The role of social media in combating organised crime in the Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Social media is considered a double-edged sword, with both positive and negative effects. A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the extent to which and the ways in which South African police use social media in the study area. The findings were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 participants comprising the South African Police Service (SAPS) officials in the Giyani Cluster policing area. The findings indicate that criminals in the Limpopo Province use social media to commit crimes in the country, other countries in Africa, and elsewhere. The findings also indicate that social media is used to bring positive attention to law enforcement agencies and aid in criminal investigations. Although the positive impact of social media was highlighted in these experiences, persistent problems and challenges also featured in the data. Finally, officer insights were drawn upon to make recommendations for future policing policy and research. This paper concludes that social media as a tool can be utilised in terms of data gathering, prediction and spotting broader patterns, for combating organised crime by the SAPS.

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Introduction

The phrase “social media” is used to describe a group of computer-mediated and open-sourced networking platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube (Fallik, Deuchar, Crichlow, & Hodges, 2020, p. 1). The International Association of Chiefs of Police (cited in in Uduma, Nwasum, Abaneme, & Icha-Ituma, 2020) defines social media as a category of Internet-based resources that integrate user-generated content and user participation. This is not limited to communal networking sites, microblogging sites, photo- and video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and newflash sites. There have been steady emergent trends that focus on law enforcement pertaining to the use and role of social media in investigations (Abdalla & Yayilgan, 2014). According to Potgieter and Mersham (2002:55), the term “media” represents the plural of “medium”, and basically entails a “diverse collection of industries and practices, each with their own methods of communication, specific business interests, constraints and audiences”. Briggs and Cobley (1998:1) add that the media finds itself in a state of perpetual flux; the contents of media are constantly changing, and media outlets change ownership, as well as regulations, technologies, and audiences. Surette (2016:67) defines mass media as any communication medium that reaches many people, simultaneously, at little cost to the receiver.

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These platforms, if utilised efficiently, can play a pivotal role in combating organised crime. With the breadth and depth of this impact in mind, law enforcement agencies have begun to adopt social media strategies to expand the scope of their communication strategies (Varano & Sarasin, 2014). Boateng and Chenane (2020) concur that, in recent times, police departments across all social contexts have undergone tremendous changes, and that a major catalyst of these changes has been the emergence of social media. This technological innovation provides departments with a platform to communicate effectively and share information with the public. Despite computer-mediated technologies, often referred to as information and communications technology resources, becoming increasingly valuable to the functioning of the South African Police Service (SAPS), the SAPS has been challenged in keeping abreast of these technological changes, both from a policing and legal perspective.

The role of social media in combating organised crime remains vague to most SAPS members, except for traditional methods of policing. Traditional and social media methods have not really offered an enduring solution to the organised crime menace in South Africa. The paucity of empirical research in this area is surprising, especially given how social media has permeated nearly all aspects of contemporary society (Fallik et al., 2020); hence, there is a need for a study of this nature.

To address this gap in the extant literature, this study drew upon an ethnographic approach and reports insights from officers in nine police stations in the Giyani Cluster policing area in the Limpopo Province. In doing so, this study first explored within the empirical literature the nature of organised crime and the role of social media in combating organised crime. Secondly, the authors describe the methodology employed in this study and then thematically present the findings based on officer insights from the interview data. Finally, the implications from these findings are provided, in terms of the changing approaches to policing and in making recommendations for police practice and research.

Literature Review

Conceptual Background

Social media applications

Social media applications are web-based platforms that encourage and facilitate communication, interaction, and the creation and circulation of content in virtual communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Whether in relation to social networking (Facebook), photo and video sharing (Instagram, YouTube), or micro-blogging (Twitter) sites, social media has transformed media systems; irrevocably altering dynamics of production, consumption, and dissemination. With the start of the 21st century, policing entered an *information era* in which order maintenance is data driven, intelligence led, and technologically mediated (Kelling & Moore, 2005). Existing research suggests that social media is used for the purposes of risk communication, impression management, and soliciting assistance (Walsh & O'Connor, 2019; Williams & Fedorowiz, 2019).

Social media offers a convenient, effective communication channel for law enforcement agencies to interact with the public. Common messaging activities include broadcasting and announcing public safety-related events (e.g. traffic conditions and inclement weather warnings), disseminating self-defence and property protection tips, reporting event statuses and updates, and calling for assistance with policing activities (e.g. criminal investigations) (Dencik, Hintz, & Carey, 2018; Procter, Crump, Karstedt, Voss, & Cantijoch, 2013). These activities and interactions are intended to increase public awareness and build trust in the community; that is, to help achieve the goals of community policing (The Police Foundation, 2014; Williams & Fedorowiz, 2019). Social media therefore provides the police with a new way to connect with the public.

The public is generally supportive of law enforcement agencies, but their responses to police departments' social media presence are limited, as indicated by the number and frequency of posts, comments, and/or likes (Neiger, Smith, Thackeray, & Van Wagenen, 2012; Williams & Fedorowiz, 2019). Information placed on social media by the police needs to be relevant and useful (The Police Foundation, 2014). An analysis of the Facebook activities of four metropolitan police departments revealed that they employed different social media management strategies, which caused different patterns of audience engagement (Huang et al., 2016). Some types of Twitter messages are more likely to be forwarded and shared by the audience than others (Van de Velde, Meijer, & Homburg, 2015), and police officers' presentation strategies in Twitter messages can affect the public's perceptions of the police (Schneider, 2014).

The art of effectively using social media is therefore arguably to balance information provision with posts that are entertaining and fun. If followers enjoy reading police updates and trust the messages as good sources of information, they will be more inclined to engage and come forward with information themselves. In this way, information provision and intelligence gathering can overlap with engagement, which, to be effective, needs to be two-way engagement (The Police Foundation, 2014). Accordingly, new media environments are sites of considerable struggle over policing's character, image, and meanings (Walsh & O'Connor, 2019).

While many notifications concern mundane issues (e.g. traffic updates), social media has proven valuable during times of crisis and has been utilised to communicate imminent risks to public safety (i.e. natural disasters, mass shootings, and riots); provide real-time alerts, instructions, and updates; and assuage anxiety (Dencik et al., 2018; Procter et al., 2013; The Police Foundation, 2014; Williams & Fedorowiz, 2019). More than crime fighters devoted to random patrols and rapid responses, officers increasingly represent 'knowledge workers' engaged in processing and evaluating risk-based information (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997; Mofokeng, 2020). According to the Police Foundation (2014), the police service's use of social media can be broadly divided into three related areas,

namely (1) *Providing information* – enabling specifically targeted information to be shared quickly, easily, and cheaply; (2) *Engagement* – providing the police with a way of connecting to and building relationships with local communities and members of the public; and (3) *Intelligence and investigation* – allowing the police to listen to what their communities are saying and to build evidence for investigations by monitoring social media content. To this end, as well as using their own pages and profiles to gather information, the police follow the use of social media by others to gain insight into their local communities, picking up leads, and preparing for potential incidents (The Police Foundation, 2014)

Despite the invaluable role the media can play in the fight against crime and, in particular, organised crime, it poses challenges to policing in developing countries (INTERPOL, 2020; Baraka & Murimi, 2019). Although crimes and the *modus operandi* of perpetrators across the world change constantly, some policing tools, especially in developing countries, remain the same (Baraka & Murimi, 2019). INTERPOL (2020) concurs that Africa continues to rank the lowest in rates of Internet connectivity in the world. According to figures from the International Telecommunications Union (cited in INTERPOL, 2020), in 2019, only 28% of Africans were reportedly using the Internet, compared to 83% of Europeans. However, relatively low rates of online connectivity have not stopped organised crime groups from taking advantage of the Internet and social media. As in other world regions, organised crime groups in Africa also use the Internet to facilitate the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, leveraging digital tools to contact and solicit victims, as well as to sell child pornography. The African continent is also a growing global transit hub for the trafficking of drugs and a range of illicit commodities, with narcotics, pharmaceuticals, stolen motor vehicles, and other goods sold and bought online on the surface, deep, and dark webs. A key factor that drives the increase in Internet-enabled crime in Africa is that many countries lack comprehensive policies and strategies to combat cybercrime (INTERPOL, 2020). While the African Union (AU) adopted the Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection in 2014, by January 2020 only 14 out of 55 AU member countries had signed the convention.

Methodology

Phenomenological Research

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delpont, 2011; Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). This was done to extract information on the role of social media in combating organised crime in the Limpopo Province. A non-probability purposive sample comprising 22 participants from the SAPS was used. Participants were drawn from the Limpopo Provincial SAPS, Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, Crime Intelligence, Technology Management Services, and Corporate Communication. Ten female and 12 male officials were interviewed, who ranked from constable to colonel. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Data from the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, where open-ended questions regarding their experiences with social media and policing, and with awareness and other preventative measures, were posed. An interview schedule was used to ensure consistency in the questions asked. The interviews were audio recorded, with the participants' permission, and then transcribed verbatim. The six-phase process as outlined by Tracy (2010) was followed. Firstly, familiarisation of the data was achieved by reading and re-reading the data with a view to identifying important ideas. Secondly, provisional codes were created from the ideas identified in the previous phase. The transcripts were printed out in full and notes were made to assist with the identification of provisional themes. Thirdly, codes were combined and reorganised to create broader themes. Fourthly, the combined codes were refined to identify links between them. Fifthly, the themes were named, and finally, the themes were presented as the research findings.

For the purposes of this study, ethical clearance was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), initially on the condition that the SAPS approved the request to conduct research. This was later changed to full ethical clearance following the approval of the research request by the SAPS. In agreement with the preselected police stations, permission was requested from and granted by the Limpopo Provincial Office, with reference number 0635312-6/217625730 in accordance with National Instruction 1 of 2006. The sample units are those SAPS officials who work in the Limpopo Province and who are aware of the role that social media can play in the fight against crime and organised crime in particular.

Analysis

This section focuses on the findings of this study relating to the selected objectives. Four objectives are mapped to the research questions, which are discussed in the next section of this article. These objectives were based on the use of social media in the commission of organised crime, the role of social media as a tool in combating organised crime, the impact of social media on organised crime, and the SAPS's capacity in the use of social media in responding to organised crime. Two themes and six sub-themes that emerged from the data are presented below and are supported by storylines.

Theme 1: Actual Use of Social Media Tools

This question was posed to the participants to ascertain and assess SAPS members' actual use of social media, while also determining if there is any social media use in the SAPS. The question included the types of social media used by members of the SAPS: "How

are the SAPS members', particularly those in crime prevention, use of social media tools?" This question received different responses from some of the participants, with their answers quoted verbatim as follows:

"Everything from crime trends, crime prevention tips, good stories about the police as an organisation, if we make arrests or [a] significant arrest, we put out those types of the stories in our private social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter" – P3.

"Crime prevention members in SAPS cannot use social media to combat crime as in South Africa; 75% are not registered on social media such as WhatsApp and it is so expensive to purchase data because even [as] members of [the] SAPS, it is so difficult to receive data. Only senior management and specialised units have access [to] social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and television" – P6.

"SAPS still need to educate when [it] comes to the use of social media in the combating of crime, to the entire community, and the entire cluster justice system need[s] to understand the procedures of how to use social media as a tool" – P7.

"We would like to understand first what the social media entails in SAPS crime prevention, particularly in our stations since even the network, it is still [a] challenge to send the message to other social media users. Member[s] need to drive five kilometres to the network towers; also, two-way radios are still a problem" – P6.

"It is the first time [for] me to talk about social media, which can be used to prevent crime in the community, how in the entire SAPS, because it is destroying our cases, and crime scene and also hides the wanted suspects" – P10

"No, some of the members said that social media is too dangerous to the SAPS and the community. White-collar criminals are in advance with regards to social media such as [the] Internet. Daily, we receive online crime such as fraud caused by social media hack[ing] of bank accounts from different banks" – P13.

"It cannot assist the SAPS as crime prevention. Some of the members understood that social media always alert[s] the criminals about the movement of victims and it causes house breaking. We are not using it at all" – P15.

"Traditional and modern social media in [the] SAPS is working in terms of preventing of crime. For example, today you commit a crime such as murder, [a] witness pick[s] [up] a cellphone and alert[s] the police on duty, sometimes pictures of [the] scene of [the] crime [are] taken by member[s] of the public and [they] post the same picture to the different social media sites and the police arrests the suspect without any delay; therefore social media is there in the SAPS for crime prevention. It is only [that] members need to be trained on how to use it in the prevention of crime" – P22.

The responses above highlight that members of the SAPS, particularly those involved in crime prevention, cannot use social media in the prevention of organised crime, while only five participants understood how to use social media as a tool in the prevention of crime. Out of these five participants, three were from provincial specialised units. From the literature review and the responses of the participants, it is very clear that the SAPS as an organisation needs to adopt new, formal strategies regarding the use of social media as a tool to correctly combat crime. Although the SAPS already has some designated social media accounts such as on Facebook and Twitter, it is imperative for the organisation to formally train and educate its personnel on the use and benefits of social media for policing. The analysis of the potential contributions of social media to policing has been an important subject of discourse among scholars (Peters & Ojedokun, 2019). Cybercrime investigation by the SAPS is evolving into a distinct investigative discipline (South African Government, 2020).

Sub-theme 1.1: Understanding of social media in the commission of organised crime

This research question focused on social media in the commission of crime. The perceptions of the participants were sought regarding crimes that are committed using social media. Their verbatim responses follow:

"If social media was regarded as a two-way mobile radio and 10111 phone inside our station, [the] daily community [is] committing crimes because they phone and insult us" – P1.

"When I watch the television, I saw the countries such as America and Australia use social media such [as] Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to commit crime by posting the fake news and also intimating others" – P4.

"I do not think social media can commit a crime because only human being[s] [can,] who is having a capacity to differentiate the right and wrong, not social media" – P8

"Truly speaking, I start to learn of social media now. Two years back I struggle[d] to understand social media since it is new technology to all the SAPS members" – P9.

"In the SAPS, where I work at my station, social media is just a dream to all of us, therefore I do not understand the crimes where social media is used" – P10.

"No, I do not understand the crime committed by social media since social media need[s] the station with network coverage. At my station, [there is] no network coverage. Always, I drive for cellphone towers and also data is a serious challenge" – P17.

“Based on my working experience here at the Provincial Technology Management Service, I can state that social media is the dangerous tool when [it] comes to the commission of organised crime in South Africa. Organised crimes such human trafficking, and smuggling of drugs from other countries. Social media is in use to communicate by syndicates globally, and today South Africa is a playground of corruption as criminals use social media such as [the] Internet to do the criminal activities [and] deals” – P21.

The responses above paint a bleak picture, as the participants said that they did not understand what social media entails in the commission of crime, while at the same time some participants indicated that social media causes damage in South Africa. However, three participants were well conversant with crimes committed using social media. This could be based on their specialisations, as they were from the Provincial Office and well trained in the field of social media, which includes technology crimes such as cybercrime. Based on the reviewed literature and the responses of the participants, it was concluded that the SAPS management needs to design and develop proper training aligned to social media and transfer it to the station level.

Sub-theme 1.2: The extent to which social media is used as a tool in combating organised crime

This research question focused on the extent that social media is used as a tool to combat organised crime to verify if the SAPS as an organisation regards social media as a tool to combat organised crime in the Limpopo Province. The participants’ responses are as follows.

“At my station where I work, we are in possession of the state cellphone, which we agree as the station management to implement social media such as WhatsApp. The same WhatsApp, we use it as our communication tool where the members of the station ... share information ... reported on duty and off duty and also [to] send the sensational crimes such as trio crimes – carjacking, business robberies, and house robberies – for the attention of [the] Provincial Commissioner” – P2.

“If the SAPS regard[s] Telkom phones and the stations’ cellphones at the station as a social media, therefore the extent of social media being use[d] to combat organised crimes is 24 hours” – P3.

“With two-way radio indicates the extent of social media being used as a tool in combating of crime. Around my station area, it is still a serious challenge since [the] network gives a serious challenge ... Also, the e-mails as one of the new mass communication, we collect at 100 kilometres from where I work, therefore I won’t be specific in time for social media as a tool to combat crime” – P5.

“I cannot be specific to the extent of social media to be used as [a] tool in the combating of organised crime since there is no training to the station levels with regard to social media as a tool in the combating of organised crime; however, only [the] Provincial Office is entitled to use social media as a tool in the combating of crime” – P7

“Each Friday, I watch Duty Call from Television Channel 2 at 22h00, where SAPS Corporate Communication traced the organised crime criminals after posting the criminals’ picture on the SABC for televised ... At my station, [the] communication officer used two hours to trace the wanted suspects and also to trace the relatives of the victims through community radio” – P14.

“Daily, I use eight hours to trace suspect[s] who committed crimes [and] used social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter with regard to the retrieved information requested by all provincial stations” – P20.

In summation, eight participants, based on their verbatim responses, did not understand what the extent of social media use as a tool in the combating of organised crime entails. It was established from some of the participants in their verbatim responses that they had knowledge of the extent of social media being used towards combating organised crime, based on the fact that all the participants’ responses mentioned the following: Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, community radio, television, and cellphones, which all fall under social media used by developed countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States of America, etc. to combat crime (Hendricks, 2013; Walliss & Rachmann, 2016). The challenge or limitation to the members is how to use it in combating organised crime. The implications for the SAPS management are that the SAPS management needs to implement social media usage nationally by all SAPS members, and develop all members in social media skills.

Sub-theme 1.3: The impact of social media on organised crime

This research question sought to establish the extent of the impact of social media on organised crime. This was done to determine the impact, if any, when social media is used to combat organised crime in the Limpopo Province. The following were some of participants’ responses, quoted verbatim:

“If SAPS, as the national police agency in South Africa, can come with the strategy of regulating social media and also to train members with technology, [the] SAPS can have impact of social media on the combating of organised crime” – P1

“I do not see any impact with regard to social media in the combating of organised crime. Social media is the contributors to crime such as theft of money from the bank accounts of account holders by Internet hacking, and banks are doing nothing” – P6

“No impact because social media, instead of combating crime caused by social media, it adds because daily there is a case of online fraud at my station and to ma[k]e an arrest, it cost[s] a lot of time as a member need[s] to apply Section 205 of the Criminal Procedure Act, 51 of 1977, for authority to the holder of the accounts of the suspect and also victim account” – P7.

“There is an impact of social media according to me. Suspects of [the] cash-in-transit heist [that] happened at Gravelotte, I saw the impact of social media because the community post[ed] the scene of crime and the pictures of the suspects. The police upload[s] the social media picture and effect all the same with the Seshego cash-in-transit. There is a best impact because [the] suspects who committed organised crime are in custody” – P11.

“I don’t see any impact from my working environment as investigator as the challenge [is that there is] no Public Prosecutor from the court who is trained with cybercrimes or social media crimes. All case dockets get withdrawn. [The] reasons always [bein] no linkage of the suspect with [the] crime scene” – P13.

“Today’s policing needs technology, therefore I ... said that social media had an impact in the combating of organised crime. In South Africa, my unit which I’m attached on, SAPS Crime Intelligence, is the heart of the SAPS. All information [is] always assessed by technology such as e-mails and cellphones ... Social media is the best tool in the entire world when [it] comes to the combating of organised crime. All the national key point places such [as the] airport, banks, and residences of cabinet ministers’ CCTV are there as part of social media. When crime [is] committed, CCTV is my crime scene since I upload the picture of the suspects” – P21.

It was established that only two participants were conversant regarding the extent of the impact of social media on organised crime. The two participants who understood the impact of social media on combating organised crime are in the SAPS specialised units and received training in a cybercrime course/technology programme. One of the participants revealed:

“Social media is the best tool in the entire world when [it] comes to the combating of organised crime. All the national key point places such [as the] airport, banks, and residences of cabinet ministers’ CCTV are there as part of social media. When crime [is] committed, CCTV is my crime scene since I upload the picture of the suspects.”

The literature review also points out the extent and impact of social media on combating organised crime (Amedie, 2015; Surette, 2016; Ellahi & Manarvi, 2010). Based on the above responses, the authors can safely argue that training on the usage of social media in combating crime will be the solution, since the participants’ responses were not supported by the reviewed literature.

Theme 2: Current resources that leverage social media as a tool in investigations

When asked what current resources leverage social media as a tool in investigations, there were mixed reactions. The question focused on the current resources that leverage social media to determine the participants’ understanding of these resources, such as social media, in their daily work environment. These are their verbatim answers:

“There is no need for training in the field of using social media as a tool to combat organised crime in SA” – P1.

“No, there are no skills in the utilisation of social media. That is the reason only [a] few are able to use social media, therefore there is [a] need for training to be conducted regularly with regard to the social media as a tool to combat organised crime” – P2

In contrast, Gravelotte Police Station members stated (verbatim):

“Members have the good skills for social media; however, they are using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram for private communication, not as [a] tool for combating organised crimes since there [is] no formal training for them at station level, only specialised units” – P3

“Some of the members in the SAPS as an organisation do have the skills such as communication members and specialised units such as Crime Intelligence and [the] Cyber Unit” – P6.

“No, the SAPS members do not have necessary skills in the utilisation of social media in the combating of crime because they were not trained on how to utilise social media ... provincial members and specialised units have the necessary skills with regard to social media as they did receive necessary training” – P7.

“Yes, as indicated that most of the members attended the courses of social media courses such as commercial course and cyber course; however, [the] SAPS does not have resources at the station level, only [the] provincial and national level have the social media resources ... members do not have social media skills and also training, only specialist units attended the social media training” – P10.

“With regard to the skills for combating organised crime in the stations, it is still a challenge at Giyani Cluster since no strategy [has been] implemented with regard to social media. SAPS still [has] [a] gap which need[s] to be address[ed] as [a] matter of urgency, because social media crimes ... always fall under organised crimes and most [are] cross-border cases as a suspect commit[s] online fraud, which happened daily. Because of lack of skills, cases end up being withdrawn” – P12.

“The SAPS does not have all necessary skills with regard to social media as a tool to combat organised crime in SA, there is only [a] few members who know and understand the technology in the SAPS, when a member request[s] to be sent for training, they will talk about funding” – P13.

“There are members who are trained to use it effectively like Crime Stop Office. However, with little skills as there is no deeper training designed for social media in crime combating for SAPS member like [in an] international country like Canada” – P15.

“Members have necessary skills; however, not for the station level, only Provincial and National Office since all the social-related matters are always sent to the head office for analysis and interpret [ation of] information for court purpose” – P18.

Ten participants said that SAPS members did not have the necessary skills to utilise social media in combating organised crime in South Africa, while two participants stated that only specialist units had skills regarding using social media in combating organised crime. These responses highlight that SAPS members need to be trained in social media skills. The findings corroborate the literature review, which shows that law enforcement resources and processes are available in global police agencies, but in South Africa there is a gap, as there are no resources or capacity available to SAPS members when it comes to leveraging social media as a tool in investigations (Crump, 2011; Gerber, 2014).

Sub-theme 2.1: Capacity in the SAPS in terms of the use of social media in response to organised crime

This research question sought to determine the level of capacity in the SAPS for the use of social media in response to organised crime, and to determine whether there are any members who use social media to combat crime. The following were some of the responses, quoted verbatim:

“In our cluster, Giyani, which consists of nine police stations, we don’t have the capacity as SAPS members to deal with social media in response to organised crime, based on lack of training and resources such as cellphones together with data. The problem [with] all the above [is that] cellphones are not for combating crime, only for update reports on duty and off duty of all members and to invite members for cluster meetings” – P1 and P2.

“No capacity for social media at station levels, few capacities who deal [with] cyber and social media crimes are at the provincial specialised units” – P11.

“I do not understand the capacity since [there is] no skill and training with the use of social media in responses to organised crime” – P12 and P13.

“According to me, SAPS needs to change the methods of recruitment and recruit the young generation with information technology [IT] qualifications to capacitate the members who could be able to work with social media” – P15.

“Only one communication officer who work[s] with social media, such as community radio, when communicat[ing] the statistics of daily arrests of the station” – P18.

“According to me, SAPS need[s] to regulate the social media like other overseas [countries] such as Canada. Based on that, always evidence from social media is inadmissible at court” – P19.

“I see centralisation, it will be an answer if [the] SAPS in the entire country can implement social media model in the combating of organised crime. Currently only members of specialised units based in the Provincial Office. Always I drove 400 kilometres to the last police station to work with regard to give evidence after providing evidence in terms of Section 212 statement as an expert in the technology evidence such as cyber [crime]” – P20.

The above responses indicate that, based on the participants’ responses, out of 22 participants, only two participants were conversant with the topic, based on their responses, as supported by the literature review. However, 20 participants’ responses did not correspond and are not supported by the literature. Based on the literature review, and the responses of the participants, it was concluded that the SAPS management needs to design and develop a proper training programme, aligned with the questions posed to the participants, to enable SAPS members to do their best when it comes to social media used as a tool to combat crime.

Sub-theme 2.2: Management of social media tools

This research question aimed to explore how the SAPS is managing its social media tools in the transformation of social media in combating organised crime in South Africa. The participants were asked this question regarding their knowledge of understanding the management of social media by the SAPS. These are their verbatim responses:

“SAPS do[es] not have the law which regulate[s] or manage[s] social media tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter” – P1 and P3

“SAPS lack[s] management of social media based on that always community arrived at [the] scene of [the] crime before the police and take the scene-of-crime pictures and send viral to the community without any authorisation” – P5

“SAPS managed their social media crimes through Crime Intelligence, since all the SAPS investigators apply Section 205 applications for alleged crimes committed by social media, together with the instruments used [and] cellphones for verification who committed the crime” – P11.

"I know that SAPS has the body to manage the social media, which is [the] South African Government News Agency" – P13

"South Africa as the country has the media ethics and policies that [are] the reasons I am not allowed to take negative picture in uniform and also I am not allowed to talk at the scene of crime because we have a station communication officer who is authorised to disseminate the message" – P16

"The Electronic Communication and Transactions Act, and Regulation of Interception of Communication or legal framework [are there] to manage social media and cybercrime" – P19, P20, and P21

"Division Corporate Communication and Liaison Office is the over-control of managing all the social media-related matters before publication to the community. After crime is committed, no SAPS member is allowed to communicate with offenders without the authority of the station communication officer, [or] cluster, provincial and national communication officer" – P22

It was established that four out of 22 participants understood how the SAPS manages the social media tool. The responses from the participants were not supported by the literature, which left a gap in the SAPS regarding the management of the social media tool. The reason could be that social media is new in the SAPS, and there is also a lack of formal training. SAPS officials at station level need to attend workshops and be trained in the management of social media in the combating of crime, according to the relevant literature linked to the participants' verbatim responses, as the gap needs to be closed for the benefit of the entire SAPS. It was also revealed that the SAPS's lack of management of social media is based on the fact that the community always arrives at the crime scene before the police do, and take photos that they send to others, without any authorisation. The SAPS manages its social media crimes through Crime Intelligence, since all SAPS investigators apply Section 205 applications for alleged crimes committed.

Sub-theme 2.3: Challenges related to the adoption of social media

This research question sought to determine the challenges related to the adoption of social media in the SAPS, and the effect of social media on SAPS members in combating organised crime in South Africa. The participants are quoted verbatim as follows:

"I don't have the skills in the utilisation of social media to combat the organised crime since social media is a new technology in our organisation. SAPS members need training to close this gap of technology" – P2.

"No social media landscape can assist the station. Only [a] few members have government cellphone[s] and also other stations such as SAPS Hlanganani and Saselamani do not have [a] network system to use social media. They don't have an access to e-mails and other equipment such as data to assist the tool such as social media" – P3.

"I experience a challenge through follows of suspects who [are] in possession of cellphone[s] stolen from the victim or so-called map call followed because of the provider's towers. [There is] sometime[s] [a] challenge of towers' batteries, which always happened since our station is [in] the rural areas. Criminals target the towers' batteries to be used for the other purposes" – P4.

"My challenge [with] social media [is] sometimes fake news and also mislead[ing] the members of [the] SAPS" – P5

"As an investigator, my problem is always electronic crime scene, which always needs specialised unit from SAPS Provincial Office in Polokwane, which is almost 500 kilometres to the station levels" – P7

"My problem is social media crime scene, because some syndicates commit theft in the South African banks while [they] are out of the country. There is the Internet theft of money from the different banks normally each month. At my station, we received not less than 100 case dockets where social media is involved on hacking of account[s]. The most suspects targeted the customers' used cellphone bank account. Good example inside the docket it read as follows: 'Suspect will phone and pretend to be cellphone service provider, ask the victim personal particulars such as identity document and later they made SIM swap, and later hacked the victim account.' Therefore, in order to investigate such kind of case docket, it is a big challenge because mostly are the people who are qualified IT, and it is difficult to arrest them because of no direct social media scene of crime" – P8.

"I hate social media because [the] community and criminal[s] are ahead to the SAPS member[s] when [it] comes to the use of social media and they are in possession of the best smartphones or technology" – P9.

"What I observed from my knowledge and understanding, [the] SAPS still operate[s] with the traditional tool[s] in the combating of crime. However, developed countries international[ly] are in the technology crime combating. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and blog[s] are in use to combat organised crime" – P10.

"SAPS do[es] not have the formal strategy to use social media as [a] tool to combat organised crime same like other police international agencies" – P11.

"My challenge is the inadmissible of evidence received through social media, because [the] court and the police are not allowed to accept such evidence. The victim will always emphasise that 'I recorded the suspect, why do [you] not arrest?'" – P14.

"In my career as a police officer, it is so difficult to investigate loss, theft, or destruction of cell phone[s] or SIM card[s] and also unlawful interception of communication" – P18.

“According to my understanding as a member of SAPS, social media it is still new, even the court[s] are still struggling to convict suspect[s] of social media and also still have a problem with regard to recognise the correct legislation” – P19.

Based on the responses above, it seems that all the participants had knowledge of what transpires regarding the challenges of social media in the SAPS. All the participants’ responses were supported by the literature. Based on what all the participants said, based on their daily work environment, the findings indicate that there is a link between the challenges of social media in combating organised crime, as all the participants indicated some challenges that occur in the SAPS. The findings in this article, are from the participants’ responses, who indicated that they do not have skills in the use of social media to combat organised crime; however, the police services use these new engagement channels, which need to be understood in the context of the government’s emphasis on neighbourhood or local policing – a trend prevalent in the United Kingdom and the United States of America since 1990 (Skogan & Hartnett, 1997).

Findings and Discussion

The significance and benefit of this study indicate that all SAPS members should be trained in the new techniques of social media as a tool in combating organised crime. SAPS members will benefit from self-development in the required skills, expertise, and academic qualifications, with a view to apply the skills of social media as a tool in proactive and reactive policing. Morris (2018) points out that the definition of what it means to be “literate” has changed drastically in the past few years. In the past, one would be considered literate if they were capable of reading and writing at a basic level. With advancements in technology and the Internet, literacy has evolved into digital literacy. In the context of this study, SAPS members should be exposed to training on how to optimally utilise technological tools and social media platforms. Morris (2018) argues that, to explain digital literacy, users must first understand why it is important to be digitally literate. It is therefore essential that SAPS officials understand the necessity of being digitally literate, which links to their day-to-day activities of the prevention and investigation of crime. Research indicates that lately “[e]very crime has a technology-enabled component behind it” (Harkin, Whelan, & Chang, 2018:530) and that “[a]lmost every crime now has a digital footprint” (Calam, 2017:12). It is argued that the volume of digital evidence, combined with a shortage of qualified police personnel to process it, has resulted in severe backlogs in the criminal justice system (Goodison, Davis, & Jackson, 2015; Gogolin, 2010; James & Gladyshev, 2015).

It is very clear from the participants’ responses and the findings that SAPS members do not have the adequate strategies, skills, legislation, policies, regulations, and knowledge on how to use social media as a tool in combating organised crime in South Africa. However, social media is in use in South Africa in the commission of organised crime, as seen from this study. The findings clearly show that as social media works hand in hand with IT such as the Internet, the SAPS needs to adopt it and implement it as a matter of urgency, as criminals are ahead with social media activities and commit serious organised crimes. This cyber skills gap has an impact on crime, and therefore on policing and law enforcement (Robertson, 2019). The implications for the SAPS management are that, when criminals teach others how to optimally utilise digital tools to improve their skills, that the same cannot be said about SAPS members. Research indicates that the availability of information that enables the digital society also allows for cybercriminals to educate themselves on how to commit digital crime (Horsman, 2017; Wall & Williams, 2013).

Implications for the SAPS’s interventions

In terms of social media as part of investigative tools, acceptance and adoption was a prominent theme throughout this study. The participants reported that members of the SAPS do not have the necessary skills to utilise social media in combating organised crime in South Africa. Only two participants stated that only specialist units have skills regarding social media in combating organised crime. These responses highlight the need that the social media on the combating of organised crime are in the SAPS specialised units but received inadequate training in a cybercrime course/technology programme. Based on the responses of the participants, the SAPS management only developed members from the Provincial Office, as it is only these members who are well equipped with the knowledge of social media in combating organised crime. As the use of social media is still a new terrain in the SAPS, there is also a lack of formal training. The SAPS officials at station level need to attend workshops and be trained in the management of social media in combating crime, according to the relevant literature linked to the participants’ verbatim responses, as the gap needs to be closed for the benefit of the entire SAPS by using social media. It was also revealed that the SAPS’s lack of management of social media is based on the fact that the community always arrives at the crime scene before the police do, and take photos that they distribute to others, without any authorisation. The SAPS manages social media crimes through Crime Intelligence, since all SAPS investigators apply Section 205 regulations for alleged crimes committed using social media, together with the instruments used – i.e. cellphones, for verification of who committed the crime.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the role of social media in combating organised crime in the Limpopo Province. The aim was to assist the SAPS to identify the gaps in the legal system that are exploited by cybercriminals. To date, there has been little research measuring the utilisation of social media in South Africa, and if SAPS members are adequately digitally literate to utilise social media, as part of their investigative tools, it will reduce organised crime activities in the Limpopo Province. Also significant in this paper are the findings that social media as a tool can be utilised in terms of data gathering, prediction and spotting broader patterns, for combating

organised crime by the SAPS. It was also noted that social media crimes cannot be addressed through quick strategies to regulate social media; they require a deliberate understanding of fundamental issues such as IT, which are lacking among members of the SAPS. For the SAPS to be effective in responding to cybercriminals – including, but not limited to, hackers, insiders, criminal networks, nation states, terrorist organisations, and others – the SAPS management needs to design and develop a manual with special focus on the training of members of crime prevention, as crime prevention members in South Africa are the pillar of the SAPS. The importance of training in police practice cannot be overstated (Stanislas, 2014). In South Africa, as in the case in Canada, police training requirements are determined by each individual province, and training standards vary from province to province (Robertson, 2019; Wyatt & Bell, 2014).

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