

# A Pilot Study on the Impact of Facebook on Perceptions of Police Force

Wayne W.L. Chan\*

*School of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University of Hong Kong*

**Abstract:** The legal authorities, particularly the police force, have been increasingly facing challenges given the popularity of social media [1, 2]. However, we know very little about how public perceptions of the police are being shaped by social media. In this context, this study attempted to investigate the impact of social media on young people's perceptions of the police in Hong Kong. The focus of this study was placed on Facebook since it was one of the most popular social media platforms in the city.

Facebook was not only conceptualized as a communication medium but also a social networking arena. In this connection, qualitative individual interviews were conducted to explore the online social networking on Facebook and its relation to the perceptions of police force. It was found that the Facebook users who were more likely to stay closely connected with other users with similar views would tend to form the politicized perception of police force. On the other hand, the Facebook users who were to be networked with some other users or real persons with dissimilar views would hold more neutral perceptions of the police.

This study was the first of its kind to investigate the role of online social networking in the perceptions of the police, thus filling an important gap in our knowledge of the increasing impact of social media. Therefore, the results of current study were expected to contribute to society by avoiding the disproportionate public discourse about law and order.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Online Social Networking, Public Perception, Police Force.

## INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong's legal authorities, particularly the police and the courts, have been facing increasing challenges that began with a series of political and public order events, such as the "Occupy Central" movement in 2014. Despite the popularity of social media, we know very little about how criminal justice institutions are represented on social media, such as Facebook, and even less about how public perceptions of the police are shaped by social media in a highly politicized climate. In this context, this study aims to investigate the impact of social media on the younger generation's perceptions of the police in Hong Kong. This paper will focus on Facebook, one of the most popular social media platforms in the city.

Facebook is not only a communication medium but also a social networking arena. This study highlights the impact of Facebook in terms of two major purposes of social networking: 1) sharing homogeneous views in the online world and 2) sharing heterogeneous views in the online world. Under the current highly politicized circumstances in Hong Kong, we assume that users who are more likely to share homogeneous views in the online world tend to form more politicized perceptions of the police force. On the other hand, those who are more likely to share heterogeneous

views in the online world tend to form more neutral perceptions of legal authorities.

This study is the first in Hong Kong to investigate the effects of Facebook on perceptions of legal authorities, thus filling an important gap in the research regarding the impact of social media. In view of its widespread use, Facebook could be the principal source of information about the police for many people who have little to no direct experience with police officers. Therefore, this evidence-based study of the relationship between Facebook and public perceptions of legal authorities could contribute to society by improving the understanding of the current public discourse about law and order.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aims to explore the impact of social media, particularly Facebook, on public perceptions of legal authorities in Hong Kong. It has long been argued that traditional mass media play a significant role in shaping public opinion by, for example, setting the public agenda [3]. More recently, the impact of innovative social media has increasingly drawn scholarly attention [4-6]. Given that law and order has been one of the major online topics in Hong Kong in recent years [7], this study emphasizes its possible impact on perceptions of the police force.

Media representations of the police have been considered an important source of public perceptions of

\*Address correspondence to this author at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University of Hong Kong; Tel: (852) 2768 6848; Fax: (852) 2391 3184; E-mail: ww@chan@ouhk.edu.hk

law and order [8-10]. In regard to the politicized perceptions of the police, it has been argued that the traditional role of the police as law enforcers served to promote a neutral and apolitical conception of policing, thus concealing the fact that the police force always operated as an instrument of the political system [11]. From this perspective, "crime-fighting" police work is nothing more than managing an apolitical appearance of the politicized police role. Indeed, in daily life, the police are more often perceived as crime fighters or service providers than as a political tool of the government. In this connection, the focus of this study falls on whether the police force is more likely to be perceived as politicized in view of the social media networking.

Social media is not simply mass (communication) media. It is also the new media by which social networking takes place. This paper therefore emphasizes not only the impact of mass media on public perceptions but also the impact of social networking on those perceptions. The literature has always highlighted the impact of the media dimension of social media. For example, it is suggested that the "new-visibility" function of social media would increase the visibility of legal authorities, allowing the general public to easily judge criminal justice [12]. With such new visibility, the general public would also be more likely to confirm their suspicions and negative attitude towards legal authorities such as the police or the courts. Nonetheless, the impact of the social networking dimension of social media is largely ignored with few exemption [13]. The current study attempts to propose an innovative framework acknowledging the impact of the media as well as social networking.

This study employs the major concepts of social capital, namely, bonding social capital and bridging social capital, to theorize the impact of social media on people's perceptions. In a very general sense, social capital is defined as the resources embedded in social networks [14-17]. Bonding social capital refers to the resources embedded in inward-looking networks, for example, for the sharing of homogeneous views or feelings. Bridging social capital represents the resources embedded in outward-looking social circles, for example, for acquiring heterogeneous views or sentiments.

In regard to the impact on people's perceptions, we conceptualize bonding social capital as homogeneous social networking that takes place on Facebook and promotes the exchange of personal opinions or

politicized views. This leads to heavy judgment, whether critical or complimentary, of criminal justice. Simply put, people are more likely to form politicized perceptions of legal authorities through homogeneous social networking on Facebook. On the other hand, we expect that bridging social capital provides Facebook users with online social networking among people with different views, which facilitates the moderation of strong opinions or politicized sentiments. This results in a more balanced or neutral view of legal authorities.

The research targets are the younger generation, specifically, people aged between 18 and 30, in Hong Kong. There are two reasons for this decision. First, Hong Kong's young people are the most active users of social media, and therefore, they should be the people who are most affected by social media. For example, one study found that social media use was significantly correlated with political participation among Hong Kong's younger generation [18]. Second, given the socio-political situation in Hong Kong after the "Occupy Central" movement in 2014, it is reasonable to expect that young people are now paying much more attention to political affairs and law-and-order issues through social media. Therefore, it is worth investigating whether young people who regularly use social media are forming more politicized perceptions of criminal justice in Hong Kong.

Based on the notions of social capital, two major assumptions are formulated as follows:

- a. Young people who possess more bonding social capital on Facebook are more likely to hold politicized perceptions of the police;
- b. Young people who possess more bridging social capital on Facebook are more likely to hold neutral perceptions of the police.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Given the explorative nature of this study, qualitative individual interviews were conducted to gauge the younger generation's perceptions of the police in Hong Kong. The in-depth interviews offered a more dynamic view of how public perceptions are formulated and, more importantly, important reasons behind those perceptions. A case in point was the perspective of different kinds of individual Facebook users on legal authorities in Hong Kong. We successfully engaged a total of 30 young interviewees, all of whom were Hong Kong permanent residents aged between 18 and 29 years. The interview was

semi-structured with the key questions ranging from the use of Facebook to the social networking on Facebook and then to the perceptions of police force. Normally it took at least one and a half hour to satisfactorily complete an interview. Non-probability snowball sampling was used to identify interviewees who possessed different types of social capital on Facebook. Specifically, two major groups of Facebook users were engaged: 1) users with a high level of bonding social capital on Facebook and 2) users with a high level of bridging social capital on Facebook.

Before exploring the impact of these two different types of online social networking on people's perceptions, we will briefly describe how Facebook functions as one of the most popular social media networks in the world. Facebook, launched in 2004, is a social networking website that enables its users to add "friends" to their Facebook account. Users can post to share personal information and opinions in various forms, such as by uploading photos, writing comments, and clicking a "like" button or emoji. Users can also engage in dynamic communication with other users by leaving various forms of messages, such as photos, comments, and emojis, on other users' posts. Many features of Facebook could be relevant to the perceptions of legal authorities. For instance, Facebook users can share news stories, commentaries, or webpages (fanpages) with other users or simply use emojis to express agreement or disagreement. They can share or comment on news reports about police actions, commentaries on the reputations of the police force, and webpages (or fanpages) in support of or against the police operation in Hong Kong.

In view of Facebook's features, we systematically categorized two specific groups of interviewees with different types of online social networking as follows:

1. Users with a high level of bonding social capital on Facebook: these users tend to engage with other users with whom they share similar views on Facebook by adding them as "friends", using emojis, expressing opinions, participating in discussion, and/or sharing information via posts.
2. Users with a high level of bridging social capital on Facebook: these users tend to engage with users whose views are dissimilar to, or even opposite, their own on Facebook by adding them as "friends", using emojis, expressing opinions, participating in discussion, and/or sharing information via posts.

We conducted 15 in-depth individual interviews with each of the above two types of interviewees, for a total of 30 interviews. Given the small size of samples, this pilot study does not attempt to create certain generalization of theoretical propositions, but to generate some qualitative data of inferential value. The individual interviews proceeded as follows. First, we collected the interviewees' social networking information (e.g., friends, communities, and fanpages) on Facebook (e.g., How does the interviewee describe his/her "friends" on Facebook? What are the reasons for "liking" some Facebook communities/fanpages?) Second, interviewees were provided with general news reports on criminal justice in Hong Kong for an open-ended discussion. If necessary, the interviewer facilitated the discussion by asking interviewees about their perceptions of the ideal roles of the police with the government and its policies. The aim was to test the major assumptions and to offer a more dynamic view of perceptions of the police force in Hong Kong (e.g., Are the police trustworthy? If yes, why? If no, why not?). Third, adhering to the idea of the "new visibility" of legal authorities on social media [19], we employed specific sets of Facebook posts for free-flowing deliberation (e.g., one set of Facebook posts was concerned about the police allegedly acting on a political mandate from the government). In this regard, we offered no evidence-based material to prove the political interference with police actions on such a Facebook post. After all, we focused on people's perceptions in the course of interviewing.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

Among all interviewees, it was evident that certain perceptions of the police were socially constructed by what they had seen on Facebook. Interviewees who believed that it was possible for the police to work with gangsters for sake of restoring public order in the "Occupy Central" movement subscribed to certain Facebook fanpages such as "Enrolling One Hundred Thousand People Against the Police-Triad Coalition"<sup>1</sup>. As described by one of the interviewees, "We would never have the substantial evidence to say so (i.e., the police work with the gangsters), but it would also not be far from the truth that the gangsters beat up the protestors with the police's consent. If it were not the truth, there would not be so many people signing up for the anti-police fanpages on Facebook and expressing

---

<sup>1</sup>A prominent anti-police Facebook fanpage in Hong Kong.

their anger at the police". Another interviewee further explained why Facebook is an integral part of our social reality: "Nowadays, you can't tell a lie on Facebook because the picture you posted on Facebook will speak the truth by itself". When asked why pictures or videos on Facebook are so trustworthy, the interviewee replied, after a second thought: "If the picture is a sort of artificial creation, the netizens will deny the truth of it. We can therefore leave this very 'matter-of-fact' issue to the monitorship of every Facebook user".

Through the above accounts, it became clear that the social media such as Facebook is a media platform that provides different kinds of media content, such as anti-police fanpages, but more importantly, it is a social arena that offers social networking among people. The perception that pictures posted on Facebook can speak the truth by themselves was based not on the media account of Facebook but rather on the subtle confirmation of Facebook netizens. Natalie (an interviewee under a pseudonym) was a year-one university student who managed to spend 5 to 6 hours on Facebook per day. To her, Facebook is an online world full of useful and interesting information, and the police images on Facebook caused her to lose confidence in, and even loathe, the police. Natalie had no actual encounter with police officers, but her Facebook friends shared news about police misconduct. She admitted that because it was her friends who shared the news, she paid additional attention to it. In describing what made her mistrust the police, Natalie said the following: "One of the teachers from my secondary school, whom I respect so much, posted a checklist about various kinds of police misconduct. When I saw her post on my Facebook, I was very impressed because the teacher seldom posts the information of this sort. Therefore, I thought that the police must have done something very wrong". Thus, it was not simply the Facebook posts but Natalie's personal and significant networking (with somebody she respected) that played a role in the formation of her perceptions of the police.

### **Bonding Netizens**

The interviewees' perceptions of the police could be divided into three categories. The first are espoused by what we call "bonding netizens". These are Facebook users who mostly agreed that what they saw on Facebook or other social media accurately reflected social reality. As one interviewee stated: "Facebook is not a vacuum. It is created by human beings, after all.

Compared with traditional media like newspapers, Facebook is more open to public scrutiny. When a newspaper reporter spoon-feeds us fake news, even if we find what is wrong in it, it is not easy for us to offer a counter-argument against such news. However, Facebook is an interactive platform for all netizens to crosscheck everything as far as it becomes nothing more than a social reality". Almost all bonding netizens perceived the police force as acting as a political instrument of the government. One of them further argued that the Hong Kong government had already lost control of the Hong Kong Police Force, and it was the Chinese government that took over and commanded the police force: "That is why so many Hong Kong people now call Hong Kong Police Force 'the mainland public security' (i.e., the official name of the Chinese police)".

Such a highly politicized perception of the police force was reinforced by the exclusiveness among the bonding netizens. When their perspectives were questioned or their arguments challenged, their immediate response was to unfriend dissidents on Facebook. One bonding netizen explained this as follows: "There is no room for any meaningful and reasonable discussion because the Blue Ribbons (i.e., those who supported the police action in "Occupy Central" movement) were either being brainwashed or receiving money from the authority..." When asked how they dealt with dissidents who were not Blue Ribbons but were their personal friends or acquaintances, another bonding netizen similarly chose to unfriend them on Facebook. The major reason was that "there is no point in arguing with them on Facebook and then doing harm to our friendship in real life". It was ironic, if not surprising, that the bonding netizens were using the unfriend function of Facebook to maintain their real friendships with dissidents. What was more unexpected was that such an easy-come-easy-go unfriend function could strongly enhance a politicized view of the police force among the bonding netizens, given that the dissidents' voices no longer managed to survive on their Facebook.

### **Inward Bridging Netizens**

The inward bridging netizens were those who perceived the police in a more dynamic way. Some of them had also subscribed to an anti-police Facebook fanpage, where they could read about police force scandals and the misconduct of individual police officers on a regular basis, but they had ambivalent responses. The inward bridging netizens often received

a tremendous amount of negative news about the police, but interestingly, they were also more than willing to look for the Facebook fanpages, posts or opinions that supported the police. One inward bridging netizen remarked: "Hong Kong has long been a pluralistic society with many different voices, so I am not stupid enough to let one single voice blindfold my mind...However, after reading 'Speak Out HK'<sup>2</sup>, I find the point of view from the police supporters unconvincing. After all, I choose to believe some, if not all, of the police scandals on Facebook". On the other hand, another inward bridging netizen chose to stand by the police because "I have ever saw a Facebook post that compiled a list of various misconduct and crimes committed by 'off-duty police officers'. At first, I questioned whether these police officers deserve our taxpayer money. However, I came across another Facebook post, which is a video showing a police constable who tried to save a person's life in traffic accidents by lifting up a vehicle. At that moment, I thought that the so-called off-duty-police-officer crimes is just a matter of minor stuff. When it comes to a matter of life and death, we do need the police, and they are also worth our support".

Nicholas (pseudonym) was the most representative interviewee among the inward bridging netizens. He not only was eager to enroll in various Facebook fanpages for both Yellow Ribbons (anti-police camp) and Blue Ribbons (pro-police camp) but also actively participated in the discussion and debate by leaving comments on Facebook posts from both camps. Nicholas summarized his Facebook surfing experience as follows: "I trust neither the Yellow Ribbons nor the Blue Ribbons. The Yellow Ribbons will humiliate the police as much as the Blue Ribbons deify the police. Both are extremists. And I can tell that the police in reality would lie in between the extreme perspectives from both camps".

### **Outward Bridging Netizens**

The remaining respondents could be categorized as outward bridging netizens. Like the inward bridging netizens, these respondents widely engaged with various online Facebook "friends". What makes the outward bridging netizens different from the inward bridging netizens is their willingness to add real-life acquaintances, including friends and family members, to their Facebook friend list.

The inward and outward bridging netizens saw the police force from a similar perspective but offered different reasons in connection with their social networking on Facebook. More often than not, the outward bridging netizens had a more neutral perception of the police than inward bridging netizens. Their typical comments on the police were that "it is hard to say whether the police are good or bad", "I will not judge the police, just as it does no good for us to judge one another", "after all, my relatives, my friends as well as myself have no personal contact with the police officers, so we do not have personal knowledge of the police", etc.

More importantly, outward bridging netizens tended to deliver their neutral accounts in a de-politicized tone: "I would rather not share any (Facebook) posts about the police, avoiding the unnecessary quarreling with my family", "it is highly sensitive to share police news because I do not want to be labelled as a Blue Ribbon or Yellow Ribbon in the classroom", and "When I read a police story on Facebook for which I would like to give the thumbs-up emoji, on second thought, I decide not to do so....this is because I cannot use one simple thumbs-up emoji to express my thinking on that (police) story, and it is very easy for someone to get it wrong".

Avoiding quarreling, labeling, and misunderstanding were clearly the major concerns for the outward bridging netizens. This also reflected that the formation of de-politicized perceptions of the police force were highly influenced by networking in the offline world.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The current study was designed to explore the impact of Facebook on perceptions of the police. The findings supported some major underlying assumptions. For example, because of their highly enclosed online social networking, bonding netizens tend to form strongly politicized views of the police. In contrast, bridging netizens tend to deliver various depoliticized views of the police because of their cross-networking both on social media and in real life. These conclusions are worth further investigation, given the explorative nature of this pilot study.

Some theorists argue that social capital is on the decline, particularly in formal associational life (e.g., joining political parties); meanwhile, there is a widespread increase in social capital through many forms of informal socializing (e.g., signing online petitions) [20-22]. Following this line of scholarly

<sup>2</sup>A prominent pro-police Facebook fanpage in Hong Kong.

inquiry, this study attempted to develop an innovative theoretical framework addressing the possible value of social capital embedded in informal socializing on Facebook. More specifically, apart from the notions of bonding and bridging social capital, linking social capital could also be used as a useful conceptual construct to acknowledge netizens with connections cutting across both online and offline worlds. A case in point in this study was the outward bridging netizens, who were found to be more accountable to their real-life friends and family. However, the question of how to bring their linking social capital into play remains unanswered.

In connection with the field of police studies, this study notes that social media such as Facebook has been gathering momentum to increase what police scholars call the “new visibility” of legal authorities [23], thus politicizing the police force. However, this “new visibility” is not merely created by various innovative functions of social media, as we may expect. The various vital roles of social networking in social media are marked with an asterisk for further deliberation.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Thompson J. The new visibility. *Theory, Culture and Society* 2005; 22(6): 31-51.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405059413>
- [2] Goldsmith A. Policing's new visibility. *British Journal of Criminology* 2010; 50: 914-934.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azq033>
- [3] McCombs M. *Setting the Agenda*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2014.
- [4] Fuchs C. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage 2017.
- [5] Grimmelikhuisen S, Meijer A. Does Twitter increase perceived police legitimacy? *Public Administration Review* 2015; 75(4): 598-607.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12378>
- [6] Schneider C. Police 'image work' in an era of social media: You Tube and the 2007 Montebella Summit Protest. In D. Trottier and C. Fuchs (Ed.), *Social Media, Politics and the State*, New York: Routledge 2015; pp. 227-246.
- [7] South China Morning Post (SCMP). 2017 “Hong Kong Justice Department to take action after online abuse of judge”, 16 February, HYPERLINK "http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2071542/hong-kong-justice-department-take-action-after-online-abuse" <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2071542/hong-kong-justice-department-take-action-after-online-abuse> (accessed 16 February 2017).
- [8] Cavender G. Media and crime policy. *Punishment and Society* 2004; 6(3): 335-348.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474504043636>
- [9] Mawby R. *Policing Images: Policing, Communication and Legitimacy*. Devon: Willan Publishing 2002.
- [10] Mawby R. Crisis? What crisis? Some research-based reflections on police-press relations. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 2012; 6(3): 272-280.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pas026>
- [11] Manning P. *Democratic Policing in a Changing World*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers 2010.
- [12] Goldsmith A. Policing's new visibility. *British Journal of Criminology* 2010; 50: 914-934.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azq033>
- [13] Turkle S. *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books 2011.
- [14] Bourdieu P. The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press 1986; pp. 241-258.
- [15] Coleman J. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 1988; 94: 95-120.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/228943>
- [16] Lin N. *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815447>
- [17] Putnam R. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse of Revival of American Community*. New York: Touchstone 2000.  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/358916.361990>
- [18] Lee F. Hong Kong: Social media and political participation in a “protest society”. In Willnat and Aw (Ed.), *Social Media, Culture and Politics in Asia*, New York: Peter Lang 2014; pp. 63-83.
- [19] Goldsmith A. Policing's new visibility. *British Journal of Criminology* 2010; 50: 914-934.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azq033>
- [20] Castells M. *The Information Age, Volume 1: The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1996.
- [21] Field J. *Social Capital (Third Edition)*. Oxford: Routledge 2017.
- [22] Halpern D. *Social Capital*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2005.
- [23] Goldsmith A. Policing's new visibility. *British Journal of Criminology* 2010; 50: 914-934.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azq033>

Received on 02-05-2019

Accepted on 22-05-2019

Published on 30-05-2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31907/2617-121X.2019.03.01.2>

© 2019 Wayne W.L. Chan; Licensee Green Publishers.

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits unrestricted, non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.