Communicating a sense of safety: the public experience of Swedish Police Instagram communication

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Abstract

Purpose – The research aim of this article is to generate novel insights into how public sector organizations (PSOs) strategically communicate with the public about critical issues on social media. To this end, the study explores the public's experiences of the Swedish Police's sense of safety communication on Instagram in the third largest city in Sweden, where the lack of a sense of public safety is a main societal challenge.

Design/methodology/approach – The research was designed as a case study employing photo-elicitation interviews as a method to collect the empirical material. A phenomenography approach was used to analyze public experiences of the Swedish Police's Instagram communication in Malmö, Sweden.

Findings – Findings show that the police's strategic communication of safety on Instagram is experienced along the dimensions of a sense of protection, a sense of proximity and a sense of ambiguity. Taken together, these dimensions broaden and develop the knowledge of what communicating a sense of safety in the public sphere entails.

Originality/value – This study adds to previous research on strategic communication in public sector organizations by demonstrating what strategic communication accomplishes at the receiving end outside of the organization.

Keywords Sense of safety, Police communications, Public, Instagram, Strategic communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Public sector organizations (henceforth PSOs) engage in complex forms of strategic communication involving many different agendas, stakeholders, recipients and media platforms (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020). In recent years, the complexity of strategic

communication in the public sector communication has increased due to the expansion of social media and the entanglement of non-digital and digital public spheres in which the meanings of societal phenomena are shaped and negotiated (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2010). For several years, scholars have focused on how strategic communication in social media can help foster relationships between PSOs and publics that will lead to increased trust, transparency and credibility for these types of organizations internally as well as externally (Christensen and Cheney, 2015; Christensen and Christensen, 2022a; Lovari and Valentini, 2020; Heide and Simonsson, 2011, 2021). Yet, the communicative challenges and dilemmas posed by social media for PSOs are still not well understood in previous research and little is known what happens to strategic communication at the receiving end (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). For example, research shows that communicative dilemmas refer to issues of transparency. Transparency involves elements of interpretation and accountability that focus on credibility, certainty and openness, along with control, exclusion, manipulation and surveillance in relation to how organizations shape their communication through, for example, social media (Christensen and Cheney, 2015; Lovari and Valentini, 2020), as well as the vagueness of what is considered strategic versus non-strategic communication (Raupp and Hoffjann, 2012). Such issues are particularly problematic for strategic communication targeted to diverse publics addressing societal problems (Christensen and Christensen, 2022b; Falkheimer and Heide, 2023). Previous studies on PSOs strategic communication have mostly dealt with information sharing, relationship building and internal aspects of co-workers as communicators (e.g. Lovari and Valentini, 2020; Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020; Heide and Simonsson, 2011, 2021) and issues connected to how PSOs strategically communicate via social media to target publics outside of the organizations and have largely been neglected.

This article uses the Swedish Police Authority (henceforth the Swedish Police) as a case in point to examine the strategic communication of a PSO employing social media to reach the broader public. The police organization is highly influenced by private-sector communication in the way messages are constructed to increase visibility and attractiveness in the eyes of the public (Olsson and Eriksson, 2016; Rolandsson, 2020). Besides creating visibility and sharing information with the public, the police also use social media in order to (1) legitimize their work in the community (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2015; Walsh and O'Connor, 2019), (2) engage in trust-building activities (Williams *et al.*, 2018), (3) narrate and control the police's own story (Walby and Wilkinson, 2023), (4) perform image work (Bullock, 2018; Schneider, 2021a), (5) uphold the social order (Schneider, 2021b) and (6) be funny (Rasmussen, 2017; Wood, 2020). According to Holgersson (2019), the Swedish Police shapes its messages in line with the interest of the organization and the way it wishes to be perceived by the public. However, Jackson and Bradford (2009) state that police communication for the public does not necessarily correlate with what the public wants. Similarly, Wood (2020) argues that the discrepancy between the police and the public is due to their different understandings of community. An example of this disparity is that the police withhold information from the public in order to sustain the myth of police work (Schneider, 2021b), creating further distance between the public and the organization (Terpstra *et al.*, 2019). In part, the disparity relates to how organizations handle critique against and responsibility for their strategic communication (Christensen and Cheney, 2015), which, in the end, is a matter of understanding the what, how, when, who and where of communication (Christensen and Christensen, 2022a). Attempts by the police to control social media content are considered problematic on various levels. The main reason is that control is difficult to maintain, and risks backfiring on the police and negatively affect the trust between police officers and the public (Schneider, 2021b).

Although police communication has been historically implemented by means of various analog and digital channels, contemporary social media networks have become the center of attention primarily because they allow the police to meet people where they are (Sjöberg *et al.,* 2023). Among other social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram occupies a prominent position. For example, in 2023, the Swedish Police had 278 official social media accounts, 116 of which were Instagram accounts (Polisen, n.d.), where the PSO and its employees take the role of media content producers and distributors (Lovari and Valentini, 2020), propagating different voices within the organization (Christensen and Christensen, 2022a; Cassinger and Thelander, 2020). It is pertinent to highlight that (1) Instagram's widespread popularity and user base make it an effective tool for reaching and engaging with large audiences, encompassing various age groups, even though the prevalent is the younger demographics (Internet Stiftelsen, 2022). (2) Instagram's visual nature makes it ideal for sharing images and videos (Manovich, 2017), enabling the police to provide visual evidence and showcase their work in a compelling format. Nevertheless, it may not always be suitable for conveying complex or detailed information. (3) Instagram offers interactive features, such as comments, direct messaging and the ability to tag and mention other users. These features potentially facilitate two-way communication between the police and the public, allowing for direct engagement, feedback and information exchange. Yet, these same features can raise privacy and data concerns, including surveillance-related activities. (4) Instagram's location tagging feature can be particularly valuable for the police. By including location tags in their posts, the police can geographically target their communications, providing localized information and updates to specific regions or neighborhoods. However, Instagram's algorithmic feed and chronological limitations can result in posts being easily missed by users. Unlike platforms that allow for pinning or categorizing posts, Instagram's content organization may not ensure that critical information remains visible to the public over an extended period. Consequently, important updates or safety warnings may be overlooked, leading to a potential lapse in public awareness. Notwithstanding the police's ambitious social media agenda, especially on Instagram, scarce research considers the public experience of police strategic communication via the platform, particularly regarding a sense of safety (Bullock *et al.*, 2021; Walby and Wilkinson, 2023).

The Swedish Police mission entails building relationships with the public to maintain law and order by solving, preventing crimes and creating a sense of public safety (Sveriges riksdag (Police Act), 1984; Polisen, 2019). In its mission to create a sense of safety among the public, the Swedish police use (1) transmediality (multiplatform content for audience engagement), (2) a physical/digital presence (for visibility) and (3) transparency (for accountability) as communication strategies (see Sjöberg *et al.,* 2023).

The research aim of this article is thus to provide novel insights into how the public experiences PSOs' strategic communication on social media and the consequences of this communication for the public sphere. More specifically, the study examines the public experience of the Swedish Police's strategic communication of a sense of safety on Instagram. The study is situated in the third largest city in Sweden, Malmö, where the lack of a sense of public safety is a main societal challenge. To achieve the aim, we pose the following research questions: (1) How does the public in Malmö experience the Swedish Police communication on Instagram? and (2) To what extent does the Swedish Police organization's communication on Instagram contribute to the public's experience of a sense of safety? In answering these questions, we use a phenomenography approach to grasp public experiences of policing in Instagram posts.

In the remaining part of the article, we first present the literature review and theoretical approach in the study. Next, we account for the methodology and results of the

analysis of the empirical material involving the dimensions of a sense of protection, a sense of proximity and a sense of ambiguity. Finally, we discuss implications of the results for understanding strategic communication on social media of police organizations and PSOs.

Police communication on social media

The police's use of social media aims at creating and maintaining public engagement so as to increase transparency and legitimacy, positively affecting the image of the organization (Bergquist *et al.*, 2015; Sjöberg *et al.*, 2023). Social media content produced by members of police organizations may increase public interest, for instance, in the case of showcasing police dogs and puppies (Wood, 2020). Furthermore, as Ralph *et al.* (2022) suggests, social media content may humanize the person behind the uniform and in this way simultaneously strengthen the relationship with the public and co-workers (Bullock, 2018). In this respect, social media becomes an auto-communication process, which involves merging the police organization's internal and external strategic communication (Madsen, 2022; Christensen, 1997). Social media communication has the potential to cultivate a deeper understanding within the police organization of how the public perceives, negotiates and processes policing (Walsh and O'Connor, 2019), which could lead to improved trust between the public and the police (Williams *et al.*, 2018). Another concern highlighted in previous research is that police organizations' high trust in their digital systems, including the use of Instagram, risks alienating the public from the police because of unjustified organizational priorities (Terpstra *et al.*, 2019).

Nevertheless, the police cannot rely on posting cute police dogs on social media (Wood, 2020); instead, the organization should post what serves the community (de Graaf and Meijer, 2019; Ralph, 2022) to increase transparency toward the public (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2015). Police communication on social media needs to gain more useful "data [that] identify public concerns and priorities directly from citizens' actual conversations rather than the indirect method based on respondent perceptions" (Williams *et al.*, 2018, p. 220). Indeed, following the aim to become a more transparent authority and build a good reputation, the police had to listen to the public with reference to what to communicate on social media (Ralph *et al.*, 2022). The result is a mix of societal messages in a personal manner (Bullock, 2018) while adapting to social media norms and conventions (Schneider, 2021a; Cassinger and Thelander, 2020).

Police communication has an inclusive or exclusionary effect on society and therefore involves great responsibility, since it affects how people perceive and trust the police (Holgersson, 2019). According to a recent survey, around 70% of the Swedish population has high or very high trust in the police and the legal system (SOM-Institute, 2023). The police organization's goal of being transparent on social media while at the same time being lawful creates tensions between police values and their mission (de Graaf and Meijer, 2019). Using social media is not without problems for public organization and may cause misunderstandings within and outside its boundaries (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014). Social media can, among other issues, lead to addiction among and negative responses from followers (Trittin-Ulbrich *et al.*, 2021). A concern for the police has traditionally been to maintain control of social media communication by avoiding discussions with and countering criticism from followers (Rolandsson, 2020; Sjöberg *et al.*, 2023) and to inform instead of communicating with the public (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2015; Schneider, 2021b; Walby and Wilkinson, 2023). The concern of controlling social media communication raises questions about to what extent the public can participate in conversations and the role of policing in the uncontrolled milieu of social media (de Graaf and Meijer, 2019; Rasmussen, 2017). Control is pressing for all government organizations employing social media, but

especially for the police, given their monopoly of violence in society (Anstead and Chadwick, 2018; Ralph, 2022). It is important for the police to uphold an image of the organization as able to fight criminality, while at the same time being engaged in softer societal issues. Strengthening relations between members of the police and the public in the digital world may create spillover effects in the public sphere and contribute positively to experiences of public safety (Bullock *et al.*, 2021; Wood, 2020).

Policing on Instagram
Like other social media platforms, Instagram intertwines the digital and non-digital worlds (Fuchs, 2021) by sharing personal snapshots of one's everyday life accompanied with a short text and sometimes with hashtags in order to achieve clicks, likes and comments (Manovich, 2017). Thus, blurs the boundary between private and public spheres (Van Dijck, 2013). For police organizations, Instagram is used to engage publics in social community topics and establish new connections and commitments (Skoric *et al.*, 2016). Cassinger and Thelander (2020) argue that Instagram is an idealistic platform for PSO strategic communication in that it provides insights into the shared rules, norms and culture of employees' social interactions. This is supported by Walby and Wilkinson's (2023) unique study on the Canadian police communication on Instagram and their use of strategic narratives.

A prominent feature of Instagram is the use of selfies as a communicative approach to elicit emotions or reactions that engage or disengage audiences (Zhao and Zappavigna, 2018). In this case, the police use selfies as a communicative ploy on Instagram (Schneider, 2021a) for the public to put a face on the police (Walby and Wilkinson, 2023). In addition to posts about everyday policing, content typically revolves around recruitment. However, police Instagram posts are typically characterized by beautification and upholding myths about policing (Walby and Wilkinson, 2023; Schneider, 2021b). Furthermore, gaining more access to information and content on Instagram can generate user engagement and achievements that connect the public and the police in socializing and trusting processes, potentially improving knowledge and awareness in the community (Skoric *et al.*, 2016; Bullock *et al.*, 2021). Withal, the police content on Instagram can blur the public's understanding of typical police work and entertainment (Schneider, 2021a), thus affecting the seriousness and trust of the police in multiple ways, for example, with regards to the activities they undertake (Walsh and O'Connor, 2019). Therefore, the police carefully curate the content on Instagram in their strive to ensure public trust and safety as well as to reduce criticism towards the police (Ralph *et al.*, 2022; Walby and Wilkinson, 2023).

Strategically communicating a sense of safety
The public perspective on a sense of safety is influenced by how we experience the social world based on our expectations and safety needs (Zou and Meng, 2020). Pain and Townshend (2002) suggest that the sense of safety affects our behavior, feelings, awareness and knowledge of risk, and other issues in the public sphere – a space in which a police presence is crucial. However, to further understand the experiences of safety, we need to be aware of how uncertainties influence understandings of being in harm's way (Furedi, 2019). In this sense, how the public sphere is organized and what is going on in it are vital to the understanding of a sense of safety among people (Pain and Townshend, 2002; Zou and Meng, 2020). Creating a sense of safety involves more than security measures regarding surveillance cameras and fences (Hermansson, 2018). By contrast, a sense of safety refers to a unified feeling and is best apprehended as a collective condition underpinning the view of what holds society together. It is based on experiences of closeness and trust between the public, authorities, and especially the judiciary system (Hermansson, 2018).

Moreover, fear is central to understanding a sense of safety. Fear is an emotional response to a perceived threat, real or imagined, that triggers a protective reaction. It is a basic survival mechanism that alerts us to potential danger and prepares us to take action to protect ourselves, including physical sensations, and mental and emotional responses (Chadee and Ying, 2013). Furedi (2019) states that we understand and experience fear based on cultural, societal and moral dimensions in which factors such as biological aspects, social class, education, our unconscious and the past reflect the consequences and impacts of fear on an individual or society. Thus, the concepts of fear and safety are profoundly intertwined and relate to the experienced risk of being exposed to crime or to general concerns that crimes occur regularly in society (Ceccato *et al.*, 2019). Crime affects us and creates insecurity, instability and fear in society (Kunnel, 2021). The entanglement of risk, fear and safety influences a change in and interpretation of cultural and societal communication across media (Furedi, 2019). Furthermore, fear and a sense of safety involve more than being in control because it relates to how we experience and become aware of our surroundings (Cassinger and Thufvesson, 2022).

Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017) argue that to prevent fear and foster a sense of safety in the public sphere, we need to confront associated risks, uncertainties and social concerns. If we do not act, the culture of fear will take over, and therefore, it is equally important to prevent and solve crimes as sustaining a felt sense of safety in the community (Furedi, 2019). Borovec *et al.* (2021) claim that citizens' sense of safety is not only about the visibility of the police and the relationship-building work they do in the community, but also that citizens know the risks connected to safety. Examples of crimes typically contributing to fear and unsafety in the Swedish context are gang violence, shootings, riots, elder crimes and robbery (cf. Sahlin Lilja, 2022). Crimes increase the sense of risk and may damage the public view of the police (Williams *et al.*, 2018), which in turn has a negative impact on the sense of public safety (Ceccato *et al.*, 2019).

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that PSOs, and especially police organizations, reflect on how they communicate about safety by providing accurate, up-to-date and vital societal information to the public outside of the organization (Zou and Meng, 2020). A key issue for police organizations is to minimize the crime risk and increase the community's well-being and public safety by using citizen collaborative efforts and transparent communication (Ho and Cho, 2017). In contact with PSOs, however, collaborative efforts are complicated by that the public uses social media primarily as an information device (top-down communicative process) rather than as a communication device (bottom-up communicative process) (Lovari and Valentini, 2020).

Experiencing police communication

The concern of this study is with how the public experiences Swedish Police Instagram communication and to what extent this communication has the potential to contribute to creating a sense of safety in the public sphere. Therefore, the concept of experience is paramount in discussions of the communication of a sense of safety.

Experience refers to the subjective awareness or perception of events, objects and phenomena in an environment, encompassing external (sensory) and internal (mental) experiences. John Dewey (1980), who made significant contributions to the understanding of the concept of experience, considers it not simply as passive reception of sensory information, but instead as active engagement with the world. According to Dewey (1980), experience is a continuous process of interaction between the individual and their environment, in which the individual adapts to the environment and the environment adapts to the individual. Experience has an individualizing and self-sufficient quality, shaping our understanding of unique happenings that we transform and perceive after they occur. Then, we process it via

thinking, communication and participation (Dewey, 1980). Souza (2022) adds that an experience is a continuous, dynamic and sensitive process that implies that we need knowledge of the world and aspects of representations to make sense of our surroundings, even if these representations are fragile and partial entities.

Consequently, an experience involves a dynamic interplay between past, present and future, and how we deal with them together with symbolism and functional elements, which refers to the *lieux de mémoire,* or sites of memory proposed by Pierre Nora (1989). *Lieux de mémoire* refer to sites or places that are charged with emotional and symbolic significance and that serve as powerful representations of a collective cultural or national memory. Adding to the complexity of the concept of experience, it is necessary to consider that our understanding of the world involves relations with *reality*, meaning that a certain degree of truth is needed because we are in constant negotiations with the world around us and how it impacts the way we experience it (Souza, 2022). This dynamic process applies to how the public experiences the police's Instagram communication, leading or not to a sense of safety.

Moreover, an experience involves patterns and structures in a symbiotic relationship between the real, the artificial and the artful (Dewey, 1980), which are three parameters that find fertile soil to grow within the Instagram platform. This implies that one's experience also derives from actions, the consequences of these actions, and the perception of them creates a relationship in which the interplay between meaning and emotions shapes future experiences (Dewey, 1980). The support of one's memories and the diachronic interaction with history also result in how we experience something (Nora, 1989), in this case, how the public experiences a sense of safety from the police's social media communication. Thus, Weick *et al.* (2005) claim that the understanding of an experience is part of how we make sense of things with the interplay of action and perception to obtain meaning in our lives in a complex world.

In connection to social media, the variety of interactions individuals can have with media content, in this case, Instagram, establish a spectrum of experiences with positive engagement, negative engagement, or disengagement, as well as engagement and relationships with media distributors (Souza, 2022), in this case, the police and police officers. Creating a sense of safety is the process of establishing and maintaining an environment that promotes feelings of security and protection from harm, danger, injury, or threat. This process depends heavily on our experiences of being safe (Ho and Cho, 2017) in the past and present, affecting our everyday lives and future experiences, including interaction and communication with others (Cassinger and Thufvesson, 2022).

Methodology

This case study qualitatively investigates the real-world context of an issue (Yin, 2018) by exploring how the public experiences the police's Instagram communication of a sense of safety in the third largest city in Sweden. The empirical study was conducted in Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden because it is (1) characterized as a dynamic and multinational city, (2) marked by crime and segregation problems, (3) considered a dangerous city in media reporting, and occasionally referred to as the Chicago of Sweden (Bjellert and Palm, 2012) and (4) working intensively with safety and crime prevention activities (Malmö stad, 2022). Moreover, the Malmö police had six active Instagram accounts at the beginning of 2023, which is unique for a Swedish city.

An inductive and qualitative research approach was used to collect data by applying photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs) with the support of the walking method to explore how members of the public in Malmö understand the police Instagram communication when interacting with the posts in the public space during daytime (O'Neill and Roberts, 2020). This method was used to gain perspective from different groups in society on how they experience

police communication in the informal and unpretentious setting of the public space in Malmö. The walking method provides a dynamic and interactive setting for conducting PEIs. By engaging participants in the city, the method creates a more relaxed and casual environment that can help to facilitate open and candid conversations. This active engagement in the city can trigger additional sensory cues, memories and observations, leading to more nuanced responses to the interview questions. Considering that "adding photographs during an interview not only provides a way to elicit additional information, but this interviewing technique also offers a visual dimension to the unobservable thoughts, feelings, experiences, and understandings" (Richard and Lahman, 2015, p. 4), the walking method is relevant to support PEIs because it creates a conducive and interactive setting for interviews, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and the social dynamics of their environment. As discussed earlier, per Dewey's (1980) perspective, experience entails an ongoing dynamic between an individual and their surroundings. In this interplay, the individual adjusts to the environment, while the environment also adapts to the individual. For example, the way in which the individual interprets the police content on Instagram.

The PEI method is beneficial when researchers intend to explore people's thoughts, insights and experiences about certain matters with the support of images (Harper, 2002; Richard and Lahman, 2015). In this study, we used PEIs with three Instagram posts from the Malmö police (Figures 1–3).
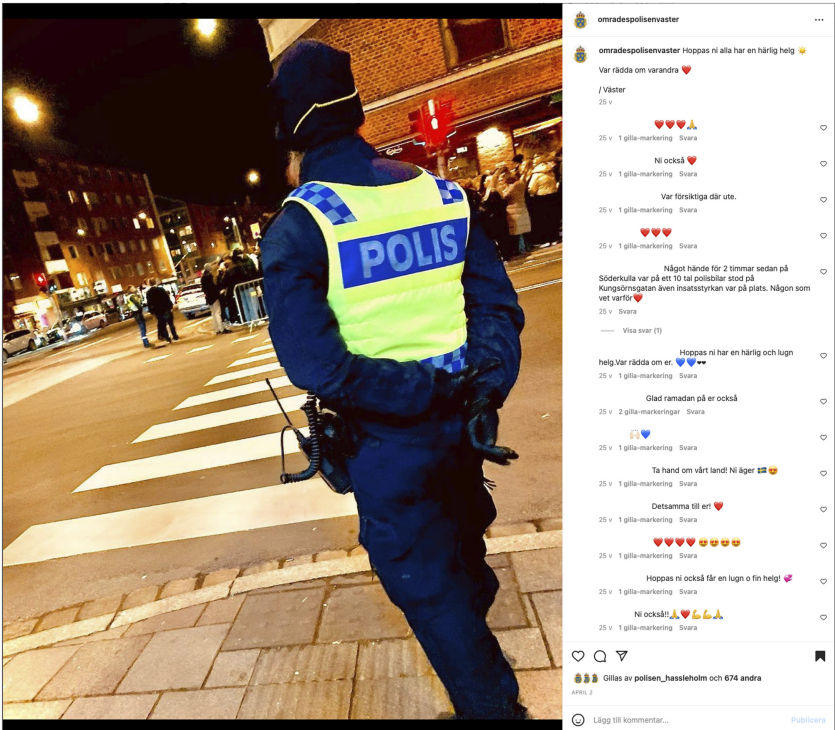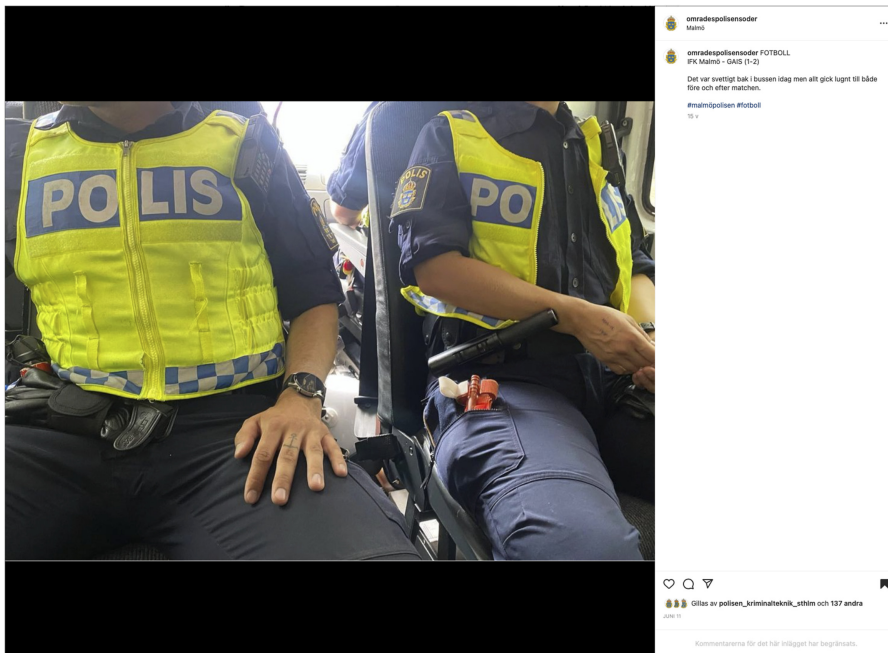
Source(s): Figure courtesy of Omradespolisenmalmo (2022), an Instagram account from the Swedish Police in Malmö

Source(s): Figure courtesy of Omradespolisensoder (2022), an Instagram account from the
Swedish Police in Malmö

Figure 2.
Football
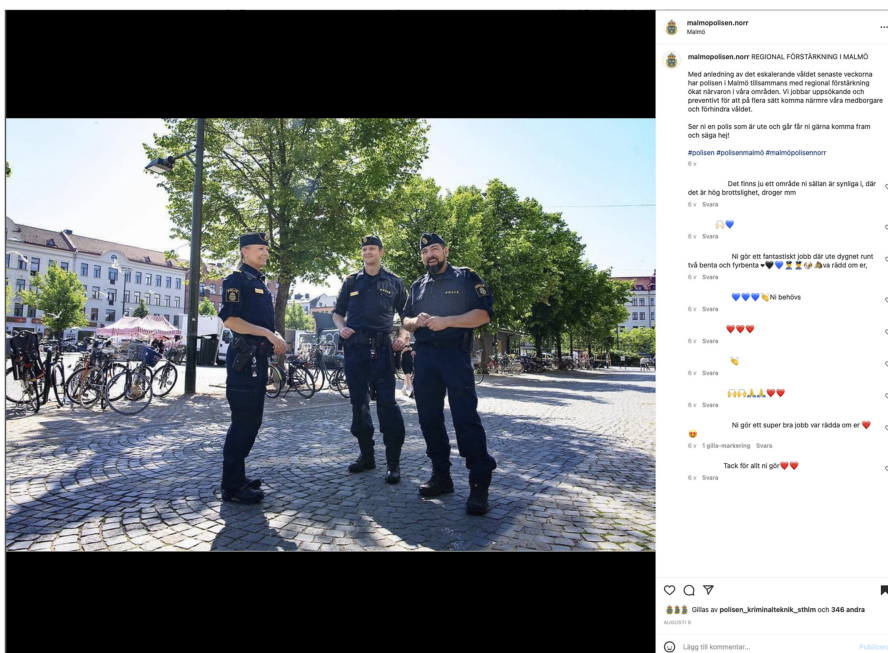
Source(s): Figure courtesy of Malmopolisen.norr (2022), an Instagram account from the
Swedish Police in Malmö

Figure 3.
Regional reinforcement
in Malmö

The Instagram posts were selected with a purposive sampling method (Koerber and McMichael, 2008) in combination with criterion sampling (Harper, 2002; Richard and Lahman, 2015), according to the following criteria: (1) posts from official Instagram accounts of the Swedish Police in Malmö that illustrate a wide span of police cases, areas, populations and events; (2) local posts from 2022 in which police employees in Malmö are working in the city; (3) exclusion of Instagram posts made by the national communication department or advertisements regarding the police training program; and (4) posts that highlight *safety* aspects but do not use the word in the text, connecting to the §1–2 in the Police Act (Sveriges, 1984) . Due to ethical reasons, and to keep the focus on the content from the police, all personal names in the posts were removed.

Photo-elicitation interviews

The empirical material consists of 25 PEIs with 41 members of the public in the city of Malmö. The PEIs were conducted on six different dates during autumn 2022. A convenience sampling approach was used to select the participants in the study (Koerber and McMichael, 2008). The interviews were conducted by the first author, 22 PEIs in Swedish and three in English, with individuals or small groups of two to three people. They typically lasted between 2 and 16 min. Even the shorter answers presented content relevant enough to enrich the empirical material as they were assertive and direct to the point in question. Participants were approached on the street or in public areas and encouraged to freely elaborate on their experiences with the Swedish Police's Instagram communication to understand whether and how the Instagram posts contribute to creating a sense of safety for the participants. The posts were shown as prints and digitally on an iPad. Around a third of the Swedish-speaking participants were aware of or recognized the Malmö Police's Instagram accounts, but only one stated during the data collection that the participant follows the Malmö Police on social media platforms. Furthermore, all interviews were transcribed by the first author, and all participants received codenames (participants A to AP) in the process.

Phenomenography

In line with the focus on public experience, phenomenography was used as the analytical lens to analyze the collected empirical material. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that aims to describe and understand the different ways people experience the world around them. It uncovers the underlying structures of meaning that individuals use to categorize and understand their experiences. This method involves collecting, mapping and analyzing data through interviews, observations, or written texts and using the data to identify common themes and patterns in the ways people experience a particular phenomenon (Adams *et al.*, 2011; Dahlgren and Johansson, 2020). This method was chosen to explore how the public experiences police Instagram communication in terms of creating a sense of safety. In addition, we used Kvale and Brinkmann's (2014) approach to validate the analysis by checking, questioning and theorizing the empirical material. This implies the rechecking of the findings based on the purpose, research questions and theoretical approach to verify the findings.

Ethical considerations

All participants received verbal information about the study and gave their oral consent to participate and to be audio-recorded. The study complies with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR; GDPR.EU, 2023). No personal or sensitive information was collected during the interviews. The participants' privacy and confidentiality are guaranteed in this study, and in most cases, they were totally unknown to the researchers. During the empirical data collection, the researcher had a university identification card visible to the participants, legitimizing the data collection process (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

Public experiences of police communication on Instagram

The phenomenographic analysis anchored in the conversations about Instagram posts of daily policing in Malmö resulted in three overarching categories of experiencing police communication: *a sense of protection, a sense of proximity and a sense of ambiguity.*

Sense of protection

The first experience emerging from the interviews concerns an ostensibly present and visible police organization, as the posts focus on the daily work of police officers. The participants experienced that the police are present in the community, watching over people in the public sphere. This happens, for example, when it is crowded and dark outside, and a police officer oversees the crowd moving through the street (see Figure 1). This experience is further emphasized when police visibility and availability are represented by a group of police officers outside on a sunny day (see Figure 3). The communication was understood as providing information about situational aspects of the police's daily work in the strive to become more accessible and transparent to the public by establishing their presence and conveying a *sense of protection*. The transparency aspect here refers to the challenge of organizational transparency through communication and the use of social media (Christensen and Cheney, 2015; Lovari and Valentini, 2020). This suggests that the police want to share credible and clear communication via social media, but they desire to control the content concerning aspects, such as, visibility and availability as well (Sjöberg *et al.,* 2023). In this case, a sense of protection is a feeling of security and safety that arises from the belief that one is being guarded from harm or danger. This feeling can arise, for instance, in the presence of a trusted person or protective authority, such as the police. A sense of protection can provide comfort and a sense of well-being, becoming an important factor in reducing feelings of fear and anxiety (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2005), potentially contributing to a broader sense of safety. Participant T strengthens this experience by commenting on Figure 1: "I would say it gives a sense of safety that they choose to show this. On the one hand, when it is dark, you are a bit scared, and all that. Then the police still choose to keep an eye on things here where there are many people."

The protective and comforting police organization was further underscored in the text of Figure 1. The police state to their followers: "We hope you are all having a good weekend. Take care of each other." The sense of protection was portrayed with imagery and text, reinforcing crime prevention, reducing fear (Furedi, 2019) and ensuring a safe environment for the public via the police's digital channels (Bullock *et al.*, 2021). Participant AO emphasizes this experience by commenting on Figure 3: "It feels like, ok, nice to know that these three people are helping to prevent violence in the city." This experience of feeling protected alludes to Nora's (1989) *lieu de mémoire*, where the interplay between one's memories and the history of how we experience, in this case, the police and their work, is charged with emotional and symbolic significance reminiscent of previous collective cultural circumstances. In addition, participants expressed that they had a generally positive feeling about the police presence because the police officers looked "friendly and welcoming" (see Figure 3). This sense of protection refers to Dewey's (1980) view concerning how we perceive actions, the consequences of actions and the influence of relationship-building with meanings and emotions.

Referring to Figure 2 (where the police officers' work relates to a football game that went well without violent incidents), participant P says, "I think they want to promote themselves as not just stopping people [but] as being needed in society as well. They are there to support and protect. Not just to be authoritarian monopolizers of violence." The participant's referral to protection is underpinned by a critical undertone toward the police as "authoritarian monopolizers of violence." In this instance, the interplay between past and present, as discussed by Nora (1989), adds complexity to the attempt to create a sense of safety. The participant seems to rationally understand that the police function is to "support and protect" the public and that

this is the message promoted in and through the Instagram post. Nonetheless, the underlying emotion in participant P's experience is the police's arbitrary activity of "stopping people"—rephrasing the critique of police profiling in Sweden (United Nations, 2022)—reinforcing the organization as "authoritarian monopolizers of violence." Therefore, we cannot automatically connect the sense of protection understood by the public in relation to social media communication as necessarily promoting a sense of safety. Nevertheless, this study offers indications that a sense of protection has the potential to contribute to creating a broader sense of safety, as exemplified by the public's experiences of Figures 1 and 3.

Sense of proximity

The second category refers to participants' experiences of their relationships with police officers. The exposure of police officers' vernacular communication, everyday work and details of their personalities, such as the display of their tattoos, turn them into authentic human beings. Such revelations allow the audience to humanize police work via Instagram, contributing to further understanding and relationship-building between the public and the police in the dynamics of the public sphere. A sense of proximity refers to the perception of distance or nearness between individuals and the social and psychological effects that this can have. Proximity can influence social attraction, the formation of relationships, the experience of others and the meanings of public places. Moreover, proximity impacts the experience of others, in that people tend to view those they are close to more favorably compared to those they are distant from. This is known as the mere exposure effect, where repeated exposure to a stimulus can increase the level of comfort and familiarity, leading to a positive association and increased liking (Montoya *et al.*, 2017). This experience is facilitated by Instagram communication.

The experience of a sense of proximity, humanization and relationship-building is highlighted by participant P in relation to Figure 1: "It gives [perspective] and humanizes the police a little bit. You should not just see them as blue lights. Well, they are there, wishing everyone a great weekend as well. They . . . well, [they] are there for us." This perceived experience by the public connects to the police ambition to establish a sense of availability via presence in the community physically and digitally (Sjöberg *et al.*, 2023; Walby and Wilkinson, 2023).

Previous experiences influence the way we think and interact in the present (Dewey, 1980; Nora, 1989). In this case, previous experiences and encounters with the police contribute to how participants in Malmö experience the organization's strategic communication efforts on Instagram. For instance, participant AG states, "When I was younger and saw a policeman patrolling the town, I felt safe. It was cool to see a policeman in town." The participants' experience that police communication on Instagram strives to be positive converges with previous research showing that the Instagram medium tends to support positive content (Cassinger and Thelander, 2020). Police communication on Instagram encourages beneficial and authentic experiences by giving real-life insights into everyday police work and officers' personal lives, showing them having a break and resting after an intensive football game (see Figure 2). Details such as a police officer's buttoned-up vest or tattoo strengthen the view of police officers as humans. Participant S says:

> You see a bit more than the police organization. You see them as people, even though you do not see their faces. Their heads are actually cut off in this photo, which is kind of creepy, trying to protect their identity, I guess. Anyway, it is nice to see that they are people and have these tattoos, this watch—one police officer has something written on his hand. [. . .] It is like, he is just a human being.

The humanization of police officers makes them appear closer to the public, which is also mentioned by Ralph *et al.* (2022). Creating proximity is an important aspect of how the police build relationships with the public via social media (Bergquist *et al.*, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2018). The participants said that proximity increases the likelihood that they will approach a

police officer in a public place. Furthermore, they associated proximity and the friendly tone in the Instagram posts with the police group chief character "Jesse" in the popular Swedish television drama series *Thin Blue Line*. In a paternal manner, "Jesse" frequently tells the members of his group, "Do not be afraid, but take care of yourselves" (Alders *et al.*, 2021). In the present case, fiction is intertwined with participants' real-life experience and becomes a reference point in relating to, engaging and interacting with the police (Souza, 2022).

Sense of ambiguity
The third category of experience involves criticism of the police's strategic communication on Instagram in terms of being silly and vague. The participants experience that there is a discrepancy between the image and the text, especially in Figure 1, in which the police officer turns from the camera, giving the impression of ambiguity. It is not clear if the police officer is showing his back to the audience as a gesture of indifference, if it is a matter of protecting the identity of the officer (implying a dangerous atmosphere), or if it is a mere circumstance of when the picture was taken.

Police communication is experienced as too shorthanded, and additional information is needed to grasp the meaning of the message. For example, the removal of the officers' faces (see Figure 2) makes participants experience this post as incomplete and directed to a vague target group. Walby and Wilkinson (2023) argue that vagueness upholds the myth of the police organization and that it is in the interest of the police that the public does not know everything about them. Figure 2 is experienced as dehumanizing and highlights the part of police work that involves violence, authority, use and abuse of power, respect and fear of the police. These aspects are emphasized by participant AM: "So just for myself, I think of abuse of power [. . .] when I think about football games and that the police always act more when a situation becomes serious." Thus, ambiguous meanings may decrease a sense of safety (Zou and Meng, 2020) and instead create fear of the police (Furedi, 2019; Kunnel, 2021).

Participants' experiences are divided in relation to the police seeking to gain points by being visible while not revealing that much about their work (Figure 3). This ambiguity seems to create confusion regarding the purpose of police communication. Participant AG states, "However, I think using social media to argue for its existence is superficial. [. . .] The police should not sell themselves [like this]." AG reinforces the criticism that police communication is more for internal communication purposes than for building relations with the public. Participant G emphasizes this experience:

> I generally have a hard time with the police on social media, especially when it comes to framing issues. When it is not just about information, but creating a definite context around them and their culture. I think the police need to stay neutral.

G's statement coincides with Nora's (1989) notion that our memories or experiences are not neutral or objective but are deeply charged with cultural and historical meanings and emotions. The dark side of police work is perceived in relation to the previous adverse events associated with it. Raising the question of the police's function in society, participant AA adds, "Should I be safer and happier and feel that the police are more humane? [. . .] They need to sharpen this [social media communication] up a bit. [. . .] somehow it misses the target [now]". This statement ties in with the ambiguity surrounding organizations' strategic and non-strategic communication (Raupp and Hoffjann, 2012), in addition to its level of accountability and transparency (Christensen and Cheney, 2015).

Experiences of ambiguity are reinforced by the fact that police communication—for various ethical reasons—directs viewers' attention only toward carefully selected snippets of reality. Another communication challenge is to maintain a balance between the informality of Instagram and an authoritative tone (Fielding, 2021), which is reflected in the participants'

experiences. Therefore, ambiguity is an important communicative tactic to protect and preserve those components of policing practice that need to be kept from the public (Schneider, 2021b).

Discussion and conclusions

Experiences of being safe are key to creating vibrant places in which order and stability are maintained. This paper has explored experiences among the public of the Swedish police's strategic communication on social media and whether the communication has the potential to contribute to a sense of safety among the public. The findings suggest that the public experience of the police communication of a sense of safety on Instagram may be understood along the three dimensions of protection, proximity and ambiguity.

The first dimension, protection, concerns experiences of safety connected to demonstrations of the visibility and presence of the police in public spaces. The second dimension, proximity, involves experiences connected to attempts to humanize the police organization and decrease the distance to the public. Creating proximity to the public may be seen as a strategy for the police to enhance the transparency of their actions in the public view (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2015). Nevertheless, transparency is not neutral and is continuously shaped as part of an organization's image work to influence social behaviors, either with good (e.g. openness) or negative (e.g. manipulation) intentions or objectives and can, thus, be understood as a two-edged sword (Christensen and Cheney, 2015). In the case of the Swedish police's strategic communication on Instagram, they use transparency both to create a credibility perspective and to restrict and control their organizational narrative (see Sjöberg *et al.*, 2023). The narrative is typically constructed as around an openness about what the organization is doing and its responsibilities towards the community. The third dimension, ambiguity, refers to experiences of vagueness connected to the police's communication efforts on Instagram. Vagueness is a response to communicative challenges for the police regarding what to show on social media, which involves maintaining a balance between distance and closeness, visibility and invisibility, exclusion and inclusion, and informality and authority. The participants criticized the police for avoiding addressing certain issues, masking police officers' identities and engaging in communication for internal or marketing purposes to improve the organization's image. In the worst case, ambiguity may contribute to experiences of fear and being unsafe in public places (see, e.g. Zou and Meng, 2020; Kunnel, 2021), counterproductively functioning in the opposite direction of the police's intention to create a sense of safety.

The dimensions of the public experience of safety in the police's strategic communication on Instagram resonate with the previous research on police communication on social media platforms, which aims to accomplish legitimacy and transparency for policing acts and policies (Bergquist *et al.*, 2015; Bullock, 2018; de Graaf and Meijer, 2019; Walby and Wilkinson, 2023). Although it is not possible to infer a sense of public safety from these dimensions, the findings of this study demonstrate the communicative challenges and potentials involved in promoting a sense of public safety in and through policing on a social media platform.

Implications for theory and practice

The theoretical contributions of the study include developing new knowledge of strategic communication from the perspective of the public and how communication undertaken by PSOs on social media shapes public experiences. Knowledge of what happens at the receiving end of strategic communication is limited and constitutes a research gap in the previous literature. The public experience, however, is of vital importance if we are to understand the effectiveness and value of communication efforts in a wider societal context and not merely how it is designed and organized. A public perspective on strategic communication was

conceptualized by means of a phenomenography approach to analyze the experience. This approach understands the public's experiences as a dynamic process involving emotions, patterns of meaning, past, present and future and forms a cohesive connection between them.

In terms of practical implications, the study underlines discrepancies between the PSOs social media strategic communication and the public experience. The experience dimensions show that strategic communication on Instagram accomplishes different and often unintended public responses and consequences. Findings also highlighted a critique against policing underpinning the experiences, pointing towards the need of understanding the local context in which the public is embedded. Even though it may be tempting to employ strategic ambiguity (Hoffjann, 2021) to navigate diverse perspectives and publics, there is also a risk that communication is experienced as purposeless and vague, which may contribute to experiences of fear–as opposed to safety–in public places.

Limitations and suggestions for further research
This study was conducted at various locations in the city of Malmö with the aim of capturing diverse public experiences of a sense of safety in the Swedish police's strategic communication. The study limits itself to interviews with participants on the street or in public areas. Several interviews were conducted during rush hour and at stressful times, which resulted in that some informants quickly answered the questions and moved on, which precluded opportunities to ask follow-up questions.

Another limitation of the study is the focus on one social media platform, Instagram, used by the Swedish police. Therefore, we suggest that future studies use a wider selection of social media platforms together with additional methods to understand the public experience of police strategic communication.

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