

“Is It Like in *Thin Blue Line*?”: A Case Study on Swedish Police Students’ Perceptions of Swedish Police Social Media Communication

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how police students perceive police social media communication in relation to their future roles as police officers. In today’s digital society, social media has become an essential communication tool for police authorities. These platforms enable them to engage with the public, share information about their activities, build trust, and promote public safety. This study is a small-scale case study, gathering empirical material from five semi-structured interviews and 15 written survey responses from police students. The findings of this small-scale case study demonstrate that while students acknowledge the importance of police presence on social media, they express concerns about the lack of formal training in this area. Many students feel unprepared to navigate the complexities of social media communication, particularly in relation to fostering public trust and safety. The article highlights the need to integrate social media communication skills into police training to ensure that future officers are equipped to effectively engage in digital spaces to foster public safety and security.

Keywords

police students, social media communication, Swedish police, police education

1. Introduction

In today’s mediatised society, social media are a natural part of our work and everyday lives. Most people today use different social media platforms for information and communication.

This shapes individuals’ and organisations’ behaviour socially and culturally in how we perceive and understand our surroundings. The pervasive connectivity enabled by these platforms affects us in the intertwinements of the digital and non-digital space, as noted by van Dijck (2013). Social media have become a prevalent method for public authorities to disseminate information and with the hope to increase engagement with the public

(see, e.g., Olsson & Eriksson, 2016; Rasmussen, 2021), drawing upon the communication strategies employed by private-sector entities (Cassinger, 2021; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020) by following social media trends (Schneider, 2021). However, in the public sector, and especially for authorities, there seems to be a lack of strategic communicative approaches that emphasise interaction and participation on social media with the surrounding community (de Graaf & Meijer, 2019; Lovari & Valentini, 2020). This can create a discrepancy for authorities between being digitally present and maintaining the core functions they are obligated to perform with the public (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). Ivarsson (2021) adds that the way public authorities, in Sweden, communicate with the surrounding society is based on the organisation's values, roles, and social obligations. These aspects are reflected in how authorities, such as the Swedish Police Authority (henceforth the Swedish police), use and combine social media to serve their goals in reaching the public, as Olsson and Eriksson (2016) demonstrate in their study of the logic behind public organisations' social media use. Here, police authorities in the Western world stand out. Such social media use without a strategy increases polarisation and the perception of what police authorities do and what it means for the public and the police themselves (e.g., Ralph et al., 2022; Walby & Wilkinson, 2021). Despite all the obligations and responsibilities that police authorities have in society, in the United Kingdom they encounter obstacles to effective communication with the public via social media due to a lack of social media training among police officers (Bullock et al., 2021, p. 383). This, in turn, ties in with the issue Christensen and Christensen (2022) raised regarding organisational communication and the communicative dimensions of *why*, *what*, *how*, *by whom*, and *for whom* to communicate (namely, the public and themselves). This standpoint thus showcases that communication is viewed as a secondary duty since organisations like the Swedish police do not see the full strategic value in it, thus affecting present and future police officers. Furthermore, given the authority's position in society, police use of social media communication is not without problems, and can for example lead to an imbalance in the shaping of the police's message. This issue is further reinforced by how police officers' different communication methods on social media influence and shape the way they communicate based on, for instance, social media trends (Schneider, 2021), which challenges the role of the police and how they behave digitally. This makes clear the necessity of social media training for police officers.

On this note, there is a notable gap in research at the intersection of police education and social media – specifically, on how police students can be trained in effective use of social media as a tool to communicate with the public. This study seeks to provide insight and knowledge to address this gap. Much of the research on police education and training focuses on practical subjects such as physical fitness and use of force (Henze et al., 2024), conflict management training (Emsing et al., 2020), and driving training (Ingrell et al., 2022). Furthermore, Swedish police students are not currently trained to communicate about police work on social media. Previous research indicates that an active presence and communicative competence on digital platforms can strengthen community engagement (e.g. Bullock et al., 2021; de Graaf & Meijer, 2019), police legitimacy (e.g. Ralph, 2022; Rønn, 2023), and accessibility and presence (e.g. Sjöberg et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2018). The question of training in how to communicate with the public on social media thus becomes central to the profession's advancement. This underlines the challenge for the Swedish police and future police officers to keep up with the increased digitalisation of society, as currently there is little or no training on social media communication in Swedish police training. We see this as problematic, as police officers, once graduated, are

expected to be active and strategic actors in digital environments – particularly on social media – in order to build trust, promote safety, and communicate effectively with the public (Polisen, 2023). All of this showcases the discrepancies between the police authority, police education, and the role of social media in society today, manifesting the lack of research concerning police students and social media in their future roles as police officers. This study therefore aims to explore and understand how police students perceive police social media communication in relation to their future roles as police officers. To examine this, we pose the following research question: *How do Swedish police students perceive social media use in their present police education and as future police officers?*

1.1 The case of the Swedish police

In this study, we focus on the Swedish police, which over the past decade has become increasingly active on social media for public outreach, public relations, and trust-building strategies, as well as for the dissemination of information on crime prevention and crime investigation and the fostering of a sense of public safety. This is based on the police's role in Sweden, which is to prevent and solve crimes and to contribute to public order and safety. Ivarsson Westerberg (2020) suggests that due to the latest police reform in Sweden, the Swedish police has faced many challenges (both politically and organisationally) when trying to be where the public is. This has resulted in the use of different social media platforms in the authority's efforts to inform and engage with the public – a consequence of the 2024 police strategy policy, which includes a statement saying that the police should be close to citizens in digital and physical arenas (Polisen, 2023). It is also a result of the objectives in the Police Act (SFS 1984:387) to prevent crime, solve crimes, and create or maintain a sense of public safety (see Sjöberg, Berglez & Gambarato, 2023; Sjöberg, Cassinger & Gambarato, 2024, for more on this concept). All of these tasks can be challenging in the non-digital and digital space. To illustrate this point, we turn our attention to Norway, where online police patrols have been active since 2015 – this has not been the case in Sweden. The Norwegian police's mission is to prevent and investigate both online and offline criminal activity and contribute to building public trust in the police. The underlying assumption is that when the police are perceived as accessible and approachable – both in person and online – it positively influences public trust in the police (Rønn, 2023).

Digital developments would suggest that the Swedish police is falling behind if we are to consider the social media platforms the authority currently uses. If the authority only uses Facebook, Instagram, or X, but not TikTok or Snapchat, it risks appearing outdated and becoming invisible to younger people (Alvén Sjöberg, 2025). This is especially worrying since media use influences all levels of a public organisation's internal and external operations (see Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020). For the police, this includes future police officers' use of social media. This is intricately intertwined with the evolution of the police's utilisation of social media, a subject that has repeatedly been depicted in popular culture. It has, for example, been highlighted in the Swedish TV series *Tunna blå linjen* (*Thin Blue Line*), which has further accelerated the discussion about the Swedish police's affection for and use of social media in the profession, albeit without any clear strategies.

1.2 Outline

This article first focuses on police authorities' use of media and social media both in Sweden and internationally, and how they shape their professional identities. The material and methods are then presented, followed by the study's results. We then conclude the

article with a discussion section where we also present implications, limitations, and suggestions for future studies.

2. Police authorities' use of social media

The use of media plays a pivotal role in the public sector today (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020). This has shaped public authorities' professional identities, through, for example, the ways the media has delved into and highlighted the meaning and nuances of the police in its reporting and media coverage of police-related events or activities, both in the Swedish context (e.g., Bjellert & Palm, 2012; Palm & Skogersson, 2008) and internationally (e.g., Graziano, 2019). Like other public organisations, the police use different media platforms, such as journalistic platforms, press conferences, and social media, to keep society informed, and this is a consequence of the public's interest in the profession (Enbom et al., 2016). In this way, social media has become a communication tool through which public organisations inform and interact with the public (see, e.g., Lovari & Valentini, 2020). Social media and its impact have changed how the police communicate with the public. This is because social media allows organisations and their members to become both producers and distributors of information. In this way, using social media has become a way for these organisations to take control of their own communication. Therefore, police authorities worldwide use social media to inform and shape their professional identity and image, which is what we will focus on next.

2.1 The role of police social media in shaping professional identity

In recent years, police authorities have transformed how the public engages with them (Bergquist et al., 2015). Wood (2020) states that social media allows the police to narrate what they want to show about their profession, for example by posting content about police dogs. In this way, police social media communication becomes a form of image work that involves sharing or highlighting different aspects of police authorities and their members (e.g., Andersson et al., 2024; Walby & Wilkinson, 2021). These platforms provide an avenue for the police on both an organisational and an individual level to establish a more direct presence in the digital space, with the aim to create law and order in society. One example is how, under the influence of the private sector, police authorities add humour or personal content to social media communication to make it more human (Bullock, 2018; Rasmussen, 2021), for instance by following social media trends (Schneider, 2021). However, even if this aims to break down the bureaucratic mindset the public perceives the police to have by showing the human side of the work (Andersson et al., 2024; Rasmussen, 2021), police social media is still argued to be a form of bureaucratic propaganda (Schneider, 2021) in which the police narrate the content to uphold the myth of the police (Walby & Wilkinson, 2021). On this note, police social media involves both affordances and constraints when used to build engagement with the public (Bullock et al., 2021). In this way, police officers must be aware of the affordances and constraints of social media by not only focusing on information-sharing but instead using it to communicate and interact in order to create further relationships with the public (digitally and non-digitally). Police social media is also perceived as having unclear purposes (Sjöberg et al., 2024), which could be a consequence of a lack of media and communication training (Sjöberg et al., 2023, p. 53). This leads to problems and consequences for police officers, as evidenced by how, for example, they deal with criticism or posts from the public on social media, where police officers choose to ignore this type

of communication for fear of making mistakes. This issue has been highlighted by the research of Kudla and Parnaby (2018), and Ralph et al. (2022), on police social media communication.

Research conducted by scholars de Graaf and Meijer (2019), Walsh and O'Connor (2019), and Williams et al. (2018) furthermore attests to the potential benefits for police authorities' image when using social media to focus on the community level. In the context of Swedish police social media communication, it is imperative that such communication is integrated into the operational work of the police. Therefore, it is essential that police employees receive training on how to communicate strategically for the sake of the public and not for the purpose of improving their organisation's image. This notion of upholding the police's image occurs both when officers communicate on personal and non-personal dimensions, as demonstrated by Andersson et al. (2024).

It has become evident that there is a need for a more comprehensive exploration of the intricacies and impact of police social media communication. Therefore, it is imperative for police authorities to develop and implement effective social media communication strategies that not only increase their visibility but also foster trust and safety, ultimately benefiting society. In regard to the importance and rapid emergence of social media use in the police, we explore police students' perceptions of it, which to our knowledge has not been studied before. Police students are trained to be able to enter a complex profession in which they are expected to interact with the public in both digital and physical arenas. However, an introduction to and training in social media use is not currently part of Swedish police education.

3. Materials and methodology

This is a small-scale case study, and therefore we use a qualitative case study design, focusing on police students' perspectives on their future roles as police officers and their understanding of social media and how to shape public safety communication. A case-study research design was chosen because of its emphasis on discovery and in-depth exploration of specific phenomena, such as organisations or events (Tracy, 2020, pp. 61–62). Further, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that impactful social science research is problem-driven rather than methodology-driven. This argument makes the small-scale case study approach particularly suitable for this research to explore and understand how police students perceive police social media communication in relation to their future roles as police officers. Also, the topics of police education and how police students can be trained to use social media as a communication tool with the public have received little research attention. The empirical material consists of five semi-structured interviews and 15 written survey responses, all collected from police students at one of the police education programmes in Sweden.

3.1 Study context – Swedish police education

Police education in Sweden is offered at five universities and colleges. The Swedish police education programme lasts two years, followed by a six-month probationary training period in the Swedish police. The universities and colleges are responsible for carrying out police education, which includes police work and the police's mission, regulations, and methods (see Polisen, 2024). The curriculum includes police tactics, forensic methodologies, and community engagement techniques such as crime prevention activities. It also includes subjects such as law, criminology, healthcare science, behavioural

science, social work, and political science. Students who complete the Swedish police education programme receive a degree certificate referred to as a police degree, which makes them eligible to apply for permanent employment as a police officer (Polisen, 2024).

3.2 Data collection

The empirical material was collected via digital semi-structured interviews and a digital survey. The interviews were inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann's (2014) work on semi-structured interviews, which mix open questions from a question guide with follow-up questions based on the respondent's answers. In the interviews, questions were asked concerning police social media communication and digital media in connection to police work, creating or maintaining trust and public safety, and using social media in their future role as police officers. This was to understand how police students perceive police social media communication in relation to their future role as police officers. This study consisted of three individual interviews and one group interview with two participants. Three of the interview participants were police students at one of the police education programmes in Sweden (semesters 1, 2, and 4), and two were graduated police officers pursuing further education at the same university. Two of the participants were women and three were men. All interviews were conducted in Swedish via Zoom between November 2020 and April 2021.

In addition to the interviews, a qualitative digital survey was also conducted. The survey was open during 2022 to all police students currently enrolled in one of the police education programmes in Sweden. A total of 84 students from all four semesters participated in the survey. The survey used a Likert scale and focused on police students' attitudes towards the police's way of creating or maintaining a sense of public safety through social media. The survey included questions on, for example, social media communication, crime prevention, safety and trust, and police education. It consisted of 21 questions and one open-ended written question at the end. In this article we have extracted and solely used the qualitative material from the survey, as this study was only focused on qualitative elements. This means that we used the individual written responses (15 in total) from the survey to gain a deeper understanding of how Swedish police students perceive the use of social media in their future roles as police officers. Finally, in this article, the interview respondents (IR) are referred to as IR1–5 and the survey respondents (SR) as SR1–15 when quoted.

3.3 Analysis process

The interviews were recorded and summarised in detailed written text, and the written answers from the survey were combined into one text. We analysed the empirical material using a qualitative content analysis method, as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The analysis focused on both manifest and latent content of the text, meaning the visible and observable components of the text as well as the underlying meanings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The analysis was conducted in three steps. The first step was inductive and explorative. Both authors listened to the interviews and read the written texts carefully to achieve a joint overall understanding of the content. The second step was deductive, guided by keywords derived from the interview guide. Examples of these keywords include social media, police students' perceptions, the profession's future role, and public safety. In this step, we specifically searched for meaning units in the material that were related to the

keywords. This means that units were then abstracted into codes, and similar codes were sorted into subcategories. In the third step, the categories and subcategories were discussed between the authors and adjusted until a consensus was reached. The analysis resulted in four categories (see Table 1) to understand how Swedish police students perceive the profession and police social media communication in their future roles as police officers.

3.4 Ethical considerations

All the respondents received verbal and written information about the study. Those who participated in the interviews gave their consent verbally and, in this way, also agreed to have the interviews recorded. For the survey, participants consented to participate by agreeing to the informed consent form at the beginning of the survey and then choosing to complete the survey. Furthermore, in this study, only material relevant to the research was collected, ensuring that no personal or sensitive information was collected during the interviews, thus maintaining the confidentiality of the participants in accordance with the Swedish Research Council’s (Vetenskapsrådet guidelines (2024)). In this case, by adhering to the Swedish Research Council’s guidelines, we meet the ethical requirements for conducting a small-scale qualitative case study without the need for formal ethical approval, in accordance with the directions of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (n.d.). Markham (2018) states that this is one way of taking ethical responsibility for the collected material that goes beyond a checklist mindset.

4. Findings

This article presents four categories that were identified through the process of interpretation and analysis; see Table 1.

Table 1. Categories identified in the analysis

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
Imagining the future police officer’s role on social media	The use of police social media as private persons and future police officers	Making sense of how the police use social media	Shaping public safety communication

4.1 Imagining the future police officer’s role on social media

The police students expressed diverse perspectives on their future roles as police officers engaging in social media. There was a strong consensus among the students that the Swedish police must be active on social platforms, emphasising that social media are essential for maintaining public communication and engagement. One student stated: “It would be extremely strange if the police were not on social media. It’s not possible. That’s how we communicate” (IR3). The student implied that since most people are active on social media, it is a significant part of everyday life, a sentiment echoed by The Swedish Internet Foundation (2024). This means that the police also should be present where citizens are – in digital and non-digital spaces.

The students recognised the dual necessity of responsibility and professionalism in online interactions, stressing that a police presence on social media should be as accountable as in any other setting. Some students highlighted social media as a tool

to humanise the police, helping citizens see “the person behind the uniform”, which can challenge impersonal or robotic perceptions of law enforcement (e.g., Bullock, 2018; Rasmussen, 2021). On the one hand, it brings the police closer to the public, which connects to the second task in the Swedish police strategy 2024, “strong local presence” (Polisen, 2023, pp. 23–24). On the other hand, police social media can also reinforce the power dimensions of the police in society. This standpoint corresponds to Kudla and Parnaby’s (2018) and Ralph et al.’s (2022) studies, which found that the Canadian and English police hesitated to listen or interact with the public online so as to uphold a facade and maintain control through their social media presences. However, this resulted in increased public mistrust, which also leads to problematic ways of building relationships between the police and the public. In this case, police officers’ use of social media becomes a form of organisational propaganda (see Schneider, 2021). IR2 states that “Much of the police’s daily work can be shared ... and [since] many people use social media today, it is a good platform for providing information if something happens.”

Still, there were voices advocating for a balance, noting that an online presence should not overshadow the police’s visibility in physical spaces. Many students believed that in-person presence on the streets remains essential to building public trust and offering a more personal connection. This chimes with Schaap’s (2021, pp. 316–317) argument that community policing and local presence are part of the police’s trust-building work. Furthermore, concerns were raised about the potential pitfalls of using the police’s identity for popularity or influence. Since social media can be a powerful tool for the police, IR4 states, “If the police are going to be on social media, the authority needs to take responsibility for it and not put it on an individual level.” Some students emphasised that social media engagement by police officers also must serve the purpose of upholding their role as a steady authority in society – a counterbalance to the rapid pace of modern digital life and a reminder of the police’s long-term commitment to public service.

4.2 The use of police social media as private persons and future police officers

The police students expressed a notable gap in their education regarding social media usage, voicing a desire for more guidance on this topic as part of their education. Many anticipated clear directives from the start but found that the subject was scarcely addressed, leaving students to navigate the nuances of social media presence on their own. IR4 reflected on the lack of advice and guidelines regarding students’ own social media use:

I’m surprised. I thought there would be much more talk about it. On the first day, I thought they would already have said “This is how you should behave [on social media].” But no one has said it. It’s up to each individual how to do it.

This lack of formal instruction led students to adopt various approaches, with some opting for a low profile online while others documented their journey through the police training programme. IR5 posited that “There isn’t really room during these four semesters to talk about the police or police students’ social media presence, but I think it’s necessary. A lesson in communication and social media would have been beneficial.” There was an underlying apprehension about social media missteps, as students worried about making mistakes that could impact their careers. Many felt that lessons dedicated to social media communication and best practices would not only help avoid potential errors but also

empower them to use these platforms responsibly as future police officers. Thus, this issue is not exclusive to police training but pertains to the whole police authority, where there is a dearth of training on both private and official social media. SR12 added:

I think the authority should have more guidelines for how individual police officers should act on (private) social media in uniform and so on. Today, it feels like some are almost “mocking” the uniform by making fun of the trust and confidence that people have in the police.

This indicates that the organisation significantly relies on policy documents and on employees assuming personal responsibility for the matter, which, though commendable, also presents certain challenges (Andersson et al., 2024, p. 305). This difficulty can be viewed as an outcome of the mediatisation that is occurring within the public sector (see Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020).

4.3 Making sense of how the police use social media

This category looks at how the respondents made sense of how the Swedish police use social media to communicate about their profession and organisation from the perspective of their future roles as police officers. The respondents stated that police social media is about being present in the digital context, where they can decide what to share and communicate, and when.

The police’s social media accounts become a channel for the police to communicate their crime prevention work directly. It serves as a counterbalance to traditional media, which more or less reports on police work when something has actually happened. For various reasons, the media influences citizens’ perception of the police and police work. (IR2)

The quote underlines the notion that police use of social media is about sharing information and showcasing what the police do in the community. In this context, social media plays an instrumental role in shaping the public perception of the police authority, especially at the local level. The respondents added that this creates a larger awareness of what they can expect to be doing when working as police officers. Social media, from this standpoint, allows the police to extend their presence in the digital and non-digital space (e.g., Sjöberg et al., 2023). Some police students also posited that social media differs from other media platforms in that it presents the public with the opportunity to leave comments or pose questions directly to the police. This feature is not available on other media platforms. In relation to this, some respondents saw the connection between police use of social media and the TV series *Thin Blue Line*, as the show shapes perceptions of the police’s work and social media use. The TV series helped spread the image of the police in digital contexts and created an interest in the subject: “*Thin Blue Line* was something new and very interesting. I’ve received an incredible number of comments from people around me, asking, ‘Is it like in *Thin Blue Line*?’” (IR4).

Moreover, for some respondents, the connection to *Thin Blue Line* served to illustrate the manner in which police officers are expected to conduct themselves. This indicates that police students’ perceptions of police social media are influenced both by the actual practices of official and unofficial police social media accounts and by fictional media content, such as the *Thin Blue Line* narrative. Police social media communication is then

primarily driven by individual interests rather than aligned with broader educational and authority objectives. This was also the case for how the police areas decided to use social media to establish police legitimacy in both digital and non-digital spaces (see Ralph, 2022), which some respondents stated differs within the police and in comparison to how other authorities use social media. Thereby, present and future police officers' social media understanding correlates to seeing police social media as a way to inform politicians, their followers, other employees, and the public about what they want them to share and take action on, such as, crime prevention, relationship-building activities, and establishing or maintaining social order and public safety. This means that the way the police use social media is a symptom of how other organisations largely use social media, which involves negative dimensions that put aside the authority's responsibilities and can thus be harmful to the public (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). One reason for this is that not all police employees are expected to communicate on social media, as this depends on their specific work tasks and their willingness to engage with the public.

Nonetheless, police students' understanding of police social media thus reflects how they understand the world today and the tasks that police officers must carry out, and that communicating with the community is part of their work. In this case, the Swedish police do not engage with the platforms TikTok or Snapchat, even though the majority of the Swedish population uses various social media platforms (see The Swedish Internet Foundation, 2024).

4.4 Shaping public safety communication

The last category focuses on shaping public safety communication through social media from the perspective of police students. The respondents stated that police education is a very dense programme, where a variety of other subjects are studied. Therefore, police education can be described as being shaped like a funnel, starting broadly and touching on the police's safety work only a little in the beginning. When it comes to fostering a sense of public safety, the police students felt as though they were expected to know the concept of creating a sense of safety for the public already or to learn on their own along the way: "I agree that there have been very limited discussions about it (creating a sense of safety), so it's something we're expected to just pick up along the way" (IR1). Another student expressed that enabling safety for the public is the police's most important task: "That is what we're working towards all the time. It is the entire purpose of the police, to make the citizens feel safe" (IR4). The students also added that there is a difference between personal and public safety, with public safety being about external threats, which are addressed theoretically and in a clear manner during the police training. Other than that, the students talked about visibility and how, both on social media and in real life, it can support the police in fostering a sense of safety for the public and also increase trust in the police.

SR7 stated that even if "(...) social media is a way to 'advertise' and reach out widely, it can't replace personal presence. Likes and comments on social media don't mean anything for someone who needs or will need help and safety". This means that communication aimed at creating or maintaining a sense of public safety, especially via social media, is not practised to a great extent within police education, according to the respondents. The respondents summarised this by stating that as future police officers, they should simply know what public safety is and how to work towards creating it. There seems to be an understanding that some form of cultivation occurs once one becomes a police officer. Several respondents stated that trust was discussed to some extent during police education.

Still, it was not actively talked about within the police, such as how the police can work to be trustworthy. IR3, who was also working as a police officer and pursuing further education within policing, expressed that this was not something that was addressed in the daily work. IR1 also adds that it is crucial for the police not only to communicate public safety on social media but also show how they do it.

SR8 added: “I believe that just as much as the police need to be visible on social media, they also need to be out and visible on the streets to create a sense of safety”. Other students also recognised the necessity of a dual approach to police presence, encompassing both digital and non-digital strategies, to effectively address police work, to create police legitimacy (see, e.g., Ralph, 2022), and create a sense of public safety (see, e.g., Sjöberg et al., 2023). However, this means that as long as the police are visible and transparent, it will increase a sense of public safety, which makes the students’ view on the subject a bit naive. Therefore, future police officers need to be aware of public demands and community issues. This is to develop effective public authority communication on public safety (Ho & Cho, 2017), using digital and non-digital strategies, guided by long-term planning and public engagement to foster safety.

5. Concluding discussion

As stated in the introduction by Bullock et al. (2021, p. 385), police officers lack training in social media communication. In this case, Swedish police students receive little to no training in media communication during their education. From our perspective, this is problematic, as – with approximately 280 social media accounts – the Swedish police are highly active online and are simultaneously expected to maintain close contact with citizens both digitally and in person (Polisen, 2023). This highlights the crucial role that social media plays in the Swedish police’s communication strategy.

Without specific training in social media use, future police officers may struggle to effectively engage with citizens and establish further relationships with their local communities in both digital and non-digital spaces, where today’s public discourse takes place. This standpoint relates to the role of the police, meaning that the authority must be communicative and therefore needs to align its communicative practices with societal and technological developments that are occurring today. Therefore, in this article we examined the question of how Swedish police students perceive social media use in their present police education and as future police officers. The analysis identified four categories concerning how police students perceive the use of social media: “Imagining the future police officer’s role on social media”, “The use of police social media as private persons and future police officers”, “Making sense of how the police use social media”, and “Shaping public safety communication”. Based on these categories, we will discuss the central findings below.

The first finding illustrates police students’ understanding of social media engagement as a police officer to maintain their role as a trusted authority in society. This serves to counterbalance the accelerated pace of today’s digital life (also see van Dijck, 2013, on connectivity) and reinforces the police’s long-term commitment to public service. A second finding, which derives from the second category, concerns the lack of social media communication training in police education. The findings here indicate that the implementation of lessons dedicated to social media communication and best practices would not only assist in the avoidance of potential errors but also facilitate the development of responsible usage of these platforms among future police officers.

The lack of social media training for police students manifests that not everything about social media is positive. This is because the way public authorities and their representatives use social media, and the purpose for which they do so, also involves negative effects that can harm the public (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). For instance, when the police use social media without considering the content and purpose, police social media can lead to misunderstandings that, in the worst cases, can cause insecurity and fear among the public. Another aspect of the lack of social media training is consistent with Andersson et al.'s (2024) research on the Swedish police's use of social media, where police officers, for example, express organisational, professional, or personal views of the police via official police social media accounts. This raises the question of the role of public authorities on social media, what actions they should take there, and what platforms they should use.

This study reveals that police students perceive social media as a tool that extends police presence into both digital and non-digital spaces and this aligns with, for instance, Sjöberg et al. (2023), Rønn (2023), and Williams et al. (2018). These studies show that reaching out or informing the community about ongoing events is a common activity that the police engage in by using social media. On this note, we also observed that the police's official and unofficial social media accounts, as well as the TV series *Thin Blue Line*, influence police students' perceptions of police social media on different platforms. However, because the Swedish police are active on specific social media platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram, they are also not reaching or engaging with younger citizens who use TikTok and Snapchat in their digital environments (Alvén Sjöberg, 2025). However, this standpoint highlights the problem that the Swedish police do not have a clear strategy for using social media that aligns with the times. The absence of appropriate social media strategies (see de Graaf & Meijer, 2019) can potentially result in the perception of police social media content as mere organisational propaganda (see Schneider, 2021). These findings are consistent with previous research, which indicates that police adherence to specific platforms (mostly using Facebook, Instagram, and X) is indicative of broader changes in policing. These changes are prolonged and gradual in nature. On this notion, the police (not only Swedish police) should be trained in communicating with the public digitally on social media platforms during their education and afterwards. Combining social media with non-digital policing can improve public engagement with the police, which is crucial for the police to function effectively. However, as posited by Bullock et al. (2021), making this a valuable aspect of policing still depends on police officers' affordances (and constraints) when using social media as a bidirectional asset. Therefore, police students must be trained in the use of social media, as operational and communicative policing requires greater interaction in order to meet the organisational and societal challenges of our time.

The findings also demonstrate that social media serves not only as a platform for promoting police work but also as a means of reaching a vast audience through enhanced visibility, which can foster trust and a sense of public safety. Nevertheless, it appears that police students lack adequate training in creating or maintaining a sense of public safety as well as in the effective communication of this concept to the public (Ho & Cho, 2017) via social media (see Sjöberg et al., 2024). This is because social media communication training is very scarce, and public safety training is also limited within police education, which means that police students have needed to take a very high level of responsibility and an interest of their own in order to learn these elements beyond the training programme. In the end, this study argues that if future police officers do not know how to navigate social media, the authority risks missing opportunities to

counter misinformation, quickly address public concerns in digital or non-digital spaces, and improve public safety and security. By equipping police students with enhanced social media communication skills, the police can better adapt to the new expectations of policing in the digital age. Therefore, as shown in this article, there is a need to include social media knowledge and communication in police education.

5.1 Methodological considerations

The age of the data represents a methodological limitation, as certain conditions have likely evolved since its collection. Nonetheless, the data still provides valuable insights into a topic that has yet to be incorporated into educational curricula.

The use of digital interviews conducted via Zoom may have influenced the dynamics of the conversations, such as reducing the ability to capture non-verbal cues. Similarly, employing a digital survey might have constrained the richness of responses compared to more interactive data collection methods. However, given the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools were the only viable option for empirical data collection at the time. Therefore, several strategies were implemented to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Both authors conducted and cross-checked the analysis, which increased its dependability. Also, key findings were illustrated with representative quotes, ensuring transparency in linking the empirical material to the interpretations and facilitating the reader's ability to judge the credibility of the findings (Graneheim et al., 2017). To conclude, although certain limitations are acknowledged, this study has upheld a rigorous approach to ensure its findings are both trustworthy and methodologically sound.

5.2 Future research

Given the limited research on this topic and the relationship between social media use, police students, and police training, we suggest that future research should prioritise qualitative and quantitative perspectives: (1) to include participants from other police training programmes in Sweden and internationally in order to gain a broader picture of the phenomenon; (2) to understand the emerging role of social media and the police profession in society based on long-term perceptions; and (3) the effects of digital transformation on Swedish police training to prepare police students to also be active and communicative in social media in order to prevent crime and promote a sense of public safety.

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