



Social Media Analysis

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The Problem

Online harassment and abuse on social media can affect anyone. However, certain occupations may be more likely to draw negative attention from social media users. Limited research has explored the nature of harm directed at police officers and staff, with the only study exploring the experiences of senior female officers.

The Current Study

The aim of the social media analysis was to explore the nature of harmful content posted to social media aimed at police officers and staff. A range of social media platforms and content were explored, including Facebook group posts, YouTube videos and comments, and TikTok content and comments. A total of 85 harmful social media posts/comments were found during the data collection period, and these were thematically analysed.

The Findings

The thematic analysis revealed four distinct themes: 'Reputation Damage', 'Personal Attack', 'Abusive Protest', and 'Identification'. In addition, seven subthemes were also identified. An overview of themes and subthemes are presented on the following page.

Recommendations

The nature of online abuse towards officers and staff is diverse, meaning the force response to protect their officers and staff should be too. Policy should seek to offer bespoke support for the various forms of harm. For example, those who have experienced reputation damage (when malicious and not truthful) may need support and reassurance from their professional standards department to acknowledge the malicious nature of the complaints. On the other hand, individuals who have experienced personal attack may benefit from more wellbeing support through their line manager (following proper line manager training), or through an occupational health referral. Abusive protests often involved abuse towards inclusion policies and practices, which may cause alienation in those groups. Increased public support for these initiatives may provide reassurance to officers and staff who identify with these groups. Finally, those who have experienced identification, particularly in a nature that might draw negative attention, may require more physical security support and advice from their force.

Reputation Damage: This theme represents an attack on the individual's career and professionalism. Two subthemes were also identified:

- Defamatory Accusations: involved unsubstantiated defamatory claims about named officers/staff that may undermine the public's trust in them, generally made by individuals who have not directly met the officer(s)/staff. This commonly took the form of paedophile allegations against officers who did outreach work in schools.
- Misconduct Allegations: characterised by allegations of misconduct made by individuals who have had interactions with the officer(s)/staff. Typically, these posts were made by either suspects or victims of investigations being handled by the targeted officer(s). These posts could largely be viewed as a way to vent dissatisfaction with the outcome of the investigation.

Personal Attack: This theme represents an attack on the individual as a person. Three subthemes were also identified:

- Hostile Sexism: Involved sexist statements made towards, or about, a female officer - generally made by (seemingly) male accounts. These comments typically related to the female officer's capability, physical attractiveness, or sexuality.
- Physical Presentation: negative non-gendered comments made about an individual officer's physical presentation, typically relating to weight and/or professional appearance.
- Mental Capacity: negative comments made about the mental capacity or capability of individual officers/staff. These comments were often aimed at older officers, joking that they have Alzheimer's or other similar neurodegenerative disorders. Other comments simply accused officers of having low IQ.

Abusive Protest: This theme represents an attack on the institution of the police through an individual officer. Two subthemes were identified:

- Political: Abusive comments accusing the police of political bias. For example, pictures of officers at pride marches attracted a lot of abusive comments for being too 'woke'.
- Rejection of Authority: Generally abusive comments made towards officers. Suggested a perceived lack of police authority in online environments, allowing users to vocally reject the police as an organisation.

Identification: This theme represents an attack on officer/staff privacy. It was very common throughout all of the reviewed content for pictured, video recorded, or discussed officers to be named, along with their rank and shoulder number. In many videos, the recorder would go out of their way to request the name of the officer being recorded. In cases where a recorded or pictured officer was not named by the original poster, there was some evidence of commenters identifying the officer's name and general location (e.g., Yorkshire).

