

**The Attitudes and Perceptions of Community Police
Forum Towards Social Media as a Tool for Crime
Awareness.**

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Norwood Community Policing forums (NCPF) response team towards social media platforms as a tool for crime awareness. This study also looked at the utilisation and effectiveness of social media platforms used by the Norwood Community Policing Forum (NCPF) in order to raise crime awareness for the purpose of, assisting the community and the South African Police Service (SAPS), to create a safer environment for all.

Methodology - A qualitative research design was implemented for this study, with semi-structured interviews as the data collection of choice. The data that was collected, was then analysed using a content analysis approach. In order to provide the right respondents for this study a purposive sampling technique was undertaken.

Findings - The utilisation of social media platforms provides alternative means, for crime awareness, to the law enforcement portfolio. Social media platforms can assist CPFs and the police in crime investigations and crime awareness initiatives, provided that the platforms are fully exploited for the correct purposes and community members know how to operate the platform/s. Given the era that we live in, social media can be viewed as an influential tool for crime awareness.

Theoretical and practical implications - Theoretically and practically this study adds on to the notion that CPFs can, with the aid of social media platforms, contribute to crime awareness.

Value - This study contributes to creating an awareness of how social media platforms can be used as an extension to the current traditional strategies used for crime awareness.

Keywords - Social media platforms, Community Police Forum, Crime awareness, Community engagement, Attitudes and perceptions.

Paper type – Research Paper

1. Introduction

According to Oliver (1998) community policing forum (CPF) refers to “a systematic approach to policing with the paradigm of instilling and fostering a sense of community, within a geographical neighbourhood, to improve the quality of life. It achieves this through the decentralization of the police and the implementation of a synthesis of three key components, the redistribution of traditional police resources; the interaction of police and all community members to reduce crime and the fear of crime through indigenous proactive programs and concerted effort to tackle the causes of crime problems rather than to put band aids on the symptoms”.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance Framework for Action (1994) further describes a CPF as a voluntary structure that comprises of communities and the police working together to identify and solve crime related activities. Due to this collaboration between police officers and the community; an enhanced sense of trust and safety is often felt within communities and of course the quality of living is also improved. It is for this reason that it can be said, the responsibility of maintaining law and order not only depends on the police but rather depends on the collaboration of the police and the community (Bureau of Justice Assistance Framework for Action 1994).

There are many avenues to allow for a collaborate effort between police officers and the community, one of these avenues is through social media. According to (Hattingh, 2015) advances in technology have allowed for social media tools to be incorporated in the process of creating crime awareness. Brainard and Edwins (2015) further point out that the use of social media for crime awareness is currently preferred, and used more often than traditional media tools such as telephone calls and newspaper articles. The use of social media in developed countries, such as the United States of America, has proven to be effective in terms of providing the police with enough information for internal investigations and for monitoring criminal activities (Patton, Brunton, Dixon, Miller, Leonard and Hackman, 2017). If this is the case surely social media can have a positive impact, on crime awareness, in developing countries, such as South Africa.

According to (Erete, Miller and Lewis, 2014) the use of WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook has enabled Community Policing Forums to work towards creating crime awareness, in collaboration with communities seeking security and safety. Sachdeva and Kumaraguru (2014) also elaborate that tools such as Electronic mail, in conjunction with social media, can help to provide easy and alternative communication services. These communication services which allow users to send crime related information to the police or to the CPF response team in large amounts or up to specific file sizes. In order for CPF's to experience meaningful and effective use from social media tools, they should make a careful selection of the social media tools that will be utilised to raise crime awareness (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2017). Furthermore, CPF's should ensure that the social media tools that they select should be easy to use and easily accessible by the community - as different communities may prefer using different tools for policing activities and to maintain law and order.

According to Erete *et al* (2014), Facebook, Twitter, Electronic mail (E-mail) and WhatsApp are the social media tools that are largely used by CPF groups in order to develop communication between CPF response teams and communities, for the purpose of crime awareness, and to promote safety and security

The purpose of this study was to find out the perceptions and attitudes of the Norwood community police forum (NCPF) response team towards the use of social media tools for crime awareness. In order to fulfil this purpose the following questions were created.

- How do social media tools contribute to crime awareness?
- How effective is the use of social media for crime awareness?
- What are the benefits and challenges of using social media tools for crime awareness?
- What are the overall attitudes and perceptions of Community Policing Forums regarding the use of social media for crime awareness?

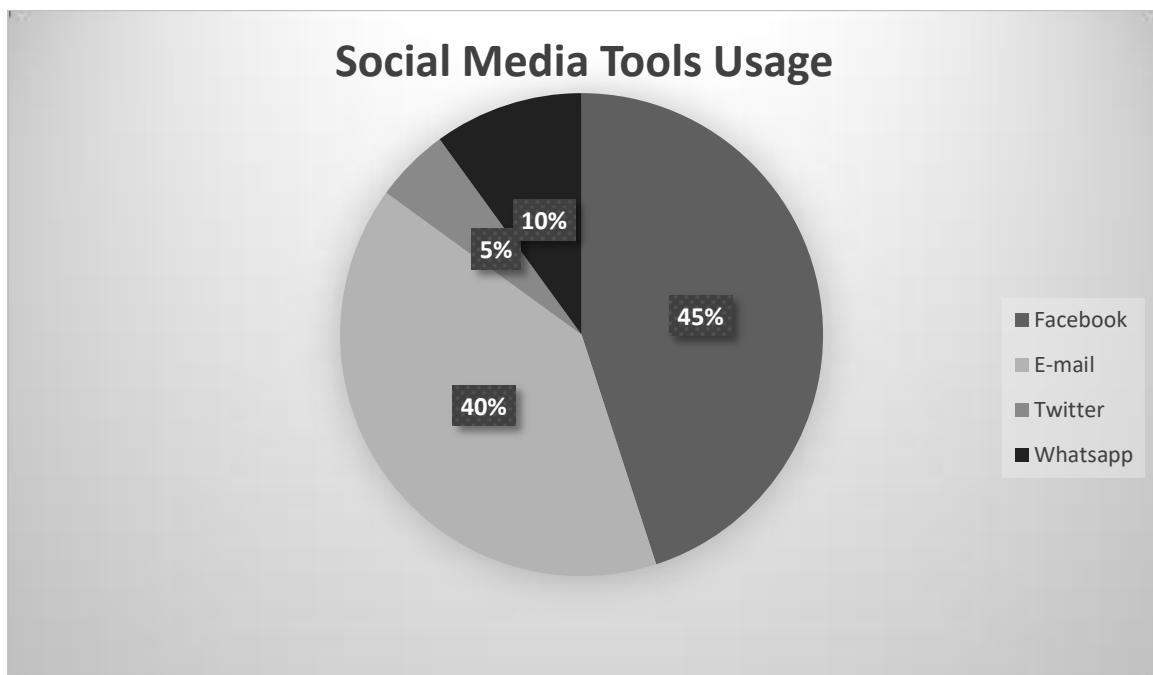
2. Research design and methods

This study took on a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews as the data collection method of choice. The interview questions were semi-structured to allow the researchers the opportunity to ask leading questions where better clarity was needed. The sample size consisted of 5 individuals who made up the CPF's response team and were of course familiar with the social media employed by the NCPF. The data that was collected was analysed using a content analyses technique where various patterns or themes were highlighted. From there conclusions and recommendations were drawn.

3. Analysis and discussion

In this section themes were derived from the content collected during the interview process and were subsequently discussed. Content from the NCPF's Facebook page and minutes from previous meetings were also utilised in the discussion as referred to by the response team during the interview process.

3.1 Social media tools used by the NCPF



45% = Facebook use, 40% = E-mail use, 5% = Twitter use, 10% = WhatsApp use

Figure 1 – illustration of community utilisation of social media tools

Figure 1 illustrates the major tools which are utilised by the NCPF members for the purpose of crime awareness. Based on the figure it is evident that Facebook is the most widely used tool for generating crime awareness with WhatsApp and Twitter not being used by as many individuals from the community. E-mails, although not entirely a social media platform, also played a large role in how the NCPF choose to communicate criminal activities with one another. The NCPF response team also note that although the NCPF have a WhatsApp group it is mainly used by a small group of friends and neighbours. WhatsApp, according to the NCPF response team, provides a restricted platform for friends and neighbours to communicate anywhere and anytime when an incident which needs to be attended arises. However E-mail and Facebook are viewed more as wide spreading platforms as they allow for communication from all members of the community.

3.2 Categories of content shared on the social media platforms

According to the NCPF there are various categories of content shared on their Facebook profile. These content categories include the following:

Crime Awareness: Facebook is mostly used to give out crime awareness content. This content usually includes safety and security tips such as informing residents to ensure that they are cognisant of vehicles following them as they drive home especially after withdrawing large amounts of money at Auto Teller Machines (ATM's). And as a daily precaution residents are also urged to use different routes when driving to and from home as robbers can target them when they use the same road.

Other safety and security tips include alerting the community of lost and found individual's as well as, of any hijackings and kidnappings that may have happened in the Norwood area or surrounding areas. For example in a previous case a 16-year-old girl was kidnapped while waiting for her school transport to collect her but later escaped from her kidnappers unharmed. This information was shared with the community via Facebook in order for them to be on high alert for the kidnappers and the girl, and also to keep their own children safe by taking any relevant precautions.

Community Events: According to Civilian Secretariat for Police (2016), there are 6 objectives to improving safety and security within a community or country. These objectives include:

- An effective criminal justice system
- Early intervention to prevent crime and violence
- Victim support
- Effective and integrated service delivery
- Safety through environmental design
- **Community participation and an active public**

In order for any CPF to be successful there has to be community engagement as well as police and community interaction. Events such as free self-defence workshops where community members are taught about self-defence and awareness techniques are often advertised on the NCPF Facebook profile. Also posted on the NCPF Facebook profile page are events such as police station clean-up sessions and South African Police Service (SAPS) public engagement sessions whose focal point is to discuss transformation in the communities which fall under the City of Johannesburg (CoJ). All these events are essential, and publicising them through online platforms is a perfect way to create community awareness. Monthly meetings and venues are also posted on the NCPF Facebook profile in a bid to keep residents informed and up to date.

Police Recognition: “Employee recognition is the timely, informal or formal acknowledgement of a person’s or team’s behavior, effort or business result that supports the organization’s goals and values, and which has clearly been beyond normal expectations” (Harrison, 2018). To a large extent people in South Africa are always complaining about how useless police officers are and how corrupt they are but never take the time to honour the police who are doing a phenomenal job. The NCPF uses their Facebook profile to honour police officers who go beyond the call of duty to apprehend criminals and to keep the community safe. Giving praise to police officers for doing a good job helps to keep employee morale high and let them know that the community does appreciate their efforts. Two police officers who have been acknowledged, on the NCPF Facebook page, for their

good work are constable Mamabolo from the Norwood Police Station and his partner constable Khoza. Their story read as follows “A hero cop who chased after 2 Hijackers on foot after the hijackers crashed into me and then lost control of their car. They abandoned the car and ran on foot. Officer Mamabolo (Norwood) and partner chased them and apprehended them both. Superfit, superbrave hero cop! Very proud of these men in blue who put their lives at risk to protect us” (Fichardt, 2016).

3.3 Management of social media platforms used by NCPF

The NCPF response team believe that managing their social media profiles is very important in order to maintain order. The NCPF’s E-mails, WhatsApp and Facebook profiles are managed by the secretary and the deputy secretary who is also the public relations officer. Their duties include, accepting requests from new residents, business’ and all those who want to be involved in the NCPF. The removal of offensive posts that are irrelevant to the NCPF Facebook profile are discussed with the NCPF committee over WhatsApp and then subsequently removed. Essentially, the secretary and deputy secretary are responsible for monitoring information or content posted on their social media profiles.

3.4 Benefits and challenges of utilising social media platforms for crime awareness

According to the NCPF one of the challenges with using social media platforms as a tool for crime awareness or for spreading information is the fact that this platform is only reached by social media Savvy individuals who are actively involved. Often elderly citizens are not active on social media. Keeping that fact in mind the NCPF are quick to note that although the elderly citizens of Norwood are not that active on social media they are the ones who regularly attend the monthly NCPF meetings in higher numbers. Leaving one with the conclusion that, not being active on social media, will not hinder your participation in community police activities. The NCPF are also of the opinion that the use of social media tools in South Africa, for creating crime awareness, is not as advanced as is in other developed countries – it is still a work in progress.

Other challenges of using Facebook, E-mails and WhatsApp for crime awareness include managing the online squabbles, fights, naming and shaming tactics and complaints that

people may have. Personal agendas are also a problem with people often promoting their businesses online instead of focusing on crime related issues which have an impact on the community.

The accuracy of information is also a concern as people sometimes post misleading information or simply information which may be trending on social media, but is not entirely true. Miscommunication and interpretation of posts is also sometimes an issue, which may require clarity at the monthly NCPF meetings. Safety is a concern on social media as the criminals might also be part of the group and monitor what people post or any information that may make it easier for them to target any of the members. Because of this NCPF members sometimes limit the information that they share on social media to avoid endangering their lives and being targeted by criminals.

Although there are some challenges noted by the NCPF there are also benefits to utilising social media for the purpose of crime awareness or addressing crime related community issues. Facebook, WhatsApp and E-mails (although more of a distributive tool) are effective means for sharing crime preventative ideas, information and tips. These platforms also allow for real time communication and for the NCPF response team to keep abreast of issues within the community. The NCPF response team also believe that the challenges they mentioned can be managed therefore they will continue to make use of these platforms.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the findings of this study social media tools such as Facebook and WhatsApp have the potential to contribute to crime awareness in Community Police Forums, if used correctly. Tools such as E-mail can also be used to contribute to crime awareness in communities. In South Africa, the use of social media tools for crime awareness has not largely been explored and further research in this field could mobilise many police stations and community police forums to implement the use of these tools in order to achieve the objective of curbing crime and living in safe and secure society.

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