steer public debate. In the current study, these beliefs related to the non-partisan feature of policing and its notion that police services are apolitical and un-biased, as officers and staff believed that this gave them credibility on social media. Similar to Bradford and Quinton ([2014](#)) who align police self-

legitimacy with having confidence in their 'position as authority figures in society' officers and staff in the study also saw themselves as authority figures on social media. Police accounts were described as 'the truth' by both Sarah and Carla (police staff, Central Communications). Likewise, Fay (police staff, Inchloch) and Molly (police staff, Central Communications) described police accounts as 'the credible source of information' and 'the legitimate source of information' respectively. According to Roy (police officer, Inchloch) police content was different from the traditional media because 'we are interested in the facts'. This view that the police have legitimacy on social media on account of sharing accurate information was further reported by Molly in connection to a serious incident that happened in Glasgow in 2014 when six civilians were tragically killed by a waste collection vehicle. For Molly, the police were 'in charge of that situation' and were thus best placed to share accurate and verified updates about the incident at the time.

... when the bin lorry incident happened in Glasgow, emm, the evaluation that we have got that, said that our numbers go through the roof because people know we are going to give the correct information. We are the people who are in charge of that situation. So, we are going to give the accurate information. We are not going to leak out stuff, that the media are leaking. Because they are desperate to get a story. Emm, and also then what happens is that the media start to point everybody to us because they are like this is where you are going to get the true ... accurate information about what's happening at this event.

(Molly, police staff, Central Communications)

Police staff and officers' sense of self-legitimacy in the study was reinforced because of the contrasting feature of 'rumour', 'fake news', and 'urban myths' on social media. Inaccurate stories reported and shared amongst social media users contributed to their belief that police information is on the other hand valid and that they carry legitimacy on social media because of this. Eve (police staff, Inchloch) reported that 'the one we get every summer is about dogs being stolen and there's someone in a white van going around stealing dogs'. In Inchloch, police staff also described their frustrations towards a Facebook account that published local hearsay stories. This account was recognised as an 'unofficial' news channel by police staff and officers across the division. For Fay (police staff, Inchloch), the account was 'an alleged news page' as they did not follow 'editorial guidelines'. Likewise, Ava said 'they put stuff up which nothing's checked (and) nothing is verified'. False information reported by this account strengthened Rob's (police officer, Inchloch) self-legitimacy as he instead viewed police content as '... not a Chinese-whispers, not a (Facebook account anonymised) perspective but a, there you go, I've read that in black and white from the police and that tells me what the situation is'. Fay's (police staff, Inchloch) belief in her own self-legitimacy was also reinforced on account of the feature of rumours on social media as she said:

Social media is great for getting a message out quickly. But it's also really bad for pages that just post stuff without any verification. And ... ye know you see rumours now just spreading, so quickly. And, and it's just wildfire ... I remember there was a sexual assault reported at Inchloch it was about a year or so ago. A couple of years ago. And it was taped off, there was a local protection on it just while they were doing the enquiries and the rumours on (Facebook account anonymised) were that a head was found in the bin ... how you get to that- I mean I've never even seen that in London and I lived there for five years. Ye know it's just ridiculous.

It's irresponsible to allow that. Ye know, I am all for freedom of speech, but they have a social responsibility as an alleged news page.

(Fay, police staff, Inchloch)

Secondly, officers and staff across the police organisation justified their self-legitimacy in relation to their police role. In connection to police studies that have highlighted the crime-orientated nature of police occupational culture (see Loftus [2010](#)), officers also viewed their role in crime-fighting ways. Tackling crime was described as the core job for police officers and was expressed by Tod (police officer) as 'I would say (for) all officers, our aim of being in the police is to solve crime'. Furthermore, Jack (police officer, Drumauld) contended that 'I don't think anyone has the ability to be the police online, as well as the police do, cause we are the police'. He argued that police officers are experts in 'operational risk and threat' as this then gave them legitimacy within the organisation to use social media. As well as this, police officer's self-legitimacy was strengthened on account of their perceived close relationship with communities in physical spaces. Participants in the study stated that because officers have external legitimacy amongst citizens, this then provides them with self-legitimacy within the organisation. This idea was put forward by Jack (police officer) as 'social media is an extension in my view of community policing' and by Gus as 'they are our true front-facing ... Police Scotland'. Likewise, Anna (police officer, Drumauld) described how 'they're the ones (police officers) speaking to the public all the time'. At the same time, police staff in both Central Communications and Inchloch recognised that officers had vast knowledge about the legal aspects of communication, in terms of what could and could not be legally shared by the police on social media. Police staff here would at times seek legal advice from officers before divulging information on the national Police Scotland social media accounts.

Police staff involved in Communications in Police Scotland were also adjudged to have self-legitimacy and symbolic power within the organisation on account of their expertise with communicating via the traditional and social media. Communications staff justified their self-legitimacy on social media in terms of how they manage Police Scotland's corporate reputation and in relation to how they enhance citizens' perceptions of the police. Liz (police staff, Inchloch) argued that police content on Facebook required to be 'written by someone who knows how to write'. This perspective was supported by Eve (police staff, Inchloch) who contended that police practices on social media 'need a bit more of a measured corporate sort of response'. This view was also shared amongst officers in the study, as they recognised police staff engaged in social media practices as communications specialists with expertise in managing the police reputation. The social media workings in Inchloch and Drumauld amongst officers and staff reported next show that officers and staff would jointly contribute to police social media practices.

In Inchloch, officers worked closely with police staff in the media department. This involved the police staff at times joining officers on specific campaigns and initiatives, and then broadcasting these events. This also involved officers asking police staff for advice before the officers themselves would post content and information on social media. This advice centred on the implications of social media posts on the police reputation. Jim (police officer, Inchloch) described staff with media roles as 'professionals ... (who will) nip and tuck (his suggestions for content) as they see fit'. Les (police officer, Inchloch) also stated that 'they

(Communications staff) are the best people to put the majority out there' in the organisation. Although police officers using social media in Drumauld did not consult with the media team for the area, they did work with Central Communications. Officers here would share content that was created by Central Communications on their divisional and local social media accounts. They would also deliver national campaigns – again created by Central Communications – on their accounts. Officers in Drumauld also acknowledged that Communications staff are proficient in using social media, as Ryan (police officer, Drumauld) for example said 'they are the ones that have got the experience, the proper training, the knowledge, (and) the contacts'. These examples convey how officers and staff across each of the case study areas worked together by sharing their expertise. Skills and knowledge were shared two-way between officers and staff. This meant that both officers and staff within the police organisation were viewed as having the power to legitimately speak on behalf of the police on social media.

Police perspectives on communicating police legitimacy on social media

With a strong sense of self-legitimacy, police officers and staff put forward their claims on social media and in doing so seek legitimacy amongst citizens. This is important for police services given that citizens will cooperate and comply with the police when they accept police legitimacy (Tyler [2011](#), Mazerolle *et al.* [2013](#)). On social media, this means that citizens will be responsive to content and information published by police accounts. Citizens can contribute to police operational goals on social media, by for example assisting with appeals and acting upon current and future risks broadcasted by the police, as was reported in the introduction. In the current study, police officers and staff recognised that they could manufacture legitimacy on social media by communicating their authority using either formal or informal styles.

A formal communication style is associated in the literature with how the police have traditionally communicated with citizens using the traditional media. According to Davis *et al.* ([2014](#), p. 14) 'many police departments have grown accustomed to bureaucratic ways of speaking, both internally and in communications with the public'. For Denef *et al.* ([2012](#), p. 24) this equates to 'police communication (that) is characterised by a formal and impersonal tone', as a participant in Bullock's ([2016](#), p. 11) study likened this to 'the old stereotype'. In the current study, police participants compared formal styles with 'police speak' and as being 'robotic', 'gobbledygook', 'the stern face of the police', 'flowery language', and 'flowery pish'. These phrases suggested that the police at times adopt a language and tone that includes jargon that will be understood by police employees but is difficult for citizens to easily understand. Examples provided by police participants during fieldwork were 'proceeding down the road, rather than walking down the road' and 'alighting from a vehicle, rather than getting out'.

One perspective put forward by police participants in the study was that communicating using formal styles was the most effective way to convey the legitimacy of the police to citizens. For them, the police must be assertive and somewhat authoritative when they communicate their authority. They believed that citizens should accept the authority bestowed to police services and should further comply with police messaging on social media. Dylan (police staff, Central Communications) felt that the tone used on social media should reflect the power and duties

of the police. He described the legitimacy of the police as being 'I don't know – Authoritative. Because we are the Scottish Police Organisation if that makes sense'. For Sarah (police staff, Central Communications) this includes the idea of giving orders and requesting citizens 'don't do this and don't do that'. Gus also felt that 'there is an element of me wanting to say I am the police, you will do as I say'. These perspectives suggested that formal styles of communication illustrated police authority on social media.

However, other participants in the study argued that only by humanising police content online would citizens accept police legitimacy. This involved displaying police authority in a less authoritative way by using a softer approach and they, in turn, supported informal styles of communication. In doing this, they felt that the police could publicly communicate a more human side to policing. This echoes recent research by Skinns, Rice, Sprawson, and Wooff ([2017](#)) that found police authority is often communicated softly and innocuously in police custody through distinct architecture and enhancing the quality of contact in an attempt to gain detainees compliance and cooperation. In the current study, officers and staff argued that citizens turn away from police messaging and will resist police legitimacy when formal styles of communication are used. According to them, citizens listen to police communication and accept police authority when it is conveyed in a more colloquial manner. This involves the police on social media broadcasting informal language, showing 'a friendly side' of the police, using humour, and publishing content that is interesting, creative, current and topical. Similar to recent research by Wood and McGovern ([2020](#)) that found humour has been used by the New South Wales Police to enhance their legitimacy, participants in the present study also felt that humour allowed the police to talk about policing subject matter and explain police action in a casual way. Ellie (police staff, Central Communications) believed that citizens were more likely to read police content when this was presented in 'a nice kind of more laidback (and) less official way'. The direct link between humour and informal communication was further described by Rob (police officer, Inchloch) as 'if you're using the kind of humour or slightly colloquial approach, it's the softer ... it's focusing on maybe a hard issue but doing it in a kind of softer way'. Ellie also supported a softer communication approach and believed that citizens should see police officers as human beings and not as 'robots' who only punish wrongdoing.

Yeah there's been, emm, incidents, like maybe it's, it's like to show the kind of softer side of policing, I think. A lot of perception out there in the public is that, emm, police are just robots, they just come in and do their job, go home, give out tickets, get money for the- and all that sort of stuff.

(Ellie, Police staff, Central Communications)

Citizens' assessments of police legitimacy on social media

After the police attempt to assert their legitimacy on social media, citizens then assess these claims. Citizens will make judgments about police practices and the right of the police to use their authority. Bottoms and Tankebe ([2012](#)) argue that police legitimacy is in flux and that citizens will accept and contest police legitimacy across space and over time. However, the authors refer only to face-to-face encounters between criminal justice workers and citizens. Instead, the current study shows that police legitimacy on social media changes depending

on how people understand the role of the police in physical spaces. For example, Drumauld residents said that images on social media depicting officers smiling was positive because for them it mirrored the nature of interaction citizens should expect with the police in the real world.

Dale- ohh yeah, totally. They look very approachable. Like it's Christmas, people should be happy. You would come and say hello.

Dawn- Dion how do you feel about that?

Dion- yes, I would agree with that as well.

Facilitator- so you like seeing them smiling then?

Dion- yes, I like to see them smiling

Dave- better smiling than scouring

Dawn- I have known quite a few of the local officers to interact, so yeah.

Facilitator – so smiling cops is a good thing then?

(Collective laughter)

Dawn- and I don't think it's frivolous. As Dale said it's festive, it's the Christmas period.

Facilitator –it's interesting-

Dawn-other people do it, why shouldn't the cops.

(Citizens, Drumauld)

The role of the police online according to citizens can be further seen in relation to a video uploaded to social media by Police Scotland ([2016](#)) that depicted officers partaking in a social media craze, at the time, known as 'The Running Man Challenge'. One perspective shared by citizens in the study was that the post had humanised police officers. Young people were identified by residents during focus groups as more likely to appreciate police use of humour. Key to this was the expressive feature of informal police communication styles. An expressive model of policing is when the police are found to represent community values and norms (Bradford and Myhill [2015](#)). Similarly, these citizens in the study implied that police officers are more akin to the rest of society when they show a humorous side. For others, this post was a waste of police resources. These citizens instead argued that the police should either be tackling crime or engaging with people in physical spaces. Here, swear words were used to convey their dissatisfaction.

Ray- that is fucking terrible.

Lee- right see this you dished out earlier (image of officers sitting in a café). We said yeah that is good they are interacting with the community. And their defence could say we are trying to show you that we are approachable. How many police spent organising that? How many takes did that- how much time did that video, from the minute guess what this would a good idea, to the point that they did three takes for that? Fucking waste of time.

Facilitator- So you like the interacting time?

Lee- no I can imagine how their approach to this might be, but it is too far. That is too far. This sitting having cups of tea is brilliant. Fucking videos that last ages that's too far.

Facilitator- So it's too organised, it's too scripted?

Lee- how much money is spent?

Ray- I can see your point that it fucks you off, and I quite agree with it. but I didn't see it that way. But the police should be up here, they should be on the ball. And to do something like that is fucking terrible. That is a fucking embarrassment.

Facilitator- why?

Lee- well it is similar to what an 18-year-old would do in a club.

(Citizens, Inchloch)

Police officers and staff also internalise citizens' judgements about police legitimacy. During fieldwork, officers and staff for the most part talked about how citizens scrutinised and, at times, criticised the police. They argued that some citizens were more likely to be derogatory towards police social media accounts compared to officers on the street. These users were described as 'keyboard-warriors' who are abusive towards the police online because their own identity is hidden. In turn, they reported frustrations with being unable to control users' responses on social media. Police officers and staff in the current study believed that power shifted away from the police to citizens once the police communicate on social media. At this point, they described how users can comment, scrutinise, and criticise the police. This follows recent research by Bullock *et al.* (2020) that also found police communication specialists perceive a lack of control on social media because users can respond to police content, and at times post negative comments. In the current study, Ted (police officer, Inchloch) described this in terms of losing control as police social media posts 'can be hi-jacked by people with the wrong agenda ... And you start off with one social media post, and it becomes something entirely different'. Likewise, Tod (police officer, Inchloch) argued 'if somebody says the wrong thing, you have no control, then suddenly it becomes a complaint which then gets us in bother'. For Doug (police officer, Drumald), positive messages intended by the police were at times misinterpreted and viewed negatively by users. Doug argued that these messages were 'construed in a way that is just turned into a stick to beat us with and once we press send, we've lost all control of that'. Similarly, Rod reported that the police are unable to control comments that can at times are critical of the police.

When you put a piece of information onto social media you've kind of lost control over it. And a conversation that then incurs as a result of that may involve comments and, and contributions that don't reflect your values.

(Rod, police officer, Inchloch)

Police perspectives on reconstructing police legitimacy on social media

Police officers and staff attempt to reconstruct police legitimacy on social media when users challenge their authority. In these cases, their sense of self-legitimacy to govern and rule does not lessen, as they instead look to repair and at times reassert their legitimacy on social

media. This follows Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) notion that power-holders interpret and later respond to public opinions and judgements about their legitimacy. According to the authors they attempt to assert again their right to rule over their audience when this is challenged. In the current study, officers and staff reconstructed their legitimacy on social media in three ways. However, these views were not shared amongst all participants in the study. Instead, the way in which officers and staff reconstructed and reasserted their legitimacy depended on their own views of social media as well as their own beliefs on how the police should tackle rejections of their legitimacy.

Firstly, one perspective put forward by police officers and staff said that restoring police legitimacy required being resilient and responding to challenges by users on social media. They conveyed the importance of being on duty when police content is uploaded to social media as this would mean they can address people's negative judgements of police authority. Eve (police staff, Inchloch) argued that the police could then 'monitor the comments ... ehm, and we wouldn't want to just come in on a Monday morning and maybe there's been some things brewed up over the weekend'. During fieldwork in Drumauld the police actively used social media to respond to public criticism on one occasion. At the time, a police officer uploaded a post to the police divisional Facebook account. This referred to foot patrols in the town centre after recent public complaints about anti-social behaviour. The Facebook post also showed a photograph of two officers walking through Drumauld town centre. Later, the officer who created and uploaded the content described how it had received 'flack' from Facebook users who complained about policing in the town centre. Fellow police officers in the division then stated that the police must respond to public criticism. Anna (police officer, Drumauld) said '... actually that it's out there now and you have to deal with it. We put ourselves up to be shot and we were shot so we have to then recover from that'. Afterwards, the police responded to each user's comment on the post and provided them with the opportunity to speak further with the Drumauld North community Policing Team. As well as this, the police proactively engaged with local people in the town centre and uploaded photographs showing these interactions on Facebook. Both strategies signified police efforts to repair citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy through community engagement.

Secondly, other officers and staff in the study reconstructed their legitimacy by ignoring user comments that reject what the police say on social media. For them, the police will never have unanimous support amongst citizens. Therefore, they argued that some people will always challenge police content and information online, and that they will hinder police attempts to use social media to aid operational policing and enhance the police reputation. Moreover, for Max (police officer, Inchloch), people will be critical of the police on social media regardless of the presence of police accounts. In this sense, social media platforms were likened to online spaces that enable citizens to challenge police authority. This idea was shared by Ted (police officer, Inchloch) who contended:

police will be criticised whatever they do. If they put out something that is far too long. People will go- ye know, ye get the comments, 'waffly pish'. What are they talking about here? I don't understand this.

(Ted, police officer, Inchloch)

Rod (police officer, Inchloch) compared social media to a 'playground'. Social media for him has a distinct culture and includes a recognisably 'different set of rules' that police officials conventionally obey. Indeed, for Rod, 'the public out there, haven't been through all the courses we have. They haven't been sort of driven through the same machinery that we have'. Therefore, he argued that the police need to accept 'the hits that come with that' as police messages would at times be at odds with citizens' beliefs. These differences were summarised in the following text by Rod as:

We (the police) enter a playground where there's some bad people. And we've got, if we're going to enter that playground, I would say the same to the public, if you want to enter that playground then that's fine, but you've got to remember that not everyone plays by the rules.

(Rod, police officer, Inchloch)

Instead, these police staff and officers contended that as long as users read police material, they will overlook their negative comments. This was put forward by Lyn (police staff, Inchloch) as 'we're not looking for criticism but if we get a criticism, then at least we've let them know this (crime in their area) is happening'. Likewise, Jan's sense of authority and self-legitimacy did not change despite negative comments by citizens on social media as he said:

Should we be worried about how many like what we are putting on? Well we shouldn't be worried if they like it or not, because a hater is going to hate, is that what they say? So, anybody who doesn't like the police anyway. You are always going to get it, but as long as they are reading what you are putting on (small laughter). So, they have read it, aye. (**pretending to type) I hate bloody this or that. You lot are scum and all the rest of it. I am going to come around your house and torch it (pretending to type**). Yeah, yeah on you go. But, eh, they have actually read what you have put on.

(Jan, police officer, Inchloch)

Thirdly, police officers and police staff described how users on social media would at times assist in reconstructing police legitimacy on social media. They were described as people who accepted a police presence on social media and supported the role of the police in tackling crime. Police participants stated that on occasions, comments on police posts were somewhat regulated by users and not the police. These users would defend the police and justify police actions when others challenged police activities. In doing so, they played an important role in attempting to repair and reassert police legitimacy. These ideas were described by Lyn (police staff, Inchloch) as 'so someone will come in and put a negative comment and then someone will comment under that and say, but it's because of this or because of this'. Similarly, Ted (police officer, Inchloch) described that users would tell other users 'get off the police's back'. In turn, officers and staff described how these users had helped to reduce the amount of negative comments on police social media posts over time. For Eve (police staff, Inchloch) social media users had become more accepting of the police role on social media. She contended that users who justified police actions played a pivotal part in restoring police legitimacy on social media.

'I think people probably then realised it was beneficial and then when we started seeing that people were coming on and actually being positive about us. And having a go at people who

are being negative about us. I think that probably helped. Because people realised, it's not all negativity.'

(Eve, police staff, Inchloch)

Discussion and conclusion

The dynamic nature of police legitimacy on social media features ongoing assessments made by those inside and outside of the police organisation about police authority. Police officers and staff cultivate, justify, and revise their claims to legitimacy on social media in response to ongoing assessments made by their audience. In doing this, they internalise and act upon negative scrutiny by citizens about the police. This paper has drawn attention to four key dimensions to police legitimacy on social media. Firstly, police officers and staff cultivate their self-legitimacy on social media in connection to how they understand their professional role and the credibility of police information. Secondly, officers and staff attempt to communicate their legitimacy to citizens using either formal or informal styles of communication on social media. Thirdly, citizens will judge police legitimacy on social media based on their attitudes of face-to-face encounters with the police, as officers and staff will internalise these assessments. Fourthly, the police will attempt to reconstruct and at times reassert their legitimacy on social media when challenged by citizens.

These research findings provide an original and significant contribution to Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) dialogic approach. Until now, little was known about their theorising in a policing and social media context. The four key dimensions to police legitimacy on social media identified in this paper confirm Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) claim that 'power-holders' recognise public rejection of their legitimacy before attempting to reassert their authority. In these cases, police staff and officers' sense of self-legitimacy does not lessen as they instead look to manage negative comments. This is a significant contribution to Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) dialogic approach because it shows that the police continually seek legitimacy from citizens and attempt to maintain this over time on social media. Police officers and staff grapple for authority on social media and will defy opinions expressed by citizens that damage police legitimacy. This involves officers and staff continually internalising citizens' judgements and thereafter responding to any rejections of police legitimacy. In doing this, police officers and staff attempt to regain control of social media and try to reassert their legitimacy.

Whilst police services attempt to manage their legitimacy on social media, the research findings also show that citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy on social media change depending on how they understand police legitimacy in the real world. This is significant because it illustrates the connections people make between police legitimacy in the digital and physical sphere. However, it is important to recognise that this comes at a time when the delivery of policing is becoming increasingly digitalised. Police services across the globe continue to invest more resources into their social media and online presence. Current long-term police strategies across the UK outline the need to enhance online engagement between the police and citizens. This can be seen with Police Scotland's (2017) 'policing 2026' strategy and the 'Policing Vision 2025' in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (see National Police Chiefs Council 2016). In early 2019, the online platform Police.UK was also launched for

residents in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This platform is often referred to as the 'single online home' for policing or 'SOH' for short and allows citizens to report crime and to contact their local police service (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners [2019](#)). Altogether, these developments demonstrate that the police presence online continues to evolve, and that citizens must increasingly go online to both contact the police and to find information about the police and crime. Despite a growing police presence online, the research findings from the current study illustrate that citizens continue to evaluate police legitimacy based on their beliefs on the role and function of the police in the physical world.

Given the research findings from the current study, police services must not overlook the role that policing in the physical world has in shaping police legitimacy online. The current study shows that citizens draw on their perceptions of policing carried out in the physical world when responding to police content online. For police services, this means ensuring quality of contact with citizens during face-to-face encounters as well as tackling crime and disorder in physical spaces. These normative and instrumental evaluations respectively, have already been shown in existing police studies to shape citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy (Bradford and Myhill [2015](#)). Police services must also understand citizen's perceptions and expectations of policing in the physical world over time so that they can respond to changes in attitudes and potential rejections of their legitimacy by citizens. As Hughes and Rowe ([2007](#), p. 341) have noted differences exist amongst citizens because 'community perceptions of social problems are constructed in particular contexts'. According to Bottoms and Tankebe ([2012](#)) these changes in judgements by citizens will in turn will shape how the police respond.

In addition, academic research should continue to capture how citizens grant the police legitimacy on social media. The current research – based on a case study methodology – provides a snapshot into people's perceptions of police legitimacy on social media when fieldwork was carried out in Scotland. This may change in an increasingly digital world, and with the evolving digitalisation of policing reported earlier. Yet, it is also important to recognise that people's use of social media may be transforming and that this in turn will have implications in terms of if and how they communicate with the police online. Perrin ([2018](#)) notes that people at times take prolonged and ad hoc breaks from social media platforms and that this can last beyond several weeks. Cao and Perin ([2018](#)) also reveal that users often experience 'technostress' and fatigue on social media platforms that is linked to being overloaded with information and social networks. This according to the authors impels people to leave social media either temporarily or indefinitely. Against this backdrop of people intermittently quitting social media and adjusting the way that social media features in their everyday lives, future research should continue to understand the interplay between how police legitimacy is granted within and between physical and digital spaces. This will contribute to a greater understanding of the dynamic nature of police legitimacy on social media and the four key dimensions identified in this paper.

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