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#Screening out: Criminal justice students' awareness of social media usage in policing

Yolanda M. Leott*

Abstract: The “rise of police indiscretion” on social media has sparked demands to closely monitor officers’ online activity and more effectively screen job applicants. The extent to which criminal justice majors are aware that personal profile content on networking sites (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) factor into recruitment, background checks, and personnel monitoring practices is absent in the literature. Results from a survey of undergraduate students enrolled at a private North-east university indicate their perceptions of police usage of social media to generally align with the manner in which these officials leverage this technology. Few respondents rated their own comments, pictures and videos as inappropriate but were critical of material posted by other site users. And, though comfortable with a range of potential audiences viewing their content, students were unequivocal in their expectation of privacy even as they varied in confidence that their posts would be shielded from employer searches.

Subjects: Internet & Multimedia - Computing & IT; Teaching & Learning - Education; Criminal Justice; Education; Police

Keywords: criminal justice; online reputation; policing; social media; recruit selection; undergraduate students



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Yolanda M. Leott earned her Ph.D. in Sociology (specialty in criminology/deviance) from the University of Kentucky. She has previously published in the areas of police stress, fear of crime and police-community relations. Interested in educating students about their return on investment in higher education, this present focus on applicant employment screening represents an effort to enhance academic competencies and understanding of professionalism in the field as we navigate this enduring age of integrated technological advancement. As past president of the Northeastern Association of Criminal Justice Sciences, she continues to serve various national and international organizations.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The 2013 Boston Marathon concentrated citizens’ attention on police use of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) to detect external departmental threats. These agencies also consider these sites a valued screening tool to identify internal risks to organisational image posed by personnel and applicants’ willingness to post inappropriate information on personal profiles. Based on a survey of over 200 undergraduate criminal justice students, this study explored whether potential recruits are aware of police reliance on this technology for these purposes. It was found that students’ views generally matched reported network usage among departments, and problematic information was related to discomfort with employers viewing it (especially future bosses)—a group they expect to evade during online searches. Universities can play a role in reducing the “rise in police indiscretion” on social media through course development focused on equipping undergraduates with competencies in the area social networking reputation management for aspiring public servants.

1. Introduction

After fatally shooting a suspect several times in the back, Albuquerque, New Mexico gang unit Detective Byron “Trey” Economidy clarified the occupation status on his personal Facebook profile as “human waste disposal” (Proctor, 2011). Police officers, like the citizens they are entrusted to serve, have taken to social media networking sites such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook to express their private interests, culturally derisive sentiments, vent frustrations at public backlash and rant about accountability-driven administrative practices (see Calamur, 2015; Goode, 2011; NewsOne, 2014; Warshaw, 2016). Recognising this “rise in police indiscretion” on social networks (Goldsmith, 2015) to be a public safety issue and a factor eroding confidence in police among a vast swath of the American public (Jones, 2015; Morison, 2017; Pew Research Center/USA Today, 2014; Weitzer, 2015), agencies have instituted social media policies and taken corrective action against employees for online conduct unbecoming a peace officer.

Concerns about police misconduct are nothing new in the annals of the criminal justice system though strikingly novel is the viral nature by which information travels about these incidences reaching both national and global consciousness. This reality has culminated in demands for reform to not only better monitor officers’ online activities but to also more effectively screen the online reputation of prospective recruits. The spectre of millennial and iGeneration job-seekers, known to be avid social media users with tremendous networking capacity (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015b; Rosen, 2010) and deep “digital archives” (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 265) trafficking the same online unprofessionalism into departments has prompted police officials to augment the conventional model of recruit selection to include screening-by-social media (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2010; International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015; National Executive Institute Associates [NEIA], 2013; Morison, 2017).

The extent to which undergraduate students are aware of social media utility in policing to gauge hiring risks and screen out applicants with problematic textual and visual content is difficult to substantiate. Only a single study was located, and it addressed external or operational tactics rather than network-based employment selection or personnel monitoring practices (Spizman & Miller, 2013). The bulk of the empirical literature focuses on student knowledge about how university officials and non-specified employers engage in reputation management, and the results have been mixed. Some studies suggest undergraduates anticipate authority figures will conduct a background check of their online presence as part of the application process (Root & McKay, 2014) while others indicate a lack of adequate awareness of institutional social media policies and monitoring activities (O’Connor, Schmidt, & Drouin, 2016; Rowe, 2014). Students were also found to vary in their beliefs about and expectation of online privacy (O’Connor et al., 2016; Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Root & McKay, 2014), but tended to feel more comfortable with family and acquaintances viewing their comments, photographs, memes and videos as compared to employers and university officials sifting through their personal accounts (O’Connor et al., 2016; Peluchette & Karl, 2008, 2010; Rowe, 2014).

This compelling research is based on psychology, business, or a sample of mixed-discipline majors while undergraduate criminal justice students—a subpopulation most likely to apply and successfully compete for entry-level police officer positions—have not been given explicit attention in the extant literature. This study aims to augment this body of work by exploring whether justice studies students are aware of police agencies’ usage of social media and the degree to which their knowledge aligns with police actual usage of these networks. Attention is also given to whether awareness is related to students’ self-rated inappropriateness of their own and others’ personal profile content, comfortability with employers viewing their social media information, as well as their beliefs in and expectation of privacy in the social network domain.

2. Review of the literature

Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat are electronic platforms that facilitate sociality through the exchange of information. Selecting from among a variety of installed features, users typically construct a profile containing personal demographic details such as: location and type

of work, relationship status, educational attainment and favourites (e.g. groups, food, sports, games, music and movies). Users have the option to initiate posts of visual and textual content (*create*), as well as comment on and share material supplied by like-minded users and permit them to affix material to their page scroll (*curate*) (Rheingold, 2012, Duggan 2015a). Animating the experience of conveying an intended self-image, this information can be supplemented with photographs, comments, distinctive names, memes, videos and reciprocal sharing of communications (e.g. hashtags, threads, tags, links). The growth in popularity of social networks is diverse and diffuse encompassing 65% of all adults (Perrin, 2015) who have woven this technology into their everyday lives. Of the 2.34 billion consumers worldwide, 1.59 billion are engaged monthly on Facebook (Statista, 2016) distinguishing it as the most popular among adults and preferred by 72% of undergraduate college students—70% of whom check in daily and 43% do so more than once a day (Duggan 2015a).

Though recruiters search these networks to make hiring decisions, undergraduate students rarely engage with these platforms to attract prospective employers. Rather, their interests centre around opportunities to connect with friends and family, initiate and nourish relationships (Park & Lee, 2014; Sherrell & Lambie, 2016), pass the time (Sherrell & Lambie, 2016), and entertain and express themselves (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Park & Lee, 2014). Using optional privacy settings, direct access to created and curated information can be restricted to a circle of “friends” or “followers”, or made open to the “public”. This form of perceptual control tends to cultivate a sense of privatising a corner of cyberspace shielded from outsider surveillance and thought to lower inhibitions to the point at which almost any information is considered permissible to upload and share on these sites (Peluchette & Karl, 2008; Rheingold, 2012).

2.1. Use of social media in policing

Social media platforms were not originally designed with police in mind, yet agencies have adopted this technology to better enable the fulfilment of essential functions integral to the overall mission and targeted operations (Houston, 2012; Trottier, 2012). A survey of over 500 US police agencies conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP] (2015), the bulk of which serve municipalities and college or university campuses, finds that social networks are used by 96.4% of departments. The platforms most accessed mirror those undergraduate students spend their time on: Facebook (94.2%), Twitter (71.2%) and YouTube (40%). Likewise, 1,200 police officers employed at all levels of government identified reliance on Facebook (93%) and YouTube (67%) as helpful tools in the performance of their work (LexisNexis, 2012; LexisNexis Risk Solutions, 2014).

The main areas for which these sites were leveraged range from community-oriented policing services such as interactive events to emergency management, but primary focus has been on its utility in supplementing criminal investigations (88.7%) (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015). Capable of tracking the daily private life and social interactions of millions of citizen-users, as well as network associates, police “listen [to]/monitor” the accounts of those directly and indirectly suspected of illegal behaviour in an effort to gather intelligence—a practice 85.5% of agencies stated was instrumental in clearing criminal cases (National Executive Institute Associates [NEIA], 2013, International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015). These outward-facing investigative tactics are however taking a more decidedly inward turn as departments and personnel realise that as a reciprocal medium of communication “[S]ocial media networks have two edges” (Goode, 2011). Improper use of this technology can jeopardise organisational image, tear at the fabric of public trust foundational to the social contract, and weaken the very institution itself (Morison, 2017; Pew Research Center/USA Today, 2014; Weitzer, 2015). With so much at stake, 77.8% of the police agencies have instituted social media policies and nearly 12% more are in the process of articulating similar guidelines (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2010, International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015, National Executive Institute Associates [NEIA], 2013) in an effort to educate as well as clarify expected online decorum of all

personnel (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2010, International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015, National Executive Institute Associates [NEIA], 2013).

2.2. Screening out-by-social media

In anticipation of filling entry-level vacancies selected from the Millennial and iGeneration of applicants that seek to answer this honourable call to public service, police agencies have also expanded the conventional selection procedure to include these networks in an effort to both attract potential recruits (61.9%) and curtail the influx of those with problematic social media content into the occupation (57.7%). Ever more vigilant at reputational sabotage abatement, it is common for police recruiters to visit the public-facing sites of job applicants with the intent to check their backgrounds. If access is blocked by the use of privacy settings, interviewers resort to other means such as requiring job candidates to request or accept a “friend” or “follow” invitation from the agency hiring manager (The Associated Press, 2012), provide the interviewer their account information including username and password, or login on to their personal profiles during the interview where the scroll of their activities and interests are made visible to the interviewer (Gutierrez, 2014; The Associated Press, 2012). Some police departments even outsource cyber-searches to companies with expertise in accessing this information without the applicant’s knowledge including the retrieval of deleted information, while others embrace affordable apps that produce similar outcomes (The Associated Press, 2012). These practices represent a growing trend in policing as 33% of respondents considering the adoption of these sites plan to search the profiles of applicants during the screening process, and 83% see generalised value in this technology for public relations and image management (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015).

The time and expense associated with the process of discerning suitability for internship and employment is a challenge for any organisation, but reliance on taxpayer dollars to fund often costly procedures arguably makes the task a more daunting endeavour for police search committees. The model procedure for recruit selection involves successful navigation through 10 distinctive areas of assessment: informational application, written test, physical fitness evaluation, polygraph examination, background check, medical examination, psychological evaluation, oral interview, academy training and a term of probation (Gaines et al., 2003; Metchik, 1999; Morison, 2017). The placement of each stage of the selection procedure is intentionally designed to screen out or immediately narrow the pool of candidates in the pipeline by obstructing the advancement of those deemed unsuitable for policing based on their (poor) performance on the initial, less costly of these various standardised and subjective assessments. This method permits the more desirable job candidates to proceed to the next, more expensive performance evaluations located towards the end of the process (Gaines et al., 2003; Metchik, 1999).

Amid concerns around invasion of privacy (Gutierrez, 2014; The Associated Press, 2012; Trottier, 2012), screening-by-social media is nonetheless viewed as an efficient means by which to diagnose early-on in the process indicators of qualities and characteristics (i.e. psychological instability, poor judgement, lack of impulse control, dishonesty and group-focused discrimination) that could render the job-seeker ineligible for police work. Though weeding out applicants has “traditionally been favored by police administrative personnel” (Metchik, 1999, p. 79), changes are afoot as agencies begin to shift focus in their search for positive and supportive aspects of applicants’ stated credentials and qualifications as well as their indisputable socially acceptable and professional reputation as portrayed online (Morison, 2017). Profiles that reflect demonstrative knowledge of the field, community service and a comportment signalling a “guardian” as opposed to a “warrior” mentality (Morison, 2017, p. 6) is expected to enhance competitive retention within the pool of applicants.

The weight assigned to the discovery of problematic online material is, however, expected to remain exacting—to stem the flow of potentially toxic conduct reaching the confines of their workplace, police agencies are engaging in pre-emptive action by screening out job applicants with

otherwise acceptable initial applications whose social media profiles may pose a risk to organisational image, employees and the public at large (Morison, 2017).

3. Student awareness

Undergraduate student awareness of influential decision-makers usage of social media appears akin to one of the prompts under Facebook's relationship status—"It's Complicated". The manner in which college students communicate on these sites may be considered productive or, in other instances, counterproductive towards landing an internship or good job. In Persona's survey of 500 college upperclassmen, 57% assessed the comments and visual material uploaded to their profiles not to be at all discrediting to their employability (Vaas, 2013). Peluchette and Karl (2008) supplied 36 items containing a mix of unsavoury information and asked a large business major sample whether they would likely affix them to their social media profile. Only about a quarter of subjects chose this type of content, a result consistent with their follow-up study (Peluchette & Karl, 2010) of a similar group of respondents for whom average ratings on a 10-item "problematic profile information" scale suggests less likelihood of selecting problematic content of the types mentioned above for inclusion on their personal profiles. These findings are important because they are based on subjective measures which capture students' acknowledgement and judgements about their own online presence, yet they differ markedly from objective observations of student conduct on social networking sites.

A willingness to post or host inappropriate content has been documented by Peluchette and Karl (2010) who found in an earlier content analysis of 200 undergraduate student Facebook profiles that over half included profane language, photos depicting alcohol use (53%), the presence of alcohol-related (42%) and sexually laden comments (20%), as well as photos of partial nudity or poses that could be interpreted as sexually provocative (25%). Other reports expand the universe of job-threatening profile information to include reckless antics, racial/ethnic, religious, gender, disability and sexual orientation intolerance, and gutter humour (Burke 2011; Fernandez & Perez-Pena, 2015; Hoffman et al., 2014; Kingkade, 2015; Mosier, 2015).

The fact that students upload such revealing information to social media that employers would likely "flag" as personal traits to screen out of the selection process has led some scientists to question whether there exists a modicum of rational calculus while networking. In an attempt to reconcile this paradox, common explanations are that these job-seekers either (a.) due to their age or lack of life and work experience are incapable of identifying information unfit for a general audience and/or (b.) must be naïve to the actual and potential risks their social media reputation may pose to their employment aspirations (Peluchette & Karl, 2008, 2010; Rowe, 2014). Evidence to substantiate these reasonable inferences is, however, tenuous in light of research that suggests a capability among students to identify specific online conduct that would normatively be considered inappropriate.

For example, Rowe's (2014) mixed-discipline sample of undergraduates, on average, correctly distinguished 10 innocuous posts from the 10 offensive in nature which described a range of content university officials would likely sanction—from disparaging remarks about university resources (i.e. services and facilities), intent to cheat or plagiarise, threats of violence and use of disrespectful, derogatory language about other students and staff demeanour, dress and general appearance which included racist and sexist comments. Moreover, beyond merely identifying objectionable content, Root and McKay (2014) asked business majors to weigh the degree of ire 18 types of posts might provoke in the hiring decisions of future employers. On average, students assigned more importance to offensive material of the type mentioned above and lesser to items involving their interests, interactions and style of communication (e.g. curated information, errors in grammar and spelling, overuse of texting-type language, Facebook games accessed).

3.1. Perceived utility of social media

The ability of students to identify conduct that would disgrace or dishonour an occupation, its mission and good name appears to be a different issue than determining the extent to which they are aware of employers' propensity to search, surveil and mete out consequences. A mixed-discipline sample of respondents enrolled in a psychology course suggests deficiency in this form of knowledge as more than 50% of subjects responded, "Don't know" to questions about social media policy existence, monitoring activities, limitations on privacy, First Amendment protections and disciplinary options for policy transgressors (O'Connor et al., 2016). Indeed, a lack of mindfulness among the collegiate student body has been documented in various news reports along with their expulsion (Fernandez & Perez-Pena, 2015) or indefinite suspension (Burke 2011). Offending students along with their families and supporters often express surprise, if not outrage, at the swift reaction seemingly unaware that such conduct could adversely impact academic and athletic persistence and ultimately, their aspirational return on investment in higher education.

There is evidence though that such comportment is not universal of student awareness. Nearly half of the respondents from a varied-major sample believed employers screen-by-social media "all the time" (Vicknair et al., 2010, p. 9), and business majors surveyed by Root and McKay (2014) indicate deft acuity as close to 80% believed it was "likely" or "very likely" that employers would turn to their personal social media profiles to conduct a background check as part of the application process. These findings track with Persona Incorporated's survey of 500 college and university juniors and seniors in which 71% conceded that Facebook profiles are "influential" or "very influential" components of hiring decisions (Vaas, 2013).

3.2. Comfortability and privacy

The prospect of employers and strangers perusing their comments, photographs, memes and videos (as well as that of "friends" and "followers") on these sites is often met with reticence among students, while more security is felt with family viewing their profile information. Among respondents majoring in business and other disciplines, Peluchette and Karl (2008) found those especially sensitive to employers viewing their content were concerned about uploaded photos of partying, alcohol and marijuana use, indecent humour, comments about work and curated information. In a different investigation of a similar group of students, choosing inappropriate content was negatively related to comfort with family and friends seeing social media posts, but no relationship was uncovered with regard to employers examining their profile (Peluchette & Karl, 2010).

More pointed views emerged among a set of studies using varied-discipline samples wherein nearly 60–80% of subjects, respectively, were firm (e.g. "disagree" or "strongly disagree") in their aversion to the idea that the university should be able to monitor student personal social media usage (O'Connor et al., 2016; Rowe, 2014). Respondents in O'Connor et al.'s (2016) study affirmed that students have a right to freely express themselves (37.2%) while 12.8% felt this was not the case and 50% were unsure whether such a right extended to their personal social media postings. That social networking speech should reside exclusively within the domain of the user was conveyed by 43.2% of respondents but dismissed as a right by 15.0% of their peers and 41.8% did not know if student social media posts were constitutionally shielded from outside searchers. These researchers multivariate analysis suggests, however, that students' notions of privacy were not influenced by their views about whether university officials should be permitted to monitor their online activities and impose disciplinary action amid violation of the policy.

Standing as a notable outlier to unease with influential decision-makers having access to their personal profiles, over two-thirds of respondents in Vicknair's et al.'s (2010) study stated employers have a right to search during the screening process, an attitude shared by their counterparts in different investigation of undergraduates who, on average, *disagreed* with the statement: "It is none of anyone's business what I post" (Root & McKay, 2014). This perspective may stem in part from a recognition that regardless of their level of comfortability or the value they place in online

privacy, employers are nonetheless going to search their personal profiles. To counteract unwanted searches, these same research subjects almost uniformly stated they avoid posting material to social media sites they would rather employers not see and have removed items prospective bosses might find objectionable during the screening process. Likewise, Peluchette and Karl (2010) found that a belief that others outside their network of friends and followers had limited access to their posts played a significant role in students' decision to post offensive material or content depicting oneself as sexually appealing as compared to subjects who did not construct such a cyber self-image.

4. Research questions

Across a range of undergraduate students, researchers have produced valuable insight about their awareness of social media sites as a screening tool. Those studying criminal justice though have not received explicit attention in the literature despite the noted rise in officer misconduct online and agencies' efforts to weed out unprofessional applicants during the selection process. To instigate clarity about this subpopulation of college students' views and social networking behaviour, this study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: Are students aware of police usage of social network sites and do their perceptions align with the utility agencies ascribe to this technology?

RQ2: Do students perceive their content and that of others personal profiles to be Inappropriate in nature?

RQ3: To what degree are respondents comfortable with or open to employers viewing their posts to get a closer look at them?

RQ4: Is knowledge of police use of social networks related to the extent to which students rate their own and others' profiles to be inappropriate?

RQ5: Are students more comfortable with employers seeing their posts more likely to be aware of the utility of social media in policing?

RQ6: Are beliefs in online privacy related to awareness or a more open attitude toward employer searches?

4.1. Methods

Criminal justice undergraduate students (i.e. major or minor) attending one small-sized, private university located in the North-east region of the US were given a voluntary, anonymous survey in the spring 2015 semester. Email messages were sent to their professors requesting permission for upperclassmen student volunteers (not enrolled in the courses) to enter their classrooms on a day and time most convenient to their schedules. And, for which they could set aside 20–25 minutes for students willing to participate to do so while allowing nonparticipants an opportunity to take a break outside of class during this time period. An introduction and invitation to take part in the survey was conducted in a total of 10 courses.

Purposive sampling procedure was employed to ensure an opportunity for all students willing to participate to be included in the survey. To increase class subset and overall response rates, a self-administered hardcopy as opposed to electronic questionnaire (Nulty, 2008; Schuldt & Totten, 2014) along with other approved IRB materials were provided to respondents by trained student volunteers briefed on the survey purpose, distribution requirements, return instructions, debriefing and the like. Prior to leaving each course, student-volunteers placed all survey material in envelopes, sealed and hand-delivered them to the principal investigator. A total of 231 students comprised all courses surveyed; however, since four respondents neither majored nor minored in justice studies and an additional seven questionnaires were incomplete, they were removed from

statistical analyses. Acceptable response rates for the classes resulted in an average return rate of 95% for a sample of 220 undergraduate criminal justice students.¹

4.2. Sample description

Only 15.1% of the subjects were infrequent users of social network sites; of the 84.9% who were regular users, their time was spent on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, respectively. A little over half of the respondents (50.7%) indicated their ideal criminal justice job post-graduation is within policing (local, state, federal). There were few people of colour enrolled at this university and even less racial/ethnic representation within the criminal justice programme; the sample therefore consists largely of White students (195% or 90.3%) nearly equally distributed along binary gender for which females were the majority (113% or 52.3%). On average, the age of respondents was 20 years² and 29.6% were freshman, 16.2% sophomores, 34.7% juniors and 19.4% were seniors.

4.3. Measures

The empirical work reviewed above guided the operationalisation of many of the variables in the present study including the use of subjective measures to capture students' overall judgements and knowledge about their own and other users' online presence. Given what appears to be a normative understanding among students of what would constitute inappropriate content, this study focuses not on specific examples of posts but a general reflective exercise in recollecting three distinct types of networking exchanges—textual and visual material they have posted since joining the platforms (i.e. created), content they permit to be posted to their profiles or threads (i.e. curated), and information contained on sites other than their own (i.e. non-curated others'). Social media privacy assessment is addressed here in terms of beliefs and expectations rather than management of privacy site settings. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for all variables under exploration; all measures were converted from a 5- to 4-point scale.

4.3.1. Perceived Utility of Social Media

Student awareness about the utility of social media to police generally and more specifically for recruitment, background checks and monitoring officers' online activities was measured on a scale ranging from 0 (not useful at all) to 3 (highly useful). Using principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation, these four items loaded on one factor and produced a Cronbach's Alpha of .633.

4.3.2. Inappropriateness

Reflecting overall on their personal social media archives and that of others, respondents were originally asked to rate the presence of decency (or, appropriateness) observed along three content areas—comments, photographs and videos. These nine subjective global assessments of social media content were later reverse recorded to reflect "inappropriateness" and measured on a scale ranging from 0 (very appropriate) to 3 (completely inappropriate). The overall alpha coefficient for this cluster of items (.794) was less robust given that a factor analysis of them resulted in three discernable dimensions of perceptual inappropriateness—"created" (alpha = .854); "curated" (alpha = .867); and "others" (alpha = .889).

4.3.3. Comfortability

The extent to which students would be unembarrassed or unashamed with their current or future employer (alpha = .927) scrutinising content on their personal profiles was measured on a scale ranging from 0 (completely uncomfortable) to 3 (completely comfortable).

Expectation of Privacy was measured by the following statement for which subjects could indicate 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree): "No one should be allowed to view/access the content (pictures, videos, comments) on your social media account(s) without your permission to make decisions about you".

Table 1. Variables, metrics and descriptive statistics (N = 149)^a.

Variables	Metrics	Mean	SD
General police utility	(0 = not useful at all, 3 = highly useful)	2.48	.609
Specific police utility	(0 = not useful at all, 3 = highly useful)		
Recruitment		2.09	.707
Background check		2.33	.664
Monitor officers		2.25	.650
Inappropriateness	(0 = very appropriate, 3 = completely inappropriate)		
<i>Created</i>			
Comments		.47	.726
Photographs		.50	.771
Videos		.45	.838
<i>Curated</i>			
Comments		1.17	.801
Photographs		.94	.864
Videos		.84	.835
<i>Others' (non-curated)</i>			
Comments		1.65	.718
Photographs		1.69	.727
Videos		1.60	.746
Comfortability	(0 = completely uncomfortable, 3 = completely comfortable)		
Current boss		2.26	.732
Future boss		2.11	.774
Confidence in privacy	(0 = not confident at all, 3 = very confident)		
Only go back so far		1.26	.934
Deleted content		1.06	.911
Overall privacy		1.13	.905
Expectation of privacy	(0 = strongly disagree, 3 = strongly agree)	2.35	.666

^aListwise Deletion of Cases

4.3.3.4 Privacy Beliefs

Confidence in virtual networking privacy was measured using three items (alpha = .819) relevant to the employment screening process. Using a scale from 0 (not confident at all) to 3 (very confident), students were asked to assess how secure they were that:

- (a.) “Employers can only go back so far into my social media networking site”;
- (b.) “Employers cannot access/see my social media account(s) or selected content (pictures, videos or comments posted) once I have deleted it”;
- (c.) “Overall, I have privacy from the searches/'eyes' of future employers”.

5. Results

On average, students believed that 71.1% of the police agencies use social media while the proportion of departments confirming social network usage was 96.4% (International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), 2015)³. This initial finding lends partial insight into the first research question (RQ1) as to whether respondents’ awareness of police use of these sites align with the amount this technology has been integrated into policing. As displayed in Table 2,

Table 2. Perceived and objective social media usage in policing^a.

Platforms Police Use	Facebook 150 (76.9%)	Twitter 38 (19.5%)	YouTube 7 (3.6%)		N = 195
<i>Police responses</i>	483 (94.2%)	365 (71.2%)	206 (40.0%)		513
Recruitment	Not useful at all ^b	Little useful	Moderately useful	Highly useful	195
	7 (3.6%)	18 (9.2%)	117 (60.0%)	53 (27.2%)	
<i>Police responses</i>	29 (5.9%)	143 (28.9%)	130 (26.3%)	98 (19.8%)	494
Vetting/Background Checks	3 (1.6%)	7 (3.7%)	101 (52.9%)	80 (41.9%)	191
<i>Police responses</i>	19 (3.8%)	116 (23.3%)	134 (26.9%)	123 (24.7%)	498
Monitor officers' activities	3 (1.6%)	7 (3.6%)	112 (58.3%)	70 (36.5%)	192
<i>Police responses</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

^aSource: International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), 2015 [online]. *Center for Social Media: 2015 survey results*. Retrieved from: <http://www.theiacp.org/portals/0/documents/pdfs/2015SocialMediaSurveyResults.pdf> [Accessed 13 November 2016].

^bPercentages do not add to 100% because the categories police agencies were asked to select from included “undecided” and “not applicable”, options not presented here. Further, response categories were in terms of “value” ranging from “not valuable” to “very valuable” (International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), 2015).

respondents accurately identified the order of each of the three sites found to be most preferred by police though their estimations similarly departed from platform usage reported by police agencies.

In a baseline question tapping general perceptual value agencies place on social media (not included in Table 2), most students agreed that this technology is of substantive usefulness to police. Drilling down into Table 2, respondents overestimated police reliance on these networks for the specific internal practices under exploration. Police agencies' view of social media as essential for recruiting job candidates was comparatively two times less than student perceptual awareness. Similar results emerged with regard to leveraging social networks to vet the background of job applicants to make hiring decisions. Finally, the absence of information on police use of social media as a tool to monitor officers' online activities negates a comparison to students' perceptions of such surveillance. It is nonetheless worth noting that these undergraduates felt police viewed social networks as quite valuable for this purpose as the majority conveyed substantial usefulness of this technology for keeping a closer eye on the posts of current officers, while only a handful of respondents conveyed that agencies place little value in social networks for regulating officers' online conduct.

The premium these criminal justice students felt police placed on social media to discern their employability is mainly reflective of previous research based on business students (Root & McKay, 2014) and those majoring in a variety of disciplines (Root & McKay, 2014; Vaas, 2013; Vicknair et al., 2010), but stands in sharp contrast to results uncovered in another study of their counterparts from a mix of disciplines (O'Connor et al., 2016).

Addressing RQ2, the results shown in Table 3 reveal strong consensus among these students that the comments, photographs and videos they post to their social media profiles (created) are not at all inappropriate. This appropriateness-leaning tendency, in the context of self-profile evaluation, is consistent with results from previous research of a sample comprised mainly of business students (Peluchette & Karl, 2008, 2010), and a study based on students representing a variety of disciplines (Vicknair et al., 2010). Relatively more critical assessments were directed at curated content; however, as with the mixed-discipline sample of students in Rowe's (2014) study, the most strident of valuations were reserved for the posts that appear on other users' (i.e. non-curated) profiles. These results are partially supportive of the job-threatening nature of others'

Table 3. Self-rated inappropriateness of social media.

	Very appropriate	Moderately appropriate	Somewhat inappropriate	Completely inappropriate	N
<i>Created content</i>					
Comments	132 (65.0%)	49 (24.1%)	19 (9.4%)	3 (1.5%)	203
Photographs	132 (64.4%)	50 (24.4%)	17 (8.3%)	6 (2.9%)	205
Videos	129 (72.9%)	26 (14.7%)	13 (7.3%)	9 (5.1%)	177
<i>Curated content</i>					
Comments	46 (21.7%)	92 (43.4%)	67 (31.6%)	7 (3.3%)	212
Photographs	78 (37.1%)	74 (35.2%)	51 (24.3%)	7 (3.2%)	210
Videos	80 (40.2%)	77 (38.7%)	35 (17.6%)	7 (3.5%)	199
<i>Others' content</i>					
Comments	16 (7.4%)	58 (26.9%)	127 (58.5%)	15 (6.9%)	216
Photographs	13 (6.0%)	63 (28.9%)	121 (55.5%)	21 (9.6%)	218
Videos	17 (7.9%)	69 (31.9%)	113 (52.3%)	17 (7.9%)	216

social media posts expressed by students in Peluchette and Karl (2008) aforementioned work but contradicts the view of business students in another study who regarded such material as a secondary, if not tertiary, barrier to their employment ambitions (Root & McKay, 2014).

The results shown in Table 4 display students' level of comfortability with employers viewing their content (RQ3); in line with several previous studies while 30–40% indicate being “completely comfortable” with this form of scrutiny, the majority are a bit more reticent about the idea of current and future employers accessing their profiles. However, a small but notable

proportion of students anticipated feelings of shame or embarrassment (moderate or complete) at the prospect of employers—particularly future bosses—seeing the material posted to their social network sites. This hesitancy is also borne out with regard to online privacy; as with mixed results that emerged in past research the distribution of responses displayed in Table 5 indicate wide variation in students' overall confidence that their content is shielded from employers' searches and their ability to retrieve deleted information or access personal profile account histories. A small percentage of respondents claimed to be “very confident” that their posts were secure in every way from employers interested in using their online reputation to obtain a closer look at them during the hiring process.

In a separate question asking *not* about employers' capability to access profile information but expectation of privacy (not included in Table 5), like much of the previous literature respondents were unequivocal in their views. An overwhelming consensus emerged that during the screening process, employers should avoid accessing and using profile information to make decisions about them without their consent. This view was refuted by a small band of respondents who offered disagreement with this position indicative of an “open book” edict found to be the prevailing stance in the past research among students from a variety of disciplines (Vicknair et al., 2010) as well as those majoring in business (Root & McKay, 2014).

Table 4. Level of comfortability.

Potential viewers	Completely uncomfortable	Moderately uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Completely comfortable	N
Current boss	8 (3.8%)	12 (5.7%)	108 (51.4%)	82 (39.0%)	210
Future boss	11 (5.2%)	20 (9.4%)	116 (54.7%)	65 (30.7%)	212

Table 5. Confidence in online privacy.

Statement	Not confident at all	Little confidence	Confident	Very confident	N
Employers can only go back so far into my account	58 (27.2%)	56 (26.3%)	85 (39.9%)	14 (6.4%)	213
Once I delete content, employers cannot see/access it	68 (32.2%)	75 (35.5%)	55 (26.1%)	13 (6.2%)	211
Overall, I have privacy from future employers' searches/'eyes'	66 (31.0%)	63 (29.6%)	75 (35.2%)	9 (4.2%)	213

The central focus of RQ4 was the extent to which knowledge of police use and utility of social media is related to students' self-rated content inappropriateness. As seen in Table 6, respondents who rated their own profile content as inappropriate seemed to have less knowledge of the general and specific usefulness of social media networking sites to police ($r = -.162$ to $r = -.239$), compared to subjects assessing these types of content on their personal profiles as more appropriate.

And, respondents rating curated and others' social media material as unfit for a general audience were significantly more likely ($r = -.164$ to $r = -.244$) to devalue social media as a useful tool overall and substantially so for monitoring officer online integrity, compared to those who felt these types of content were appropriate.

Turning to RQ5, awareness of police use of social media was found to be unrelated to students' level of comfortability with employers' viewing their content. However, as shown in Table 6, respondents more at ease with current and future employers viewing their personal social media content were significantly more likely ($r = -.188$ to $r = -.350$) to rate their own profile content and that of others as containing appropriate information, compared to those expressing discomfort with these influential decision-makers "eyeing" their comments, photographs or videos.

The findings of concern to RQ6 lend some support to previous research (Root & McKay, 2014; Vicknair et al., 2010) as students' beliefs about the capabilities of prospective employers to access applicant social media profile information was found to be significantly related ($r = .163$ to $r = .164$) to their comfortability with these influential decision-makers viewing their content (see Table 6). While the relationships are relatively weak, the direction of the coefficients suggests those more confident that access will be blocked are more comfortable with employer scrutiny, as opposed to respondents who attribute greater cyber-acumen to employers interested in searching recruit social media profiles.

Table 6. Significant correlations (N = 149)^a.

Variables	Gen utility	Recruit	Background	Monitor	CmftCBoss	CmftFBoss
CrCmts	—	—	-.162*	-.163*	-.319**	-.254**
CrPhotos	-.201*	-.188*	-.197*	-.239**	-.301**	-.332**
CrVideos	—	—	—	-.203*	-.317**	-.350**
CurCmts	—	—	—	—	—	—
CurPhotos	-.166	—	—	-.244**	-.216**	-.188*
CurVideos	—	—	—	-.213**	-.261**	-.195*
OthrVideos	—	—	—	-.164*	—	—
Only Back	—	—	—	—	—	.164*
Deleted	—	—	—	—	—	.163*

^aListwise Deletion of Cases.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

6. Conclusion and policy implications

Across the United States and internationally, inappropriate use of social media networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) among police officers is increasingly recognised as a formidable human and public relations challenge. Indiscreet comments, pictures and videos posted to these platforms can alter institutional conduct norms, damage organisational reputation and public trust, compromise the trajectory of an employee's career and complicate a job-seeker's application during the selection process. As such, the judgement of new recruits has come into sharper focus as a basis for suggested reforms.

In an effort to explore undergraduate criminal justice students' perceptions of social media usage in the context of employability, the present study surveyed over 200 majors and minors asking them about their awareness of police agencies use and value of social networks to attract and screen recruits as well as monitor officers' online activities. Additionally, students were asked to rate the inappropriateness of their own and others profile content, degree of comfortability with employers viewing their material and their stance on privacy while social networking.

It is clear from this study that students are not only aware that police departments are using social media but appraise high value to these sites for the purposes of recruitment and vetting applicants, which is a fairly accurate reflection of agencies' reported utility of this technology. Though less than 10% of students reported leaving sullied footprints across the digital landscape and generally felt at ease with current and future employers viewing their personal profiles, they unequivocally considered any form of unwanted search or surveillance as an affront to their privacy.

Given that departments desire this information and are quite adept at conducting myriad types of social-media-based searches, it is concerning that 7% of respondents were completely confident that police agencies are incapable of accessing their accounts and retrieving archived (including deleted) posts. And, about one-third of their peers were certain (albeit relatively measured) in social network screening obfuscation. One might assume that some undergraduates are more self-assured in their own counter cyber surveillance methods (e.g. use of privacy settings, refusal to supply passwords, or allow employers to "friend"/"follow" them) than police screening investigative tactics. The basis for these protective measures might lie in the belief that the more distant a viewer is from their intended audience the greater the risk their actual and associative online self-image will be misinterpreted in employers' evaluation of their character and thus suitability for a job.

The dearth of research on this subject generally and the lack of bivariate or multivariate analyses specifically, makes it difficult to discern whether these outcomes are aberrant. Gathering a different and/or larger sample of post-secondary criminal justice students from various colleges or universities may clarify these findings. While some of the results are consistent with past work, fruitful avenues for additional research exist. Since the present study did not include item-specific exemplar profile posts for students to rate, self-protective actions they may take or tap the sources of awareness of police usage of social media, future researchers may wish to undertake this exploration. It may also be useful to include objective measures of inappropriateness to determine whether they match subjective assessments of created and curated information. Finally, a fuller picture of students' views and behaviours as they relate to awareness and social media usage might emerge with the inclusion of specific actions influential decision-makers may take (i.e. hire, fire) in the face of problematic social media posts.

The need to replenish the police workforce puts college students at the forefront of Goldsmith's (2015) prescient assertion that social media "is changing police culture through *invasion* as well as through organisational adoption" (p. 264). It is understandable that as private citizens students would find searches devoid their consent, or even the inquiry itself, to be discomforting and an invasion of personal space. Assuming the "guardian role" (Morison, 2017, p. 6) will require an adjustment since in the present climate of police-citizen relations, a slim margin of error exists for youthful indiscretion inherent conventional rites of passage. As aspiring caretakers of this special status, development of sound introspection is an essential quality not only to perform honourably on the job but likely to land

the position at all. There is no doubt that human capital of the kind explored here begins in the home and requires self-motivation, but institutions of higher education can play a role in teaching students about the importance of online reputation management.

Augmenting the principles of netiquette, faculty and administrators should explore and develop curricula designed to better equip students with competencies in the area of professionally ethical practices as private citizens and aspiring public servants. Of particular focus is enhanced self-reflective discernment of profile content, clarity about officials' capabilities to access social media information and the private-public dichotomy that can challenge those across all ranks in the police hierarchy to behave in a socially acceptable, if not professional, manner while networking on social media sites.

The call to educate criminal justice students in the areas of technology germane to the discipline is a novel idea. With a focus on "cybercrime" for example, Myers and Myers (2005) expressed concern about the fact that this particular type of criminal activity has outpaced the skill sets available in criminology and criminal justice that would demand the discipline to "...respond to because the level of technology sophistication among cybercriminals far exceeds the capabilities of those in business and criminal justice to detect, investigate, and prosecute" (p. 37). Indeed, some cybersecurity programs have been successfully launched by colleges and universities in an effort to meet this demand (see for example, Maryland Governor's Office of Small, Minority & Women's Business Affairs, (2014).

Social media-intelligent applications to criminal justice are clearly the next technological frontier to be navigated in the classroom. Since students enter college adept at social networking online, this technical learning curve will not be nearly as steep as the skill-set demands posed by other types of technologies such as encryption (a subfield of cybersecurity).

Moving them from casual engagement to interactions more fit for a general audience might reveal a substantive learning curve in need of further investigation. Indications from auxiliary questions posed in the questionnaire suggest undergraduates would welcome the addition to the curriculum. The majority of respondents (67%) agreed that such education would be a beneficial learning experience while others were either ambivalent (25.5%) or opposed (6%) to such an offering. Achieving certification in social media skill development was similarly viewed by 59% of students who felt that this form of training would be useful, though 11.6% saw no such value and 26.9% were unsure of its potential impact. Given the promises of higher education, there is a good reason to be attentive to this sub-population of college students since many of them may soon become our criminal justice practitioners of tomorrow.

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Notes

1. Just over half of the non-continuing studies, undergraduate criminal justice student body was represented in this sample. In the spring 2015 semester, there were 431 criminal justice majors and 24 minors; of the majors, 145 students concentrated their studies along one of four tracks (i.e. networking and security, forensic science, legal studies and security assurance).

2. Respondents' age ranged from 18 to 26, however, those 22-years old and younger made up 97.2% of the sample.
3. Though it would be informative to produce a triangulated analysis by examining how these national data and students' comparative views align with regional statistics on police usage of social media, such a disaggregated set of regional data has yet to be amassed thus preventing such an investigation in the present study.

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