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Improving Police Social Media Use Practices

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Abstract

Phenomenological study findings identified police social media site use practices that law enforcement leadership may wish to consider incorporating. Findings showed that members of the public in their lived experiences desired two-way asynchronous and synchronous interpersonal communication capabilities when accessing social media platforms maintained by law enforcement agencies. Improved police social media use practices in these areas may be a gateway to building stronger community relations and using social media as an instrument to aid in crime solving. The themes identified included crime solving, building community-relations, asynchronous versus synchronous engagement, humanistic branding, and public image.

Keywords: police leadership, social media, community policing, community relations

1. Introduction

According to Smith and Anderson (2018), approximately 68% of the United States adult population ages 18-64, or 118 million people, use Facebook annually as their primary online social media (SM) platform. Of those, approximately two-thirds or 78.3 million reported daily Facebook access (Smith & Anderson, 2018). The aggregate breakdown by age groups of 18-29, 30-49, 50-64, and 65 and older showed 88%, 78%, 64%, and 37% respectively for those who reported daily SM use in the United States (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) submitted that SM platforms are unlimited resources for active users to interact, express, and share. Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that proper police use of SM platforms may create opportunities for the exchange of information between the police and community residents. Of course, this is with the understanding that SM cannot replace hands-on policing. SM platforms used and monitored appropriately by police leadership may be used as a method to improve police community-relations as well as be a useful as a tool for solving crime (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012; Beshears, 2017).

The problem addressed in this study was the gap in peer-reviewed scholarly literature regarding citizens' lived experiences with police-department maintained SM platforms. Additionally, the study was in response to a call for a qualitative design to lessen the limitations of previous statistical assumptions regarding the effectiveness of police SM use (Beshears, 2017). Previous analysis of police SM platform use had not examined citizens' lived experiences as to the usefulness of police SM use to foster positive constructive police-community relations or in solving crime.

2. Literary Overview

2.1 Police Social Media Use and Citizen Engagement

Smyth (2012) noted the importance of police SM being utilized to garner help from the public to solve crime in local neighborhoods. Smyth further recognized that SM could be used as a tool to positively connect with the public and work cohesively with the community to solve crime. Furthermore, Rosenbaum, Graziano, Stephens, and Schuck (2011) posited that the internet should be used as a platform for law enforcement organizations to include the community in decision making and crime prevention initiatives. Rosenbaum et al. felt that SM could be used as a tool to not only increase

community awareness but would allow greater public participation in police-community discussions as well. The suggestion was that access to SM sites as a tool to participate would be especially beneficial for those who are reluctant or possibly incapable of appearing at public meetings. Additionally, it was found that law enforcement agencies could use SM as a tool to educate the public on relevant public issues and engage in problem-solving discussions (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Using SM platforms, the ability of law enforcement is effectively and efficiently improved with respect to reaching more significant segments of the citizenry (Hollywood et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, Lieberman, Koetzle, and Sakiyama (2013) as well as Beshears (2017) found law enforcement communication with the community was significantly affected by the frequency of the contact, not by the mode or method of contact. However, SM formats continue to be proposed and viewed as effective contact applications toward improving community relations between police and the communities they serve as it is a viable means of exchanging information in that the connections tend to grow stronger over time with usage (Bertot et al., 2012; Goel & Mousavidin, 2008; Schneckenberg, 2009). Furthermore, while the Toronto Police Service is recognized as a leader in the employment of SM, specifically Twitter, in an attempt to strengthen communication ties with the community (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018), the focus of researchers' review of police SM usage has been primarily from the perspective of the police (Kim, Oglesby-Neal & Mohr, 2017) or the specific form (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018), frequency (Beshears, 2017; Lieberman et al., 2013), and the communication strategy (Meijer & Thaens, 2013) or style (Ching & Hand, 2011) rather than the reactions and responses of the citizens.

Skogan (2009) investigated a Houston, Texas community policing project regarding building constructive, mutually beneficial police community-relationships through public dissemination of information. A structural equation model was used to analyze the conflicting claims of concerns related to crime and public confidence with the police force. Data were obtained via a two-wave panel survey. The findings indicated the existence of a statistically significant positive correlation between the police community relations and dissemination of knowledge to the public (Skogan, 2009; see also Dukes, Portillos, & Miles, 2009; Ivkovic, 2008). Additionally, the nature of the constructs was evaluated based upon the charted participants' experiences (Skogan, 2009). Similarly, Dukes et al. (2009) and Ivkovic (2008) found citizens' feelings of confidence in the police increased in correlation to the quality of the communication with the police. In other words, dissemination of law enforcement activities to the citizenry through SM channels works toward increasing overall police-community relations in terms of support, confidence, and opening the means of establishing a stronger and more effective method of engagement.

2.1.1 Importance of Positive Contact with Police

Ivkovic′ (2008) utilized the International Crime Victimization Survey (N = 19 788) and the World Values Survey (N = 39 350) to comparatively analyze the lived experiences of the general population of 28 European and North American countries regarding their support of law enforcement. Depending on the status of the country, the surveys were accomplished through telephone or face-to-face interviewing. The underlying complex factors of participant characteristics and police contact experiences varied from 20-85% with respect to support for law enforcement. It was found that characteristics and experiences were directly linked to the range of differences in perceived support. Likewise, in a more limited study focused on a Colorado Springs, Colorado community policing organization, Dukes et al. (2009) considered the specific issues of contact with the police and the resulting attitudes held by the citizenry. The data were collected from 3 591 residents via a phone interview survey. The researchers concluded the nature of contact with police was viewed by the participants as being of greater importance than the frequency of contact ($ß$ = 0.66).

Ivkovic (2008) and Dukes et al. (2009) both found that in order to increase assurance in the police, meaningful interactions are important. While differences in statistics between the two studies were noted due to the one study being internationally based and the other United States city-based, a significance was found regarding the nonthreatening nature of SM. Therefore, it was concluded that SM use by police organizations may be used as a tool to create positive experiences between the public and police.

Law enforcement agencies around the world have enlisted community residents via SM in the activities of surveillance and crime solving within their neighborhoods (Smyth, 2012). Smyth (2012) asserted that SM is a tool police organizations can utilize to create an atmosphere for building positive experiences with the public. Additionally, SM can also be used to enlist the public to assist in solving crime. Rosenbaum et al. (2011) supported and further emphasized the ideals of law enforcement organizations using the internet (e.g., SM) to increase community involvement regarding decision-making and the development of crime prevention initiatives. They found SM to be a particularly useful tool to engage large numbers of participants and encourage those who would, for one reason or another, be unlikely to appear in public places. Furthermore, it was found that the internet was an effective public communication and education tool in terms of allowing for two-way discussion and increasing public awareness (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Due to its far-reaching capabilities, the internet can assist law enforcement agencies in reaching a greater portion of the population more quickly and cost

effectively.

Individual self-awareness to enhance relationships is also very important for enhancing police and community relations. Maguire and Johnson (2010) described quality policing service based on the characteristics or dimensions of attentiveness, reliability, responsiveness, competence, manners, and fairness. These characteristics were developed and based on the issue that citizens want police to be accessible and available in accordance with community needs. In addition, citizens want police services to be calculable, service oriented, friendly, and advantageous. Furthermore, police are to be dependable, receptive, and proficient. Maguire and Johnson asserted that citizens in communities want to be treated with respect and fairness by law enforcement officers in all circumstances. Also, it is important that law enforcement leadership and individual officers maintain an ethical guideline to help ensure they meet the requirements of these six dimensions. They found the six dimensions could in fact be acquired through law enforcement's online SM community connections with the people the officers served. Specifically, it could be accomplished by police departments expanding the application of online SM use and incorporating both asynchronous and synchronous SM citizen engagement. This is in keeping with the idea that all values, rights, obligations, and duties originate in individuals (Marwah, 2012). The foundation of individualism, face-to-face or online, goes hand-in-hand with the concept of self-awareness and the treatment or attitude toward one another for both officers and citizens.

2.1.2 Bureaucratic Versus Interpersonal Style of Communication with the Public

The type of SM usage is dependent upon the outcome sought by the law enforcement organization (i.e., informational, transactional, or collaborative). According to Gallon (2010), informational is utilized when the goal is to educate or inform, whereas transactional is used as a means for individual citizens to perform a clerical or administrative action such as submit a form. Both are considered a bureaucratic style of one-way communication with the community. However, there is the collaborative style where the community and the police work hand-in hand in their communication efforts to address community crime issues. In conjunction with the style of communication is the type of strategy used. Informational communication tends to follow a push, pull, or push-and-pull strategy in that each of these involve the presentation of information be it the pushing of the information by the primary entity (police) to draw attention to itself, pulling the consumer's (citizen) attention and or building awareness of the value of the entity (police), or a combination of both (Dontigney, 2017). Push, pull, or push-and-pull tend to be one-way communication focused on educating or informing and so are bureaucratic in nature. Likewise, collaborative communication is based upon a networking strategy in that both the entity (police) and the consumer (citizens) are encouraged to interact and build connections with each other. Clearly, the internet is viewed as the primary means of collaboratively networking. Hence, four types of internet communication are noted: (a) one-to-one asynchronous; (b) many-to-many asynchronous; (c) synchronous one-to-one, one-to-few, or one-to-many; and (d) asynchronous many-to-one, one-to-one, or one-to-many (Ching & Hand, 2011). Whether using bureaucratic (push, pull, or push-and-pull strategy) or interpersonal communication (networking strategy), the style of communication is an important consideration when seeking a preferred methodology.

Brainard and McNutt (2010), examined how police interacted online with citizens in their Washington D.C. study. Findings from their study concluded that the major focus of activity with the police was informational, and next transactional, with the least amount of activity being collaborative. The significance of these findings showed that a bureaucratic versus an interpersonal style of communication was utilized. Between 2006 and 2007, the data from eight law enforcement districts regarding use of Yahoo! for a law enforcement group indicated citizen memberships had a significant increase of 22 to 184% by each district. The style and demeanor of communication was reported as more than likely having a significant effect with respect to the data (see also Kudla & Parnaby, 2018). According to Brainard and McNutt, the findings indicated the departments' relationships with the public resembled an old public administration style of interaction. Hence, it can be surmised that the Washington D.C. police utilized a bureaucratic style of communication online with the public via their website. The police websites examined in this study were most likely used to disseminate information as the means to educate or inform the public as well as a means for transactional interaction to submit a form, such as an application for employment. Similarly, Meijer and Thaens (2013) found the police departments of Boston and DC employed push and push-and-pull strategies (bureaucratic) respectively while the Toronto police used a networking strategy (collaborative).

Researchers such as Brainard and Derrick-Mills (2011), Ching and Hand (2011), and Kudla and Parnaby (2018) expect SM implementation of holding the possibility to fundamentally alter the interactions and relationships between the government and the populace; however, Kingsley (2012) does not agree. According to Kingsley, the government's use of SM has been viewed as merely a way to emphasize services the city offers, plus websites and SM continue to be an avenue for information distribution. Kingsley views the use of SM as a device that can be employed to develop open engagement and discussion as a tributary compared to the mainstream focus of SM sites.

Brainard and Derrick-Mills (2011) utilized mixed methods and uncovered some interesting results. While the quantitative

portion of the study revealed a lack of hierarchical ranking regarding the police and the community residents, the qualitative data indicated otherwise. They found inconsistent police presence or participation in the discussion groups regarding support for community policing. Considering this, the researchers used the information to propose ways to make positive changes to the experiences shared between law enforcement and citizens. One approach suggested was for police agencies to be more open-minded about their relationship with the community. Additionally, situating themselves as active listeners would be perceived as being empathic, thus enhancing the communication experience. This is in keeping with Gallon's (2010) contention that SM users are more likely to adopt the role of listening and communication not unalike their behavior on Facebook. However, Kudla and Parnaby (2018) posited that an individual's behavior on Facebook is determined by the strategy applied, ergo the strategy applied by the police would potentially affect the community's response.

Brainard and McNutt (2010) as well as Kula and Parnaby (2018) advocated the need for future studies regarding collaborative discourse and its usefulness. In addition, they called for further scholarly research regarding the enormous potential of SM use by government agencies. Similarly, Rosenbaum et al. (2011) stressed the need for researchers to ascertain the overall effect of police online SM use as a means for police agencies to engage the citizens they serve. This type of community-police interaction has the potential to provide law enforcement with valuable information that could help them to better serve their communities (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Lastly, according to Hand and Ching (2011), reciprocal communication between the government and the community residents can be provided via the employment of SM. Therefore, if the community is able to establish dialogue with each other on SM as well as with their local law enforcement agency representatives effectively, it could prove to be beneficial for the police as well as the communities they serve.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Purposeful sampling within the State of Arkansas via the internet was employed to acquire study participants and obtain data. Specifically, the participants were a purposeful sample of 30 Arkansas residents, age 25 to 65, who received an invitation to participate via a SM platform (i.e., Facebook). Even though data saturation was achieved at eight responses, data collection continued with the focus of achieving aggregate data saturation of 30. Per Griffin and Hauser (1993), and Mason (2010), a sample size of minimum 30 is ideal for empirical studies while Creswell (2013) recommended that a phenomenological study should be conducted with a sample size minimum of three to a maximum of 15 individuals. Therefore, per the scholarly literature on research sample size, an appropriate sample size for this phenomenological study was obtained.

3.2 Ethical Standards

Ethical standards were practiced and adhered to. The potential participants received an invitation to voluntarily participate via a SM platform (i.e., Facebook). The invitation letter was posted on Facebook indicating the purpose of the study. The invitation requested the participation of Arkansas residents for a private interview regarding their lived experiences of the effectiveness of police SM use to foster positive police-community relations and assisting with solving crime. Participant lived experiences were sought for ways to improve police SM use to encourage frequent citizen SM engagement with their local law enforcement. Phone and contact information were provided for those who desired to voluntarily participate to facilitate the asking and answering of study questions. Volunteers who chose to participate were prescreened and Arkansas residency was verified. To eliminate researcher bias, any individuals known to the researchers and or those affiliated with law enforcement or criminal justice academia were not accepted as participants.

Prior to the scheduled individual, semi-structured interviews commencing, the informed consent form was shown and reviewed either in person or online. Included in the discussion and signing of the informed consent, the option of refusing to answer any question or cease the audio-recorded interview process at any moment was verbally re-reviewed with the participants. Of note is the fact that none of the volunteers exercised the options of declining to respond or ending their interview prematurely. At the conclusion of each interview, the participant was debriefed regarding the process and the means of allowing for member checking of the transcripts was arranged.

3.3 Data Collection

Since the focus of this study was the lived experience of the participants in their review of local law enforcement SM use, no other demographic data were acquired. Hence, semi-structured phone and or in-person private interviews that lasted approximately 30 minutes each were conducted with 30 individuals with the focus upon the participants' experiences. The semi-structured format encouraged more genuine responses from the participants to questions regarding the following issues: familiarity with local police/sheriff SM site, thoughts of law enforcement SM usage, effectiveness/ineffectiveness of site usage for resolving crime and community building, and the perceived overall public image of police SM

application based on personal experience.

3.4 Data Analysis

Moustakas' (1994) modified, Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen descriptive design for qualitative research (Chwalisz, Shah, & Hand, 2008) was applied for the analysis and coding process. First, an analysis of each statement to determine if it was descriptive of the experience after a participant had reviewed local law enforcement SM use was completed. The transcripts were read multiple times in their entirety by each researcher to ensure comments related to police use of SM for community engagement were extracted. Comments were recorded and irrelevant data excluded in the initial analysis. Relevant responses or "invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122) were listed next, including elimination of repetition. Next, the process of identifying and grouping the invariant meaning units into themes or categories was completed to then be able to form them into a textured description of the participants' experiences. The final analytical coding process was the development of a cohesive, synthesized cogent description of the meanings derived from the experiences shared by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

The outlined process allowed for the identification of specific themes based upon the participants' lived experiences. The findings were then used to ascertain possible ways police departments and sheriff's offices could improve SM use to build positive community relations, solve crime, and foster constructive and frequent citizen SM engagement. According to Groenewald (2004), the process and data garnered phenomenologically allows for the discovery of themes as well as information such as was identified through this study. Therefore, because each interview was transcribed, read, interpreted, coded, and analyzed per the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen, the findings are deemed to be an accurate reflection of the true lived experience of the participants as well applicable to the topic studied (Moustakas, 1994).

Furthermore, it is noted that the response patterns, repetitions, and themes were additionally analyzed via the use of the constant comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Specifically, the interview responses as well as the field notes regarding body language and facial expressions from the in-person interviews were reviewed and analyzed during the data collection process for comparison purposes and recognition of when saturation was reached. This step was of importance due to recognition of the relatively small saturation sample size of eight and thus the continuation of data collection of 30 respondents. The purpose for taking this additional analysis step was also completed to further ensure as well as potentially enhance the reliability of the description of the lived experiences of individuals' responses for improving police SM use.

4. Results

The following comments are from the interviews with 30 people who resided in a metropolitan or rural area within the state of Arkansas at the time of this study. Those interviewed acknowledged they had previously reviewed their local police or sheriff's office internet website or SM use. Garnering the initial thoughts of each participant regarding SM application by law enforcement provided significant insight that then allowed for the narrowing of the topic regarding issues of the effectiveness of the format in terms of fostering constructive community relations and/or solving crime, the personal human touch or branding accomplished by the police via SM, and the public image that is projected.

The police departments and sheriff offices reported having been reviewed by the participants used at least one SM platform. Facebook was identified as the SM platform used the most by the law enforcement agencies examined in this study. Secondly, while nothing was asked about which SM platform police should use, many of the participants stated their thoughts as to this matter. The comments ranged from "I am a huge fan of Facebook for making connections with others and very happy that our sheriff uses it" (#2) and "I prefer Facebook because I use it almost every day. I feel the police should use Facebook because most everyone now days knows how to use it" (#5), to acknowledging that not much thought had been given SM use. The specific comment was, "Much thought until now, beyond keeping in touch with family and friends, and I could care less for the type of SM as long as it is free" (#4). Participant #4 also stated appreciation for Facebook as a means to communicate with others and stay up to date with happenings in the community.

Two participants (#1 and #8) expressed being upset by police use of SM. Participant #1 felt police use of SM was "a waste of time [and] waste of officer resources" because small communities have limited funds and small police departments. The attitude was expressed as follows: "Police social media use is a total waste of time and a waste of officer resources that need to be on the road. Our local city police department only has a handful of officers and the sheriff's office is in the same boat with a large area to cover." Likewise, Participant #8 commented, "My community does not have the money to waste on hiring someone to play on the computer." Nevertheless, some of the participants shared more ardent views and concerns, particularly about the benefits of police SM use in building positive, constructive police-community relations and solving crime within the community.

With respect to the themes of using SM to involve the community in crime solving and building community relations, 21 of 27 and 21 of 26 expressed concern respectively. Specifically, during the conversational interviews, it was evident that the participants who had experience or were knowledgeable about the use of SM were more critical and felt police use of SM needed to be modified to maximize its capabilities in order to build police community-relations and solve crime within the community. For example, Participant #17 opined, "The police could do so much more if they knew how to use social media to build community trust," and both Participants #9 and #18 felt the police needed to be better trained on the proper way to use SM to listen to members of the community. However, Participant #7 admitted having less concern due to residing in a rural location with low crime and Participant #19 remarked about not caring much for law enforcement personnel in general. However, the consensus seemed to be the valuing of positive, constructive police-community relations and solving crime benefits gained from proper police use of SM.

In conjunction with the concept of police SM usage to engage the public in terms of building connections with the community and assisting with crime, the need for police SM humanistic branding arose as an independent central theme. Sixteen of the 30 participants made comments related to the need for a more personal touch from the police. It is also noted that 14 of the 16 expressed concern with two simply mentioning the issue but expressing neutral attitudes and or concern. Of specific consequence are the following comments.

My local police department and the sheriff's office have a website, and that's it. I don't think they care to know what the public's concerns are or they would try to talk to us more. I kind of wish they would use Facebook or something like that and let the community know what is going on and let members of the community post our thoughts and concerns about crime. Who knows, someone may even get to trust the police and offer information to solve a crime. It would be nice, but I don't know if I want to speak with a stuffed shirt. The police officer would have to be someone who acts like they care and want to listen to gain the trust of the community.

The police department and sheriff's office have a website and a Facebook site. The problem is, they're more preoccupied with promoting their public image than they were with connecting with the community. The website contained picture after picture of "Look how great we are" and what we're doing. The Facebook site was also being used more like a large continuous photo album. I did not see any posts or anyone from the community having a conversation of any kind with anyone. If an actual conversation were there, I did not see it. After scrolling past a ton of pictures, I gave up looking for a conversation. Someone needs to teach the police here how to use social media. The police here are not using social media to connect with the community or for asking for assistance to solve the crime within the community.

The sheriff's office where I live used a Facebook site and website. The Facebook site allowed anyone to post and often showed the community, the various ongoing investigations. Plus, the Facebook site had posts from the sheriff's office asking the community for their assistance on different types of crime. I wish it had an actual person manning the site or at least an officer identified that was on the site. The Facebook site and website lacks a personal feel or a human-to-human connection.

I am a bit upset by the lack of thought put into our local law enforcement social media sites [website and Facebook]. But not for reasons of lack of information, but because of feeling it was not "meeting its potential use" because even though the department posted information, it appeared no one seemed to monitor the sites.

While Participant #20 expressed consternation over the police not necessarily being concerned about contacting the community in a meaningful way, she was appreciative of being informed of who was currently in jail and the location of sex offenders. The sentiment was,

[The department is] obviously more concerned with promoting its public image than actively wanting to hear from community residents. I mean, the police *talk the talk* of wanting to engage with the community, but do not *walk the walk*, so to speak, in their use of social media. The department's leadership is capable of having daily open or closed dialogue on social media, even if they were in a wheelchair.

Similarly, Participant #8 admitted, "After viewing our local law enforcement SM sites, it is obvious the police have underutilized SM and its potential to communicate with community members."

Furthermore, closely related to the concept of humanistic branding was how SM use is perceived in terms of the public image of the police. For example, due to having personal knowledge regarding two police officers, Participant #3 admitted to having doubts regarding either officer being effective if selected to engage with people on a police SM site. The participant described the officers as unapproachable and standoffish. Participant #3 stated this due to having casual interactions with them frequently each morning in a local restaurant. As he passed them while exiting the restaurant, he always said, "Hello," however, "the officers talked to me once and asked if I had a problem.... I said no, but felt my crime was [interacting] with the officers." Participant #3 appeared convinced that the officers looked at him as if he was not to be trusted and that his actions were indicative of being "manipulative." Conversely, Participant #12 seemed to be

open-minded regarding his attitude toward the local police and their use of SM because an officer goes to his church and is involved in the community.

The participants who knew an officer with an unfriendly demeanor expressed negative reactions and attitudes toward the officers being effective communicating with others on SM. Participant #14 plainly stated, "The officers I know do not even wave when I passed or smiled. It just makes me sick." Likewise, Participant #16 admitted, "I have no desire to get to know our local police - they are simply rude." Furthermore, several participants noted that knowledge of their local officers' temperaments made a difference regarding their feelings and responses. For example, Participant #10 related, "I think it goes down to the point that it depends on, to me, what kind of person the officer is in their actions and demeanor. I feel most community members want to discuss on social media their concerns, fears, and needs with someone that cares and is approachable." Comparatively, Participant #8 commented, "Personally, I distinguish a difference between caring and acting as if you care. I know this is a complex subject; however, people want to trust their police and not fear them. The police would be wise to use social media to build trust and goodwill." However, and to the contrary, based upon having personally known police officers of a length of time, Participant #6 stated it had "no effect" on his life.

In summation of the human factor and the overall topic of study, two participants shared thoughts as to the potential positives of police SM use. Participant #13 observed that the lived experience of effective police SM use could make a difference in how community residents look at their local law enforcement and help prevent conflict. "For a young adult I have been taught not to trust the police,...I do not know any police officers; they make me uncomfortable. It would be nice if I could feel comfortable to talk with a police officer in a nonthreatening way on social media and be able to ask questions." Similarly, Participant #15 shared that police use of SM would possibly allow members of the community to form bonds or even friendships with local officers, but "we don't have an contact with police officers. We just don't at all."

5. Findings and Discussion

Some of the participants shared the lived experiences that effective SM use by the police made a difference in how the community residents looked at their local law enforcement and helped prevent community conflicts with the police. However, several participants indicated in their responses that law enforcement SM sites were underutilized by police departments and sheriff offices in crime solving and building positive community relations. This may seem to be in contrast to the literature in that Kim et al. (2017) reported 89% of the law enforcement agencies surveyed responded to using SM for community building and 59% used the format to assist in crime solving; however, the percentages represent responses from approximately less than one-third of U.S. law enforcement entities. Further, the participants indicated that several police SM sites in their lived experiences seemed preoccupied with self-promotion and pushing information more so than community engagement. This situation is further supported by past study (Kim et al., 2017).

In addition to how and for what reason police use SM, the participants in this study felt their lived experiences would have been improved if police SM environments had been more open to two-way asynchronous and synchronous interpersonal communication through daily open or closed dialogue on police SM sites. Fielding and Caddick (n.d.) encouraged police to consider the SM format when posting to improve not merely the communication, but more effectively connect with the citizenry. Relatedly, some participants also reported that despite how well the police SM sites were designed, many sites lacked a humanistic quality. In other words, a law enforcement person, specifically trained with the proper temperament, demeanor, and professionalism to effectively communicate in writing and verbally while engaged with members of the community, is needed. The need for the appropriate personnel to actively maintain and respond to the law enforcement account was noted as significant factor of the success implementation of SM by other researchers (Kim et al., 2017; Paradis, 2018).

Lastly in conjunction with the findings, according to research (Beshears, 2017; Bertot et al., 2012), the issue of police online SM use appears to be a significant factor with respect to assisting in solving crime within local communities in addition to the building of positive community relations, and the responses in this study indicated the same. Police organizations should not be dismissive about online SM use as a means of connecting with the public and developing positive lived experiences working together with the communities they serve (Rosenbaum et al., 2011; Smyth, 2012). Police SM use should not be ignored, especially when 70% of the participants' lived experiences indicated that effective police use of SM sites made a significant difference in solving crime within their local communities and helped build positive community relations. That is, when police departments and sheriff offices utilized SM sites to their full capabilities by incorporating two-way communication, both asynchronous and synchronous, via SM sites such as or similar to Facebook, the overall opinions and attitudes of the communities they serve are likely to improve. Additionally, the participants' lived experiences indicated recognition of the need for humanizing branding to spark a connection between the police department's online SM presence with the public it serves.

6. Conclusion

This phenomenological study's findings identified police SM site use practices law enforcement leadership may wish to consider incorporating. Findings showed that the members of the public interviewed desired two-way asynchronous and synchronous interpersonal communication capabilities when accessing SM platforms maintained by law enforcement agencies. Improved police SM use practices in these areas may be a gateway to building stronger community relations and using SM as an instrument to aid in crime solving. However, there is the need for further research to learn more about the living experiences of those accessing police SM platforms and ways to improve police community relations and SM practices as an aid to solve crime. The recommendation with future research is to include demographics such as age and technology acceptance and or usage of the citizen participants as that may have played a role regarding some of the experiences shared by the participants in this study. Further, investigation of the social media platforms themselves in conjunction with the lived experiences may also be helpful toward successful inclusion of social media as viewed by not only the public but law enforcement as well.

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