The article by Stephan G. Grimmelikhuijsen and Albert J. Meijer, “Does Twitter Increase Perceived Police Legitimacy?,” is an interesting and long-awaited study that should be reviewed by any police service considering the use of social media, especially Twitter.

Often, police services are eager to take on social media, or any other piece of new technology, without considering how its use can be incorporated into an already existing strategy. This is especially the case with social media. At the Toronto Police Service, we wanted to be more methodical in our approach, so we spent time and resources developing a work plan with specific goals that we intended to meet. Our guiding principle was to use social media as another avenue by which we engage with the public for the purposes of crime prevention and public education. The Toronto Police Service has police officers whose day-to-day responsibilities already embrace these goals, such as traffic officers, school resource officers, and crime prevention officers. Adding social media platforms to their “tool belts” seemed like a logical next step given that our communities were starting to use them as well.

Exactly how effective we have been is a question worth asking, and Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer have taken a very analytical approach to finding the answer. While I do not dispute their findings, I feel there are important peripheral questions that arise.

First, the conclusion that, as stated by the authors, “interactive use is . . . minimal. . . . This means that the relation between the interactive use of social media and perceived effectiveness and perceived procedural fairness is not asserted” does not consider the broader impact of those few people who do engage on social media with the police.

We refer to these individuals as “social media influencers,” and one of the first things we consider, when deciding how and when to respond to social media...
interactions, is to review a person’s “influence.” We do this by asking questions such as how many followers they have, who is following them, and what is the content of their tweets. If they “score high,” then we know our interactions with them will be watched and analyzed by many.

Consider the application to a more traditional form of community policing. How an officer manages or responds to an individual on the street, particularly someone in crisis, can have the same effect. Other observers may not be able to sympathize with the person needing police assistance, but they certainly can empathize with the way that person is being treated. They may have, up until that point, a neutral or even less than positive view of the police. After witnessing an officer’s behavior, their perception of legitimacy or procedural fairness could be influenced positively or negatively by that interaction.

Social media has the same effect, albeit in a virtual sense. Individuals do not need to have the interaction themselves to determine their thoughts on police legitimacy and procedural fairness, particularly when the person with whom the police are interacting has “social media influence.”

Second, the authors seem to focus much of their article defining “interactions” to mean the sharing of information for the purpose of reporting or helping solve a crime. I believe this only skims the service of how social media “interaction” should be defined. Interactions can include the informal sharing of anecdotes and experiences that chip away at the perceived image of “us versus them.”

For instance, social media started at the Toronto Police Service because a traffic officer asked the public, via Twitter, for contributions to a “Top Ten Traffic Pet Peeves” list. This request went viral throughout the city and caught the attention of the mainstream media in a way that had never happened before. The ability of the officer to engage with commuters about a common interest not only created a space where the public felt comfortable sharing this information but also reinforced the concept that road safety is everyone’s responsibility in a way that did not place the emphasis on enforcement activities.

In addition, the officer with the most followers of the more than 300 Twitter accounts associated with the Toronto Police Service garners most of his attention for sending tweets about lost teddy bears and school cafeteria bullies. This may not seem like appropriate messaging for a police officer, but what it has done is create a virtual environment in which the public feels connected to us, and to each other, on an emotional and intellectual level. Who cannot empathize with a toddler losing his teddy bear or a child left to sit alone on the first day of school? Again, the 22,000 followers of this officer’s account may never have the desire to interact with him directly on Twitter, but they are watching and they are listening.

It is for these reasons that I believe the authors’ findings could use further research on the topic. Their insights into the effects of social media interaction on the perceived legitimacy of police are valid and a must-read for any police service. They should also serve as a cautionary tale for police services that believe simply starting a Twitter account will turn public perception in their favor.

Any social media effort should be considered in the bigger picture of strategic communications and public education. Any study on the effects of social media on police legitimacy should consider the impact of the interactions of a few on the perceptions of many.