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When trust turns digital: why relational cues matter in online crime-reporting portals

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Abstract

Objectives To test whether trust in the police (a) improves the online crime-reporting experience and (b) increases support for digital reporting. To examine whether a procedurally just follow-up email and primed motivations enhance or amplify these effects.

Methods In a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial experiment, 638 UK participants reported a hypothetical crime online. Experimental conditions: trust prime, reporting motivation, follow-up communication and crime type. Outcomes: user experience (fair and efficient) and support for online reporting.

Results Most participants felt the experience was fair and efficient. Support for online reporting was generally high. The trust prime improved both user experience and support. A procedurally-just follow-up email increased support but did not interact with trust. Motivation and crime type had no measurable effects.

Conclusions Systems that engage trust help users interpret impersonal processes as procedurally fair and efficient. Lacking such cues, online reporting risks being a hollow transaction—undermining police legitimacy.

Keywords Procedural justice · Trust in police · Digital policing · Online crime reporting · Police legitimacy · Human–technology interaction

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Introduction

Trust is the foundation of legitimate policing—without it, police cannot govern by consent and must resort to coercion and control. Trust is built through everyday encounters between officers and citizens: respectful treatment and fair decision-making affirm people's dignity, signal rightful use of authority, and reinforce a shared commitment to the public good (Tyler, 2006a, 2006b). These moments matter because they reveal something fundamental about the power dynamic—that authority is being used fairly, and that those subject to it are recognized as full members of the community (Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Oliveira et al., 2021).

Procedural justice is essential to securing the cooperation police depend on. Legitimacy reduces the need for costly and minimally effective forms of crime-control. Yet this foundation is increasingly strained as police–public contact becomes more impersonal (Tyler, 2025). Amid rising demand and limited resources, many interactions are now mediated by technology rather than face-to-face engagement. Forces have expanded digital channels—live chat, chatbots, online portals—to improve access, manage workload, and streamline services (Bradford et al., 2025; HMICFRS, 2020; Minhas et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2023). But this shift introduces a clear tension: gains in speed, scale, and efficiency may come at the cost of the procedural cues—voice, dignity, neutrality, and care—that build trust.

Nowhere is this tension more visible than in the rise of online crime-reporting portals. These systems offer speed and scale, but they also raise pressing questions about whether procedural fairness can survive digital contact. For victims, portals provide a way to submit reports, track progress, and message officers. For police, they reduce pressure on frontline staff and automate routine administrative tasks. They work well for straightforward cases—property theft, criminal damage, insurance claims—where efficiency and consistency matter most. But they may be far less appropriate when reports are personal, emotional, or traumatic. In these moments, victims are asked to disclose deeply sensitive information without knowing if they will be believed, supported, or protected. The risk is not just indifference, but re-traumatisation—through blame, silence, or institutional inaction (Elliott et al., 2011, 2014; Hohl et al., 2025; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019).

Against this backdrop, we present findings from a 2×2×2×2 factorial experiment exploring how people respond to reporting crime online—either property damage or anti-social behaviour. Participants were asked to report a hypothetical offence using a real digital portal developed by an English police force. Though the scenario was fictional, it closely mirrored real-world contact, allowing us to systematically vary key features of the process and observe how they shaped user experience and perceptions of the police. This low-stakes setting provides a conservative test: can digital encounters communicate the interpersonal qualities—fairness, respect, and care—that build trust and legitimacy? If relational cues matter even here, they are likely to matter far more when people report real crimes under conditions of stress, uncertainty, or harm.

Our study has two parts. First, a descriptive analysis examines whether the portal meets basic expectations of fairness and usability; whether those experiences translate into support for wider adoption; and how users' pre-existing trust in the police shapes their interpretation of the process. Second, the experimental design

tests whether that trust helps users bridge the relational gaps of a largely impersonal, portal-based exchange. To do this, we evaluate three propositions: (1) that trust acts as a perceptual filter, leading users to interpret minimal cues as signs of fairness and competence; (2) that framing crime reporting as a civic duty—rather than a practical task—affects how those cues are noticed and valued; and (3) that a procedurally just follow-up can reintroduce a human element, increasing support for digital reporting and amplifying the role of prior trust. Taken together, these components allow us to assess not only whether portals deliver efficiency, but whether they convey the same relational signals that sustain legitimacy in face-to-face policing.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining the procedural justice challenge in online crime reporting, focusing on why digital portals may struggle to convey core relational cues: voice, respect, neutrality and trustworthy intent. We then introduce a trust-based framework for understanding digital contact and set out our hypotheses concerning prior trust, reporting motives and procedurally just follow-up. Next, we describe our experimental design and present the results. We conclude with implications for the design and perceived legitimacy of digital policing. Our central argument is clear: online portals should complement—not replace—human contact. Their legitimacy depends on activating existing trust in the police and communicating procedural fairness, even in digital form.

The procedural justice challenge in online crime-reporting

Online reporting platforms offer 24/7 access and lower the costs of engagement. Victims no longer need to travel, wait in line or phone through their report. But accessibility and efficiency do not guarantee meaningful interaction. By design, these platforms prioritise speed over connection—often at the expense of the human elements that underpin procedural justice: being treated with dignity, having a voice, participating in decisions and perceiving trustworthy intent.

In traditional reporting—whether face-to-face or over the phone—process often matters as much as outcome. Officers can show empathy and shared values through simple gestures: leaning forward to listen, offering reassurance when someone struggles, or acknowledging with a nod that what happened was wrong. Victims seek this. They want not just resolution, but to be treated with dignity and respect throughout (Elliott et al., 2011, 2014). Coming forward often means sharing personal, sometimes painful, details with an institution that holds considerable power, without knowing how that disclosure will be received. Many fear being dismissed, disbelieved or treated with indifference—responses that risk compounding the original harm.

Procedural justice speaks directly to these concerns. It centres on the fairness of decision-making processes and rests on four core elements: voice—the opportunity to be heard; dignity and respect; neutral, unbiased judgment; and trustworthy intent on the part of authorities. When present, these elements do more than ensure fair treatment, they signal that the victim is seen, heard and valued as a rights-bearing individual, both by police and the broader community (Hohl et al., 2025). This recognition can help repair a damaged sense of self. When those signals are missing, the harm can deepen (Koster et al., 2020; Laxminarayan, 2012). Even small gestures can carry disproportionate weight. A single empathetic callback on an otherwise

unsolved case, for example, can significantly improve victims' satisfaction and trust in police (McKee et al., 2023).

Relational qualities are most visible in face-to-face encounters, where officers can convey fairness and care through subtle but meaningful gestures. These cues—a steady tone, sustained attention, a moment of empathy—communicate respect, seriousness and good intent. They can shape whether an experience harms or helps. Portals, by contrast, often reduce contact to dropdown menus, word limits and automated replies (Wells et al., 2023). In these pared-down interactions, it becomes harder to express the tone, attentiveness and empathy that define procedural justice. For some victims—such as those reporting property damage for insurance—this impersonal format may be enough. For others, especially those seeking recognition or care, portals may strip away the very qualities that make reporting bearable (Murphy & Barkworth, 2014; Pemberton et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2023; Wemmers, 2008).

Evidence from existing platforms highlights the challenge. A recent study by Henning et al. (2024) examined property crime victims in the United States—cases typically considered routine—and found that only one in six were satisfied with how their online report was handled. Victims described the interface as "impersonal," "clunky" and "outdated," with dissatisfaction rooted in poor usability, a lack of empathy and no meaningful follow-up. Strict constraints on storytelling—character limits, no option to upload evidence, rigid drop-down menus—left some feeling that their reports were not taken seriously. Those who sought assistance often faced long waits on helplines, only to be redirected back to the portal. Just 12% received any follow-up beyond an automated case-number email. Yet those who did receive a personal response reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction. As one victim put it, even a simple call to say "I'm sorry this happened" would have built trust.

These findings show how digital environments can struggle to reproduce the four dimensions of procedural justice: voice, respect, neutrality and trustworthy motives. *Voice* means having a genuine opportunity to tell one's story and feel heard (Lind et al., 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Portals constrain this: fixed fields and character limits compress lived experiences into what Terpstra et al. (2019) describe as "system information." When victims cannot fully explain what happened, they may come to feel that their voice carries little weight. *Respect* affirms that the person matters—that their concerns are legitimate and valued, even in moments of vulnerability. Here too, portals may fall short: the politeness, attentiveness and warmth of human interaction are replaced by standardised acknowledgements. A brief confirmation email—or worse, prolonged silence—is easily read as indifference, reducing the interaction to a transaction (Bowling & Iyer, 2019; Wells et al., 2023).

Neutrality requires decisions to be based on facts and consistent rules. Portals may appear impartial—everyone fills out the same forms—but uniformity is not the same as perceived fairness. In face-to-face settings, neutrality is demonstrated through evidence gathering, clear explanations and visible rule application (Leventhal, 1980; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Online, without these cues, neutrality can come across as bureaucratic detachment (Joh, 2007). Finally, *trustworthy motives* refer to whether authorities are seen to act in people's best interests, rather than for organisational con-

venience (Tyler, 1997). In human encounters, benevolence is communicated through empathy, acknowledgement and transparency. In digital settings, these qualities must be built into the design—through supportive language, clear explanations of how data will be used, and follow-up contact that feels personal rather than procedural.

Is trust important in digital crime reporting?

The willingness to accept vulnerability lies at the heart of many definitions of trust. It reflects an expectation that the other party will act with fairness and care, even when outcomes cannot be monitored or controlled (Jackson & Gau, 2016; PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016). On this view, trust is not just a general attitude—it is a psychological mechanism that enables cooperation under conditions of risk and uncertainty (Bradford et al., 2018). One influential framework helps to explain how this works.

Mayer et al.'s (1995) integrative model of organisational trust has been widely applied across domains, including criminal justice (Hamm et al., 2017). It highlights two key components. The first is *perceived trustworthiness*—that is, judgements of competence, integrity and benevolence. In the policing context, these map onto perceptions of effectiveness, distributive justice, procedural justice and bounded authority (Jackson et al., 2023). The second is *propensity to trust*—a general disposition to rely on others and tolerate risk (cf. Möllering, 2006). In policing, as in other domains, this disposition shapes how people interpret ambiguity and assess institutional behaviour when information is limited. When *perceived trustworthiness* and *propensity to trust* align, individuals are more likely to believe that cooperation with a powerful but partly unknowable institution like the police will be rewarded rather than exploited. When either is absent, that leap becomes far less likely.

Research consistently shows that people are more likely to report a crime when they view the police as trustworthy (Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2011; Murphy & Barkworth, 2014; Tyler & Fagan, 2008). Trustworthiness shapes expectations of treatment, beliefs about whether reporting will be worthwhile and fears of secondary harm—making the vulnerability of reporting easier to bear. Trust also acts as a social licence. Citizens are more willing to accept the police's coercive powers when they believe those powers will be exercised fairly and in the public interest (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This logic extends to technology. When people trust officers to act with fairness and care, they are more likely to accept body-worn cameras, predictive algorithms and facial recognition (Bradford et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2023; Miethe et al., 2019; Yesberg et al., 2024; cf. Afroogh et al., 2024). Technologies that might otherwise seem intrusive can appear protective when the humans behind them are trusted (Almasoud & Idowu, 2024; Bradford et al., 2020; Gritsenko et al., 2025; Li, 2024; Mesch & Lam, 2024; Narayanan et al., 2023).[1]

[1] Recent experimental work underscores this point. Schiff et al. (2025) found that citizens judged AI in policing less by its technical features than by who deployed it: trust in local sheriffs produced greater confidence than trust in the FBI. The study supports what the authors call the 'Closer to Home Hypothesis': technological innovations were filtered through pre-existing expectations of institutions and their motives.

Trust and user experience

One question for online crime-reporting portals whether trust helps to humanise technology-mediated encounters that might otherwise lack clear signals of respect and fairness. Why is this plausible? First, *trustworthiness may shape interpretation*. Users who came into the online experience believing that police are competent, fair and benevolent may be motivated to fill in the gaps when portals provide only thin signals. In an online setting where expressions cannot be read and clarifying questions cannot be asked, even small design elements—clear instructions, courteous wording—could take on relational meaning. High-trust users may interpret them as signs of respect, neutrality or benevolent intent, experiencing the portal as smoother and more responsive. Belief in police ability, benevolence and integrity lets them assume, with some confidence, that their disclosure will be handled with fairness and care, even when procedural cues are minimal. Low-trust users may lack this lens; the same cues might feel scripted or dismissive, turning efficiency into bureaucracy. A high-trust user may see a simple "thank you for your report" screen as genuine acknowledgment—"the police have me on record, they will take this seriously"—while a low-trust user may dismiss the same message as a canned response.

Second, *trust may make people feel comfortable being vulnerable*. Submitting a report through a digital portal is a form of what Mayer et al., (1995: 724) call "risk taking in a relationship": it is the behavioural leap that occurs when people place themselves in the hands of another without guarantees of a positive outcome. Victims take this risk when they disclose personal experiences even in face-to-face encounters, opening themselves to the possibility of being dismissed or disbelieved. Online reporting may amplify this risk because portals strip away human intermediaries—tone of voice, body language, spontaneous reassurance—leaving victims with fewer signals about how their disclosure will be received. To alleviate this problem, trust may help users transform a *'cold' digital interface* into a space where they feel safe enough to make themselves vulnerable, converting institutional faith into personal disclosure. For low-trust users, by contrast, each missing relational cue—the lack of acknowledgement, the inability to gauge sincerity—may amplify a sense of perceived risk that they do not feel comfortable with.

To examine these dynamics empirically, we adopt a four-part analytical strategy. First, we prime institutional trust by exposing participants to positive or negative news stories about the police, and test whether this manipulation increases measured trust in the police (serving as a manipulation check). Second, all participants interact with the same online reporting portal, meaning they are exposed to identical procedural content and functional design. This allows us to isolate perceptual differences against a common stimulus, testing higher trust in the police (measured post-prime, and thus capturing both pre-existing levels and experimentally induced variation) is associated with perceiving the portal as more fair and more efficient. Third, we use the experimental manipulation to test whether the high-trust condition increases the strength of this correlation. Our reasoning is that the prime activates the salience of trust, encouraging those predisposed to trust the police to apply that orientation to the reporting task. Finally, we test whether the high-trust prime has a direct causal effect on user experience and support for online reporting. Here, the experimental design allows us to move beyond correlation and assess whether primed trust improves the experience.

The effect of procedurally just follow-up communication

In digital systems, where responses are often limited to automated emails, any additional human-like message may carry disproportionate weight. Even short, carefully worded messages that convey explanation, empathy and acknowledgement after the interaction could signal genuine care rather than routine procedure. They may not alter how the portal feels in the moment, but they can still shape how the system is judged after the fact—and whether people would return.

To test this, we designed a procedurally just follow-up email—'sent' to participants after they submitted their report—into the study. The email embedded the four recognised elements of procedural justice: it explained the decision (neutrality), acknowledged disappointment with empathy (respect), invited further input (voice) and affirmed shared goals and benevolent intent (trustworthy motives). Because the message arrived after the reporting task, it could not influence participants' immediate experience of the portal. The question was whether it shaped broader attitudes toward online reporting—satisfaction with the process, acceptance of digital channels, and willingness to use or recommend the system in future.

We also test whether the effect of such a message depends, in part, on baseline trust in the police. Theory points in two competing directions. One possibility is that, *because it is unexpected*, procedural justice matters most to those who distrust the police. Bayesian models of belief updating suggest that people revise their views by integrating prior assumptions with new evidence (Griffiths et al., 2008). These updates are most likely when new information contradicts expectations and produces "Bayesian surprise"—a signal that one's mental model has failed to predict reality (Gollwitzer et al., 2018; Panitz et al., 2021). From this perspective, a clear and courteous message may feel routine to high-trust users, but stand out to low-trust users who expected silence or indifference. Confronted with this mismatch, the distrustful may begin to revise their assumptions about institutional intent.

An alternative view is that procedural justice resonates more strongly with those who already trust the police. People are motivated to protect their worldview. Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning lead individuals to favour evidence that supports existing beliefs and to discount information that challenges them (Kunda, 1990; Lord et al., 1979; Nickerson, 1998). Trusting users may be predisposed to interpret follow-up messages as authentic and sincere, while distrustful users may dismiss the same cues as formulaic or strategic. If this drive for consistency is strong, a procedurally just message may fall flat for sceptics, who might see empathy or transparency as a surface-level performance masking institutional indifference. By contrast, trusting users may read the message as validation: the explanation, invitation for input and expression of concern confirm that their initial leap of faith was justified. In this sense, follow-up contact could "complete the trust cycle"—the individual took the risk of engaging, and the institution responded in a way that honoured that risk.

The effect of reporting motivations

Finally, we consider whether people's reasons for reporting a crime shape how they experience an online portal. Procedural justice theory distinguishes between two

broad motivations for cooperation and, by extension, reporting decisions (Jackson et al., 2025). Instrumentally motivated users report to achieve a concrete outcome—for example, securing a crime reference number for an insurance claim. For them, reporting is a pragmatic transaction. Normatively motivated users, by contrast, report out of civic obligation. They see notifying the police as a contribution to collective justice, irrespective of personal gain. Because the act carries symbolic meaning, affirming their role as engaged members of society, they are more attuned to relational cues such as trustworthiness and fairness.

On this basis, we expect instrumental users to evaluate the portal more positively. A streamlined system that delivers the necessary paperwork may satisfy their core need: if the system is quick, reliable and produces the required documentation, then it works. Relational warmth or institutional care is incidental, almost irrelevant, because functionality is everything. In this sense, efficiency can be enough—because efficiency is all that is being asked of the system. A clear interface, a crime reference number and a downloadable acknowledgement may be all it takes for instrumental users to feel satisfied. Normative users, however, may seek evidence that their action is valued—that the organisation is listening, takes their concerns seriously and shares their commitment to doing the right thing. Because they invest more, cues of respect, neutrality and benevolent intent carry greater weight. A standardised or impersonal interface may therefore feel insufficient, particularly if it limits narrative detail or offers little human follow-up.

We test whether normatively-motivated research participants experience the portal less positively than instrumentally-motivated research participants. We also test two interaction effects: whether each of trust and procedural justice matter more for normative than for instrumental users. For those driven by civic duty, the interaction may function as a moral exchange whose success hinges on relational assurances. If they trust the police, normative users may accept impersonal design, assuming benevolent intent behind the interface. A procedurally just follow-up email could further affirm that their effort was recognised and respected. By contrast, instrumental users' vulnerability is narrower—focused on efficiency and documentation—so their evaluations may be less sensitive to trust or procedural cues, though not entirely unaffected.

Current study

At the heart of our design is a digital crime-reporting platform designed for Merseyside Police by the company Salesforce for use in cases of criminal damage and antisocial behaviour. Our focus is not on technical performance or back-end systems, but on the user-facing experience and people's willingness to use such platforms again. Using a "mystery shopper" approach, UK-based participants were asked to submit a fictional report via a sandbox version of the portal, and then reflect on their experience. To examine the effects of trust, reporting motivations and procedural justice cues, participants were randomly assigned to different experimental conditions. These manipulations included priming trust and reporting motives before the task, and varying the follow-up communication (procedurally just vs. unjust). This design allowed us to test both main effects and interactions—assessing whether these factors amplify or offset one another in shaping user experience and support for digi-

tal reporting. In the four subsections that follow, we describe how each factor was operationalised—trust, procedurally just follow-up, reporting motivation and crime type—and set out the specific hypotheses tested.

Does trust matter?

Participants were randomly assigned to read a news story about the police force hosting the portal (for the text, see the Appendix) that primed either higher or lower trust. This common psychological method (Molden, 2014) uses contextual cues to activate latent beliefs. The high-trust story was expected to boost confidence in the police among those predisposed to trust, while the low-trust story was expected to heighten scepticism among the doubtful. Trust was measured afterwards as a manipulation check. Our analysis has two parts.

Descriptively, we test whether prior trust in the police is positively associated with user experience (i.e. whether the portal felt procedurally fair and efficient) and support for online crime reporting:

- H1a: Trust in the police (measured as a manipulation check) is correlated with positive user experience.
- H1b: Trust in the police is correlated with support for online crime reporting portals.

Experimentally, we test three hypotheses:

- H1c: For participants primed to trust the police, there is a stronger correlation between (i) trust in the police and user experience, and (ii) trust in the police and support for online crime reporting, compared to participants primed to distrust the police.
- H1d: Participants primed to trust the police will report a more positive user experience.
- H1e: Participants primed to trust the police will express stronger support for using online reporting portals in future.

Does a procedurally just follow-up matter?

After participants submitted their online report and completed the initial survey questions, they were randomly assigned to receive either a control or treatment email. The control message was a brief acknowledgement stating only that no further action would be taken. The treatment was a fuller message designed to convey procedural justice through its content: it explained how the report would still inform policing priorities (*neutrality*), expressed empathy and acknowledged likely disappointment (*respect*), invited further input (*voice*), and affirmed that every report contributes to collective safety and shared goals (*trustworthy motives*). Full operationalisation details are provided in the appendix.

We test whether a procedurally just follow-up increases satisfaction with the process and willingness to report online (H2a). We also ask whether its impact depends on baseline trust in the police. As outlined earlier, the direction of interaction is theoretically ambiguous. One possibility is that unexpected fairness prompts *Bayesian surprise*, leading distrustful users to revise their assumptions (H2b). Another is that procedural justice resonates more with those who already trust the police, reinforcing expectations and completing the *trust cycle* (H2c). We test:

- H2a (additive effect): A procedurally just follow-up email will improve user experience and support for reporting crime online, independent of the trust prime.
- H2b (interaction effect, PJ × trust): The positive effect of a procedurally just email will be larger among participants primed to distrust the police.
- H2c (interaction effect, PJ × trust): The positive effect of a procedurally just email will be larger among participants primed to trust the police.

Do motivations to report matter?

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two short vignettes before submitting their hypothetical online report. The instrumental vignette framed reporting as a practical step to obtain insurance documentation, while the normative vignette cast it as a civic duty essential to justice. Both scenarios involved the same theft incident, were matched for length and tone, and differed only in the motive emphasised—recovering loss versus doing the right thing.

This design tests whether (i) reporting motive shapes user experience and support for online reporting, and (ii) motive moderates the effects of trust and procedural justice. Instrumental users are expected to evaluate the portal more positively because it delivers efficiency, since this satisfies their primary goal. Relational cues are incidental. Normative users, by contrast, attach symbolic meaning to the act of reporting and are more sensitive to cues that signal their contribution is valued and that they are respected and being listened to. A standardised or impersonal interface may therefore feel insufficient, particularly if it restricts narrative detail or offers little follow-up.

These orientations may also shape how trust and procedural justice are received. For normatively motivated users, trust may be more important because their cooperation is framed as a moral exchange—one that depends on fairness and benevolence. A high-trust prime may therefore carry more weight for them than for instrumental users, whose expectations are narrower and more outcome-focused. Similarly, a procedurally just follow-up may resonate more with normative users, as it affirms that their effort was acknowledged and respected. We predict:

- H3a (additive effect): Instrumental users will have a more positive user experience and be more supportive of online reporting than normative users.
- H3b (interaction effect, motivation × trust): The positive effect of the high-trust prime will be stronger among normative users.
- H3c (interaction effect, motivation × PJ): The positive effect of a procedurally just follow-up will be stronger among normative users.

Does crime type matter?

Finally, we varied the type of incident to reflect the portal's intended use. Participants were randomly assigned to report either criminal damage or anti-social behaviour—the two offence categories the pilot system was designed to handle. This decision was primarily practical, but it also enabled an exploratory test of whether user responses vary by offence type. We did not specify ex ante hypotheses, though one might reasonably expect the more chronic and emotionally charged nature of anti-social behaviour to reduce support relative to a one-off incident of property damage. Any differences observed are reported descriptively.

Methods

Study design

Using a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design, participants were randomly assigned to one of 16 experimental conditions, based on:

- Trust in police (high or low trust prime)
- Crime-reporting motivation (instrumental or normative prime)
- Type of crime (criminal damage or anti-social behaviour)
- Procedural justice in follow-up communication (procedurally just or unjust)

Participants and procedure

We recruited 638 UK-based participants (aged 18 and over) via Prolific Academic, using a stratified convenience sample designed to approximate the UK population on gender, ethnicity, and education (ONS, 2021). There were no exclusion criteria beyond Prolific's requirement that participants be at least 18 years old. Prolific is a widely used platform that enables rapid recruitment, fine-grained pre-screening, and broader demographic diversity than most student or convenience samples. Comparative studies highlight its methodological advantages, including superior data quality, higher attention check pass rates, and greater cost-effectiveness per high-quality respondent (Douglas et al., 2023; Peer et al., 2022). Participants recruited through Prolific also show lower rates of satisficing, mind wandering, and multitasking relative to other platforms (Albert & Smilek, 2023).

Nonetheless, online panels are pragmatic sampling frames rather than population mirrors, so we treat generalisability with caution (Newman et al., 2021). Prolific samples tend to over-represent younger, more educated and technologically literate participants, with distinct behavioural patterns that may affect external validity (Rinderknecht et al., 2025). Compensation structures may also introduce selection effects, as participants' reservation wages correlate with economic attributes (Aksoy & Nevo, 2025). Moreover, strong attention metrics on Prolific may reflect heightened vigilance rather than naturalistic engagement (Albert & Smilek, 2023).

Participants were paid £5 for completing the experiment and were required to pass two attention checks during the survey. No participants were excluded from the analysis. Before beginning the experimental tasks, all participants read an information sheet and signed an online consent form. Our study was given exemption from full ethical approval by the UCL Research Ethics Committee, on the basis that it was reviewed and cleared by the Departmental Ethics Committee of Security and Crime Science.

A further limitation of online surveys is the potential for social desirability bias—respondents shaping answers toward perceived norms—especially for topics such as fairness, justice and institutional trust. While self-administered web surveys reduce interpersonal pressure relative to interviewer-administered modes, social desirability persists online and can still influence reports of prosocial or stigmatised behaviour (Gnambs & Kaspar, 2015; Kreuter et al., 2008). To mitigate these risks, we ensured anonymity, used neutral item wording, placed sensitive questions later in the survey, and embedded engagement checks (Newman et al., 2021; Oppenheimer et al., 2009). These procedures align with best practices for online data collection, which stress researcher responsibility for methodological rigour regardless of platform reputation (Cuskley & Sulik, 2024).

The mean age of the sample was 40.2 years (SD = 12.3, range 18–75). Slightly more than half identified as male (53%), 46% as female, and fewer than 1% as non-binary or undisclosed. Most identified as White (83%), with 14% from Asian/Asian British, Black/Black British, or Mixed backgrounds, and 3% selecting "Other" or "Prefer not to say." Educational attainment ranged from secondary school only (19%) to undergraduate (26%) and graduate or professional degrees (20%).

Table 1 reports overall sample characteristics and their distribution across the experimental conditions. Balance checks confirmed that age, gender, ethnicity and education were well distributed across the 2 × 2 design (trust × procedural justice). This 2 × 2 focus in the balance checks is deliberate. While our full factorial experiment also manipulated reporting motivation and crime type, the motivation prime produced no clear differences and the crime-type comparison (criminal damage vs anti-social behaviour) offered limited theoretical leverage. Because our main findings centre on trust and procedural justice, we therefore present balance across these conditions. Overall, the absence of systematic imbalances supports the validity of our randomisation and reassures us that observed treatment effects are not attributable to demographic confounds.

After initiating the survey on Prolific, participants completed a seven-step process simulating an online crime report, with experimental conditions systematically varied (full materials in Appendix):

Trust prime. Participants read a positive or negative press story about the host police force to activate high or low institutional trust; trust was later measured as a manipulation check.

Motivation prime. Participants read a short vignette framing reporting as either a practical task (instrumental) or a civic duty (normative); a follow-up item assessed whether the prime was effective.

Crime scenario. Participants were assigned to read about either a criminal damage or an anti-social behaviour case.

Table 1 Sample characteristics and balance across 2 × 2 (trust x PJ) experimental conditions

	Overall sample (N = 638)	High trust, high PJ (N = 157)	High trust, low PJ (N = 161)	Low trust, high PJ (N = 160)	Low trust, low PJ (N = 160)
Age (mean, SD) [range: 19–78]	40.2 (12.9)	40.2 (11.8)	39.8 (12.9)	40.5 (14.1)	40.4 (12.9)
Gender: Male	339 (53.1%)	72 (45.9%)	77 (47.8%)	73 (45.6%)	74 (46.2%)
Gender: Female	296 (46.4%)	84 (53.5%)	84 (52.2%)	87 (54.4%)	84 (52.5%)
Gender: Non-binary	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)
Gender: Prefer not to say	2 (0.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)
Education: Postgraduate degree	130 (20.4%)	34 (21.7%)	35 (21.7%)	32 (20.0%)	29 (18.1%)
Education: Undergraduate degree	252 (39.5%)	55 (35.0%)	66 (41.0%)	70 (43.8%)	61 (38.1%)
Education: Secondary	119 (18.7%)	30 (19.1%)	34 (21.1%)	25 (15.6%)	30 (18.8%)
Education: Some further education	78 (12.2%)	21 (13.4%)	12 (7.5%)	22 (13.8%)	23 (14.4%)
Education: A-level or equivalent	48 (7.5%)	15 (9.6%)	11 (6.8%)	8 (5.0%)	14 (8.8%)
Education: No formal/primary	7 (1.1%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.9%)
Education: Other/Prefer not to say	4 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)	3 (1.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Ethnicity: White	525 (82.3%)	123 (79.4%)	130 (81.2%)	139 (86.9%)	133 (83.1%)
Ethnicity: Black/Black British	43 (6.7%)	8 (5.2%)	13 (8.1%)	10 (6.2%)	11 (6.9%)
Ethnicity: Asian/Asian British	42 (6.6%)	14 (9.0%)	9 (5.6%)	8 (5.0%)	12 (7.5%)
Ethnicity: Mixed	11 (1.7%)	5 (3.2%)	4 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.2%)
Ethnicity: Other	7 (1.1%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.2%)	2 (1.2%)	1 (0.6%)
Ethnicity: Prefer not to say	7 (1.1%)	3 (1.9%)	2 (1.2%)	1 (0.6%)	1 (0.6%)

Note. Table 1 reports overall sample characteristics and their distribution across the four conditions of the 2 × 2 factorial design (trust × procedural justice). While the experiment also included manipulations of reporting motivation and crime type, these did not yield theoretically meaningful effects: the motivation prime failed to generate distinct responses, and differences by crime type were limited. For clarity and parsimony, we therefore present balance checks only for the conditions that underpin our main findings. No systematic imbalances were detected across demographic characteristics, supporting the validity of random assignment

Portal task. Participants clicked through to the live pilot portal, entered fictitious details and submitted the assigned crime report. The process averaged about five minutes (M = 299 s).

User experience. After submitting the report, participants returned to the survey and rated their portal experience.

Follow-up communication. Participants received a fictional email from a police officer, varying in procedural justice. The high-PJ message conveyed respect, transparency and empathy; the low-PJ version was brief and impersonal. Participants then rated its fairness.

Outcome measures. Finally, participants completed items on satisfaction, perceived fairness and future willingness to use online reporting.

Measures

Table 2 presents the core measures used in the study, along with descriptive statistics for each indicator.

Table 2 Key measures of constructs

Construct	Indicators	Response scale	N	Mean (SD)
Trust in the police (manipulation check)	Merseyside police is an organisation I can trust	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	638	3.16 (1.26)
	When dealing with victims, Merseyside police can be trusted to treat them properly		638	2.99 (1.33)
	When intervening in people's lives, Merseyside police can be trusted to make the right decisions		638	3.18 (1.28)
	When investigating crimes, Merseyside police can be trusted to do the right thing		638	3.21 (1.29)
Motivations to report crime (manipulation check)	To what degree would you report it to the police because you needed a crime reference number from the police for an insurance claim?	1 = Not at all to 5 = A great deal	569	4.11 (1.14)
	To what degree would you report it to the police because you thought it was your moral duty to report any crime to the police?		569	3.67 (1.23)
Procedural justice of follow-up email (manipulation check)	To what extent do you think the follow up email was respectful?	1 = Very respectful to 4 = Not respectful at all	638	2.11 (0.77)
	To what extent do you think the follow up email was clear?	1 = Very clear to 4 = Not clear at all	638	1.56 (0.65)
	Do you think the tone of the follow up email was rude?	1 = Very rude to 4 = Not rude at all	638	3.28 (0.78)
	How helpful do you think the follow up email was?	1 = Very helpful to 4 = Not helpful at all	638	2.97 (0.90)
	To what extent do you think the follow up email was dismissive?	1 = Very dismissive to 4 = Not dismissive at all	638	2.19 (0.93)
User experience	During the online reporting process, I felt like I was being treated with the respect I deserve	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	638	3.74 (0.82)
	During the online reporting process, I felt like my experience was being taken seriously	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	638	3.65 (0.93)
	Reporting crime online is easier than using the phone or visiting a police station	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	638	4.19 (0.97)
	I'm happy to use an online service if it's quicker and easier than other options	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	638	4.39 (0.80)

Table 2 (continued)

Construct	Indicators	Response scale	N	Mean (SD)
Attitudes towards online crime-reporting	How satisfied are you with the reporting process as a whole?	1 = Very satisfied to 5 = Not satisfied at all	638	1.74 (0.89)
	How acceptable is it for police to ask people to report crime this way?	1 = Very acceptable to 4 = Not acceptable at all	638	1.90 (0.78)
	In general, would you be willing to use an online crime-reporting portal like this in the future?	1 = Very willing to 4 = Not willing at all	638	1.81 (0.82)
	In the future, if someone you know experienced a crime like the one you reported, would you recommend they use an online reporting portal if one is available?	1 = I definitely would to 4 = I definitely would not	638	1.93 (0.86)

Note. The procedural justice manipulation check emphasised interpersonal dimensions of procedural justice (respect, trustworthy motives) but did not fully capture neutrality or voice. These limitations reflect the nature of the follow-up email, which involved no substantive decision-making and offered no realistic opportunity for participants to provide further input

Trust in the police (manipulation check 1). Four items adapted to the local force captured perceived trustworthiness (e.g., "Merseyside police is an organisation I can trust"; "When dealing with victims, Merseyside police can be trusted to treat them properly"), each rated from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Average scores were close to the scale midpoint (M = 2.99–3.21), with substantial variation in perceptions of institutional trust.

Motivations to report crime (manipulation check 2). Two items captured instrumental and normative orientations ("…because you needed a crime reference number for an insurance claim"; "…because you thought it was your moral duty to report any crime to the police"). Both motives were endorsed above the midpoint, though instrumental reasons were somewhat stronger (M = 4.11, SD = 1.14) than normative ones (M = 3.67, SD = 1.23).

Procedural justice of the follow-up email (manipulation check 3). Participants evaluated the follow-up email on five items: respectful, clear, rude (reverse-coded), helpful and dismissive (reverse-coded). These indicators primarily tapped interpersonal dimensions of procedural justice—respectful treatment and trustworthy motives. It was difficult to properly capture neutrality and voice. On the one hand, the email communicated "no further action," so one could assess the perceived fairness of that decision, though no other substantive choices were involved. On the other hand, participants had no realistic opportunity for voice, given the digital nature of reporting. A more comprehensive measure could have incorporated decision-making transparency and opportunities for participation. We acknowledge this as a limitation later in the paper.

User experience (outcome 1). Four items assessed perceptions during the portal task (e.g., "I felt like I was being treated with the respect I deserve"; "Reporting crime online is easier than using the phone or visiting a police station").

Attitudes toward online crime-reporting (outcome 2). Four items assessed satisfaction with the process, acceptability of online reporting, willingness to use portals in the future, and likelihood of recommending them to others.

Scaling

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate a measurement model with four correlated latent variables: trust in the police, user experience with online reporting, attitudes toward online reporting, and perceived procedural justice of the follow-up email (Table 3). Each latent variable was measured using multiple ordinal indicators. The model was estimated in lavaan (v. 0.6–18) using diagonally weighted

Table 3 Standardised factor loadings from the CFA model

Construct	Indicator	Standardized factor loading
Manipulation check 1: Trust in the police	Merseyside police is an organisation I can trust	0.975
	…treat victims properly	0.940
	…make the right decisions	0.982
	…do the right thing when investigating crimes	0.968
Manipulation check 2: Motivations to report crime	*(not included in CFA model—see text)*	–
Manipulation check 3: Procedural justice of follow-up email	Email was respectful	0.926
	Email was clear	0.643
	Email was rude (reversed)	−0.820
	Email was helpful	0.883
	Email was dismissive (reversed)	−0.821
Outcome 1: User experience	Felt I was treated with respect during online reporting	0.869
	Felt my experience was taken seriously	0.897
	Online reporting easier than phone/station	0.740
	Happy to use online if quicker/easier	0.831
Outcome 2: Attitudes toward online reporting	Satisfied with the process	0.754
	Acceptable for police to ask people to report online	0.872
	Willing to use online portal in future	0.994
	Would recommend online portal to others	0.914

Note. Motivations to report crime (manipulation check 2) were assessed separately with two single items and not included in the CFA model

least squares with the WLSMV correction. Motivations to report crime were excluded from the CFA because they were measured using two single items.

The model showed a good overall fit: CFI = 0.989 and TLI = 0.987 exceeded the 0.95 benchmark, SRMR = 0.069 was comfortably below 0.08, and RMSEA = 0.084 (90% CI: 0.078–0.091) was only marginally above conventional cutoffs, indicating an acceptable representation of the data.

Standardised factor loadings were satisfactory (all ≥ 0.64, most > 0.80). Trust and user experience were particularly well defined (all > 0.90), while the reversed procedural justice items (rudeness, dismissiveness) loaded negatively as expected, reinforcing construct validity. User experience items cohered on a single factor that combined relational (respect, acknowledgement) and functional (ease, efficiency) dimensions, consistent with our conceptualisation of engagement in digital reporting.

Reliability was excellent overall. Composite reliabilities (CR) ranged from.90 to.98 and average variance extracted (AVE) values from.68 to.93, surpassing conventional thresholds. Trust and attitudes showed especially strong consistency (CR > .90, AVE > .75), while user experience and procedural justice achieved adequate reliability despite somewhat lower AVEs—reflecting their broader or narrower scope. User experience was intentionally multi-dimensional, while the procedural justice scale emphasised respect and trustworthy motives, leaving neutrality and voice less directly represented.

The four constructs were correlated but empirically distinct. Specifically, trust in the police was moderately associated with user experience (r = .36), attitudes (r = .34), and perceptions of procedural justice (r = .30). User experience correlated strongly with attitudes (r = .75) and moderately with procedural justice (r = .38), while attitudes and procedural justice were also strongly correlated (r = .68).

Results

Descriptive findings

User experience was generally positive. Around four in five participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated with respect (78%) and that their experience was taken seriously (78%). A similar share felt that reporting online was easier than using the phone or visiting a station (80%). Nearly nine in ten (90%) said they would be happy to use an online service if it were quicker and easier than other options. Online reporting attitudes were also favourable. Nearly all participants reported being satisfied with the process (92%) and over four in five judged online reporting to be acceptable (81%). More than four in five said they would be willing to use such a portal again in the future (82%), and just under four in five (78%) said they would recommend it to others.

Correlations among (1) trust in the police, (2) user experience and (3) online reporting attitudes were all in the expected direction (Fig. 1). Trust in the police was moderately associated with user experience (r = .32, 95% CI [.25,.39], p < .001), supporting H1a. Trust in the police was also moderately associated with online reporting attitudes (r = .30, 95% CI [.22,.37], p < .001), supporting H1b. The strongest

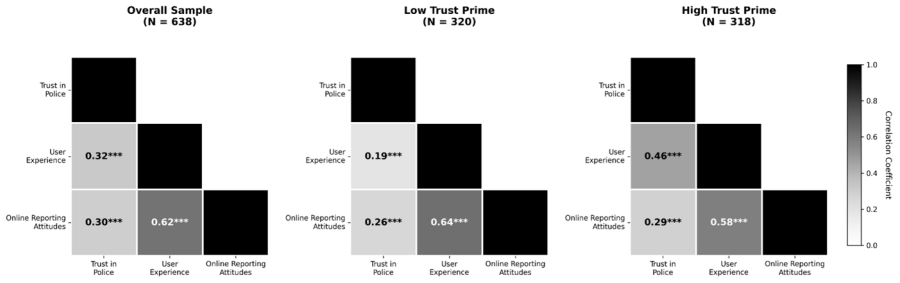

Fig. 1 Correlation matrices showing relationships between trust in police, user experience, and online reporting attitudes by experimental condition

association was between user experience and online reporting attitudes (r=.62, 95% CI [.57,.67], p<.001), indicating that more positive portal experiences were closely linked to more favourable online reporting attitudes.

Splitting by experimental condition showed that the correlation between trust in the police and user experience was significantly stronger in the high-trust prime condition (r=.46, 95% CI [.37,.55]) than in the low-trust prime condition (r=.19, 95% CI [.08,.29]; Fisher z= −3.92, p<.001), supporting H1c (please note that in the next section we report that the trust primed 'worked', i.e. it increased trust in the police). This is consistent with the idea that by priming trust, we activated the salience of trust during the reporting task. Those who treated the police inferred a greater level of fairness and efficiency compared to those who did not trust the police, especially when trust was made salient by the prime. By contrast, the relationship between trust and online reporting attitudes did not vary by condition (high-trust prime: r=.29; low-trust prime: r=.26; Fisher z= −0.37, p=.708). Similarly, the association between user experience and online reporting attitudes remained consistent across both conditions (low-trust prime: r=.64; high-trust prime: r=.58; Fisher z=1.17, p=.243).

Manipulation checks

Figure 2 displays the manipulation checks for the three experimental conditions, with group means and 95% confidence intervals superimposed on individual-level data.

Trust prime

A linear model confirmed a strong effect on the trust factor score (b=–1.51, SE=0.05, t=–30.71, p<.001; R^2=.60). Marginal means were 0.76 (95% CI [0.69, 0.83]) for the high-trust condition and –0.75 (95% CI [–0.82, –0.69]) for the low-trust condition.

Motivation prime

There was no evidence that the prime shifted self-reported motivations. For the instrumental item: b=0.13, SE=0.10, t=1.36, p=.176 (marginal means 4.04 vs 4.17). For the normative item: b=0.01, SE=0.10, t=0.12, p=.901 (marginal means

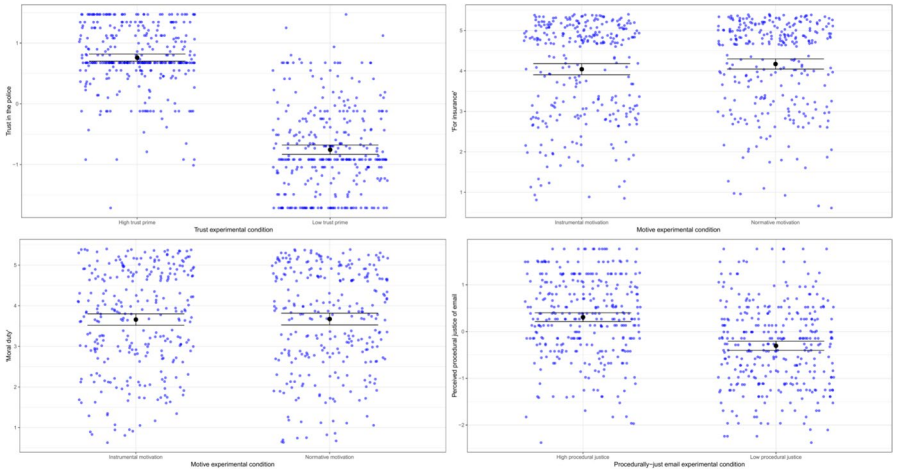

Fig. 2 Manipulation checks

3.66 vs 3.67). Because the manipulation failed, we do not present tests of H3a and only report moderation tests for H3b/H3c in a footnote.

Procedural justice treatment

Participants in the high-PJ condition rated the email more positively (M = 0.31, 95% CI [0.21, 0.40]) than those in the low-PJ condition (M = –0.30, 95% CI [–0.40, –0.21]), confirming a robust treatment effect ($p < .001$).

Overall, two manipulations (trust and procedural justice) worked as expected; the motivation prime did not.

Effects of experimental conditions

We estimated all experimental effects using linear models. Because the motivation prime failed the manipulation check, it was excluded from primary analyses. Figure 3 plots adjusted means with 95% CIs for the main and interaction effects involving the trust and procedural justice manipulations.

Crime type (exploratory). There was no evidence that crime type influenced user experience (b = –0.02, SE = 0.07, t = –0.27, p = .785), and only a weak, non-significant tendency on attitudes (b = –0.13, SE = 0.07, t = –1.71, p = .088).

Trust effects (H1d–H1e). Participants primed with high trust reported more positive user experiences (b = –0.32, SE = 0.07, t = –4.60, $p < .001$; marginal means 0.16 vs –0.16). They also expressed more favourable attitudes toward online reporting (b = –0.31, SE = 0.07, t = –4.24, $p < .001$; marginal means 0.16 vs –0.16). These results support H1d and H1e.

Procedural justice effect (H2a). Receiving a high-PJ follow-up email predicted more positive attitudes (b = –0.22, SE = 0.07, t = –2.99, p = .003; marginal means 0.11 vs –0.11), supporting H2a.

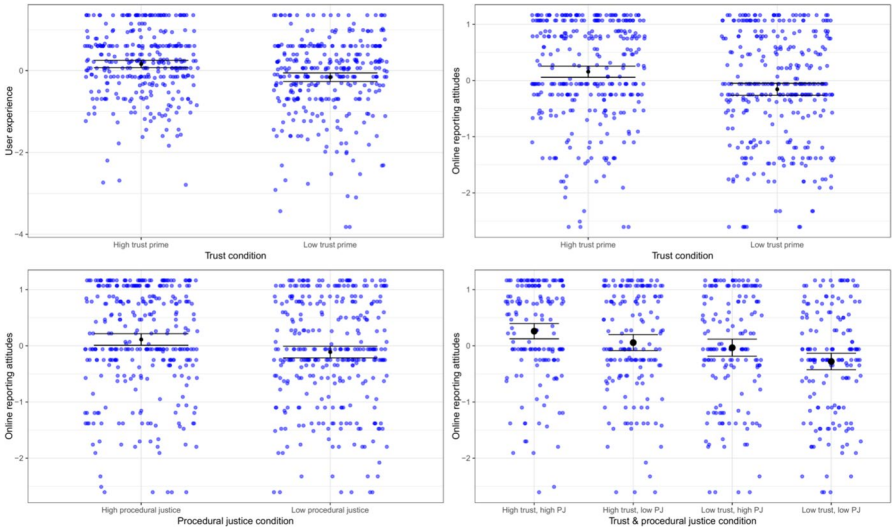

Fig. 3 Experimental effects

Trust × *PJ* (H2b & H2c). A fitted 2 × 2 linear model with an interaction term showed additive, not multiplicative, effects. Main effects: trust (low vs high) b = –0.29, SE = 0.10, p = .005; PJ (low vs high) b = –0.20, SE = 0.10, p = .052. The interaction was small and non-significant (b = –0.04, SE = 0.15, p = .771). Adjusted means by cell were 0.26 (high trust, high PJ), 0.06 (high trust, low PJ), –0.03 (low trust, high PJ), –0.28 (low trust, low PJ). This pattern illustrates parallel improvements rather than synergistic ones.

As shown in Fig. 4, trust and procedural justice each exerted independent, additive effects: participants reported the most positive attitudes under high-trust/high-PJ conditions and the least positive under low-trust/low-PJ conditions. There was no evidence of an interaction.[2]

As previously noted, the motivation manipulation failed its check. We did not find support for H3a, H3b, or H3c.

Discussion

Tyler (2025) argues that the growth of digital policing represents a second wave of depersonalisation, following earlier changes brought by cars and mobile communication. The risk is that technological systems lose the interpersonal cues that help people feel acknowledged, respected and cared for. This matters not only for service quality but for perceptions of legitimacy. When interactions feel purely transactional,

[2] A sensitivity analysis indicated that with N = 638 in a 2 × 2 design (α = .05), the study had ~ 80% power to detect main effects of $\eta p^2 \geq .012$ ($f \approx .11$) and interaction effects of $\eta p^2 \geq .017$ ($f \approx .13$). Very small interactions ($f < .10$) could not be reliably detected with this sample size. However, the observed trust × procedural justice interaction was essentially zero (b = –0.04, p = .771, partial $\eta p^2 < .001$), suggesting that the null finding reflects the absence of a substantive effect rather than inadequate power.

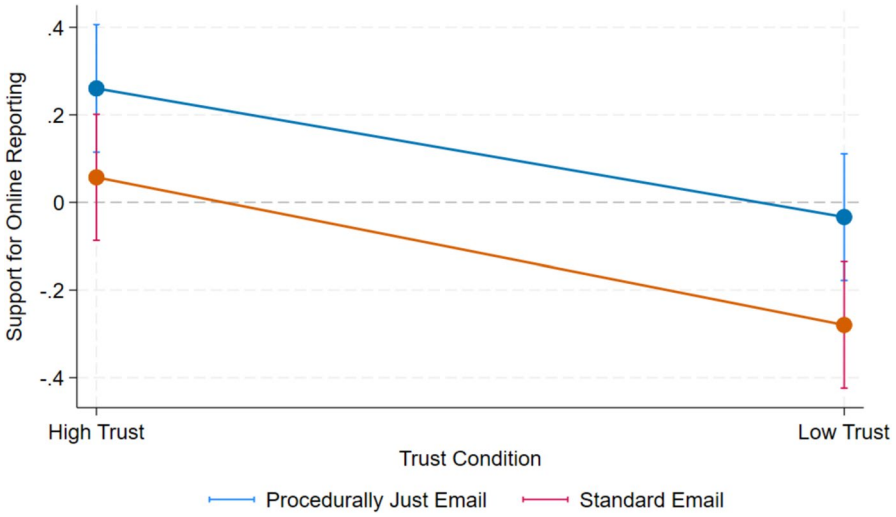

Fig. 4 Visualising the main and interaction effects of trust and procedural justice on online reporting attitudes

with few signs that someone is listening or taking the report seriously, people may be less inclined to view the institution behind it as moral, just and appropriate.

In our study, research participants reported a hypothetical crime used a trialled version of an online reporting portal developed by an English police force. We embedded experimental manipulations before and after the reporting task. The first, descriptive part of the study assessed whether the portal met basic expectations of fairness and usability, whether these experiences translated into broader support for online reporting, and whether existing levels of trust in the police influenced those outcomes. The findings were broadly positive: most participants felt respected and taken seriously, found the portal easier to use than phone or in-person reporting, and expressed high levels of satisfaction and willingness to use or recommend such systems. These results suggest that, even in a simulated context, online reporting can meet core expectations and generate public support. Crucially, these impressions were shaped by the degree of trust participants already held in the police—an issue we return to later.

The second, experimental part of the study examined whether trust helps people interpret digital reporting experiences that lack the interpersonal signals typically present in face-to-face encounters. We tested three causal propositions: (a) that trust acts as a perceptual filter, shaping how people respond to impersonal interactions; (b) that framing reporting as a civic duty rather than a practical task would influence how people interpreted those interactions; and (c) that a procedurally just follow-up message could reintroduce a sense of fairness and care after an otherwise automated exchange. Two findings are particularly noteworthy. First, participants who were primed to trust the police reported a more positive user experience—both in terms of relational elements (feeling respected and taken seriously) and practical considerations (ease and efficiency of use)—and were more willing to use online systems

again in future. Second, participants who received a procedurally just follow-up email expressed greater support for the reporting platform.

Taken together, our findings point to both the potential and the limitations of digital crime-reporting systems. On the descriptive side, the portal appeared to meet core expectations of usability and fairness, fostering support for its broader adoption. Experimentally, both trust and procedurally just communication independently improved participants' experiences and attitudes. Our results reinforce a central insight: relational signals still matter, even when human contact is limited. Careful design and thoughtful follow-up can help digital tools feel more responsive and legitimate.

Limitations and future research

This study shows how trust and procedural justice shape responses to online crime-reporting, but several caveats remain. First, ecological validity. Participants were not reporting real incidents, they were responding to a hypothetical scenario involving either property damage or anti-social behaviour. The task did not capture the emotional complexity, vulnerability, or uncertainty that often characterise real-life victimisation (Hohl et al., 2025; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019). Actual victims bring stress, uncertainty and previous experiences with the police, all of which may influence perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. While experimental designs allow for the targeted testing of mechanisms, they cannot fully replicate the emotional intensity or unpredictability of lived victimisation. Future studies should assess how these effects play out among real users of reporting portals, and whether the impacts are stronger—or weaker—than those observed here. They should also test whether digital platforms are equally suited to all types of crime. Most saliently, online systems may be more appropriate for routine, low-impact incidents—such as property damage linked to insurance claims—than for cases involving personal trauma, where the risk of not being believed or supported is more salient.

Second, sampling. Although demographically diverse, our sample was not nationally representative. Online panels offer more variation than student samples but remain pragmatic tools rather than true reflections of the general population. Larger, probability-based samples would allow researchers to test how far the results generalise across different regions, age groups and communities—especially given that trust in police and attitudes toward digital services can vary widely.

Third, scope. We studied a single portal developed by one UK police force. Design features—such as interface layout, language tone or levels of automation—may influence how users judge fairness and legitimacy. Comparative research could help identify how organisational reputation, local trust climates or international context affect user experience, and which portal features help buffer against scepticism.

Fourth, statistical power. While our design was sufficiently powered to detect small-to-moderate main effects, it was less sensitive to very small interaction effects (see footnote 2). In our case, the observed trust × procedural justice interaction was effectively zero. Nonetheless, larger samples in future studies may be able to detect more subtle interaction effects, particularly in different operational settings.

Fifth, measurement of procedural justice. Our manipulation focused on the presence or absence of fairness cues but did not disentangle distinct dimensions such as voice, neutrality, explanation or dignity (Trinkner, 2023). A related limitation lies in the manipulation check. Participants primarily assessed respect and benevolence, but had limited opportunity to evaluate neutrality or voice. The follow-up email communicated "no further action" and offered no real input channel, which likely constrained how participants assessed decision fairness. Future work should use more fine-grained manipulations and broader measures to capture how procedural justice is conveyed—or constrained—in digital communication.

Finally, the interaction between trust and procedural justice. Competing theories suggested that those low in trust might be more responsive due to the element of surprise induced by a procedurally just follow-up email, or that those high in trust would be more receptive because the message aligned with their expectations. In practice, we found no evidence of moderation. This may reflect the timing of the follow-up message: arriving after the report was completed, it may have shaped general attitudes rather than perceptions of the reporting process itself. Alternatively, it may suggest that messages of procedural fairness have a broadly similar effect regardless of prior trust—at least in the context of reporting relatively minor crimes online.

Conclusion

Public trust and police legitimacy are grounded in perceptions and experiences of procedural justice—particularly in face-to-face encounters where officers listen, offer explanations and affirm the equal standing of those they serve (Mazerolle et al., 2013a; Murphy et al., 2014). Yet as these encounters shift to digital platforms, we need to ensure that these relational signals—of fairness, respect, and benevolent intent—are not lost in translation. Digital platforms may reduce certain vulnerabilities: offering anonymity, avoiding intimidating interactions, and providing consistent, neutral interfaces (cf. Rothwell et al., 2022). The systemic appeal of online reporting is clear: greater standardisation, reduced variability in decision-making, and clearer pathways through what is often an opaque and unpredictable system. But the task is not merely to build efficient systems—it is to design digital tools that preserve the interpersonal foundations of legitimacy.

Studies have shown that online contacts and digital conduct are often judged less procedurally just (Bradford et al., 2025; Henning et al., 2024; Hobson et al., 2023; Mentovich et al., 2023; Wells et al., 2023). Our study has contributed to a growing effort to adapt and extend procedural justice theory to the digital context (Tyler, 2025; Tyler et al., 2021). Trust is often framed as a condition for accepting police authority (McLean & Nix, 2022; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Yesberg et al., 2024) but our study points to a complementary role: trust as an enabler of meaningful engagement within digital, service-oriented encounters. In the absence of interpersonal cues, trust helped users infer institutional intent—that the police were attentive, that they cared, and that their systems were designed to assist rather than dismiss. Our findings thus highlight that digital policing tools are not judged in isolation but are interpreted through the lens of broader institutional relationships. This mirrors Schiff et al.'s

(2025) observation that confidence in AI-based policing hinged less on the technology itself than on the identity of its deployer—being seen as more legitimate when linked to local sheriffs than to the FBI.

Digital systems should actively prime and sustain trust through design, tone and responsiveness. Evidence from human–computer interaction and communication studies reinforces this. Small design choices—naming authors, providing feedback, or adopting a socially oriented communication style—can cue transparency, empathy and presence, raising trust in otherwise impersonal systems (Lee & See, 2004; Spain & Madhavan, 2009; Kosova et al., 2025; Janson, 2023; Kulms & Kopp, 2018). For police designing new modes of digital crime reporting, the lesson is twofold. First, embed trust-activating cues—clear explanations, professional presentation, transparency about process, and acknowledgement of seriousness—so that even minimal signals carry relational meaning. Second, avoid design features that could inadvertently activate distrust, such as curt acknowledgements or overly legalistic warnings.

In sum, relational cues—of fairness, responsiveness, and purpose—are not decorative. They are foundational. In a digital era, where face-to-face contact is increasingly rare, preserving these signals is essential if police authority is to remain recognised as rightful and just. Ultimately, while efficiency may drive the shift toward online systems, their legitimacy depends on whether they communicate fairness, respect and shared purpose—qualities that give authority its rightful standing, even in technologically mediated encounters. And while design can support trust, it cannot conjure it from nothing. Digital legitimacy must be built, not assumed—earned through fair treatment, sustained through transparent process, and made visible in every interaction, however automated (Tyler, 2025). In the end, what legitimises authority in the digital age is not the technology itself, but the human values it manages to carry across the screen.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Press stories for high trust group

Police officer dives into Mersey to rescue woman who jumped 17 NOV 2022.

A police officer dived into the Mersey to rescue a woman who tried to take her own life.

Two Merseyside Police officers were recognised yesterday at an awards ceremony for their bravery after saving a woman who tried to take her own life. Constables Alex Crawford and Graeme Hurd responded to an emergency call after a concerned taxi driver reported a woman standing on the wrong side of the railings next to Liverpool Cruise Terminal.

While on route to the terminal the woman jumped into the Mersey. The tide was high and the strong current had started to pull the woman out to sea. Constable Crawford removed his body armour and equipment, and risking his own safety, jumped into the water after her.

Constable Hurd alerted the coastguard and ambulance services but both officers realised help would not be there in time. Constable Crawford was struggling to lift the woman out the water but Constable Hurd was able to drag them both to safety and administer first aid.

A police spokesperson said: "Thanks to the officers' bravery, the woman's life was saved that night and she was offered the help and support she needed." Constable Hurd said: "There were some really worthy nominees, so for us, winning the bravery award is completely unexpected. I would say that Alex was the main brave person on the day, he's the one who jumped in the water.

> "This is honestly just one of the things we do on a daily basis, we don't really see it ourselves as something special, so it's nice to hear how valued our work is by others. I have been in the police for about 15 years and it's the first time I have ever been to an event like this, it's so nice to have been part of the awards."

The two Constables were recognised at the fifth Community First Awards for their dedication, bravery and professionalism. Chief Constable Serena Kennedy said: "These awards are a celebration of the hard work, professionalism, and dedication that our officers, staff, volunteers and partners display day in, day out, to protect victims, prevent crime and serve the public. It is so important that these achievements are recognised and celebrated because policing and the work carried out to support our communities across Merseyside is by no means an easy job.

> "The judges had a really difficult task choosing the winners, as everyone nominated was a worthy winner for their outstanding work and commitment, and for the difference they have made to keep people across Merseyside safe."

Merseyside cop nominated for national bravery award after disarming armed drunk 15 JUL 2017.

A police officer is a candidate for a national bravery award after disarming a drunk man with a knife and whiskey bottle. Thomas Griffith grappled with a man who had gone to his ex-partner's home and was threatening her family with an eight inch kitchen knife. The constable tried to talk calmly with the offender, but he became more aggressive as he looked set to violently turn on the woman's relatives. PC Griffith then spotted a chance to disarm the man in the street in Wavertree when he got distracted. The man was pinned to the police van, restrained and arrested, in March, last year. He was later sentenced to ten months in jail.

PC Griffiths ended up with injuries to his hand and a number of bruises on his torso and limbs. Now, the cop has been nominated for a national police bravery award. Pete Singleton, chairman of Merseyside Police Federation, said: "PC Griffith showed great courage and bravery in deliberately placing himself in harm's way to protect the public. "He consciously approached the man and selflessly diverted his attention on himself to deflect the aggression away from others. "PC Griffith was composed in an extremely trying and dangerous situation, but his calm approach and decisive action prevented a dangerous and unstable individual from seriously harming, or even killing, innocent members of the public.

"The members of the public at scene, including the victim, expressed how brave PC Griffith had been, and how his actions were a credit to both him and the force." PC Griffith will attend a reception and an evening awards ceremony in London in July. The National Police Bravery Awards honour officers who have performed outstanding acts of bravery while on or off duty.

Merseyside Police 'outstanding' at disrupting serious crime gangs 18-August 2022.

Merseyside Police has been rated "outstanding" at disrupting serious organised crime.

An audit from the police watchdog also praised officers' success in keeping people safe and reducing crime. However, there was room for improvement in services provided to victims and priority-call response times, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary said. The force it was "delighted" and would keep striving to improve. Merseyside Police was one of three forces to pilot the watchdog's new approach to inspections along with Suffolk Constabulary and Dyfed-Powys Police. The inspection took place in May 2021 and was followed by a second visit in May looking at new evidence on areas assessed as needing to improve. The Inspectorate graded the force as "good" in nine areas and "adequate" in supporting victims, as well as "outstanding" in dealing with serious organised crime. Spokesman Matt Parr said: "I congratulate Merseyside Police on its performance in keeping people safe and reducing crime." He said the force performed well across most other areas of policing including protecting vulnerable people, preventing and investigating crime and supporting its workforce.

It had reduced the impact of crime by disrupting gangs bringing in drugs from other areas in innovative ways and had consulted the public on how to use money seized to benefit the community, he said. Mr Parr said the force was also was good at protecting vulnerable people and children at risk of violence, alcohol or drugs. Chief Constable Serena Kennedy said the findings were the result of the "hard work" of officers and staff. She said it recognised their "pride and commitment in providing a professional and effective police service that puts our communities at the heart of everything we do". Ms Kennedy added work was "already underway" in relation to areas identified for improvement. Merseyside's Police Commissioner Emily Spurrell also welcomed the "positive" report.

Appendix 2: Press stories for low trust group

Merseyside police apologise to woman deterred from sexual assault complaint 31 Jul 2022.

Merseyside police have apologised after an officer deterred a woman from pursuing a sexual assault complaint by saying that because there were no witnesses or CCTV "there will be no realistic prospect of a prosecution".

The letter, seen by the Guardian, was sent last month by a detective sergeant before the complainant had been interviewed by officers.

Campaigners said it helped to explain why so few reports of sexual offences end up with anyone being charged, let alone convicted. Just 1.6% of rapes recorded by police in England and Wales in 2020 resulted in a charge or a summons.

After hearing about the case on a visit to Liverpool this week, Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour party, described the approach as "completely wrong".

He said it would deter others from reporting sexual offences: "If anybody thinks: 'If I come forward, I'm going to be told it's too difficult to do,' then why am I going to come forward in the first place?".

In the letter, sent on 13 June, the police officer told the woman that "in order to proceed we would require a video interview from yourself for the formal complaint. After this is obtained we could look to interview the suspect and the evidence would be reviewed, however without anything supporting such as a witnesses [sic] or CCTV there will be no realistic prospect of a prosecution."

Lorraine Wood, the operations manager at Rape and Sexual Assault Centre (Rasa) Merseyside, who is supporting the complainant, said: "The woman had not even given a statement, so how the police could make that decision is beyond me."

She said the service often heard anecdotal reports of victims being encouraged to drop a case, "but this is the first time we have seen it in writing".

Wood said the police needed to "look at the language that we use when speaking to victims, and need to respond so much better".

She added: "Five years ago this would be a very rare thing that we would hear, especially from specialist officers. Now this is an everyday experience. Nine out of 10 victims tell us about this negative response that they hear."

Assistant chief constable Chris Green said a senior officer had spoken to the complainant after the Guardian raised her case and "apologised for any additional distress our response has caused, and we are now working with her to ensure she gets the support she should have had from the beginning".

He added: "Sadly, I can say that the victim did not receive the high level of service that the force expects and she deserved – this included a letter that did not demonstrate the level of sensitivity and empathy that we would expect. "We wholly understand that when a victim comes forward to report an allegation of this nature that it can be painful and traumatic for them to recount the ordeal they have suffered.

> "I want to reassure anyone who is a victim of rape or sexual abuse, that if they can find the strength to come forward and speak to us we will do everything within our power to bring the offenders to justice."

Wood said the woman was very distressed to receive the letter and initially thought there was no point giving a video interview, but had now changed her mind, with the support of Rasa's independent sexual violence adviser team.

Merseyside PC accused of having sex with multiple women while on duty appears in court 29th Nov 2022.

A Merseyside police constable faces allegations of misconduct by having sex while on duty. PC Adam Hoyle, based at Lower Lane police station, appeared at Liverpool Magistrates Court on Tuesday accused of four offences of misconduct in a public office. He also faces three charges of unauthorised access to computer data.

The 39-year-old of Yelverton Close, Halewood, was sent by District Judge James Hatton to the city's crown court where he is due to appear on January 4.

The first two charges against him allege he formed an inappropriate relationship with a woman and had intercourse with her while on duty. The third charge involves the same allegations involving another woman. The fourth misconduct charge relates to kissing a third woman and trying to instigate sexual activity with her while on duty.

The charges span May 26, 2012 to May 31, 2019. The computer misuse offences allegedly took place between June 20 and November 18, 2019.

The bearded officer appeared at court after a postal requisition and was remanded on unconditional bail. Merseyside Police confirmed that Hoyle is suspended from duty.

A statement from the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) said: "We investigated the conduct of PC Adam Hoyle, 39, following allegations he had abused his position for a sexual purpose. On conclusion of our investigation, we passed a file to the Crown Prosecution Service which authorised charges."

Merseyside Police officer 'bought and used Class A drugs' 31 JAN 2023.

A Merseyside Police constable was allegedly found to have bought and used "Class A drugs".

The officer, who has since left the force, has been named as former Constable 2751 Brown.

According to a notice posted by Merseyside Police: "Former Constable 2751 Brown will appear before the Hearing for breaching the Standards of Professional Behaviour, namely, Discreditable Conduct – in that in August 2022 you purchased and used illegal class A drugs and that your actions have the propensity to bring the police service nationally into disrepute."

The type of drug used and the location and circumstances it was taken in have not yet been publicly shared.

The officer's case will be considered at an "accelerated" misconduct hearing, which can take place in cases where "special conditions" exist as defined by the Police Conduct Regulations 2020. These are usually when "on the balance of probabilities there is sufficient evidence of gross misconduct", and it is in the public interest for the officer to be sacked as soon as possible.

Accelerated hearings can be decided by the Chief Constable, rather than an independent legally qualified chair. If Merseyside Chief Constable Serena Kennedy finds that PC Brown's behaviour amounts to gross misconduct his name can be added to the College of Policing Barred List, prohibiting him from holding any other policing job in the UK.

The hearing is due to take place on Friday, February 10, at the force HQ in Cazenau Street, and is scheduled to finish that day.

Appendix 3: Motivation manipulation text provided for instrumental group

Reporting crime to the police

Many people only report a crime like personal theft to the police because they want to make an insurance claim. They believe that the criminal justice system is mostly there to safeguard people's property and compensate for loss and damage. If they do not need a crime number to get money back from insurance, they would not

report the crime to the police, because they do not see the point. Their goal is to get back what they lost.

Appendix 4: Motivation manipulation text provided for normative group

Reporting crime to the police

Many people report a crime like personal theft to the police because they feel a moral duty to do so. They believe that the criminal justice system can only work effectively with everybody's help and cooperation. They would report crime to the police, irrespective of whether there was any personal gain (for instance, allowing them to make an insurance claim), because they think it is everybody's responsibility to do so. Their goal is to do the right thing.

Appendix 5: crime scenario of criminal damage

Imagine you live alone in a flat in a quiet part of Liverpool. One day, when you return home from work, you find two windows to the side of the main door smashed in. The door is still shut and locked, though, and there is no sign of anyone having entered the property. You assume that someone deliberately smashed the windows as some sort of joke or prank. You pay a service charge to the owner of the building, and you know that some of this money will now have to be used to pay for replacement windows.

You want to report this to the police. You check the website of Merseyside police, the local force, which suggests that the easiest and quickest way to report the crime is online via the force website. The website directs you to an online reporting portal.

Appendix 6: crime scenario of anti-social behaviour

Imagine you live alone in a flat in a quiet part of Liverpool. To the front of the property is a small garden. Large quantities of litter are constantly being thrown into the garden. Much of this litter is associated with a local takeaway, and it is always particularly bad after Friday and Saturday nights. There is often so much that you assume the property is being deliberately targeted. While you try to pick up as much as you can yourself, you pay a service charge to the owner of the building, and you know that some of this money is used to pay when illegal litter needs to be disposed of. This means the service charge cannot be used for another purpose, such as maintaining the quality of the building and garden.

You want to report this to the police. You check the website of Merseyside police, the local force, which suggests that the easiest and quickest way to report the crime is online via the force website. The website directs you to an online reporting portal.

Appendix 7: Content of high procedural justice follow-up email

We are sorry to hear that you have been a victim of crime. An investigator from Merseyside Police has looked carefully at your case and we are sorry to say that with the evidence and leads available it is unlikely that we will be able to identify those responsible. We have therefore closed this case.

We know how disappointing this news will be for you. It is disappointing for us too – our officers and staff joined the police to catch criminals and bring them to justice. It is frustrating to all of us when the circumstances mean we are unable to do that. Although the case is closed, every bit of information we get from the public helps us to do our jobs and your report may yet assist us in tackling crime. For example, the information may help us improve our intelligence on known offenders, spot links between crimes or identify places and times of day where crimes are more likely to occur so that we can do something about it.

If you have remembered anything else about the crime, or would like to understand more about how we made our decision, please contact us at the email address below, quoting [your reference number].

If we receive any new information about your case, we will of course review it. We will contact you should we re-open our investigation – it is important you are kept up to date on any new developments.

If you need support or advice on coming to terms with your experience, the independent Victim can help. See https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/resources/merseyside/.

Yours sincerely,
Pam Smith.

Appendix 8: Content of low procedural justice follow-up email

An investigator from Merseyside Police has looked carefully at your case. The evidence and leads available means that it is unlikely that we will be able to identify those responsible. We have therefore closed this case.

If we receive any new information about your case, we will review it. We will contact you should we re-open our investigation.

If you need support or advice on coming to terms with your experience, the independent Victim can help. See https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/resources/merseyside/.

Yours sincerely,
Pam Smith.

Appendix 9: Clarifying the aspects of procedural justice that were manipulated in the follow-up email

Neutrality/Transparent reasoning: The high-PJ email provides a rationale for the decision ("with the evidence and leads available…") and explains how the report will still inform future policing (intelligence gathering, crime pattern analysis). This transparency about decision-making processes and future use addresses Tyler and Blader's (2003) neutrality component—showing decisions are evidence-based rather than arbitrary.

Respectful treatment: The acknowledgment of disappointment ("We know how disappointing this news will be for you. It is disappointing for us too…") conveys empathy and dignity, recognizing the victim's emotional investment. This

goes beyond mere politeness to affirm the person's worth as a valued community member (Lind, 2001).

Voice: The invitation to provide additional information ("If you have remembered anything else…") and to seek clarification ("…or would like to understand more about how we made our decision") offers an opportunity for continued participation. The low-PJ email's absence of these invitations positions the recipient as a passive recipient rather than an active participant.

Trustworthy motives: The affirmation that "every bit of information we get from the public helps us to do our jobs" and the explanation of broader benefits (crime prevention, pattern detection) signals that the police value the contribution and are acting for collective benefit, not bureaucratic convenience. By signalling shared interests, the sentence "It is disappointing for us too – our officers and staff joined the police to catch criminals and bring them to justice" also conveys trustworthy motives.

It is also worth noting that applying principles of procedural justice does, in general, make interactions longer, and in this sense the imbalance in the length of the texts (treatment versus control) is 'a feature not a bug'. The Queensland Community Engagement Trial, for example, reported that interactions in the procedurally just condition (relating to a road-side breath test) were over a minute – more than four times – longer than interactions in the control, business as usual condition (mean durations of 97 s and 25 s, respectively) (Mazerolle et al. 2013).

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