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Maintaining police-citizen relations on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of recent literature that has examined the role of the police during the COVID-19 pandemic, little is known about police approaches to citizen-engagement on social media in England. Accordingly, this paper draws on robust qualitative research conducted with police officers and staff across England who utilised either official, semi-official, or unofficial police social media accounts. The paper illustrates how they understood their role on social media during the pandemic, and the opportunities and lessons that can be learned. Above all, officers and staff in the study reported that the police transitioned between three distinct stages on social media during the first year of the pandemic. First, they discussed the need to move police engagement with citizens entirely online when the first lockdown started in March 2020 to maintain contact, albeit under very restricted circumstances. Second, during the initial stages of lockdown, they believed it was important that the police shared content on social media on how to keep safe, although they also acknowledged specific challenges in relation to sharing visual content, details of coronavirus legislation, and government guidance. Third, police participants later reported withdrawing from discussing pandemic-related content on social media, and instead promoting positive and feel-good stories about generic police activity. These findings are significant because they reveal that social media enabled the police to maintain their relationship with citizens during the pandemic, although in doing so the police played less of a role in relation to broadcasting guidance and rules linked to keeping people safe.

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Introduction

To start with, it is relevant to understand the context of the pandemic and lockdown in England as much of this underpins the research findings reported later. After the first confirmed case of coronavirus in England was detected on January 29th, 2020, national lockdown occurred less than two months later on the 26th of March. Around this time, people in England were advised by the Government to 'stay at home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives' (Nartowski *et al.*, 2020). On the 10th of May 2020, the guidance changed to 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives'. Then on the 23rd of June 2020, England left national lockdown. After this point, parts of England were put into local lockdowns and different tiers before further national lockdowns again occurred on November 5th and 6th January 2021.

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During these restrictions, the role of the police evolved in accordance with new legislation and government guidance, including The Coronavirus Act 2020 and The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020. Whereas the former centred on the police assisting public health officials, the latter necessitated that the police act when restrictions in place were contravened (National Police Chiefs Council and College of Policing 2020). The role of the police during the pandemic also extended online, with police social media accounts used to broadcast information linked to coronavirus legislation and coronavirus guidance (Nikolovska *et al.* 2020). In doing so, the police have been considered to play a critical role in public health and educating citizens on both changing restrictions and the risks of infection (Luong *et al.* 2020).

While existing studies illustrate the role of the police more broadly during the pandemic, we do not know how police officers and staff perceived their engagement with citizens online. This is important if we are to understand the relationship between the police and citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research findings demonstrate that police officers and staff transitioned between three distinct stages during the first year of the pandemic and that each of these centred on maintaining their relationship with citizens. The first stage reflected police attempts to move their engagement with citizens entirely online from March 2020 onward in England. In doing this, police officers and staff believed that they would be able to maintain their existing links with citizens. The second stage shared by police participants connected to coronavirus information being communicated by police accounts on social media. Soon after national lockdown in England, they felt at the time that the police should take an active role in publishing information on how to keep safe. Yet, they also said that there were unique challenges in relation to divulging visual content, coronavirus legislation, and government guidance on social media during the pandemic. The third stage reported by police participants in our study was that the police should instead publish positive stories and less or no information linked to coronavirus given that this was previously adjudged to be detrimental to people's perceptions of the police. These research findings are significant because they illustrate that social media allowed the police to maintain their relationship with citizens online. However, on account of attempting to do this, they were thwarted from playing a role in broadcasting information about the pandemic and irrespective of its links to protecting the public.

The following section provides an overview of recent literature that has examined the role of the police and police social media practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Afterwards, the methods adopted in the current study are presented. The paper then discusses the three key stages outlined above in relation to how police officers and staff understood their own role and their engagement with citizens on social media. The final section considers the implications of these research findings in connection to the utility of social media for the police.

Existing literature linked to policing during the covid-19 pandemic

There has been a proliferation of studies linked to the role and function of the police during the pandemic as well as its impact on both the delivery of policing and on police personnel. Levels of reported crime in England and Wales have changed during the pandemic with less reported crime overall, although cases of anti-social behaviour and drugs offences did appear to increase (Dixon *et al.* 2020, Adams and Millie 2021, Langton *et al.* 2021). International evidence points towards increases in domestic and intimate partner violence during the pandemic- for instance in the US (Boserup *et al.* 2020, Buttell and Ferreira 2020, Hsu and Henke 2021). Police practices have had to adapt in response to these changing circumstances and priorities. This has involved preventing the spread of infection with police action directed towards enforcing social distancing (Grace 2020). According to Alcadipani *et al.* (2020) officers in Brazil were expected to carry out fewer stop-and-searches (Alcadipani *et al.* 2020), although tensions were thought to exist between the Brazilian government and police organisations. Police officers in this study described coronavirus restrictions as being imposed by the Government and that this in turn created a division between the

police and citizens. Consequently, officers reported not enforcing laws to safeguard their relationship with citizens. Further changes across the globe during the pandemic included a reduction of face-to-face contact amongst employees within the police organisation (Matarazzo *et al.* 2020) as well as a suspension of non-essential face-to-face contact between the police and citizens (Jones 2020, Hu *et al.* 2022).

Additional studies have found mixed results in terms of the impact of policing the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of police employees. Research in Peru (Hernández-Vásquez and Azañedo 2020) and the US (Jennings and Perez 2020) has shown that officers more exposed to coronavirus may experience a higher rate of infection and death because of the disease (Hernández-Vásquez and Azañedo 2020, Jennings and Perez 2020). A study by Simpson and Sandrin (2021) revealed that police officers in North America were aware of these risks, and that they viewed personal protective equipment (PPE) as essential to safely carrying out their role during the pandemic. Further research in the US (Stogner *et al.* 2020), India (Grover *et al.* 2020), North Macedonia (Ristevska-Dimitrovska and Batic 2020) and England and Wales (DeCamargo 2021) has illustrated that officers have experienced greater stress and anxieties during the pandemic, although in Brazil it has been noted that some officers have been somewhat unfazed by coronavirus and have likened it to the dangers that they routinely find themselves in as part of their job (Alcadipani *et al.* 2020). In England and Wales, Flemming and Brown (2021) further report that officers on the frontline experienced higher levels of stress compared to those working from home.

At the time of writing, research had started to shed light on police social media practices across the globe during the Covid-19 pandemic. A key role of the police internationally has been addressing misinformation linked to coronavirus on social media. In India, for example, Brindha *et al.* (2020) report that the police are expected to tackle false information about coronavirus guidance and Government policies shared online by users. A police officer in their study said that the police were actively monitoring social media content to uncover and act upon coronavirus misinformation. In relation to online police communication practices, studies have proclaimed that effective use of social media by police services was more important given that people were living physically apart because of the pandemic (Jones 2020, Hu *et al.* 2022). Hu *et al.* (2022) found that the police in the US attempted to convey a 'friendly' image on social media, and that this helped the police to stay connected with citizens. Jones also argued that the police should both engage in dialogue with users and share positive news stories involving the police, as this would in turn be perceived as procedurally fair by citizens online. Research by Nikolovska *et al.* (2020) examined how law enforcement agencies in the UK used Twitter between September 2019 and May 2020. In total, they studied 114,257 Tweets. The researchers found that much of the Tweets linked to coronavirus were about encouraging compliance with lockdown rules. Law enforcement agencies also posted more about fraud, cybercrime, and domestic abuse during the pandemic than beforehand. They also discovered that law enforcement agencies tended to re-post information that was created by other organisations during the pandemic. In doing this, the researchers suggest that:

> the increased percentage of retweets that were COVID-19 related might be due to the urgency associated with spreading information regarding the pandemic, as retweets require only 'one click' to send, which is simpler. (Nikolovska *et al.* 2020, p. 17)

While these studies provide insight into what the police were doing on social media, they do not tell us how and why these practices occurred. Accordingly, this paper sheds light on police-citizen engagement on social media from a police perspective. The methods used to research with police officers and staff in England are outlined next.

Methods

A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with police participants. All interviews were conducted on the phone and lasted on average 50 min. The interview schedule (see Appendix) was

organised around five themes, that included questions on participants' police background, their use of social media, as well as their thoughts on visual content, internal practices, and external engagement with citizens. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling from several police services across England. This resulted in a combination of police officers, PCSOs (Police Community Support Officers),[1] police specials, and police staff taking part in the study. Participants were selected on account of their involvement in police social media practices. This included police officers and staff operating in a mix of urban and rural areas and in the largest and smallest police services in England and Wales (see Allen and Dempsey (2016) for a full breakdown of workforce size for all 43 police services in England and Wales). Their responsibilities ranged from communicating via police social media accounts to overseeing and coordinating police use of social media. Participants communicated via police accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram. An important feature of the study is that interviews were conducted with police officers and staff who utilised what they referred to as either official, semi-official, or unofficial police social media accounts. Official social media accounts were validated and endorsed by their police service and had oversight from Corporate Communications. Semi-official accounts were largely controlled by individual officers although they at times followed guidance set by Corporate Communications. Unofficial social media accounts were independent of their police service and were not formally approved by their organisation. Users of these accounts in our study used fictitious names and concealed their real identity online. Table 1 provides an overview of the nature of social media accounts utilised by police participants in the study.

Ethical approved was granted by Northumbria University Department of Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Informed written consent was gained before interviews were then conducted between August 2020 and January 2021. During this time, coronavirus rules in England changed between lockdowns being in place (either nationally or locally) and the easing of lockdowns. As a result, interviews were conducted at times when different national and local rules in England existed. These interviews were later transcribed and analysed using the qualitative software NVivo. The main themes relating to police practices on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic are reported next.

Overview of police adaptations of social media during the pandemic

Table 2 provides an overview of police adaptations of social media during the pandemic between March 2020 and January 2021 and at a time when different restrictions were in place across England (see Institute for Government (2021) for a more comprehensive timeline of lockdowns in the UK). During this time, police participants in our study reported that they transitioned between three stages, as they adjusted their communication during the pandemic in broadly similar ways, and despite operating either official, semi-official, or unofficial police social media accounts, and across different parts of England. However, there was some variation amongst interviewees in relation to when these stages occurred. This is reflected in Table 2, showing that the dates for some of the stages narrowly overlap. Stage one followed growing concerns about coronavirus disease in England from March 2020 onward. At this point, police participants in the study stated that they moved their engagement with citizens to entirely online. Stage two occurred between

Table 1. Police social media accounts used by participants.

Type of social media account	Social media account characteristics	Number of police participants involved in the study
'Official'	Authorised and overseen by Corporate Communications.	22
'Semi-official'	Independent of Corporate Communications although their guidance was at times followed.	2
'Unofficial'	Autonomous of Corporate Communications.	6
Total number of participants		28

Table 2. Overview of three stages relating to how and when social media was utilised during the pandemic between March 2020 and January 2021.

Stage (1–3)	Date(s)	UK Government Coronavirus restrictions in place	Nature of communication
Stage One	1st March to 23rd March 2020	Shifts between none to non-essential contact and travel advised.	Police- citizen engagement moved entirely online with several benefits identified.
Stage Two	23rd March to 23rd April 2020	National lockdown in England	The role of the police in delivering Covid-19 pandemic messaging is initially embraced and later questioned by police officers and staff using social media.
Stage Three	30th March to January 2021	Shifts between National lockdown, local lockdowns, and easing of lockdowns in England.	The police reduce the amount of social media posts about the Covid-19 pandemic and focus on police activity that is not related to the pandemic.

23rd March and 23rd April 2020 and centred on the police grappling with broadcasting content linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although, initially embraced, police participants in our study said that they later found talking about the Covid-19 pandemic subject matter on social media as inherently difficult. Stage three happened between 30th March and January 2021 (coinciding with when the final interviews were conducted) and involved the police either discussing Covid-19 pandemic content sparingly or not at all on social media. Instead, the police referred to returning to conventional police messaging that existed prior to the pandemic which centred on non-pandemic-related police activities. The following sections examine each of these stages in more detail and in doing so conveys that police use of social media during the first year of the pandemic transitioned between three stages.

Stage one: transitioning to entirely online engagement

Police officers in the study talked about having regular face-to-face contact with citizens through both formal and informal meetings prior to March 2020. They said that formal face-to-face contact existed through police surgeries, and council and community meetings (including Police and Communities Together meetings, also referred to as 'PACT'). They also discussed informal face-to-face contact in relation to 'crime clinics', 'coffee with a copper' initiatives[2] and community gatherings. Officers described how during these formal and informal meetings, they would listen to people's concerns about crime and disorder and would thus be able to identify local priorities. At the same time, officers stated that they would also provide updates to residents about police action in their area. How effective these face-to-face meetings were is not known, but they were perceived by participants in the study as valuable to their engagement with citizens who were not on social media, and in particular the elderly population. These ideas were put forward by a police officer as:

> We'd have crime clinics where we might put a table at the approach to Asda (supermarket) or something like that in the doorway and, you know, with a few crime safety sort of leaflets and the PCSOs or maybe a neighbourhood beat officer, you know, to help people, you know, people who don't use social media could come in and say, "oh I've got this issue and" or "I need this advice" and we could just have them face-to-face chats. (Interview 4, police officer)

Conversely, from March 2020 onward, officers described how their face-to-face engagement with citizens was shifting entirely online. The importance of transitioning to entirely online engagement was put forward by one participant as:

> we've had to find different ways of reaching out to the community, just to keep them informed … We always have to adapt, really, as a police force, to meet the needs of the community. (Interview 2, PCSO)

Police participants referred to several online platforms that they utilised to engage with citizens, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Microsoft Team's, Community Alert, Skype, and Slido. Whilst not all participants shared their reasons for using these platforms, those who did stated

that the police had established a presence here, that they permitted the police to have a written message, and that this then allowed them to be in control of what they wrote. These participants also felt unease about communicating in non-written ways using for example the platforms Snap-Chat or Tiktok, and as one participant put it:

> I suppose my point is, even if, let's just say (name anonymised) Police went onto TikTok, me dancing around in my office trying to give them the crime prevention message, I would just be a laughing stock, wouldn't I?" Even if you're on the right platform, if it's not the right people giving the message, it's still not going to land. (Interview 8, police officer)

Similar to the purpose of face-to-face meetings, online and social media platforms were viewed as essential by officers to maintaining the relationship between the police and citizens. For one interviewee, this would 'keep people onboard, so we've found that we've posted a lot more on social media during COVID' (Interview 2, PCSO). In doing this, the police could continue to understand people's concerns about crime and disorder and could provide feedback on police action. In addition, they believed that the police would be able to influence people's perceptions of the police by showing them that officers continued to tackle crime. This change was described by another interviewee as 'we've just sidestepped it and adapted how we work and just let people know that we're still here; we're still doing our job' (Interview 2, PCSO). According to this interviewee, police visibility moved from physical to digital spaces, as they reported:

> I suppose it has been more about maintaining the relationship, but because we've not had our visual presence out on the streets like we'd normally be and engaging, we've used social media to be our visual presence. It's reminding them that we are still here; we are still working; we are still going out and doing drugs warrants and things like that. That's the kind of thing we've used it for. Rather than bringing us closer together, it's to remind them that throughout this, we've not stayed at home; we've done our job as we normally do. Because we've not had as many calls for service, it's given us a chance to be more proactive and follow-up on concerns and things like that. We've let them know that we're working in a different way, but we are still here. (Interview 2, PCSO)

Police participants said that several benefits arose from moving their engagement with citizens completely online. They felt that engaging online was a more efficient use of police time than the face-to-face contact with citizens that existed before the pandemic. On account of engaging via online platforms, officers no longer had to travel to and from different venues, nor did they have to wait and hope for citizens to turn up at the venue. In addition, officers noticed that social media allowed them to widen their engagement with a more diverse audience. According to Interview 13 (police officer):

> Social media has allowed us now to push it out, but it's also pushing it out to a much bigger audience, because at these community committees, coffee mornings etc, there'd always be the same people, and there would always be quite a small number compared to the amount of people you're reaching on social media. (Interview 13, police officer)

Officers also reported uptake from younger people, who otherwise may not have attended community meetings in person before coronavirus. According to officers, younger people would be more likely to share their views online because they are proficient with technology and would feel more comfortable talking to the police online than face-to-face. Interview 2 (PCSO) described these points as:

> Normally, someone of the younger generation wouldn't want to come to a PACT (Police and Communities Together) meeting and sit in (a) room, but they're more than happy to join a meeting online and do it that way or do it via social media. Yes, I think it's the right way forward. I think it's a good thing. It's kind of helped us see that yes, we can do things a different way … I think doing it this way, even though they (young people) know we'll get their email address so we do have some details about them, they know that they can just come in and say … And they might feel more confident because it's not face to face. (Interview 2, PCSO)

Stage two: broadcasting content related to the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants in the study felt that soon after lockdown started in England in March 2020, it was important that the police broadcast coronavirus-related subject matter on social media. They believed at

the time that the police should play an active role in showcasing information about how people should both keep safe (linked to washing hands and social distancing) and adhere to national lockdown rules because of their public service role. According to one interviewee, these messages were aimed at 'getting people to abide by COVID rules' (Interview 23, police officer) as another said:

> When things start to come in, you know, that we have enforcement powers where we could fine people, it was really important that we got those messages out there in a timely fashion and, you know, (we) said, "These are the rules, please stick to them.
>
> (Interview 6, police staff)

The same interviewee also stated:

> When this first all kicked off, and we were using the rainbow graphics[3] which was, "Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives." We got those quite early on and we started pushing those on social media. (Interview 6, police staff)

The need for the police to share coronavirus-related content was reported by another interviewee as:

> I've got a real firm view, a pandemic is a once in a lifetime, hopefully, not to be repeated before I retire, incident, so I think it was all hands to the pump, use any means necessary to get messages out. (Interview 5, police officer)

At the same time, police interviewees reported challenges in relation to broadcasting visual content online during the pandemic. Existing police campaign material had to be updated to fit with social distancing legislation. For instance, they reported occasions whereby images taken both prior and during the pandemic could not be uploaded to social media because the officers in them were not social distancing. This was described as particularly troublesome because of the police role in enforcing social distancing guidelines. As a result, Interview 7 (police staff) contended that 'right now with pictures and videos we're kind of … it tends to be one person, or we just don't put one on'. This interviewee went onto say that 'right now, for me, pictures and videos just aren't worth any hassle or grief, because rightly so, if we're breaching Covid at work, then you shouldn't be doing it'. This view was shared by Interview 2 (PCSO) who said:

> We do just have to always be careful. I mean, I will often get photographs sent to me by officers and I'll have to go back to them and say, "I can't actually use that. It's no good." For example, during the lockdown, I tried to get my officers at different hospitals and care homes on the 'Clap for Carers'[4] on a Thursday evening, and they'd do it, and they'd send me the video, and they wouldn't be social distancing. Little things like that; if we put something on where we're not social distancing, and we're the ones that are advising it, we would be straight on it. We'd just get complaint after complaint after complaint, so that I'd make the decision to not use it. (Interview 2, PCSO)

Another significant challenge cited by police participants in the study related to coronavirus legislation and guidance (outlined in the introduction). They argued that these were ambiguous, open to different interpretations and were being debated across society. This idea was put forward by one police officer who described that it was difficult to retell citizens on social media what was and was not permitted by the state. This according to Interview 26 (police officer) was difficult because of a distinction between coronavirus rules that were law and coronavirus rules that were guidance.

> Erm because the job that I have at work, I have to be all over that like a rash and it's not great legislation either and of course both the politicians and the media and loads of other people are arguing about what the law says, what it doesn't say, what the rules are, and I've come to hate that use of the term 'the rules' because, you know, we know what rules are but of course within that there are rules that are laws and rules that are guidance … and to try and tell people that they can't do things, which the law in fact perfectly will allow, so even if it is contra the guidance, and a bit of me had thought about using social media to do a bit of stuff about that, but I thought well officially at work that's not my role, but then at the same time I haven't seen too many police forces doing too much work. (Interview 26, police officer)

Furthermore, police participants felt that laws linked to what citizens could and could not legally do were constantly changing. Police officers said that changes to legislation often occurred

instantaneously and without prior notice. As a result, they reported that it was difficult to plan police practices that would be required to abide by new legislation. This idea was put forward by one participant as:

> I mean the change is as much a shock to us sometimes when Boris starts talking about them, that we're getting no more, you know, we're not told about what's going to happen at all, so literally we're listening to the news ourselves. (Interview 11, police officer)

This view was shared by a member of police staff who argued that it was difficult to keep pace with changing legislation:

> Yeah, I mean, you can go into stuff and edit, I suppose. But it's just knowing that if it does change. For example, if I was on leave or (name anonymised) was on leave, you know, things change that often that unless you're physically reading the guidance every single day, then you could miss something. (Interview 1, police staff)

As a result of changing coronavirus rules, participants in the study declared that the best solution was to share content on social media produced by the UK Government. In doing so, police participants attempted to convey that the Government was responsible and in control over changes to the state response to the pandemic. At the same time, republishing Government content was associated with being non-partisan and not giving a police angle on coronavirus rules. As a police member of staff put it 'we've just been sharing what the government have been putting out on Public Health England. We're trying to just do that really, as opposed to having a view about anything' (Interview 1, police staff). Police participants also described incidents whereby they had directed users to the UK Government website when asked about current rules. These points were expressed by members of police staff in the study as:

> When COVID came in, we used to get people messaging us saying, "Can I do this, can I do that?" and you'd be like, "Unfortunately, no" or we'd just advertise them on the website and say, "You need to look on Government website about Coronavirus and COVID-19." (Interview 7, police staff)

> we tend to quite heavily signpost because the government have made it clear what, you know, and it changes so often. As soon as we say, "Right, this is the situation," it'll change the next day. I think it is just a case of signposting, really. Knowing what we're doing from guidance around the National Police Chief (inaudible). But I think it is generally just signposting, that tends to be the best way to do it. (Interview 1, police staff)

However, police participants judged coronavirus legislation to have a negative impact both inside the organisation amongst police employees and on their relationship with citizens. Inside the police, they said that officers had to get to grips with ever-changing rules and that they also faced criticism from the public who sometimes disagreed with the law enforcement of coronavirus rules. In turn, Interview 5 (police officer) reported that they had communicated on social media less during the pandemic and they said, 'I've been a bit useless the past couple of weeks on Twitter'. For Interview 16 (police staff) changing coronavirus rules had a negative impact on police morale.

> I think we went through a stage probably a couple of months ago when it was erm really bad morale wise, and the messages were constantly changing from government and everybody was confused and we had to do enforcement and people didn't like it and erm yeah, it was a bit of a tough time a couple of months ago, I'd say. (Interview 16, police staff)

Outside the organisation, police participants believed that coronavirus legislation endangered police-citizen relations. According to Interview 5 (police officer) 'nationally there was that nervousness about what are the police going to, what's the goal, how are they going to enforce it'. As a result, they said that citizens would likely turn against the police if they were seen to impose coronavirus rules online. Again, this vindicated their decision to reshare information created by the UK Government. These beliefs were described by further interviewees as:

> This is not about doing what the police tell you: this is about doing what your country is asking of you, almost. Otherwise, I think, you can get into a position where it's the police saying that you've got to stay two metres

> away from people, and I think some people react badly to that, and want to do anything other than that (Interview 4, police officer)

> I think we just tend to signpost because, again, it is that whole perception of the police as well. We don't want to go out there being like, "Right, you guys have to do this, that and the other," and yeah, we don't want to come across like the bad guys all the time. (Interview 1, police staff)

Stage three: shifting away from COVID-19 pandemic content

Police participants reported that between one week to one month after lockdown in England, they stopped posting about coronavirus on their social media channels. They felt that they were losing the engagement and support of users online, who had either started to criticise police posts or had ceased to engage with police content. According to Interview 16 (police staff) 'there was definitely a lot of Covid fatigue, we found people were just absolutely sick to death of it'. Another interviewee reported that this shift in attitude happened 'I reckon by the 1st (of) April [2020], so after a week of lockdown, they said, "Look, we need to get a grip of it", and that's when they (Corporate Communications) started to direct us' (Interview 5, police officer).

Police participants also reported that negative comments by social media users towards police Covid-19 pandemic messaging had a negative impact on their morale. As a result, police officers and staff in the study reported feeling discouraged from communicating via police social media accounts during the pandemic. This idea was put forward by Interview 16 (police staff) as 'we had a few people (in the police organisation) say they didn't want to erm post anymore erm because it just felt, you know, like I said, morale was rock bottom'. The same interviewee also said:

> We've had a lot of negative comments on all of the police pages, actually, which has not been great for police morale because they've not wanted to put stuff out because everything they put out has been slated erm and obviously we're just trying to do the job given what the government is telling us to do. (Interview 16, police staff)

As a result, participants in the study talked about the need to regain the support of users online. To do this, they felt the police should broadcast less posts that were coronavirus-related. For Interview 16 (police staff) this meant 'So what we've done is eased off the Covid messages and now sort of gone back to its business as usual, you know, we are still there for you'. Others also talked about the need to stop posting social media content that showed police enforcement of coronavirus rules. According to Interview 5 (police Officer) new social media guidance in their police service shifted to partnership working, as they described a change in communication approach as:

> They were after us thanking the public, as opposed to identifying people going against the guidance … It went to all partnership types, "We're working with our partners", as opposed to "reports of groups of youths out and about". (Interview 5, police officer)

The same interviewee further reported:

> (Previously we would have said) "four youths, campfire, barbecue, scarpered off on police arrival. Do you know where your kids are? They're meant to be at home. Stay at home saves lives" blah de blah, blah. And then it went to more partnership and, "This is where you need to get your information", so the trusted source of information type thing. (Interview 5, police officer)

Other interviewees considered the need to abandon coronavirus messaging altogether and to return to what they described as traditional police content on social media that existed prior to the pandemic. This was discussed in terms of posts that conveyed close ties between the police and communities as well as police action against non-coronavirus-related crime. According to police participants these types of posts would show citizens that the police were still carrying out their traditional roles. This idea was expressed by Interview 22 (police officer) as:

> Then it came to enforcement and then it came to erm positive messages again and business as usual. So, it was kind of there was a kind of, at first, there was a kind of message from the centre saying look we don't want you to

> be doing … we don't want you to be publicising this. That's changed very, very quickly and it was very much a kind of case of we've actually realised people wanting to see you doing business as usual and people wanting to see you preventing crime, and erm detecting crime, so in regards to that, other than if I'm, you know, got people in my pictures I have to, you know, place them in certain parts that I'm going to be honest aren't realistic to the way that we're working, but that's just the way that is. (Interview 22, police officer)

In addition, police participants talked about the importance of sharing positive and feel-good news stories involving the police on their social media accounts. They believed that posting uplifting messages online would enhance their relationship with users. Examples included positive engagement with citizens, police involvement in social movements linked to the National Health Service in the UK at the time, and highlighting valuable contributions being made by community members during the pandemic. These were often described in terms of what makes a 'good post' on social media and would for participants in the study invoke positive reactions. According to Interview 22 (police officer) this meant 'we want to be saying positive stuff that the community are doing rather than going down the enforcement route'. For Interview 1 (police staff) police posts that were cheerful and uplifting 'show that we are human' to people outside the organisation. Similarly Interview 2 (PCSO) said police social media content that depicted officers partaking in 'Clap for Carers' had a positive impact on their audience:

> The thing that did change was when we were out doing the 'Clap for Carers', I think they liked that we were there clapping there for them too, so we were showing our thanks to them, and I think that was quite endearing to the public. (Interview 2, PCSO)

Likewise, another interviewee shared an example of a positive encounter between a police officer and a young person that they believed would show the human side of policing:

> I mean some of our posts that went down really well was an officer who had gone to erm sing happy birthday to a young child at the living room window because he wasn't able to have his birthday party and see any of his family and friends. So sometimes it is very much that human side of policing that gets a good response. (Interview 18, police staff)

Discussion and conclusion

This paper adds to a growing body of literature that has examined the role and function of the police during the Covid-19 pandemic. Until this study, little was known about police-citizen engagement via social media from a police perspective. Above all, the research findings demonstrate that considerable importance was placed within the police organisation on maintaining and managing their public relations on social media, at a time when restrictions were changing and altering police practice. Despite operating in different parts of England and utilising different types of police social media accounts (including official, semi-official, and un-official accounts) police officers and staff were found to adjust their social media practices during the pandemic in broadly similar ways. This suggests that the same opportunities and challenges were realised and that their experiences of using social media were comparable. Police officers and staff transitioned between three stages during the first year of the pandemic. Stage one showed that at the beginning of the pandemic, the police shifted their engagement with citizens completely online. In doing so, social media platforms afforded the police in some respects with an opportunity to maintain contact with the communities that they serve. Stage two revealed that the police initially took an active role in sharing content linked to the Covid-19 pandemic because they saw this as emblematic of their public service role that above all aims to protect the public. However, soon after, the police questioned the extent to which they should broadcast pandemic-related content as this was perceived at the time as being detrimental to their relationship with citizens online. The third stage highlighted that the police later refrained from discussing the Covid-19 pandemic and instead used social media to broadcast stories relating to core police activity that was not connected to the pandemic. In each of these stages, the police attempted to uphold positive public relations. Let us finish by reflecting

on these findings in relation to the utility of social media for the police both during the pandemic and more broadly.

On one hand, social media enabled the police to gauge an understanding of public perception, and this was vital to maintaining positive relationships online. Whilst current research suggests that citizens in the UK are supportive of their local police communicating on social media (Cartwright and Shaw 2020) and that police services primarily used social media during the pandemic to push information to their online audience (Nikolovska *et al.* 2020), the degree to which this was shaped by users online should not be overlooked. This finding adds to a growing body of research that shows the police attempt to secure legitimacy amongst citizens over time on both social media (Ralph 2021) and in physical spaces (Bonner and Dammert 2021). The research showed that police officers and staff actively paid attention to how their messaging was received by users. After internalising these judgements, they then adjusted their communication practices, although this change in practice was at times directed by Corporate Communications. This resulted in an about-turn from divulging information relating to the pandemic at the beginning to later reducing the number of these posts or stopping commenting about the pandemic altogether. Consequently, the police were found to both listen and act upon users' responses to police content and as a result citizens played a key part in influencing police communication on social media during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the police played a limited role in relation to broadcasting content about the Covid-19 pandemic on social media. This contradicts existing research that suggests that the police had a key part in relation to divulging Covid-19 pandemic information linked to disease prevention and current risks (Luong *et al.* 2020). Instead, officers and staff reported that in the end they either commented sparingly about the pandemic or in the main shared government content. Whilst additional research has also found that it was common practice for the police to re-post information created by other agencies and by the government during the pandemic (see Nikolovska *et al.* 2020, Hu *et al.* 2022), the reasons for this were about shifting responsibility away from the police. Above all, the police sought to let citizens know that coronavirus guidance and rules were out of their remit. Building on existing research that has shown upholding citizens' trust in the police during the pandemic was crucial to securing compliance (Jennings and Perez 2020, Laufs and Waseem 2020), the current study demonstrates that police officers and staff sought to carefully manage this online. Rather than being an executive arm of the state online, the police instead wanted to be at arms-length from pandemic-related content. Like Hu *et al.* (2022) who found that the police used social media in the US to both humanise its officers and to show appreciation to citizens, the current study also revealed that the police sought to share feel-good news stories. Again, this signified police attempts to maintain their relationship with citizens.

This in turn raises questions over the utility of social media for the police. Existing literature has suggested that social media enables the police to deliver instrumental goals, such as warning and informing citizens (Procter *et al.* 2013) as well as securing compliance (Lee and McGovern 2013a), although user engagement with these posts has also been found to vary according to the nature of the post and the multimedia used (Jeanis *et al.* 2021). Further research illustrates that image management serves another important function for the police on social media and connects to police attempts to strengthen their relationship with citizens online (Lee and McGovern 2013b, Dai *et al.* 2017, Bullock 2018, Walsh and O'Connor 2019, O'Connor and Zaidi 2021). Examples of image management, include the police depicting their officers on social media as crime-fighting or as community centred (Hu *et al.* 2018). Yet, the current study shows that promoting the reputation of the police by way of advertising feel-good stories is given greater importance on social media within the organisation. Police officers and staff ultimately distanced themselves online from subject matter that was identified within the organisation as contentious and out of their control, and irrespective of its instrumental links to the delivery of policing and keeping people safe. Despite initially being a courier of public health messaging, the police soon after returned to commentating about traditional police subject matter that was not associated with the pandemic. This shift in approach was seen within the police organisation as safeguarding their reputation in the public eye. In this

respect, the study illustrates that the police are somewhat constricted by their relationship with citizens online and this prevents them from discussing something that may invoke a negative response.

However, it is important to recognise that this paper is based on interviews with police officers and staff that were carried out during the pandemic between August 2020 and January 2021. This, therefore, does not tell us if and how the police adjusted their approach on social media beyond the third stage identified in this paper and after January 2021 when data collection stopped. Whilst, this study did not analyse police social media posts, research by Nikolovska *et al.* (2020) and Hu *et al.* (2022) also confirm that the police largely shared information online during the pandemic that was created by other organisations, and in particular the government. Conducting future research with police officers and staff and on social media by examining police social media posts will further demonstrate if and how the police prioritise safeguarding their relationship with citizens online above communicating contentious subject matter that may bring them into disrepute with their audience.

Notes

1. Police Community Support Officers operate across England and Wales with limited powers and their role is primarily linked to being visible within communities (see O'Neill 2019).
2. 'Coffee with a copper' (also sometimes referred to as 'cuppa with a copper') initiatives involve police officers meeting residents to informally gather people's views about issues affecting their community in an informal setting that also provides hot drinks.
3. Rainbows were displayed in the UK as a symbol of support for the National Health Service (see Knipe *et al.* 2020).
4. 'Clap for carers' was a social movement in the UK that occurred every Thursday at 8pm for 10 weeks during the first national lockdown and involved people applauding the role of carers during the pandemic (see Wood and Skeggs 2020).

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Appendix

Appendix. Semi-structured interview schedule

Background

(1) Can you describe your role in the police?
(2) Why did you join the police?
(3) What do you think the function of the police is?

Police use of social media

(4) What are your aims and objectives of using social media?
(5) Can you tell me a time when a social media post(s)/campaign could be described as successful?
(6) How would you say that you use social media?

Police visual content

(7) What are some of the visual ways that the police use social media?
(8) What is the purpose of images/videos/emojis/gifs?
(9) What is the process involved in using images/videos/emojis/gifs?

Internal practices

(10) Who uses social media in your organisation?

External engagement with citizens

(11) Can you tell me a bit about the relationship between the police and citizens in your area?
(12) What do citizens think about the police?
(13) Can you tell me about how your users respond to police use of social media?