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"A Few Minutes of Fun, Probably Saves Their Sanity": Consuming and Producing the Experiences of Incarcerated Individuals in Prison via #prisontiktok

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Abstract:

During the early months of 2019, the social media platform TikTok skyrocketed to worldwide popularity. Content on TikTok posted by its "creators" (users) is diverse and includes lip-syncing, dancing, sports, cooking, and daily vlogging. "Prison TikTok" is a particularly popular content area and provides the public with insight into the prison experience from those who have been in or currently reside in prison. This article explores what incarcerated individuals share with the public on TikTok about the prison experience. Our thematic analysis of 34 TikTok videos revealed four main topics that currently incarcerated individuals presented to the public via TikTok: the prison environment, food, performances, and aspects of prison life and culture. In addition, 102 user comments associated with these videos were analyzed to explore public perceptions of incarcerated individuals' experiences and incarcerated individuals on TikTok. This analysis revealed that incarcerated individuals are perceived as deserving of sympathy, ridiculous, guides/informants, and talent/entertainers. The current research is one of the first of its kind, as it provides an exploratory look at what incarcerated individuals are sharing via TikTok about their prison experiences and how the public is responding.

Keywords: incarcerated individuals, TikTok, social media, user perceptions, prison

Introduction

The social media platform TikTok has quickly grown to become one of the most popular social media platforms, joining the likes of Twitter, Meta (Facebook), and Instagram. During the early months of 2019, TikTok's user base grew substantially. For example, TikTok reached over 315 million app downloads within the first quarter of 2019 but by September 2021 had amassed over 1 billion users (Lyons, 2021). The platform is known for its short-form videos (referred to as tiktoks) that consist of content that includes dancing, lip-syncing, cooking, day-in-a-life vlogging, and sketch comedy. A popular and emerging genre on TikTok is "Prison TikTok," where current or formerly incarcerated individuals post prison-related video content. This content ranges from prison cooking how-tos, prison-related question-and-answer sessions, and snippets of daily life in prison as presented by incarcerated individuals themselves. Prison TikTok content has become popular on the platform as it provides other TikTok users with an inside look at prison and prison life from individuals with lived experience.

Having incarcerated individuals' voices on Prison TikTok is an improvement over other forms of media consumed by the public that often misrepresent the reality of incarcerated individuals and prison life (O'Sullivan, 2001). For example, films such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) have been criticized for perpetuating stereotypical prison conventions and cliches (e.g., corrupt officials, violence between incarcerated individuals) (O'Sullivan, 2001). Whereas television shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013) have been applauded for subverting dominant discourses of women in prison but critiqued for their inability to truly represent the harsh physical and psychological realities of prison life to a consuming audience (Crooks & Frigon, 2020). By contrast, incarcerated individuals' voices on Prison TikTok can challenge societal attitudes and stereotypical notions of incarcerated individuals, prison, and the prison experience. Incarcerated individuals' voices also hold the potential to provide a realistic portrayal of prison experiences, which can help to inform public perceptions.

Often, prison media lacks content that is informed and created by incarcerated individuals. Existing literature mainly focuses on incarcer-

ated individual-led radio stations and podcasts (Anderson, 2013a; Anderson, 2013b; Cecil, 2020). Only a small amount of existing research discusses incarcerated individuals' use of social media and there is even less exploring TikTok specifically (O'Connor et al., 2020; Reid & Niebuhr, 2022). The little academic literature about incarcerated individuals on TikTok, in contrast to the growing popularity of Prison TikTok, warrants an exploration of the Prison TikTok space. This article adds to the existing literature about incarcerated individuals and social media by exploring: (1) what incarcerated individuals are sharing about the prison experience on Prison TikTok; and (2) how the online public perceives incarcerated individuals on TikTok.

In what follows, we first discuss the existing literature on incarcerated individuals and media, particularly social media. Next, the methods used to examine tiktoks and user comments are provided. Our sampling of tiktoks and thematic analysis presents an exemplar of how future studies might methodologically approach researching TikTok videos. Next, our findings demonstrate that incarcerated individuals on Prison TikTok are creating and sharing TikTok videos that provide insight into the prison environment, food, performance, and prison life and culture. We also show that the online viewing audience perceives incarcerated individuals primarily positively, particularly as deserving of sympathy, guides/informants, and talent/entertainers. However, some users perceived incarcerated individuals (and their online activity) as ridiculous. Finally, our discussion section examines how incarcerated individuals' tiktoks are an attempt to humanize themselves and inform a consuming public about the prison experience. This works to help counter previous exaggerated and inaccurate media depictions of prison and incarcerated individuals and has some influence on how the public consumes/receives these videos and thus, their perceptions of incarcerated individuals and the prison experience. We argue that in a mass-personal communication environment, incarcerated individuals posting on Prison TikTok can be viewed as acts of resistance and survival.

Literature Review

TikTok, Smartphones, and Prison TikTok

TikTok is a social media platform on which its users create and share video content, known as tiktoks. In the video creation process, Tik-Tok allows users to add sound effects, filters, and text to their tiktoks. TikTok users can respond to one another's videos through duets (i.e., a video response) or in each video's comment section. Hashtags are used on TikTok to organize and curate similar tiktoks that users may want to explore and enjoy. A key aspect of TikTok is the "For You" page, a home page that features a self-directed, algorithmic feed of tiktoks curated for TikTok users based on their activity (Herrman, 2019).

For incarcerated individuals to post and share content on TikTok, they must at a minimum have a smartphone, particularly one with available data to connect to the internet. Despite often being categorized as contraband, cellphones and smartphones within correctional institutions are common. These phones enter correctional institutions and into the possession of incarcerated individuals via several avenues (e.g., visitors, staff) (Christie, 2010). They offer incarcerated individuals the opportunity to maintain contact with friends and family, which can decrease prison misconduct, reduce recidivism, and ease re-entry into society. It should also be noted that cellphones and smartphones can be used to help facilitate crime (Grommon et al., 2018). While there is not space here to debate the relative merits and disadvantages of cellphones and smartphones in prison, we consider their use an act of resistance and survival under oppressive prison conditions (e.g., confinement, isolation, separation) as it allows incarcerated individuals to communicate and maintain contact with the outside world.

The process of how incarcerated individuals film, edit, and post Prison TikTok videos (e.g., not under direct supervision by prison staff, a degree of privacy to film, enough battery life and data on their smartphone) and how frequently this occurs is unclear. As previously noted, there is minimal research on incarcerated individuals using TikTok. We were only able to find two scholarly sources. First, O'Connor et al. (2020) used a case study to compare Tumblr's True

Crime Community and TikTok's Prison TikTok. They found similarities between these groups including young people showing admiration (e.g., fan art, fan fiction, jokes, romantic advances) and support for incarcerated individuals who have committed violent crimes (e.g., murder, mass shootings). O'Connor et al. posit that Prison TikTok is an online dark subculture where the potential exists for crime to become normalized. It also eases communication between incarcerated individuals and young people, which may facilitate copycat crimes. Second, Reid and Niebuhr (2022) thematically analyzed Prison TikTok videos to understand what incarcerated individuals shared on TikTok. Common themes that emerged from their analysis included: performance (e.g., dancing, music, skits); food (e.g., cooking, how-to, eating); prison (e.g., prison cell, inside view, outside view, incarcerated individuals, and correctional officers); and pains of imprisonment (e.g., scared straight, relationships, and goods and services). Their findings suggest that incarcerated individuals participated in trends found on TikTok and shared content that both supported and contradicted outsiders' perspectives of incarcerated individuals and technology use.

Our research builds upon this sparse existing research. Similar to the work of Reid and Niebuhr (2022), we analyze TikTok videos from the Prison TikTok genre to explore how incarcerated individuals present the prison experience to an online audience through video content they create and share online. We expand on this notion by analyzing user comments left on Prison TikTok videos to examine public perceptions of said videos. Before we discuss this, the upcoming sections aim to situate Prison TikTok within the larger literature surrounding incarcerated individuals, media, and technology.

Media Depictions and Public Perceptions of Incarcerated Individuals and Prison Life

News coverage of a crime, often biased, passes through multiple stages: the crime, the investigation, the arrest, the trial, and then sentencing. The crime story ends there with little coverage of prison life — the "bad guy" is sent to prison to pay for their crime(s) (Doyle & Ericson, 1996). Incarcerated individuals are separated from the rest of society and placed in institutions to serve their sentences (Reiter, 2014). Due to its isolated nature, the public knows little about pris-

ons, prison life, and incarcerated individuals (Levan et al., 2011). This lack of information is perhaps intentional, as existing data on what occurs in prisons is inadequate or hard to come by and gate-keepers limit researchers' access to institutions and the people that inhabit them (Armstrong, 2014; Reiter, 2014).

Given the lack of readily available public information, the public often learns about prisons, incarcerated individuals, and the prison experience through fictional depictions (e.g., television shows and films). However, fictional depictions of prison have been roundly critiqued for their inaccuracies (Bougadi, 2016; Cheatwood, 1998; Mason, 2003; Ross & Snead, 2018). For example, these critiques include that prison symbolism comes from what is seen in films and television series rather than factual information (Levenson, 2001) and prison films and television series highlight the worst aspects of prison life, which may lead audiences to believe prison reform is unachievable (Cheatwood, 1998). Similarly, scholars have criticized the American television show *Orange is the New Black* for perpetuating and reinforcing racial and sexual orientation stereotypes (e.g., Latinas as overtly sexual and manipulative and for emphasizing differences in perceived attractiveness between white queer and non-white queer characters [Chavez, 2015]). These inaccuracies and stereotypes are problematic because the "media and fictional narratives which conform to simplistic and reassuring assumptions can reinforce deeply entrenched stereotypes and impact on the actual measures with which critical phenomena are understood and dealt with" (Pasolini, 2019, p. 275).

Incarcerated Individuals' Voices in the Media

While incarcerated individuals are physically isolated from the general public, their voices are not completely silenced. Although often having to navigate gatekeepers (Cecil, 2020), incarcerated individuals can have their perspectives heard through a variety of means. First, prison writings (e.g., zines, poems) and other artistic works provide firsthand insight into the prison experience. These have examined the issues and challenges incarcerated individuals face (e.g., sexual and physical violence, neglect from prison staff, inadequate medical care, and solitary confinement experiences) (Rimstead & Rymhs, 2011; Wright, 2018). Incarcerated individuals also participate in academic

discourse and knowledge-production processes by contributing to research journals such as the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*.

Second, prisoners' radio and prisoner-led podcasts are two communication methods for incarcerated individuals to make their voices heard by the outside world (Anderson, 2013b). For example, prisoners' radio programming entails providing information specifically about prison issues and entertainment (e.g., playing music, taking song requests, and making shout-outs) (Anderson, 2013a). Similarly, *Ear Hustle* is a prisoner-led podcast that operates out of San Quentin State Prison in the United States where incarcerated individuals discuss topics such as life before prison, prison life, the pains of imprisonment, death row, cellmates, race relations, aging and parenting while in prison, and LGBTQ+ issues (Cecil, 2020).

As Anderson (2013b) notes, these types of communications are "vital for healthy public debate on prison issues and to allow incarcerated individuals a sense of connection with their communities" (p. 112). For example, prisoner-led podcasts have helped to humanize incarcerated individuals by showing listeners that they share similarities (e.g., trauma, troubled childhoods, loss and death) (Cecil, 2020). In addition, Kiernan (2021) found that incarcerated individuals' storytelling through podcasts enhanced their personal development, aided in the rehabilitation process, improved relationships with correctional staff, and offered resistance to stigmas associated with prison. Overall, these types of communication outlets provide an avenue for incarcerated individuals' voices to be heard by the media-consuming public, which contrasts sharply with more mainstream media depictions.

Communication and Social Media

The two prominent communication models, interpersonal and mass communication, are well-established in the scholarly literature and help to inform our approach to understanding Prison TikTok. Interpersonal communication is characterized as a two-way, non-mediated message exchange between two individuals (e.g., face-to-face, via email) with some level of personal knowledge of one another (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Whereas mass communication is a one-way, often impersonal, technologically mediated message exchange

(e.g., movies, radio) from one individual to a large audience (McQuail, 2010; O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). While these have often been perceived as a strict dichotomy (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018), the rise of social media has challenged this notion.

Social media platforms are utilized by individuals for both interpersonal and mass communication purposes, leading to the creation of the *masspersonal communication* model (Brown et al., 2017; Choi & Chong, 2021). The masspersonal communication model occurs in instances where: (1) individuals use mass communication channels for interpersonal communication; (2) individuals use interpersonal communication channels for mass communication; and (3) individuals simultaneously engage in mass communication and interpersonal communication (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Whereas the interpersonal and mass communication models are individual-to-individual and individual-to-audience respectively, the flow of communication in the masspersonal communication model, as seen on social media, is user-to-audience, audience-to-user, user-to-user, and audience-to-audience (Carr & Hayes, 2015). This multidirectional nature of communication allows for messages to be sent and received as interpersonal and mass messages (O'Sullivan, 1999).

Individuals engage in masspersonal communication on social media platforms as a means of entertainment, for emotional support, to socialize with a broad group of friends, to bridge online social capital (e.g., extend oneself and self-interests into social groups outside of one's social sphere), for self-development, and to seek information (Brown et al., 2017; Choi & Chong, 2021). Little existing literature examines masspersonal communication on TikTok and amongst TikTok users (Choi & Chong, 2021). However, we posit that the TikTok space, particularly Prison TikTok, allows for masspersonal communication, given its multidirectional messaging. What follows next is a discussion of the methods used in the current research to explore the Prison TikTok space.

Method

Specific to prison research, qualitative research methods are often employed to provide a subjective understanding of prison and incarcerated individuals that cannot be achieved through quantitative

means (Patenaude, 2004). Qualitative research methods are used in research to present emotional and painful aspects of social practices that occur in everyday society (Beyens et al., 2015). Liebling (1999) notes that the pains of imprisonment are vastly underestimated through traditional methodological approaches. Common qualitative methods used in prison research include interviews (e.g., individual, focus groups, open and/or semi-structured), ethnographies (e.g., prison ethnographies, auto-ethnographies, insider research), and participant observation. To a lesser extent, prison research has also utilized qualitative content analysis and participatory action research (Abbott et al., 2018; Beyens et al., 2015). The benefits of qualitative research methods, particularly individual and focus group interviews, include emotional well-being felt amongst interview participants and richer data collection (Copes et al., 2013; Patenaude, 2004). Despite how beneficial qualitative research and its methods may be in prison research, there are specific challenges qualitative researchers face while attempting to conduct prison research. As described by Patenaude (2004), these challenges include gaining entry to the prison, establishing rapport with inmates and officials, gaining and maintaining the trust of inmates and officials, providing feedback and analysis, and publishing one's study results. The current research builds upon the existing Prison TikTok research and, more generally, qualitative prison research by employing a thematic analysis of collected tiktoks and user comments.

Data Collection

TikTok videos were selected to be part of the research sample if they were popular in the #prisontiktok hashtag and consisted of actual incarcerated individuals. A purposive sample of 34 TikTok videos was collected for the current research. Initially, a sample of 30 tiktoks was desired, but after the start of the data collection period, four additional tiktoks were added to the sample as they rose in popularity (i.e., gained likes from TikTok users) and appeared in the #prisontiktok hashtag. At the time of writing, the #prisontiktok hashtag had a total of 2.8 billion views. TikTok's search feature and its search filters (i.e., "date posted" and "sort by") were used to find and narrow potential tiktoks to be included in the sample. For the "date posted" search filter, the "all time" option was enabled to ensure all videos

tagged under the #prisontiktok hashtag would be shown in the search results. For the "sort by" search filter, the "most liked" option was enabled to ensure videos with a high like count (i.e., videos with 10,000 likes and higher) were shown in the results. Determining if a video consisted of actual incarcerated individuals was based on the video's background setting (e.g., prison cell or common area), an individual's clothing (e.g., a prison uniform), and video quality (i.e., poor video quality linked to residing in prison). TikTok videos of formerly incarcerated individuals or relatives of a currently incarcerated individual were not selected to be part of the sample. The sampling criteria mentioned above (i.e., high #prisontiktok popularity and the presence of actual incarcerated individuals) were put in place for the current research to explore how incarcerated individuals presented the prison experience to an online public audience. The current research also explores public perceptions of incarcerated individuals' experiences on TikTok, as seen through comments left on TikTok videos shared by actual incarcerated individuals. The top three comments on each TikTok video were examined to achieve this. Comments on TikTok videos were pre-sorted based on popularity (i.e., how many likes they received), with the most liked comments being shown first. The like count on these most liked comments varied in number starting from tens of thousands and higher. Once the 34 tiktoks and their respective top three comments (102 comments in total) were selected for the current research, analysis and coding began.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to examine emerging themes from the research sample. In qualitative research, thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, interpret, and provide insight into a set of themes (e.g., a pattern of meanings) consistent across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Additionally, thematic analysis has been noted for its accessibility and flexibility. As Clarke & Braun (2017) note, it provides "accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data" (p. 1). Guided by this approach, our thematic analysis took an inductive approach and entailed manually coding the collected data. The first and second author each took 17 tiktoks to code for general themes that emerged from the data (i.e., TikTok videos and user comments). Inter-coder reliability oc-

curred during the coding process to finalize a list of themes present within the tiktoks and their respective top three user comments. Four themes emerged from the 34 TikTok videos of incarcerated individuals in prison sharing their prison experiences. Out of the 102 comments analyzed from the 34 TikTok videos, four themes emerged and provide insight into how online users perceive incarcerated individuals on TikTok. The video and comment themes are discussed further in the section below.

Findings

The majority of incarcerated individuals in the videos analyzed were male and English-speaking. There were no videos in the sample that featured female incarcerated individuals. However, three tiktoks in the sample featured non-English on-screen text or captions; two were in French, and the other was in Spanish. The analysis found that themes from the videos included prison environment, performance, food, and prison life and culture. As well, perceptions of incarcerated individuals' experiences as seen by comments left by online users revealed that incarcerated individuals sharing content on TikTok are perceived as deserving of sympathy, ridiculous, educators/guides, and talent/entertainers. In this section, we examine each of these themes in-depth, starting with the videos and then moving on to the online comments.

Themes Found in the TikTok Videos

Prison Environment

TikTok videos that showed a complete or partial view of the various areas in prison were coded as the prison environment. Most of the videos under this theme consisted of prison cells, or "cell tours," and common areas. For example, in one video an incarcerated individual filming a "cell tour" gave a wall-to-wall view of their cell, showing their bunk, small mirror, toilet, sink, shelving units, cupboard, and personal belongings while the on-screen text in the video read "prison life." Similarly, other videos showed the more open spaces of common areas with multiple tables, chairs, and incarcerated individuals. Some of the videos filmed in common areas showed incarcerated individuals exercising or dancing with one another. For example, a video captioned "prison olympics" [sic] showed two incarcerated indi-

viduals racing from one side of a common area to the other while groups of other incarcerated individuals watched from the sidelines and cheered on the racers. There was also one video where three incarcerated individuals were filming themselves in the communal shower area, half-clothed and flexing their muscles toward the camera. The intention behind this video does not appear to be a tour of the showers, yet a partial view of the showers (e.g., ceiling, brick walls, and green shower curtains with a clear plastic top) is present. In addition, two videos were filmed outdoors. One was filmed in a dirt pit next to tall fencing with barbed wire on top, while the other was filmed on a sunny day with plenty of green grass and the exterior of other prison buildings visible. These videos help to illustrate various aspects of the prison environment.

Performance

Videos of incarcerated individuals performing dance routines or comedic skits were coded as performance. For example, some videos depicted groups of incarcerated individuals performing dance routines to popular songs. Other videos depicted comedic skits. For example, in one skit two incarcerated individuals in their cell acted out what it would be like to wake up late for inspection and compared it to people not in prison waking up late for work and rushing to get ready. These incarcerated individuals acted like they were in a hurry to get ready, pulling out their uniforms and making their beds in a rushed manner. These performance videos give the viewing audience some insight into what occurs in prisons and how incarcerated individuals spend their time.

Food

Food figured prominently in many videos. The majority of these entailed incarcerated individuals filming how certain meals or beverages were made in prison. For example, in one video a group of incarcerated individuals were grilling sausages on an outdoor grill, while in another incarcerated individuals were cooking burritos by using their bunk as a grill with a trash bin fire underneath the bunk as the heat source. Similarly, another video depicted the making of an Oreo cake out of Oreo cookies. Some videos even provided detailed cooking how-tos with voice-over instructions. For example, one video

instructed viewers on how to make prison wine. The video shows the addition of various sodas and (what appears to be) rotten fruits and vegetables to a garbage bag-lined mop bucket filled with ice. The incarcerated individuals let the fruit and vegetables ferment for a few days, then the fruits and vegetables are strained, and the remaining liquid is the prison wine ready for consumption. Overall, these videos provide the public with a snapshot of how various foods and drinks can be made and consumed in prison, aside from the food that is made and given by the prison.

Prison Life and Culture

Several sub-themes make up the prison life and culture theme. These themes are activities, background, communication, relationships, stereotypes, and technology. Each sub-theme is discussed individually but holistically represents prison life and culture.

Videos of incarcerated individuals engaging in actions unrelated to work, food, or performance were coded as activities. Tiktoks under this theme consisted of incarcerated individuals exercising, competing against one another (e.g., racing, playing basketball), drawing, or giving one another tattoos. For example, one incarcerated individual was doing burpees (a combination of push-ups and standing squat thrusts) in the common area. In another video, one incarcerated individual was tattooing another, stopping to show the camera their tattoo portrait of an unidentified woman. These activities provide the viewing audience with some insight into how time is spent in prison.

Tiktoks that consisted of incarcerated individuals providing information about their life before prison or discussing the events that led to them becoming incarcerated were coded as background. There are only four videos that were coded under this theme. As an illustrative example, one of the videos was of an incarcerated individual sitting in their cell, talking to the camera, and responding to a comment left on another video of theirs asking when they will be getting out of prison. The incarcerated individual says the following: "I get asked this question a lot, I get out in 2027, I got sentenced 14 years for manslaughter. But before you judge me, just know there is a story behind it." The incarcerated individual went on to post three other videos in which they narrate the events leading up to them becoming

incarcerated. These types of videos seem to be designed to help inform the public of the complex paths and precipitating factors that have led people to be incarcerated.

Videos that presented how incarcerated individuals communicated and interacted with one another while in prison throughout various times of the day or night were coded under the theme communication. There was only one video coded under this theme. It is of an incarcerated individual "fishing," where they ripped a small but long piece of their bedding material, tied it to what seems like a book jacket, tossed out a string (like a fishing line) with the book jacket attached into the hall underneath their cell door, and called out for another incarcerated individual to receive it. The incarcerated individual pulled the string back into their cell with a note from the other incarcerated individual now on their "line," along with the book jacket. There was text on the video that read, "If you been in prison you know wassup…". Through this specific video, "fishing," a method of communication while physically separated from one another, is acted out and presented to a viewing audience.

Videos portraying moments of bonding or conflict between incarcerated individuals or correctional officers and incarcerated individuals were coded as relationships. Most of the videos showcased positive moments between incarcerated individuals. They were seen telling each other jokes, laughing, enjoying each other's company, and praising each other for their talent. In one video, an incarcerated individual was filming the grilling of sausages on an outdoor grill. The dialogue heard was as follows, "Ooooo we cookin' right there! We cookin' right there! Big dog sausage, cooking that big dog! Yeah! Okay! Yeah!" The on-screen text reads, "Mr. Put it On!! Gotta whole grill in prison." Similarly, one video showed an incarcerated individual filming himself giving advice and support to his cellmate, seen in the background of the video, who is about to be released from prison. Their speech includes the following: "...without allowing what is in the middle to stop you from going forward because one thing I do understand is that God is in my tomorrow, just gotta get through today."

The relationships theme also captured moments of conflict and favouritism, although these types of videos were less prominent. For

example, one video with on-screen text reading "Prison arguments 101" showed two incarcerated individuals arguing about the correct title of a music album. One incarcerated individual is seen stepping into the other's personal space and talking in their face, and the other incarcerated individual attempts to move away to create space while arguing back. Another video depicted how correctional officers might engage in favouritism. The on-screen text reads, "when the officer finally Like's you" [sic] and the incarcerated individual is seen pulling a Dairy Queen burger and a bottle of orange soda out from the cell door slot and doing a small dance with a smile on their face. Overall, incarcerated individuals presented relationships in prison in both negative and positive ways, similar to what one might expect from relationships outside of prison.

Videos that appeared to portray common tropes about prison, incarcerated individuals, or prison life were coded as stereotypes. Only three videos were coded into this theme. Two videos portrayed incarcerated individuals as caged animals. For example, the videos show incarcerated individuals lip-syncing to the sound of a chimpanzee calling other chimpanzees who respond at a much louder volume. One of the on-screen texts reads, "When u locked down in them cages" followed by two emoticons of sad gorilla faces, while the other on-screen text reads "in the jungle." The latter video consists of one white incarcerated individual and three Black incarcerated individuals who do not appear to be participating in the chimpanzee lip-syncing and are just looking at the camera. Through a critical lens, the message portrayed to the public is a racist one. The other video showed how pedophiles and rapists were not well-liked in the prison. In this video, four incarcerated individuals look into the camera (which one of them is holding) while slowly swaying to an audio track that is playing. The on-screen text reads, "Free the REAL… but they can keep the pedophiles & rapists." The suggestion here to the viewing audience is that pedophiles and rapists deserve to be in prison while others should be set free.

Tiktoks that specifically discussed the presence and use of electronic technology (e.g., smartphones and televisions) in prison were coded as technology. Several videos featured televisions in prison cells, yet only one video specifically discussed the prison marketplace for elec-

tronics. This video listed the prices for various smartphones and one multi-platform streaming device for sale in prison. This incarcerated individual presented various smartphones, mainly Apple iPhones, and an Amazon Fire TV stick and remote and their selling prices (in Euros). Prices ranged from €200 to €1000, with an iPhone X Plus being the most expensive and the Amazon Fire TV stick and remote being the least expensive. The prison economy for electronics raises consumption questions regarding the affordability, supply, demand, and import of such electronics while in prison.

Overall, the various topics discussed via tiktoks provided the viewing public with a first-hand account of people's lived experiences in prison. The audiences were provided with content to consume on the prison environment, performances, food, and prison life and culture. We now turn to how those messages were received by the public.

Themes Found in the Online Comments

Incarcerated Individuals as Deserving of Sympathy

Public comments that appeared compassionate and sympathetic toward incarcerated individuals were coded as incarcerated individuals deserving of sympathy. Throughout the sample of TikTok videos, some of the top comments advocated for others to not criticize incarcerated individuals for having some fun while incarcerated and noted the pains of imprisonment incarcerated individuals face. For example, one comment stated: "Prison is a hard place to be but when you can laugh here and there it makes it a little better." Another comment shared a similar sentiment: "Please believe it's a punishment… a few minutes of fun, probably saves their sanity." On another video of an incarcerated individual talking about his prison sentence and asking people not to judge him, one user commented: "Nah I feel bad he really looked like he had a good reason." These comments suggest that the TikTok videos have evoked some sympathy from the viewing audience.

Incarcerated Individuals as Ridiculous

Comments left on TikTok videos that appeared critical of incarcerated individuals posting on TikTok were coded as incarcerated individuals perceived as ridiculous. For example, one comment left on a

video of two incarcerated individuals performing a comedic skit said: "Y'all risking extra time just to make senseless tiktok good luck with that" [sic]. In another video, in which an incarcerated individual gave a brief explanation as to how he ended up in prison and asked for people not to judge him before knowing his journey, one comment read: "You already been judged that's why you got 14 years. Story behind everything don't change the reality" [sic]. Additionally, throughout the top comments analyzed, a common refrain was the notion that incarcerated individuals can do many activities in prison yet cannot keep themselves out of prison. This notion appeared in the following comments found on two different tiktoks: "They can do everything but stay out of prison" and "Got everything but freedom." Sharply contrasting with the previous section's comments, some TikTok videos also appear to evoke ridicule and contempt from the public.

Incarcerated Individuals as Educators/Guides

In the analysis of top comments, TikTok users who left comments asking incarcerated individuals who make prison tiktoks questions about what is occurring in the video or about prison life in general were coded as incarcerated individuals as educators/guides. For example, in one video of an incarcerated individual dancing with other incarcerated individuals in the prison common area, a top comment read, "How y'all doing tiktoks in jail?????" In another video of an incarcerated individual giving a cell tour, one user commented, "How do you exercise in there, it looks way too small." Similarly, in a video of an incarcerated individual explaining his sentencing, one of the top comments was of someone asking for a "storytime" — an in-depth retelling of how the incarcerated individual ended up in prison. The comment read: "Hey man I don't wanna be noisy but can we get a story time?! Luv u bro" [sic]. These comments suggest that commenters are curious about prison and are seeking information directly from incarcerated individuals.

Incarcerated Individuals as Talent/Entertainers

Top comments that applauded or praised incarcerated individuals for entertaining video content or being talented in certain acts were coded as incarcerated individuals as talent/entertainers. For example, in

one video of incarcerated individuals grilling sausages on an outdoor grill and joking around with one another, one of the top comments read: "Good for them though. Must be nice to laugh with the bros while making some BBQ on a nice summer day." Another top comment spoke about the artistic talent of an incarcerated individual who drew a large portrait of a woman, writing: "It's crazy man, the amount of talent that's locked up man ran into some raw mfs some real talent" [sic]. Similarly, in a video of two incarcerated individuals performing a comedic skit, one top comment read: "Ah Boy…You F'd up Boy! This is so real, tho! Keep Ya Head Up!" [sic]. As these comments help illustrate, consumers of these videos recognize incarcerated individuals as being artistically talented and express being entertained.

Discussion

Our findings highlight that incarcerated individuals on TikTok create and post video content of themselves and about prison in an attempt to humanize themselves and inform the viewing audience about the prison experience. This was illustrated through the video content posted about the prison environment, food, performance, and prison life and culture. These results confirm some of Reid and Niebuhr's (2022) study that found tiktoks created and shared by incarcerated individuals emphasized food, prison, performance, and the pains of imprisonment. For incarcerated individuals, TikTok provides an avenue to illustrate to the public that what occurs outside of prisons also occurs inside them (e.g., cooking, skits). That is, the ways in which technologies are consumed in prison are similar to how they are consumed outside of it. As we further discuss in this section, the use of TikTok, particularly Prison TikTok, can be conceived as masspersonal communication and, in part, an attempt to disrupt the oppressive conditions and nature of prisons, primarily the isolation and separation of incarcerated individuals from broader society (Reiter, 2014).

The masspersonal communication style that TikTok provides offers incarcerated individuals a direct line to the general public and vice versa. Our findings demonstrate that public comments left on #prisontiktok videos showed much positivity directed at incarcerated individuals (e.g., of the four comment themes only one was negative). The majority of online comments saw incarcerated individuals as

sympathetic figures, guides to the prison experience, and talented entertainers. Overall, it appears as though TikTok users were receptive to hearing directly from incarcerated individuals on TikTok and enjoyed the prison content being shared. This suggests that there is potential for the public to develop a generally positive perception of incarcerated individuals by consuming Prison TikTok, which could lead to improved public policy and prison reform. While Prison TikTok videos may lead to more positive perceptions of incarcerated individuals, there is also the possibility that the public are simply voyeurs. That is, the public may have little interest in educating themselves about prison experiences and injustices. Instead, they may only be consuming Prison TikTok content as a means of entertainment for themselves. For example, previous literature lends some support for this as it has been shown that voyeurism can occur on social media (Doster, 2013) and that carceral tours, often presented as educational, may not actually educate the public on the pains of imprisonment (Piché & Walby, 2010). However, the potential for improved public policy and reform as well as the public's intent in viewing Prison Tiktok content would need to be explored further in future research.

Incarcerated individuals' voices are a vital source for understanding prison and incarcerated individuals' experiences. The #prisontiktok videos examined in this paper demonstrate how incarcerated individuals can use their voices and lived experiences via social media to combat media inaccuracies, harmful stereotypes, and sensationalized accounts of what occurs in prison. TikTok's masspersonal communication style allows incarcerated individuals to circumvent the media, which often portrays stereotypical views of prison, as well as prison officials who are often not forthcoming with information about what goes on inside correctional facilities (Armstrong, 2014; Bougadi, 2016; Mason, 2003; Reiter, 2014). Overall, Prison TikTok helps to illustrate the porous nature of prisons and how access to the public via social media can provide a direct line to a public that appears to be curious, given the popularity of #prisontiktok, about what is happening in carceral institutions.

However, TikTok's masspersonal communication environment also holds the potential to reaffirm stereotyped versions of incarcerated individuals and to do harm. For example, the video previously dis-

cussed of one white incarcerated individual and two Black incarcerated individuals with on-screen text that reads "in the jungle" accompanied by chimpanzee sounds illustrates how racist tropes can pervade these videos. Because the white incarcerated individual is filming the video, we deduce that this person came up with the video idea, on-screen text, and use of chimpanzee sounds. While the true intent cannot be known without speaking to the creator, the video suggests to the viewing audience that Black men are animals (e.g., gorillas) that belong in the jungle. While the voices of incarcerated individuals must be heard, it is not entirely clear that the public or TikTok would flag videos of this type as racist and restrict their postings. This raises questions about how this type of content should be regulated.

Despite potential downsides, incarcerated individuals are using #prisontiktok videos to break through prison's imposed isolation and separation and challenge public notions about prison and incarcerated individuals. As the public becomes more aware of what occurs behind prison walls (e.g., living conditions, daily routine, prison rules and restrictions) from incarcerated individuals, there is potential to build toward a prison reform or even abolition movement. However, for this movement to be fruitful and bring about tangible results, the concern the TikTok audience has for incarcerated individuals must transcend the comment section and broader online sphere and lead to actual steps and action toward change in the offline world. Framed in this way, we contend that the presence and activity of incarcerated individuals engaging with Prison TikTok can be seen as an act of resistance (e.g., using a smartphone in prison) and survival (e.g., combatting loneliness) to stand against the oppressive living conditions of prison.

Conclusion

There is a notable presence of incarcerated individuals on TikTok creating and sharing content reflective of their experiences. While our research was able to contribute to existing scholarship by exploring the current space of Prison TikTok and examining how the public perceives these types of videos, we are limited in our ability to generalize our findings to a larger social media environment or a particular geographical location. The Prison TikTok videos analyzed in our re-

search do not disclose their geographic location or the name of the correctional institution in which they are residing. We also recognize that commenters on tiktoks do not capture the public's perceptions per se and only provide a snapshot. Our findings could also have been enhanced had we been able to speak directly with the incarcerated individuals creating content and the public consuming said content.

Despite these limitations, our research has helped lay the groundwork for future Prison TikTok research. While isolated and separated from society, incarcerated individuals use technology to permeate the physical barriers of prison institutions and produce consumable media content for the public. Prison TikTok (along with other social media platforms incarcerated individuals may utilize) deserves more scholarly attention. Such attention could substantially improve our understanding of the intersection of social media, incarcerated individuals, public perceptions, and the potential for changing public perceptions of prison and responses to crime. Presumably, TikTok is reaching a younger audience, still forming their perspectives on social issues, than other social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), which in the long term could hold the potential to sway public perceptions toward more just responses to crime than prison. Overall, social media, and in this case TikTok, provides new ways to consume media content on prison and incarcerated individuals. What is still unanswered, though, is whether these new consumption patterns lead to tangibly different public perceptions and thus better outcomes for incarcerated individuals.

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