

**BEYOND BARS AND INTO SOCIAL MEDIA: RELATIONAL STIGMA
MANAGEMENT, PRIVACY MANAGEMENT, AND OUTCOMES ON PRISON TALK
ONLINE AND INSTAGRAM**

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By

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Relational stigma is a discrediting attribute that questions the moral status of that individual based on maintaining a relationship with someone who holds a discrediting mark. Significant others of incarcerated persons often experience relational stigma through social and structural discrimination in their daily lives. Considering the growing centrality of social media in everyday life, social media sites offer opportunities to manage their relational stigma; however, different social media sites create different opportunities and privacy concerns such as seeking support and blurred audiences.

In this dissertation, I examined the role of two social media sites, Instagram and Prison Talk Online, for individuals who experience relational stigma based on having a significant other who is incarcerated. I conducted field observations on these two sites and interviewed 13 significant others of incarcerated persons who use either Instagram or Prison Talk Online. Respondents were asked to recall moments when they experienced relational stigma, how they used social media to discuss their incarcerated relationship, what privacy concerns and

management strategies they used on social media, and how social media has affected them and their incarcerated relationship over time.

I used a grounded theory approach and identified several connections between social media use and relational stigma management, privacy management strategies, and self-concept outcomes. Findings suggest that respondents' social media use is dependent on their perceptions of the extent of support and ability to build friendships within the social media sites.

Respondents' privacy concerns stemmed from concerns of community privacy violations and whether or not people within the support groups could be trusted. Participants stated that they felt more validated with their identity and relationship and a greater sense of emotional well-being occurred for those who used social media sites to talk about their incarcerated relationship.

These findings suggest that social media sites can be helpful for managing relational stigma when relationally stigmatized individuals create a supportive network that they trust and that does not overlap with individuals who might judge the relationship.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alexandra Hinck completed her Ph.D. in the Department of Communication at Cornell University in 2020. Prior to her Ph.D., she also received a M.S. in 2018 in the Department of Communication at Cornell University, and received her B.A. in 2014 in the Department of Psychology with a minor in English at Beloit College. During her time at Cornell, Alexandra worked in the Communication and Collaborative Technologies Lab led by Dr. Susan R. Fussell. Alexandra is originally from Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. In addition to graduate research, Alexandra loves to be outdoors, bake bread, and travel.

To my family, Aaron,

And to anyone who has a loved one who is incarcerated

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FtF	Face-to-Face
ILO	Incarcerated Loved One
PTO	Prison Talk Online
MBI	Met Before Incarcerated
MWI	Met While Incarcerated

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

More than 1.5 million individuals are stigmatized because they are currently imprisoned in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). This number, however, does not reflect the countless significant others who are affected by the incarceration and stigmatization of their loved ones. Stressed by the absence of their loved one, feeling the shame of having a loved one who is incarcerated, unable or unwilling to share their concerns with their incarcerated partner, and without any other support system, significant others of incarcerated loved ones (ILOs) often have few people to turn to for help and fewer spaces to talk about their relationship and share their stigmatized experiences (Heijnders & Van Der Meij, 2006; Lowenstein, 1984). Social media sites can offer significant others of ILOs opportunities to connect with similar others who are geographically dispersed to discuss their relationship and learn how to cope with their loved one being incarcerated. However, the popularity, tie strength, and audience overlaps on different social media sites might affect how they use social media and the outcomes of using social media to discuss their relationships.

Previous stigma research on the criminal identity has pointed out the widespread social effects of being labeled a criminal. Often being stereotyped as an immoral person by societal standards, people with a criminal identity are physically separated from the rest of society while they are incarcerated and then outcasted when they are released (Goffman, 1963; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011; Schnittker & John, 2007). Digitization of criminal records extends the negative social effects of incarceration due to the increased availability of information (Jacobs, 2015). Crime sites are created to share criminal records and mug shots of arrested and incarcerated individuals to ensure that the public is aware of the crimes of their community

members (Lageson, 2016; 2017). Digital footprints are created, which prevent incarcerated people from moving on from the singular “criminal” identity (Lageson & Maruna, 2018). This modern-day scarlet letter of incarceration is always publicly available for anyone to access via the Internet and impacts incarcerated individuals’ and their family members’ daily lives (Ajunwa, 2015; Lee, Porter, & Comfort, 2014; Murphy, Fuleihan, Richards, & Jones, 2011).

An extensive amount of research has shown that maintaining strong family and romantic relationships helps prisoners cope while they are incarcerated. These relationships also help prisoners during the re-entry process, reducing recidivism rates (Braithwaite, 1989; Christian, Martinez, & Martinez, 2015; Christian, Mellow & Thomas, 2006; Clear, Waring & Scully, 2005; Daniel & Barrett, 1981; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Hairston, Rollin, & Jo, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2003). More specifically, support from families can help previously incarcerated individuals learn to accept their criminal identity and grow from their previous experiences (Maruna, 2001; Winnick, & Bodkin, 2008).

While maintaining relationships with family and friends can help incarcerated individuals cope and re-enter society, these relationships can be challenging for significant others of ILOs. Similar to incarcerated persons, significant others of ILOs also face negative social outcomes such as labeling, stereotyping, discrimination, status loss, and separation; however, this is due to the relationship that they have with a person with a criminal identity. Significant others face unique economic, social, and psychological hardships while maintaining the relationship (Breen, 1995). They can lose income and childcare assistance, and obtain new expenses related to the carceral system (Braman, 2007). Many must pay for prison expenses, lawyers, phone calls, and transportation to see their loved ones (Christian, et al., 2006; Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zach, 2001).

At the same time, many significant others of ILOs lose support from their community or lack sufficient socio-emotional support from their usual support system (Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996). As a result, they may feel ashamed for maintaining a relationship with someone who is incarcerated or blamed for allowing their loved one to break the law (Fishman, 1988). Significant others of ILOs have reported experiencing a loss of well-being and self-esteem for maintaining the relationship (Comfort, 2008; May, 2000; Moore, 2016; Peterson, Cohen, & Smith, 2013; Victoria, 2014). Thus, the effects of incarceration extend well beyond the incarcerated individuals and into significant others' sense of self and daily lives.

Research suggests that individuals react and respond to stigma in different ways depending on a) the extent that the individual believes there is a stigmatization of the identity that is placed by societal standards, and b) the extent that the individual accepts that the stigmatized identity can be publicly applied to themselves (Meisenbach, 2010). Research has shown that significant others of ILOs often manage relational stigma by avoiding most groups (withdrawal) or keep the relationship secret (secrecy), especially when they believe that society and community members will negatively judge them (Fishman, 1988; Girshick, 1996). These behavioral responses can lead to cognitive shifts in attitudes towards the stigmatized identity (e.g., lower self-esteem and well-being).

While withdrawal and secrecy strategies reduce direct relational stigma that might occur through social interactions, significant others of ILOs' own felt stigma is still present and can lead to feelings of shame about the relationship, decreased well-being and lower self-esteem (Lowenstein, 1984). Significant others of ILOs may only socialize with similar others in order to more freely seek and receive support about having a loved one who is incarcerated (Fishman, 1990; Hinck, Hinck, Withers & Smith, 2019; Peterson et al., 2013). Social support groups might

be beneficial for significant others of ILOs because they might feel more comfortable discussing the relationship, which could improve their attitudes towards the societal stigmatization of the relationship and towards their own self for maintaining the relationship (Goffman, 1963; Meisenbach, 2010.) However, support groups for significant others within face-to-face contexts are rare and difficult to establish for two reasons. First, there are no visible markers to determine who is a significant other of an ILO, which forces people to disclose their relationship before they can establish a group (Fishman, 1990). Second, while people can find similar others in the waiting rooms in prisons, people often do not live close to the prisons where their loved ones reside, which makes it difficult to establish given the geographic barriers (Peterson, et al., 2013).

Social media sites provide many opportunities for members of stigmatized and relationally stigmatized groups to manage their stigma by connecting and communicating with others across geographic and temporal boundaries, with positive cognitive outcomes. Social media are digital technologies that allow users to interact with multiple people across geographic and temporal boundaries.

Research has shown that people frequently seek support through popular social media sites such as Facebook (High & Buehler, 2019; Wohn, Carr & Hayes, 2016). Further, popular social media sites can increase the heterogeneity of people's networks, which can increase the variety of knowledge, information and support from other individuals. The greater variety of people, therefore, increases people's subjective well-being (Kim & Kim, 2017). Research has even shown that publicly discussing intimate relationships can increase their strength and closeness (Lane, Piercy, & Carr, 2016; Toma & Choi, 2015). However, popular social media sites can decrease audience boundaries and encourage people to share only information that everyone within the audience would accept (Hogan, 2010), use hidden language that only the

intended audience would understand to reduce the chance that unwanted audiences will understand their meaning (Marwick & boyd, 2014), or even use emotionally loaded messages to indicate distress and a need for support from similar others without actually disclosing the stressful experience (Das & Hodkinson, 2020).

While little is known how relationally stigmatized groups such as significant others of ILOs use popular social media sites to manage feelings of stigma, recent work has shown that significant others of ILOs have found refuge on at least one targeted social media site: Prison Talk Online (prisontalk.com; PTO). On PTO, significant others of ILOs can connect with similar others and can ask for and provide support on prison-related topics such as navigating the prison system, managing romantic relationships, and coping with the stigma that is attached to these relationships (Hinck et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2013). Less is known, however, about how use of different social media sites affect support behaviors and what privacy concerns and management behaviors are present in more targeted social media sites for stigmatized groups. Further, it is unclear how these sites might affect relational or cognitive outcomes given that the users share a similar identity.

This dissertation seeks to bridge this gap in research by comparing how significant others of ILOs use a popular social media site (Instagram) with others who use a more targeted social media site (PTO). Through this comparison, we will better understand the social support benefits across social media sites, privacy management strategies, and outcomes of using different types of social media sites. I focus on PTO and Instagram because they both have a large presence of significant others of ILOs. However, these two sites vary along a number of dimensions, including size of user base, dedicated vs. general purpose conversation, access to strong and weak ties, audience heterogeneity, and privacy management tools. As a result, the two types of

sites might create different social media behavior, privacy management strategies, and cognitive outcomes. This dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do significant others of incarcerated individuals interact differently with a dedicated social media site (Prison Talk Online) versus a general purposes social media site (Instagram)?

RQ2: What privacy management behaviors are used to reduce privacy concerns on Prison Talk Online and Instagram?

RQ3: How does communicating on social media influence significant others of incarcerated individuals' feelings of relational stigma and self?

To answer these research questions, I examined daily social media behavior and norms on Prison Talk Online and Instagram. I conducted in-depth field observations of both social media sites over the course of eight months and semi-structured interviews of individuals that use each site. Through multiple iterations of coding, I identified several patterns of social media use that participants used to manage relational stigma and privacy concerns and show how these patterns of use shape self-concept.

My findings suggest that social media sites can be used to manage relational stigma, however, the success of this stigma management depends on access to support and opportunities to build friendships with similar others. Further, privacy management strategies (e.g., finding a space where they trust and feel supported by similar others) as well as features of the social network sites (e.g., the ability to separate audiences and reduce disclosure ripple effects) increases significant others of ILOs' willingness to talk about their relationship with others. Also, online stigma management and privacy concerns varied somewhat depending on which type of site participants used (Instagram vs. PTO), the gender of the respondents, and when

respondents first met their ILO (before or during incarceration). Finally, when significant others of ILOs actively use social media to talk about their relationship and interact with similar others, they report positive self-validation outcomes.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows: In Chapter 2, I review previous research related to relational stigma, self-presentation behaviors, and their effects on people's self-concept. Building upon this literature, I present the rationale for my study and the development of my research questions. In Chapter 3, I describe my research methods, provide the rationale for my choice of method, and discuss ethical concerns. In Chapter 4, I present findings about how partners of ILOs manage their relational stigma. In Chapter 5, I present findings on the privacy management strategies that significant others of ILOs use to discuss their relationships on the two social media sites. In Chapter 6, I discuss the self-concept outcomes of using social media to manage relational stigma. Finally, in Chapter 7, I provide a new understanding of what relational stigma management behaviors occur within mediated spaces. I then discuss how findings from the present research contribute and extend our understanding of relational stigma management and self-concept change on mediated spaces.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Individuals who choose to maintain a romantic relationship with a person who is incarcerated must endure a host of economic, social, and psychological stressors while their loved one is locked away. Often with a lack a support network, significant others might turn to social media sites to manage these daily stressors. However, it is not yet clear what types of social media sites are most beneficial for helping partners of ILOs manage their stigma and what privacy concerns arise on different social media sites.

The current chapter reviews previous work that provides potential insights into relational stigma management within social media contexts. I start by introducing the concept of stigma and relational stigma. I then review work on relational stigma management strategies. After that, I discuss the potential of stigma management on social media, highlight possible privacy concerns within different social media sites, and describe potential outcomes of using different social media as spaces to manage relational stigma. Findings, concepts, and theories presented in this chapter lay a foundation for my current study, which aims at understanding how significant others of ILOs use social media (Instagram or Prison Talk Online) to manage their relational stigma, their privacy management strategies, and the cognitive outcomes of using social media.

Relational Stigma

A stigmatized identity is traditionally defined as an attribute that is a discrediting mark on someone of questionable moral status (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatized identity, however, does not just affect the individual who holds that identity. Rather, individuals associated with people who are stigmatized may also be stigmatized due to this relationship. I refer to this kind of stigma as *relational stigma*. Research suggests that stigma and relational stigma are socially

constructed and culturally determined to protect group survival (Neuberg, Smith, & Asher, 2000). This suggests that stigma and relational stigma vary across time, place, and group; however, stigma is present in all cultures (Link & Phelan, 2001; Meisenbach, 2010). Therefore, completely eliminating stigma is unlikely, and instead research often focuses on the management of stigmatized and relationally stigmatized identities.

The study of stigma has been largely informed by two independent research traditions: (a) the sociological paradigm that explains how various economic, political, and historical forces produce social structures, which promote and maintain prejudice and discrimination directed at a specific group; and (b) the social psychological paradigm that models the cognitive and motivational processes that lead an individual to stigmatize an identity. Below, I review research from both these traditions; however, the focus of this research will be within the social psychological paradigm.

Stigma

In order to understand relational stigma, one must first contextualize the concept by examining the conceptualization of stigma. Historically, societies often exposed lower or immoral status individuals by cutting or burning marks onto the body as a way to signal to others to avoid these individuals in public places (Goffman, 1963). Visible marks were imposed on others to create and indicate a social, economic, and political hierarchy, and while this practice might seem outdated today, stigmatization is still present and used as markers to determine these hierarchies whether through seen or unseen marks. Within the context of incarceration, criminal records become a mark to indicate immorality. Anyone convicted of a crime is immediately valued less in character and is cast within a system of perpetual discrimination and oppression based on their criminal records (Alexander, 2012). Suddenly, the ease of getting a job, housing,

or education becomes more difficult because of the criminal record associated with their name (Leasure & Martin, 2017; Pager, 2003; Stewart & Uggen, 2020; Thacher, 2008). More recently, Jacobs (2015) shows that the digitization of crime reports and crime records even further perpetuates systemic oppression and discrimination because these records become easier to access and reduces the chance of moving on from the criminal identity. Therefore, the moment someone is convicted of a crime, their social, economic, and political status are reduced.

The sociology of stigma brings attention to the systemic issues surrounding incarceration; however, it does not account for the daily social and psychological impact it has on individuals. Within the social psychological line of research, stigma can be conceptualized as a relationship across four dimensions: labeling, stereotypes, cognitive and social separation, and status loss/discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). *Labeling* identifies the group. *Stereotyping*, often with negative attributes, is the process to which individuals place negative attributes onto the labels given to others. Once different groups and stereotypes associated with that group are identified, intergroup distinctions are often created that encourage *social and cognitive separation from* the outgroup. Finally, *status loss and discrimination* are the combination of a person's tendency to label, negatively stereotype, and separate groups because they devalue, reject and exclude people. It is important to note, though, that while stigma is often assumed to be placed on the individual by societal standards, it can also be placed by the stigmatized individual (Link & Phelan, 2013).

Research has given attention to the stigmatization of the criminal identity. Incarcerated individuals perceive and experience stigma while they are incarcerated as well as after incarceration. Often, previously incarcerated individuals are labeled as a "ex-con" or "ex-convict" or "criminal", which leads to negative stereotypes such as aggressiveness (MacLin &

Herrera, 2006). Identity labels also adopt an “us v. them” mentality which creates social distancing within communities (LeBel, 2012). Previously incarcerated persons are discriminated against because of their identity and often have difficulty finding employment, housing, and education (Portnoy, 1969; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). Incarcerated and previously incarcerated people, in turn, fear being devalued and/or discriminated against based on their knowledge of the stigmatized label (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012).

Incarceration and the stigma of being incarcerated have shown to reduce people’s social and psychological well-being both while incarcerated and post-incarceration no matter the gender or race of the incarcerated persons (Kasser, 1996; Keaveny & Zauszniewski, 1999), although Black men have reported more significant negative impact on their social well-being than white men (Blankenship et al., 2018). However, social support from family and friends and learned coping strategies have shown to reduce these negative impacts (Gullone, Jones, & Cummins, 2000; Maruna, 2001; Winnick, & Bodkin, 2008).

Relational Stigma

While the placement of the criminal identity affects the incarcerated person in many ways, it can also impact family members, including parents, children, friends, and romantic partners. However, relational stigma is experienced differently based on the role and nature of the relationship (Goffman, 1963). Parents living with a family member with a mental illness, for example, perceive stronger relational stigma than parents not living with the family member (Phelan, Bromet, & Link, 1998). Romantic partners, however, experience relational stigma that is unique due to the fact that they (unlike parents or children) have the choice to opt in or out the relationship at any time (Corrigan & Miller, 2004). Relational stigma (sometimes called

courtesy stigma, stigma by association, or associative stigma), like stigma research, has been explored in both the sociological and social psychological paradigms.

Goffman (1963) classified such people as *courtesy stigmatized* or *stigmatized by association* and described them as, being able to pass as “normal” within societies, however, also hold a secret life that is connected to a stigmatized person. Mehta & Farina (1988) suggest that the public may extend the stigma of an identity to families for two reasons. First, people who appear together in public are assumed to be alike. Second, if someone opts to be associated with a stigmatized person, it is assumed that that person also is not “worth much”. Thus, a discreditation is placed on individuals who are associated with a stigmatized person by societal values. Furthermore, relational stigma, like Link & Phelan’s (2001) conceptualization of stigma, can be placed by both outsiders and/or the stigmatized by association individual.

Within the sociological paradigm, researchers have given attention to the “collateral consequences” of incarceration (see Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Collateral consequences include childcare complications (Braman, 2007; Brooks & Bahna, 1993), financial hardships (Christian, et al., 2006; Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zach, 2001) and family and community disruption (Clear, Rose & Ryder, 2001; Rodriguez, 2016). These sociological impacts, however, do not address the social and psychological impacts of being relationally associated with someone who is incarcerated.

Within the social psychological paradigm, research has shown that relationally stigmatized people also experience labels, negative stereotypes, separation, and discrimination (Corrigan & Miller, 2004). Labels often include the relational association with the stigmatized identity (e.g. “family members of mentally ill patients,” “parents of juvenile delinquents,” “significant others of prisoners”). This immediately associates a person with the stigmatized

identity, shapes how a person is categorized, and creates opportunities for others to stereotype and discriminate against families of individuals with stigmatized identities.

Outside of the context of incarceration, Corrigan & Miller (2004) suggest that the shame of having a family member who holds a stigmatized identity is a nonspecific prejudice, which accounts for two types of stereotypes: blame and contamination. Parents are frequently blamed when children show symptoms of mental illness (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988; Corrigan et al., 2000). Siblings and significant others are often blamed for mismanaging the illness (Corrigan & Miller, 2004). With respect to romantic relationships, Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler (2013) have found that nontraditional relationships (e.g., open marriages) are stereotyped as less stable and less fulfilling than traditional monogamous romantic relationships.

Discrimination against relationally stigmatized individuals is also present across relationships and stigmatized identities. Employers are less likely to hire or continue to work with people who are associated with someone who has schizophrenia (Penn, Kommana, Mansfield, & Link, 1999). Landlords are less likely to rent out homes to families that include a member with a history of health issues, and neighbors are less likely to socialize with families of stigmatized individuals (Corrigan & Miller, 2004). Interracial romantic relationships are more likely to feel less respected because of their relationship status (Doyle & Molix, 2014).

The stigma of having a family member who is incarcerated can be diffused to all family members—both immediate and extended family (May, 2000). Consistent with stigma research, significant others of ILOs also feel stereotyped, shunned from social groups, and discriminated against (Moore, 2016), which impact their behaviors and views of themselves. Wives of incarcerated husbands have reported feeling stigmatized based on having a relationship with someone who is incarcerated and shamed for maintaining the relationship (Fishman, 1988).

Wives of ILOs also worry about feeling stigmatized by community members. Other research has found that significant others of ILOs often experience a loss of social support to help them cope through the difficulties of having an ILO (Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996). Peterson et al., (2013) further suggest that significant others of incarcerated persons are *courtesy incarcerated* because they must endure structural and social discrimination for having a loved one who is incarcerated.

Relational Stigma Management

Given the devaluation of their relational identity, research shows that individuals respond to their stigmatized or relationally stigmatized status through three possible behaviors: secrecy, withdrawal, and education (Link et al., 1989). *Secrecy* refers to the concealment of one's stigmatized identity in an effort to avoid rejection by people who are not associated with the stigmatized identity. *Withdrawal* consists of distancing oneself from others, avoiding social environments where the threat of being stigmatized is present. Instead, stigmatized and relationally stigmatized individuals often turn to those who they know will accept their stigmatized condition in order to protect themselves from social rejection. Finally, *educating* others is an attempt to teach people about the identity in hopes of reducing negative attitudes. Meisenbach (2010) suggests that choices of stigma management techniques depend on an individual's attitudes towards public perception of the stigmatized identity and of holding that stigmatized identity. If a person agrees that people associated with incarcerated persons are bad, but know that they are one of those people, then they will likely keep their association secret.

Previous research has shown that secrecy as a relational stigma management strategy is often used when both the stigmatized individual and the relationally stigmatized individual have no visual markers to suggest that a stigmatized identity is present within the family. Families of schizophrenic patients, for example, are less likely to disclose the identity when the stigmatized

person is in a hospital (Angermeyer & Schulze, & Dietrich, 2003). However, when either the stigmatized individual or the relationally stigmatized person cannot successfully conceal the identity, avoidance and educational strategies are more often enacted. For example, parents of children who have intellectual disabilities that are become visible through social interaction such as children with mental retardation tend to limit interactions with community members to avoid social rejection from the wider social environment (Birenbaum, 1970; 1992).

Withdrawal strategies include avoiding social environments where the stigmatized or relationally stigmatized person will likely be judged as well as turning to groups where they feel they will be supported by others, such as social support groups and communities. Connected by similar identities and experiences, individuals might be more likely to seek support from others and feel more comfortable disclosing stigmatizing experiences without the fear of judgment (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Weber, Johnson & Corrigan, 2004). While withdrawal can lead to more constricted social networks, these networks provide support that is not present in larger social environments (Link, et al., 1989).

The stigma of being connected with an incarcerated individual who others may view as morally unfit may constrain the number of people significant others of ILOs believe will support them in their situation (Fishman, 1990). Significant others of ILOs keep their relationship status secret or lie about their relationship when they assume community members will shame them for maintaining the relationship (Moore, 2016; Fishman, 1988). Support groups can provide outlets for significant others to discuss their relationship more freely with similar others, though these support groups are difficult to find in face-to-face contexts because these networks are rarely visible and difficult to access (Fishman, 1990). While significant others can find similar others in spaces such as waiting rooms in prisons, geographic constraints reduce the likelihood of creating

FtF support groups from similar prisons because people often do not live close to the prison that their loved one is assigned (Christian, 2005).

Stigma management behaviors are an effort to cope with and shift one's attitudes towards stigmatized identities (Meisenbach, 2010). Maintaining secrecy of the stigmatized or relationally stigmatized identity can further make people feel ashamed (Scheff, 1971), isolated, or even lower one's self-esteem (Link et al., 1989). Disclosure or sharing their experiences with others, however, can improve individual's acceptance of the relationally stigmatized identity. Beals, Peplau, & Gable (2009), for example, found that disclosing their sexual orientation to others increased feelings of well-being. However, this was largely because of the perceived support the received when disclosing their stigmatized identity.

Research within the context of significant others of incarcerated persons have demonstrated that relational stigmatization of having an ILO is present and could benefit from disclosing their relationship and receive support from similar others. However, as research has also already mentioned, significant others of ILOs often feel a sense of social separation and a reduced support system within FtF contexts. Therefore, other spaces such as social media sites might provide the opportunity to find similar others, share their experiences, and receive support.

Relational Stigma Management on Social Media

According to social information processing theory, people have the same social motives online as they do in FtF contexts (Walther, 1992). If significant others of ILOs are motivated to manage their relational stigma through communication (whether to a specific group or build their own support network) and feel as though they cannot communicate with others within FtF contexts, many might turn to online contexts. Further, online communication can even provide new communication opportunities that face-to-face contexts could not provide (Walther, 1996).

Due to the mediated text-based component of social media, users can spend more time strategically crafting their support-seeking messages before posting rather than feeling pressure to disclose something unintentionally (Oh & LaRose, 2016).

Online stigma and relational stigma management has predominantly focused on online social support. While much of the literature on online stigma management focuses on more targeted social media and online support sites (e.g. Wright & Rains, 2013), other research has examined the benefits of online social support within broader social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook. However, targeted and broad social media sites differ in many ways, which can influence how relationally stigmatized groups use the sites. Anonymity and tie strength are only some of many differences between social media sites. Understanding how a relationally stigmatized group uses different social media sites that differ in cues and audience will allow scholars to understand how site features shape stigma management processes.

Targeted Social Media Sites

Targeted online support sites and social media sites such as Prison Talk Online, YouBeMom, Ravelry, DeviantArt, and Body Modification Ezine, create comfortable spaces for select groups to connect with similar others, share similar experiences, and provide support when needed (Hinck et al., 2019; Lingel, 2017; Schoenebeck, 2013). Targeted social media sites tend to focus on one specific topic or identity that users can discuss without the judgment of others who do not have any connection to the topic or identity. These sites often make specific design and audience choices in order to maintain the goals of the site.

Research has shown that online support sites and targeted social media sites often design their site for users to remain anonymous, which prevents others from learning the source of the message (Anonymous, 1998). Anonymity is used to increase the perception that these targeted

forums are safe spaces to talk about difficult or stigmatizing experiences and connect with others who have had similar experiences (e.g. Andalibi, Haimson, Choudhury, & Forte; 2018; Choudhury & De, 2014; Schoenebeck, 2013). Anonymity also reduces interpersonal risks because sensitive disclosures cannot easily be connected back to the source (the discloser). Further, anonymity reduces concerns for saving face because face-saving behaviors are no longer needed when people are protected from visual and discursive cues such as pictures and pseudonyms. This in turn helps people feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing information that could be stigmatizing (Joinson, 2001).

Targeted online support sites also tend to be connected through weak ties who share a common goal for using the platform (Wright & Rains, 2013). Weak ties include strangers or acquaintances that are connected by a similar identity or experience but have no interpersonal commitment to each other. Strong ties, in contrast, include people with whom individuals maintain intimate connections (Granovetter, 1973) Weak ties only interact within certain contexts and can be used as social support resources (Rains & Keating, 2011; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright, Johnson, Bernard, & Averbeck, 2011). Because of this shared common goal and lack of interpersonal commitment, users perceive the risk of disclosing stigmatizing experiences to weak ties than to strong ties (Wright & Miller, 2010).

The focus on common identity rather than tie strength in targeted online support sites allows communication to stay within the boundaries of the purpose of the site and focus more directly on support. While previous studies have found that stigmatized groups have a preference for online social support from weak ties (Wright & Rains, 2013), most online support sites that focus on stigmatized groups are content-oriented (Rains, Peterson & Wright, 2015). Little is

known if social support from weak ties within targeted social media sites actually affect a person's sense of relational stigma or other self-outcomes.

While limited, previous research has shown that significant others of ILOs seek, receive, and provide social support on a targeted social media site called Prison Talk Online (Hinck et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2013). This work revealed that users often manage their relational stigma by seeking social support, including advice, listening, reality confirmation, and self-disclosure, as well as receiving support such as advice, reality confirmation, community support, emotional support, and challenge support (Hinck et al., 2019). This research shows that significant others of ILOs seek out spaces to disclose and share their relationship as well as seek social support on social media sites; however, this research does not address how these support seeking and receiving behaviors within this targeted social media site effects their attitude towards their relationally stigmatized identity.

Broad Social Media Sites

Targeted social media sites and online support sites help stigmatized and relationally stigmatized people withdraw to one specific group in order to seek and receive support, however, broad social media sites provide access to a larger number of potential social support providers and lower social barriers to seeking support from a larger group of people (Vitak & Ellison, 2013). Research on broad social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok have shown that self-disclosure and social support can increase psychological (Burke & Kraut, 2016) and subjective (Kim, 2014) well-being. Broad social media sites tend to be more identifiable than users of many targeted social media sites, and their social networks are likely to be mixed between strong and weak ties. These differences have been shown to create different ways of seeking and receiving social support.

The larger user base of broad social network sites suggests that there will be a greater number of potential supporters but at the same time, each user tends to be more identifiable. This does not, however, necessarily negate sensitive disclosures and online social support. Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte (2017), for example, find that disclosures of depression on Instagram often attract emotional, network, and esteem support. This provides evidence that stigma management through online disclosures and support can be enacted through popular social media sites. However, given the large network and group of individuals, indirect support strategies tend to be adopted more often on sites like Facebook (Buehler, 2017).

While previous research has shown a preference for weak tie support (which is usually more common in targeted social media and support sites), other social support research has shown that support from a variety of strong and weak ties can be perceived as more beneficial and can influence psychological and social well-being. Facebook, for example, connects people to a larger variety of social ties because of the broad audience that it provides (Ellison et al., 2007). Kim & Kim (2017) found that a more heterogeneous network can provide a larger variety of social support than a more homogenous network. Further, recent work has shown that perceived support is positively correlated to tie strength, which suggests that broader social media sites that include strong ties can provide positive social support (Burke & Kraut, 2016).

These findings are further supported by research on paralinguistic digital affordances, which are signals such as “liking” posts that can be perceived as providing support (Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016). These one-click responses suggest relational investment and are positively correlated to perceptions of social support (Ahmadi, Schneider, Kadam, & Wohn, 2016; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014) as well as satisfaction with the responses received (Bazarova, et al., 2015). Carr, Wohn, & Hayes (2016) found that paralinguistic digital responses are perceived

as more supportive when received by relationally close individuals rather than weak ties, which suggests that these signals might be more useful for social media sites that include strong ties than within weak tie support communities.

Anonymity, popularity, tie strength, and presence of paralinguistic digital affordances are just some of the ways targeted and broad social media sites differ. However, these examples demonstrate how site features and their potential impacts on relational stigma management can vary across platforms. As Rains et al. (2015) has argued, additional research should explore social support across different online settings to better understand the social support strategies and outcomes. This present study aims to bridge this gap by examining how significant others of ILOs use either Instagram (a broad social media site) or Prison Talk Online (a targeted social media site) to manage their relational stigma and how these different stigma management processes affect wellbeing and other outcomes.

Privacy Concerns and Management Strategies on Social Media

While each type of social media site provides opportunities for people with relational stigmatized identities to connect with others and find support, at the same time all social media sites also give rise to privacy concerns. The nature of these concerns and how people address them can vary depending on the type of site and the features it provides.

Broader social media sites create several privacy concerns for seeking social support within stigmatized and relationally stigmatized groups. *Context collapse* arises from having connections from many different aspects of life can create concern when a stigmatized person does not want to disclose their stigmatized identity to everyone (Marwick & boyd, 2011). To address these concerns, users adopt privacy management strategies either through technological features or communication shifts (Marwick & boyd, 2014). For example, fathers struggling to

cope with and disclose mental illness seek support by vaguely disclosing emotional distress or symptoms that are only recognizable by others have suffered from mental illness (Das & Hodkinson, 2020). Similarly, Buehler (2017) found people tended to use more indirect language in their social support seeking messages on Facebook, possibly due to the increased perceived costs of seeking support within a larger network of different audiences. While privacy concerns such as context collapse and privacy management strategies have not been examined within targeted social media sites because of the lack of multiple audiences, concerns and management behaviors might still be present.

Overall, privacy concerns and strategies impact how individuals use different social media sites. Buehler (2017) noted that if the perceived costs of communication outweigh the benefits of seeking support, individuals might maintain secrecy or fail to adequately ask for support. Changes in communication due to privacy concerns and strategies might affect the overall stigma management outcomes; however, this is not theoretically clear within the literature on relationally stigmatized communities. This dissertation aims to explore this gap in research by examining privacy concerns and management strategies that significant others of ILOs use on both Instagram and Prison Talk Online.

The Current Study

While research has identified differences between targeted and broad social media sites, less is known about how relationally stigmatized individuals, especially significant others of ILOs, use these two types of sites, how privacy management strategies shape their use of the sites, and the cognitive outcomes they gain from using different social media sites.

In the scope of my current study, the contextual motivation for people's online behavior and its effects is examined by collecting evidence from three different angles. The first angle

focuses on how significant others of ILOs use different social media to talk about their loved ones. This allows me to focus on the specific online behaviors that occur within both Instagram and Prison Talk Online. This angle forms my first research question:

RQ1: How do significant others of incarcerated individuals interact differently with a dedicated social media site (Prison Talk Online) versus a general purposes social media site (Instagram)?

The second angle considers privacy concerns and strategies of using different social media sites. As I have argued, dedicated and general purpose social media sites differ in privacy features and in the makeup of the audience, and these in turn can impact communication behaviors. Therefore, my second research question is as follows:

RQ2: What privacy management behaviors are used to reduce privacy concerns on Prison Talk Online and Instagram?

The third angle considers how using different social media sites affects cognitive outcomes in unique ways with regard to relational stigma. Therefore, the examination of both Instagram and Prison Talk Online helps determine the present variables in regards of self-concept change. This angle forms my third research question:

RQ3: How does communicating on social media influence significant others of incarcerated individuals' feelings of relational stigma and self?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

I used a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to investigate how significant others of incarcerated loved ones use different social media to manage relational stigma, what privacy management strategies they adopted, and how the use of different social media sites affects their sense of relational stigma and overall self. I conducted in-depth field observations on Instagram and Prison Talk Online and also interviewed thirteen participants who use either social media site. I first took extensive notes and memos on both social media sites to get better acquainted with the design of the sites and to develop a deep understanding of the setting and communication norms. I then interviewed significant others of ILOs who use either Instagram or PTO to gain a deeper understanding of their own perceptions and behavior on these social media sites and the effects of these behaviors on their wellbeing. Demographic questions were asked at the end of each of the interviews.

My grounded theory approach through both field observations and interviews provides an in-depth understanding of how relationally stigmatized individuals use different social media sites, why they use these sites, and the effects it has on their self-concept. These same goals would be difficult to achieve through one method alone, such as interviews (e.g. Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Fishman, 1990; Fritz & Gonzales, 2018, May, 2000; Moore, 2016), thematic analysis (Hinck et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2013), or surveys (e.g. Lowenstein, 1984). Using a grounded theory approach that combines field notes and interviews that can highlight changes over time provides a stronger understanding of how self-presentational behavior affects a person's relationally stigmatized identity. Further, qualitative research such as the grounded theory approach maintains ethical considerations with this population because they are aware of

the purpose of the research and provide consent with discussing their online behaviors (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Markham & Buchanon, 2015).

Within grounded theory, I take a social constructivist perspective. I view the data analysis as a construction that not only locates the data in time, place, culture, and context, but also reflects my own thinking and relationship as a researcher (Charmaz, 2002). This is to gain a more complex understanding of the multiple perspectives that respondents develop in terms of identity, relational stigma, and privacy concerns within Instagram and Prison Talk Online. Research highlights that stigma is a socially constructed valuation of a specific identity that is dependent on time, place, and group (Crocker, Major & Steele., 1998; Goffman, 1963; Jones, 1984; Link & Phelan, 2001; Meisenbach, 2010). Because of the complexities and social construction of stigma, it cannot easily be captured using quantitative methods or an objectivist perspective. Rather, qualitative methods through a constructivist perspective can illuminate the different perspectives and experiences individuals have in terms of relational stigma, relational stigma management, and its effects on the self-concept.

Research Settings: Prison Talk Online & Instagram

This dissertation focuses on two social media sites that are often used by significant others of ILOs: Prison Talk Online & Instagram. These sites were chosen because significant others of ILOs have created visible presentations of their incarcerated relationships in both sites that are easily accessible for outside users. Both sites provide spaces for individuals to create a profile to disclose limited information about themselves to other users, post about their relationship publicly, and directly message other members of the site. While there are distinct differences between the two social media sites (e.g. the purpose of the sites, extent of anonymity

within the sites, and how the sites are moderated), they both have a strong presence of significant others of ILOs. Below is a detailed description of both social media sites.

Prison Talk Online

Prison Talk Online is an internet-based site that is both web-based and mobile-based for Android users. It labels itself as a “web community” because it originated within the World Wide Web. The site was created by previously incarcerated persons in 2001 and as of July 2020 it had over 495,000 current members, 7,852 active members who have contributed to the site within the past 6 months, and approximately 7.6 million posts. The purpose of Prison Talk Online is:

To bring those with an interest in the prisoner support community a forum in which their issues and concerns may be addressed by others in similar circumstances and beliefs. ...PTO’s goal is to bridge the communication barrier that exists in and around the criminal “justice” system today and bring everyone in the prisoner support community closer together to effect change in policy, prisoner rights, sentencing and so much more (prisontalk.com).

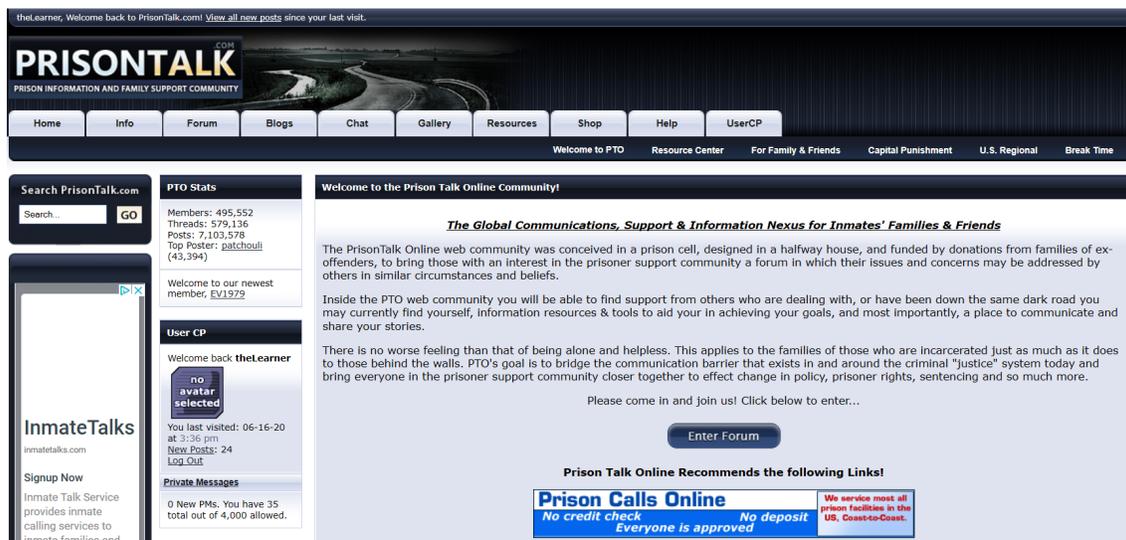


Figure 1. Prison Talk Online Homepage

Users enter PTO via the Home Page, which presents a welcome message, a display of the number of messages created on the site, the total number of members, and a visualization of the six sections for individuals to connect and communicate with each other (Figure 1). Users are can then click on 10 different sections that are available to PTO members. Five of these sections take users to places where members can communicate with each other: (a) a list of forums organized by different prison-related topics, relationships, and geographic locations; (b) a section for members to create and maintain blogs; (c) a place for users to chat with other users in-real-time; (d) a gallery dedicated to posting pictures; and (e) a list of resources about the carceral system. The other five sections serve as navigation functions: Home, Info, Shop, Help, and User Control Panel. Though not found from the Homepage, users can also privately message each other within the social media site. The majority of the field observations were conducted in the forums section because of its public accessibility and its frequent use by PTO members.

While the forums are visible to the public, only PTO members can access and contribute to the site through posts and private messages. Members of PTO must create a username and create a profile that is only visible to other PTO members. Members are urged to create a pseudonym for their username so that identity anonymity is still present. This is to ensure the safety of the community and its loved ones. However, profiles can contain personal information (e.g. geographic location, relation to the carceral system, activities that the individual enjoys), any pictures that the member posts, a list of friends (connections) on the site, a direct message section, a private message area, and any community awards that they received on PTO for their participation (e.g.. Staff Superstar, PTO Super Moderator; see Figure 2).

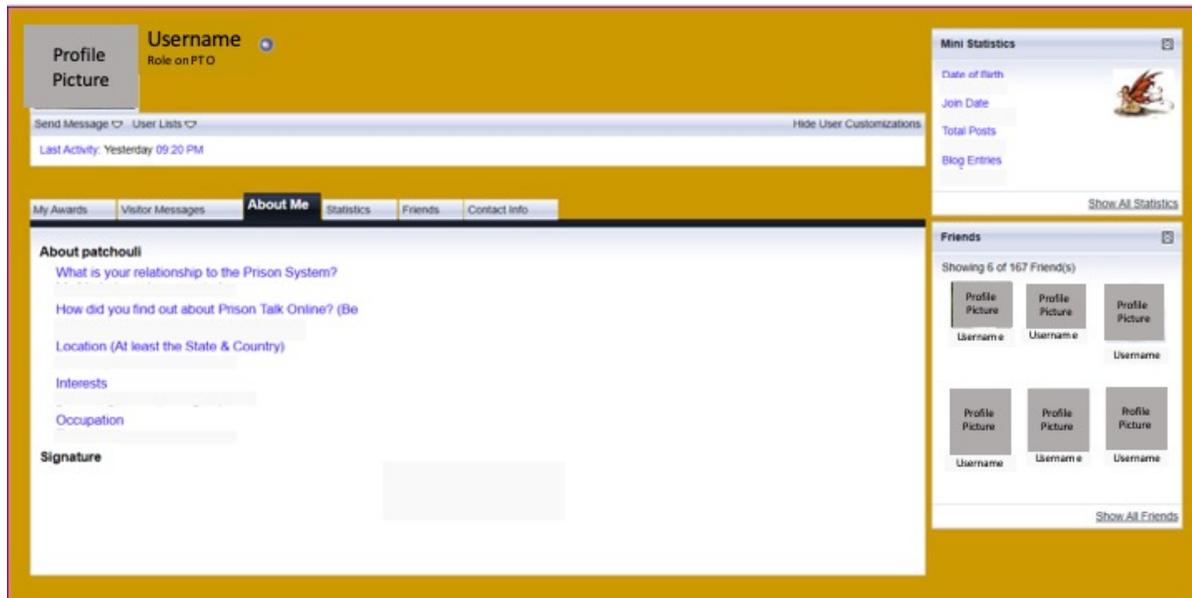


Figure 2. Prison Talk Online Profile Template

At the time I collected my data, the site contained 15 public forums with 127 sub-forums. Two of the public forums are specifically focused on families of incarcerated persons: “For Families and Friends”, and “Loving A...”. There were 15 subforums for these two public forums. Eight were dedicated specifically to people who maintain an intimate relationship with incarcerated persons (significant others of ILOs): “Husbands and Boyfriends in Prison,” “Wives and Girlfriends in Prison,” “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered People in Prison,” “When the Relationship is Over...,” “Met While Incarcerated,” “Loving a Violent Offender,” “Loving a Lifer,” and “Loving a long-term Sentenced Offender.” Figure 3 provides an example the layout of a forum and sub-forums within the “For Families and Friends” section.

Moderators, super moderators, and administrators will step in if they see rude or hurtful language, move conversations that fit better in different sub-forums, and reserve the right to

FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS				
Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts	
PTQ General Prison Talk Does your issue not fit into another forum? Post it here. Find support, answers and assistance. Sub-Forums: GPT Phones, Mail, and Visitation Discussions	Ask a Correctional Officer by [redacted] Today 07:16 PM	30,636	475,381	
PTQ Husbands & Boyfriends in Prison For everyone who has a husband, boyfriend or male partner incarcerated.	Wants to call less by [redacted] Today 07:28 AM	32,143	705,705	
PTQ Wives & Girlfriends in Prison For everyone who has a wife, girlfriend, or female partner incarcerated.	Do you think your... by [redacted] Yesterday 07:25 PM	1,018	17,040	
PTQ LGBTQ+ People in Prison For anyone that has a same sex partner, family member, friend or Pen Pal in prison that is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, or Omnisexual	Is your partner "out" in... by [redacted] 02-24-2020 03:12 PM	727	9,410	
PTQ Remembering Those That Passed While In Prison This forum is for all those - family, friends, spouses, wives, husbands, significant others, brothers, sisters, parents, and children - who lost a loved one or friend while incarcerated.	He died by [redacted] 04-14-2020 05:32 PM	261	3,886	
PTQ When the Relationship is Over... This forum is about discussing your thoughts, feelings and issues now that you and your incarcerated (or formerly incarcerated) loved one are no longer together. (This forum is NOT for bashing - please read the rules before posting.)	MWT's Release update is not... by [redacted] Today 02:31 AM	3,640	69,689	
PTQ Met While Incarcerated Were you introduced by a friend or family member after he/she was incarcerated? Did you meet as Pen Pals? This Forum is for you!	Visiting MWI for the very... by [redacted] Yesterday 12:45 AM	7,291	160,922	
PTQ Parents with Children in Prison For the parents of prisoners Sub-Forums: PWCP - Introductions , The Parents Forum Lounge	My son signed for life & I'm... by [redacted] 04-13-2020 10:51 PM	8,833	193,726	
PTQ Raising Children with Parents in Prison For the Parent left behind with children AND for the Children that have a parent inside. Discussion of unique challenges facing this group!	Baby born while daddy is... by [redacted] 11-04-2019 03:45 PM	1,927	18,335	
PTQ Adult Children and Siblings of Inmates For Adult Children, brothers and sisters of prisoners	Birth Dad in Prison/Updated by [redacted] 04-07-2020 12:22 PM	1,020	10,149	
PTQ Extended Family For the grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins of inmates.	Extended Family~who do you... by [redacted] 04-23-2020 08:39 PM	244	1,475	
PTQ Juvenile Discussion of everything related to minors in the criminal justice system: juvenile detention, courts, rights, and family support.	Greenville Hills Academy by [redacted] Yesterday 06:13 PM	455	2,870	

Figure 3. “For Family and Friends” Forum on Prison Talk Online

remove people from the site if they do not follow the community guidelines. Administrators answer user questions about the site, fix technological problems, approve PTO memberships, and monitor the community as a whole to make sure that it is progressing in a positive, supportive manner.

Instagram

Instagram is a mobile and web-based photo and video-sharing social media site, which is currently owned by Facebook. Instagram allows users to share their daily life or promote products to either the public (any Instagram user) or their Instagram followers. Only Instagram users can look at fellow Instagram profiles (if the profile is public); however, users can also put their Instagram account on private, which means that only their followers can see their Instagram activity. Since its launch date in October 2010, Instagram has been steadily growing as a social

media site. Currently, over 120 million users have an Instagram account. As of 2019, 37% of U.S. citizens ages 18 and older reported having an Instagram account (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). While this site has more users than PTO, it is unclear how many of these users have a significant other who is incarcerated. Instagram users can be anyone, which creates a heterogeneous group of users whereas Prison Talk Online is only composed of people who have some connection to the carceral system.

Instagram users can post pictures, videos, written messages, and “stories” (short videos that disappear after 24 hours). They can also send private messages to individual users or to groups. Users often use hashtags (i.e. #) to indicate a theme within their Instagram post, begin following others who use specific hashtags, or gain followers by using a hashtag. While the number of significant others of incarcerated person who use Instagram is unknown, popular Instagram hashtags pertaining to incarceration or having a loved one who is incarcerated are: #prison (1.1 million posts), #prisonlife (58,5000 posts), #prisonwife (68,800 posts), #prisonwifelife (31,700) posts, #prisonlove (23,000 posts), #prisongirlfriend (13,300 posts). Instagram posts that focus on the prison relationship often include pictures of their loved ones, quotes that relate to having an incarcerated loved one, or memes that others within similar situations can relate to. Figure 4. provides an example of the public posts of users who have used #prisonwife within their Instagram feeds.

Similar to Prison Talk Online, Instagram users must create a profile and a username in order to contribute to the site. Profiles on Instagram have a 150-character limit as well as a 30-character limit for the username (see Figure 5). Further, Instagram users have the choice to make their profiles public or private. Public profiles are visible to anyone who has Instagram, whereas

private profiles are only visible to people who the user allows to follow them. This is different than Prison Talk Online where all profiles are visible to all other PTO members.

There are no designated moderators on Instagram specifically for significant others of ILOs.

Instagram has both automated and human content moderators to monitor posts to determine if the content is “inappropriate” on the site or does not follow Instagram rules of conduct (Gillespie,

2018). This is different from Prison Talk Online moderators because Instagram content

moderators are solely concerned about the over-arching site rules and regulations, rather than the smaller group norms that are created within the site.

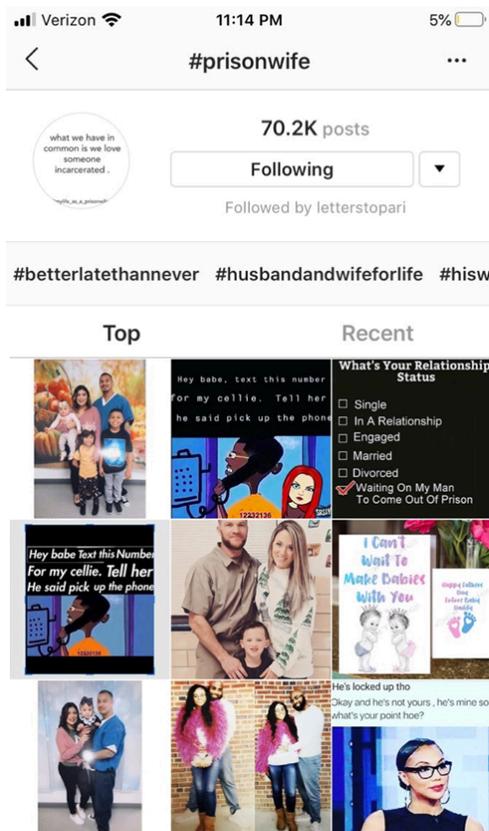


Figure 4. The #prisonwife Hashtag Page on Instagram

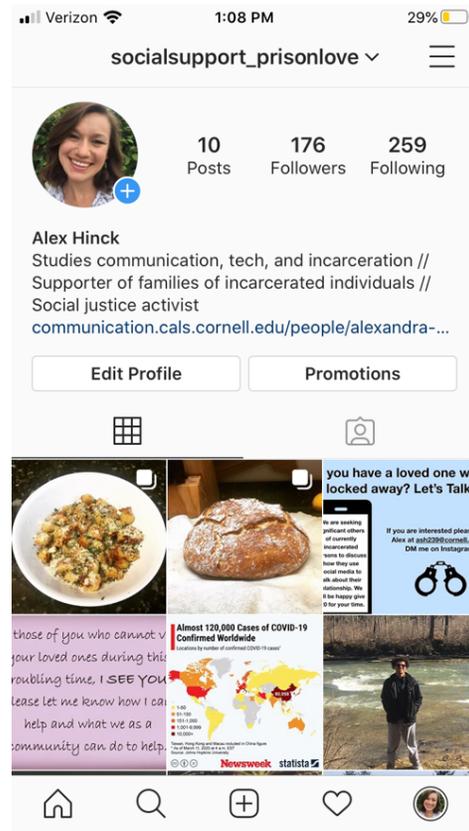


Figure 5. Instagram Profile Template

Data Collection

The field observations and semi-structured interviews took approximately 8 months and occurred between September 2019 and April 2020. Field observations began in September 2019 and continued until Interview were completed. Interviews were completed in March-April 2020. Interview questions were slightly modified three times based on answers from respondents After the third interview, respondents began to discuss relational maintenance difficulties due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which lead to a final modification of the interview script.

Field Observations

From September 2019 to April 2020, I spent approximately 30 minutes a day on either Prison Talk Online or Instagram building an understanding of the communities within the two sites. I first began my observations as a passive user. This means that I observed the site designs, public discussions, and communication behaviors without having an account dedicated to either site. At this time, I took copious notes on the daily posts, colloquial language, normative communication patterns, and surprising interactions. I also familiarized myself with the sites' community expectations and rules. In November 2019, I assumed a peripheral membership role by creating profiles of myself on both PTO and Instagram and disclosed my intentions for joining the sites. This allowed me to introduce myself, disclose my research intentions, and interact with members closely without assuming a group membership (Adler & Adler, 1994).

PTO encourages users to create usernames so that privacy can be maintained within this space. Therefore, I created used a username to demonstrate my positionality as a learner within this site. I introduced myself in the "Introduce Yourself" forum to further state my intentions and position within this site by stating that I am a researcher and I am here to learn. As I explored the site more, I would periodically respond to posts by giving words of encouragement or sharing

information about COVID-19 related topics. I also “thanked” posts periodically when I thought they were especially important or valuable.

Within Instagram, I stated my real name but created my Instagram username that related relayed my position as a researcher and my role within this site. I chose this username to show my support specifically for prison relationships. Because Instagram is not solely for people associated with incarceration, I needed to clarify the purpose of this account through my Instagram username. My bio then articulated that I am here to learn about this population. My bio specified that I study technology and communication, I am a supporter of loved ones of incarcerated persons, and I wanted to learn more about people’s experiences of having a loved one who is locked away. The bio also includes a link to my professional website. These strategies were put in place to demonstrate trust, my positionality, and my intentions.

After I had created an Instagram profile, I began following approximately 150 public Instagram profiles that have used the following hashtags: #prisonlife, #prisonwifelife, #prisonwife, #prisongf, #prisonhusband, #prisonbf, and #prisonrelationships. This was an effort to begin observing the social dynamics and normative behaviors on Instagram. I periodically posted pictures of my daily life, food that I baked, and disclosed that I had a significant other as well. I also “liked” other users’ posts when they pertained to having a loved one who is currently incarcerated. Again, this was an effort to gain trust and build familiarity with me while still maintaining my positionality as a researcher rather than a group member.

Participant Sampling and Recruitment

Because I was interested in how significant others of ILOs talked about themselves and their relationship within social media, I adopted purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that I was studying the specific population

within my study (significant others of ILOs) and snowball sampling was used to help generate a larger field sample who possess the characteristics of interest. Only respondents who met the following criteria could participate in the study:

- 1) The respondent must be in a relationship with someone who is currently or was incarcerated within the United States.
- 2) The respondent must have an active Prison Talk Online and/or Instagram account.
- 3) The respondent must be 18 years or older.

Because significant others of ILOs have historically been marginalized, I used gatekeepers who had already interacted with me and were more trusted in the community than I was. Purposive sampling was initially used in both social media sites to gain access to some respondents.

Snowball sampling was applied later as well as \$20 compensation for Instagram users to create a larger sample.

Recruitment of Prison Talk Online Users. Prison Talk Online's site administrators were very protective of spammers and scammers. Therefore, administrators have articulated rules before researchers can conduct a study. Researchers must first contact administrators to see if their request is appropriate. If so, researchers can only send out a recruitment message within one sub-forum. Further, researchers are not allowed to contact individual users; rather, individual users can only initially contact the researcher through the site's direct messaging service. Once contact is established, other forms of communication (e.g. email, Skype, or phone) are allowed. Finally, no form of compensation was allowed within Prison Talk Online.

Following Prison Talk Online's rules and regulations, I first contacted the administrators to get their approval to post a recruitment advertisement. Once my message was approved, I posted my advertisement on the "General Prison Talk" sub-forum within the "For Family &

Friends” forum because it is the second most active sub-forum that related to significant others of incarcerated persons (it has 475,848 posts as of July 2020). While the “Husbands & Boyfriends in Prison” sub-forum is the most active sub-forum that related to significant others of incarcerated persons (705,973 posts as of July 2020), I wanted to have the opportunity hear stories from a larger diversity of romantic relationships (e.g. husbands/boyfriends in prison, wives/girlfriends in prison, heterosexual relationships, homosexual relationships, open relationships, LGBTQ+ relationships, etc.).

The recruitment advertisement stated that I am a researcher hoping to learn more about significant others’ experiences (both struggles and support) for having a loved one who is currently locked away. I positioned myself as an advocate as well as someone who would like to learn from them and stated the ultimate goal of the project. Respondents were to contact me via direct message. After each interview, snowball sampling was implemented by asking them if they could pass on my information to anyone else within Prison Talk Online who they thought I would benefit from interviewing.

A total of six respondents from Prison Talk Online were interviewed. Four of the respondents were men. The average age was 49 (range: 37-60). Five respondents identified as White, and one respondent identified as Black. All respondents identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual. However, they varied in how they classified their relationship. Two thirds of the respondents disclosed having met their ILO before they were incarcerated. These respondents are what I refer to as Met Before Incarcerated (MBI). Others shared that they met their loved one while their loved one was already incarcerated, whom I refer to as Met While Incarcerated (MWI; see Table 1 for a complete list of the respondents).

Recruitment of Instagram Users. I posted a recruitment advertisement on Instagram and used the following hashtags to increase visibility of the post: #prisonwives, #prisonhusband, #prisonlove, #prisongirlfriend, #prisonboyfriend, #prisonlife, #prisonwifelife, #prisonrelationship, #prisonwifesupport, #prisonhusbandsupport #prisonlgbtq. These hashtags were chosen because they are popular hashtags used to discuss prison relationships. Further, they highlight a variety of intimate relationships.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Social Media Site	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Relationship Status	Time relationship began
PTO	Bill	51	Male	Heterosexual	White	Married	MBI
	Emma	37	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Engaged	MWI
	Jack	52	Male	Heterosexual	White	Married	MBI
	Samantha	60	Female	Heterosexual	White	Committed	MWI
	Noah	45	Male	Heterosexual	White	Committed	MBI
	Mason	37	Male	Heterosexual	White	Committed	MBI
Instagram	Camila	28	Female	Heterosexual	Latina	Married	MWI
	Ava	37	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Married	MBI
	Veronica	25	Female	Heterosexual	Latina	Married	MWI
	Olivia	37	Female	Heterosexual	White	Committed	MWI
	Jesse	40	Female	Heterosexual	White	Committed	MWI
	Raven	22	Female	Heterosexual	Other	Complicated	MBI
	Aliyah	45	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Committed	MBI

Note. PTO refers to the social media site, Prison Talk Online. The MWI and MBI distinction refers to when the romantic relationship began in relation to when the loved one was incarcerated. MBI = Met Before the loved one was Incarcerated. MWI = Met While the loved one was Incarcerated.

Interested respondents contacted me through Instagram's direct messages to set up a time to be interviewed via phone. At the end of each interview, snowball sampling was implemented as well. After two months, two respondents had contacted me and were interviewed. Due to the low number of respondents and Instagram's regulation flexibility, I created a promotion with the original Instagram recruitment ad and offered to pay them \$20 for their time and implemented snowball sampling once again. Five more respondents contacted me and were interviewed.

These recruitment procedures acquired 7 respondents who contacted me and were interviewed. All respondents were women who identified as heterosexual. Their average age was 33 (range: 22-45). Two respondents identified as White, two identified as Black, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as "Other". While their relationship status was evenly distributed between being married or in a committed relationship, one reported her relationship status as "it's complicated". Table 1 provides further details of the respondents' demographics.

Interview Procedure

I interviewed a total of 13 respondents (PTO = 6, Instagram = 7). Respondents had their choice among phone, Skype or email interviews. The majority chose to participate via phone call, however, two respondents preferred email, and two respondents preferred Skype.

Phone/Skype Interviews lasted approximately 70 minutes long ($SD = 11.9$ minutes, $Range = 46-87$). Interviews that took place via intermittent email lasted approximately 2-3 weeks.

I first sent participants a consent form. Once the interview started, I asked if they had any questions about the consent form and formally asked if they agreed to participate in the interview. With the respondents' permission, I audio recorded the interview and took notes. Participants were asked to discuss their relationship, their experienced/perceived stigma (e.g. to whom they talk about their relationship, if they had ever experienced any judgments for being in

the relationship), what role social media plays in their relationship or their self-concept (e.g. what they post about their relationship on social media, who they talk to about their relationship online, how posting about their relationship has influenced how they view their relationship and/or their self-concept), what concerns they have when posting about their relationship, and how posting (or not) about their relationship has affected their relationship or self-concept over time (see Appendix for the full interview script). For respondents who were interviewed after March 15th, I also asked how COVID-19 has affected their relationship and how they have managed to maintain contact with their loved ones. Once the interview ended, I thanked the respondent for their time and asked if I could collect and examine their Prison Talk Online or Instagram posts to gain a deeper understanding of their behavior on the respective social media site.

Analysis

All observational notes and interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti for data analysis. I analyzed the data using an inductive open-coding approach, which consisted of three phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout each phase, I analyses the data through multiple iterations.

In the *open coding* phase, I read through the whole dataset several times using line-by-line analysis to create initial codes and labels that emerged from the data. I continued to read through the dataset until the codes exhausted the data. I then refined the initial codes that overlapped each other. Codes were created from observational fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and interview notes. As the open coding phase continued, codes and labels began to overlap into larger codes that included sub-codes that described elements of the larger codes.

I then conducted *axial coding* throughout the coding process to organize, refine, and connect codes and labels with each other. I used frequent memoing to make sense of the emerging codes and continuously compared my inductive codes with previous theories. Through this process, I refined the themes and codes and made connections from the dataset. During the axial coding phase, I discussed the emerging themes and connections with two other researchers.

Finally, within the *selective coding* phase, I identified core categories that emerged, such as support accessibility, which I defined as the ease of accessing a supportive communication environment within online sites. Support accessibility reveals how easy it is to find similar others within a stigmatized community, and the comfort of seeking and receiving support. Other core categories within online relational stigma management strategies as well as relational privacy management strategies. Through this process, a deeper understanding that describes online social media use for individuals who experience relation stigma. The following chapters present my research findings in detail.

Reflections on Ethical Data Collection

Throughout this dissertation, I intentionally took an ethical approach to collecting data. While this population is not considered a “sensitive population” by the University’s IRB, significant others can be impacted by having a loved one who is incarcerated. Therefore, every decision that I made was carefully considered to ensure the safety of this population.

Ethical decisions were made when collecting field observations. Although all of the PTO forums are technically public, I had an ethical responsibility to keep any identification information private unless I was given consent by the specific users. For example, while I made copious notes about what PTO members discussed and who discussed those topics, no usernames and direct quotes from PTO activity were shared within this dissertation. Similarly, while

individuals who have public profiles on Instagram technically makes the content public, all individual usernames were blurred to reduce any unforeseen consequences. However, memes, quotes, and short comments were still included when the content was not easily identifiable.

Given the sensitivity of the study, I offered to disclose my personal experience with a relative in jail. Respondents were often reassured by my own disclosures, which reduced concerns about my commitment to people who are affected by the carceral system. Further, all respondents were given the opportunity to read through the transcripts of their interviews to determine if there was anything that they wanted to remove from further analysis. These decisions took more thought, time, and careful consideration as a researcher; however, I plan to use similar approaches in future research involving social media data collection and sensitive populations.

CHAPTER 4

ONLINE RELATIONAL STIGMA MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS

Overall, the data suggest that significant others of ILOs frequently experience relational stigma and many turn to social media to manage this stigma. Active social media use with groups of similar others helped respondents buffer internalizations of relational stigma, which in turn helped validate their decisions to maintain their relationship as well as increased their sense of emotional well-being. Structural differences between Instagram and PTO impacted how easily they could find similar others and how they sought and provided social support.

Experienced relational stigma primarily occurs within face-to-face contexts, though it sometimes appeared in Instagram. Further, the type of relational stigma that significant others of ILOs experienced differed depending on when the relationship began (before or during incarceration).

Many of my respondents adopted two strategies for using social media: finding similar others to use as a resource for social support and building new relationships that are grounded in similar experiences. The ease of finding similar others, however, differed between social media sites, gender, and when the significant others began their relationships. Through active social media use revolving around the carceral system, significant others of ILOs were able to develop close friendships through personal messaging without feeling judged or misunderstood.

Finally, the active use of social media sites as a space to present themselves and discuss their relationships and the daily struggles of being a significant other of an ILO with similar others had several positive effects on respondents' sense of relational stigma and general self-concept. Respondents felt validated for maintaining their relationships and experienced a more positive sense of emotional well-being. However, those who did not actively use Instagram or

PTO to create a supportive network and build friendships continued to suffer from internalized relational stigma and low emotional well-being.

The rest of this chapter presents details of these findings in three sections: Experienced Relational Stigma, Online Relational Stigma Management, and Relational Stigma Management Outcomes. In order to maintain privacy for all respondents and Instagram and PTO users, I gave respondents pseudonyms. Further, I removed names of incarcerated loved ones and relevant information about the prison.

Experienced Relational Stigma

Significant others of ILOs frequently reported experiencing relational stigma in everyday interactions with friends, family, and co-workers. *Experienced relational stigma* are interactions with people who place labels, negative stereotypes, and social distance on the significant others who maintain a relationship with someone who is stigmatized. Within this context, significant others of ILOs experienced relational stigma because they maintained an intimate relationship with a person who is incarcerated (the stigmatized). Experienced relational stigma differed between those who met their ILO before they were incarcerated and those who met while they were incarcerated.

Approximately half of the respondents were in a romantic relationship with their significant others before their loved ones were incarcerated (met before incarceration, MBI). Most of these respondents noted that because many family, friends, and community members knew of their relationship before incarceration, they did not feel they needed to hide it. However, once their loved one was incarcerated, many respondents noted that their previous friends and family placed blame on them and began questioning if there was something morally wrong with

them. All MBI respondents reported experiencing two types of relational stigma: assumed accomplice and questioning of character.

Assumed Accomplice

Respondents who were romantically involved with their loved ones when he/she committed the crime found that many people within their community assumed that they too were involved in the crime:

They think there's something wrong with us. I can appreciate why from a purely logical standpoint. Being married to or romantically involved with someone who's physically unavailable makes no sense at all. I think many people never involved in the "justice" system or prison system think we should dump those who violate societal rules rather than comforting them. Remaining with them and supporting them may look like approving their transgressions...I was treated as though I had been involved in my wife's activities or at least condoned them. After all, how could I have been married to her and not known she was a "sexual predator"? "Birds of a feather," after all! (Jack, PTO)

Respondents suggested that people not associated with the carceral world could not understand how they were unaware of their loved one's crime. In order to make sense of why they maintained the relationship, many community members placed blame on the significant other and assumed that they must be an accomplice to the incarcerated person.

Questioning of Character

Significant others of ILOs' moral character came into question because their loved one was incarcerated. Rather than viewing the relationship as complicated and multifaceted, respondents felt that people questioned their decision-making, character, and sense of morality

because they were are not associated with the carceral system. Noah, a PTO user who has been with his fiancé (previously his girlfriend when she was incarcerated) for 4 years, describes a time when his mother questioned if staying with his girlfriend while she is in prison is the best decision for him and his family. He has had similar interactions with others: “And then there was the questioning of me, it’s like, “if you’re okay with what she settled for and her lifestyle, what is wrong with your lifestyle?” (Noah, PTO). Similarly, Ava, an Instagram user who has been with her husband (previously her boyfriend when he was incarcerated) for 7 years reported having to justify her decision to stay with him to her friends and family: “Trying to explain why you love someone is like the hardest thing to do to somebody,” (Ava, Instagram).

Questioning Mental Stability

The other half of the respondents met their loved ones while they were already incarcerated (met while incarcerated, MWI). Some met through family and friends while others started as pen pals and developed a romantic relationship over time. Most mentioned having their own stereotypes about prisoners before they began the relationship; however, once they met their ILOs, their stereotypes changed, and they came to view their partners as multifaceted rather than simply “a prisoner.” While MWI respondents’ stereotypes changed after meeting their ILOs, friends, family, and co-workers often held negative stereotypes. These stereotypes of MBI significant others, however, were different than those for MWI respondents. Rather than assuming the significant other was an accomplice to the crime or condoned the crime, MWI respondents felt like they were stereotyped as victims of incarcerated individuals that prey on their mental instability and gullibility.

Most MWI respondents mentioned having conversations with friends, family, co-workers, and strangers who questioned their self-worth and mental stability. Many people had

called them “crazy” or reassured them that they were “worthy” of someone better than a “criminal”. Camila, an Instagram user who met her husband through her cousin, remembers people asking: “Oh, well what’s wrong with you? Are you crazy?” After hearing these comments, she began to wonder if she really was crazy rather than being happy with the relationship. Similarly, Emma met her loved one through a pen pal service. Whenever she tells people who are not associated with the carceral system about how they met, they say, “I’m crazy. Everybody says I’m crazy. A lot of them will be like, ‘Why are you wasting your time?’” Similarly, Samantha, a PTO user who met her boyfriend from working with other incarcerated individuals remarks:

You can’t even talk about most of this with someone in the regular world. Then if you choose, when I made a very deliberate choice about getting involved with [someone in prison], you choose to do that, and they just think you’re crazy. Every time you try to talk about it, you can see the shutters going down over their eyes like, “This is crazy. Why is she doing this?” (Samantha, PTO)

In short, MWI respondents experienced relational stigma by others questioning if they are “crazy” or lack proper decision-making skills, thereby suggesting that the relationship that they are currently engaged in is not normal or okay. People not associated with the carceral system assumed MWI individuals were mental unstable and being taken advantage of by incarcerated persons.

Assumed Gullibility

MWI respondents also reported being viewed by others as unusually gullible. Rather than assuming that incarcerated persons could be faithful and good-willed, other people assumed that incarcerated persons were preying on gullible people who were willing to give them their time,

money, and physical intimacy until they are released. For example, Jesse, an Instagram user who met her loved one through her mother, remembers numerous instances when people assumed that her ILO will just leave her when he is released from prison: “A lot of people are worried that when he comes home that he’s not really going to want to be with me or that he’s only using me.” Veronica, another MWI Instagram user experienced perceived gullibility with direct interactions as well as through community gossip:

I used to get comments all the time, or not even towards me, towards other people, and people will tell me, “Oh, this person said that you’re hella dumb,” or “These people said you’re stupid,” or “He’s just using you and you’re just there to give him money,” or, “He’s just there and had you around so he can have his time go by.” Hearing stuff like that, or even, “Oh, he’s cheating on you.” ...At the end of the day, what can you do? You either let it make you or break you.

The assumption that MWI significant others are mentally unstable and/or gullible people who are being taken advantage of, negates the validity of the significant others’ own ability to make decisions. Further, it suggests that they are lesser than other significant others because they cannot make good decisions.

While MWI respondents are perceived as victims as opposed to accomplices like MBI respondents, they both choose to maintain an intimate relationship with an incarcerated person and often felt like they could not talk to others because of perceived negative judgment or lack of understanding. Respondents primarily discussed these experiences occurring within face-to-face contexts; however, a few respondents also experienced negative comments on Instagram. This only happened when audiences of those associated with the carceral system overlapped.

Online Relational Stigma Management

Significant others of ILOs have experienced relational stigma in a variety of ways depending on when the relationship began. As a result, many respondents noted several relational stigma management strategies both on and offline. Within face-to-face contexts, most respondents described behaviors such as relational secrecy and social avoidance (see chapter 5). However, they sought ways to talk about their daily encounters and their relationship in nonjudgmental spaces in mediated contexts such as Instagram and PTO. Most respondents used social media to access similar others and create a resource for social support as well as to build friendships with individuals who understand the struggles of having an ILO.

Support Accessibility

My interviews and observations indicate that Instagram and PTO help significant others of ILOs access similar others and engage in supportive communication. However, the ease of finding similar others and type of support given differed between the two social media sites.

Similar Others with Similar Experiences. Many respondents who used either Instagram or PTO remarked on wanting to find people who were going through similar experiences without feeling judged or having to explain one's self. Finding similar others reassured them that they are not alone and created a source of support if needed. Both Instagram respondents and PTO respondents had found similar others by using the sites, however, the ways in which they found similar others differed between social media sites.

Communicative acts such as relationship disclosure and giving advice helped respondents find similar others on both sites. Disclosing their relationship indicated to similar others that they are likely going through similar experiences. Veronica, an Instagram user, remembered when she first started posting about her ILO:

It's so weird, because I started posting, and I'll just be like, "Here's just a picture of me and my husband and my daughter." All of a sudden, I just started blowing up with DMs and requests from facilities or other prison wives. From there that's just how it all started. I just thought to myself, wow, I'm really not alone, because I don't know anybody who's a prison wife who is with a husband who's serving two life sentences. That just sounds outrageous to me. I just came to a conclusion with like, wow there really are people out there just like me, and I'm not alone. That's just it." (Veronica, MWI)

Creating a network of similar others who have gone through the same struggles alleviates disclosure or relational stigma concerns. Ava, for example, had created a large enough network with similar others to feel comfortable talking about her relationship on Instagram:

I go to [Instagram] and I have people that are like-minded, like me. Mostly all of my friends or people that follow me, we all share something in common. I just love being on there. There are no boundaries. I can go on there and say, "I love my husband" and I get a whole bunch of likes. That makes me feel real good.

...The vibe that I get from everyone else, it boosts my vibe to do more. (Ava, MBI)

Similar experiences have occurred for PTO users when they first started using the site. Mason, for example, enjoys using PTO because, "Misery is like loneliness. Both are best shared." Other PTO respondents noted that because the site is created just for people who are associated with the carceral system, everyone on the site has had similar experiences and can understand each other's points of view. Noah discussed how he moved from a passive user where he only read other people's stories on PTO to an active user who shares his own stories and advice:

At some point you feel like you can contribute to a thread that's on there and maybe I can just help them out. ...And then, a couple of the people on there actually reached out to me and gave me some words of encouragement. I like that because there's things that I talk about on [PTO] that I can't talk about anywhere else without being persecuted, without being fucking judged. (Noah, MBI)

While respondents from both Instagram and PTO were able to find similar others through active use of the sites, there are important structural differences between the two sites that affect the ease of finding similar others and thus, support accessibility. Prison Talk Online's organizational structure focuses on labeled forums that revolved around the users' relationship to the carceral system (e.g. offender, ex-offender, family member of an offender), geographic locations (divided by state and country), and relevant social identities (e.g. Immigrants, Native Americans). Within each of the forums, threads are created by users and are titled for users to easily see what the conversation is about within each of the threads. Polls about other respondents are also used to find others who might have similar social identities, experiences, or struggles. Polls such as, "Is this your 1st relationship with a man inside prison?" shows users that there have been over 3,000 votes, over 1,000 replies, and close to 200,000 users have viewed this

Thread / Thread Starter	Rating	Last Post	Replies	Views
 Little Down Tonight		07-06-2020 10:51 AM by [redacted]	2	344
 Poll: Has Your Incarcerated Loved One Ever Been In A Fight While In Prison? (1 2 3 4 5 ... Last Page)		07-05-2020 05:27 PM by [redacted]	210	23,917
 Poll: What is your Loved One in prison for? (1 2 3 4 5 ... Last Page)		07-05-2020 12:51 PM by [redacted]	745	135,168
 Questions about travel when he's out.		07-05-2020 09:53 AM by [redacted]	19	753
 Me and my husband go through it sometimes but I love him		07-04-2020 05:38 PM by [redacted]	10	368
 Poll: Curious of the racial diversity between women with men in prison on PTO (1 2 3 4 5 ... Last Page)		07-03-2020 11:32 PM by [redacted]	195	20,267

Figure 6. Interactive differences between Polls and Threads on PTO. Polls are indicated by showing a bar graph to the left of the threads. A picture of a piece of paper indicates that the thread is a regular message. The sad face indicates a specific emotion associated with the message.

poll. Polls tended to receive more user interaction than personal posts (see Figure 6). Further, polls remained highly active for many years while personal posts tend to receive less attention after a few weeks. This is useful for helping PTO users find the specific space in which they can find similar others and seek support if needed.

Respondents who use PTO report appreciating the ease of finding similar others. not just those associated with the carceral system but those who are located in the same geographic area or have similar relationships. Bill, a PTO member who had joined a month before the interview acknowledged the ease of using the site:

There's a general prison area that I frequent more than anything else. But I like the fact that they broke down the sub-forums, especially with the states. I would hate for you to have your person in prison and you'd have to wade through a ton of stuff from people in Massachusetts, Alaska, or California. I like that it's broken down that way. ...[And] I'm guessing there's more men in prison than women. So I think it's kinda cool that there's a place for husbands/boyfriends and wives/girlfriends. (Bill, PTO)

Instagram, on the other hand, is search-based, which requires users to guess and learn the language within the specific group before being able to find similar others. In an effort to become more visible to similar others, people frequently use hashtags. Many users used multiple hashtags that related to each other to increase the possibility of connecting with similar others, such as #prisongf and #prisongirlfriend. While respondents discussed finding groups on Instagram through personal disclosures, these disclosures were often accompanied with hashtags.

In addition, people have established specific social support groups and non-profit groups on Instagram, including location-based groups such as NJprisonwives and relationship-based

groups such as Connectprisonfamiliez. Again, these support and non-profit groups were found through Instagram's search-based hashtag structure. Once respondents learned how to find other significant others of ILOs, they reported feeling feel like they were not alone:

They understand it more than friends that aren't part of the same situation. I can talk to my friends about it, but they don't get it, not as much. So it just helps to have ladies that are going through it or that have maybe gone through it longer and can offer some insight on things" (Jesse, MWI)

While most respondents had reported finding similar others on Instagram, a few respondents were unaware that support groups and other significant others of ILOs were present on Instagram. Raven and Aliyah, for example, who are both Instagram users who have been having difficulties with their ILOs, were completely unaware that similar others existed on Instagram before they saw my advertisement. When asked if they ever thought about disclosing their relationship or searching for similar others on Instagram, both remarked that they wanted to post about their relationship but were too afraid of how others would respond.

There were some noteworthy observational differences in finding similar others based on when they began their relationship. Within Instagram, the hashtag function can help find other significant others of ILOs and even other people who #MWI; however, a #MBI is not used for people who met before incarceration. Rather, there appears to be no consistent signifier of what MBI means on Instagram. Similarly, on PTO there is a forum dedicated specifically for MWI significant others; however, there is no separate forum for MBI. This makes it more difficult for MBI users to find similar others on both sites.

I also noted some gender differences in how respondents sought similar others on the two sites. Men who sought other men with an ILO seemed to only prevalent within PTO but not

Instagram. This may be due to the structural differences between the two sites. Since Prison Talk Online has separate labeled forums for “Wives/Girlfriends in Prison” and “Husbands/Boyfriends in Prison”, this helps other men find each other within the social media site. However, I could not find a consistent way for men to find other men with an ILO on Instagram. While there are many hashtags that Instagram women used to indicate their incarcerated relationship (e.g. #prisonwife, #prisonwifelife, #prisongirlfriend, and #prisongf), there appear to be no equivalent hashtags for men with a wife/girlfriend in prison. Rather, when using the #prisonhusband hashtag, for example, the posts usually focused on a husband who is in prison rather than being the husband of someone who is in prison. Furthermore, when I asked respondents if they followed any men with an ILO on Instagram, most said no. The lack of consistent hashtags, support groups, and connections for men on Instagram suggests that seeking similar others through search-based social media sites might result in people feeling more alone if no consistent search word or phrase is used.

Overall, respondents consistently discussed their desire and ability to find similar others on both Instagram and PTO. Building a network of similar others creates a space for them to talk about their daily interactions and struggles with people who understand what they are going through and without judgment. Therefore, both sites have support accessibility; however, the ease of finding similar others who experience relational stigma is dependent on knowing how to find similar others within the site and knowing who uses the site.

Social Support. Finding similar others was only respondents’ first step towards finding support. After finding similar others, respondents reported using public posts, messages, and reactions to seek and provide social support within Instagram and PTO. These public, supportive messages largely focused on three types of support: emotional, informational, and relational

maintenance. Instagram users often utilized both visual and textual posts to seek and receive support while PTO users could only use textual posts. While respondents received and gave support in both Instagram and PTO, PTO users sought and provided support more explicitly than Instagram users.

Emotional Support. *Emotional support* was present when someone sought or gave comfort or encouragement to other significant others of ILOs. Many respondents from both sites had received emotional support through active use of the sites. Within Instagram, users often posted a selfie, a picture of the significant other and the ILO, a quote, or a meme to indicate how they were feeling. Posts were often accompanied by a brief caption that focused on feeling sad, missing their loved one, or sharing their commitment to the relationship such as, “Missing my King”. Instagram respondents often received “likes” from their followers and some posts received encouraging messages. Olivia, an Instagram user who MWI stated, “The main thing, when you are very, very depressed, sad, and down, you can get support from others. These women have been through way more than what we have.”

Similarly, PTO respondents like Noah stated how easy it was to talk with each other because everyone has similar emotions. The ability to receive emotional support with a level of empathy helps comfort him. “I think it’s just good people supporting each other, but it’s a tough nut to crack at first. We are all connected in sorrow, we’re all really, really affected” (Noah, PTO). Users on PTO, however, often stated that they were in need of emotional support by explicitly asking for support within the subject lines of their posts. Rather than having visual cues to convey how they were feeling, users on PTO verbally described their feelings through often lengthy posts.

Informational Support. *Informational support* was present when someone sought and received facts or advice on how to navigate the carceral system. Informational support helped reduce uncertainty regarding the carceral system and the status of the ILO. Many respondents had noted that the carceral system is very confusing and causes significant uncertainty on how to navigate different prisons in different states. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic increased uncertainty about what was happening with their loved ones and when they could visit again.

Respondents who used Instagram for informational support noted that their mediated support network greatly helped them learn about the carceral system, what visits were like, and what was happening with different prison lockdowns during COVID-19. Information about the specific prison that their ILO was in was not always conveyed but having information on other prisons reduced some uncertainty of the general prison policy changes during COVID-19. Jesse, for example, states, “It’s helped because they discuss when they’re on lockdown, they discuss if there’s a specific problem with the phones and emails. And then if we have questions about something, we can post it on there and then we’ll get a bunch of answers or advice.”

The lack of a support network to lean on and stay up to date on information about the prisons makes it more difficult for respondents to navigate all of the intricacies of the prison system—especially during moments where there is more chaos and uncertainty than usual. Raven, an Instagram user who had not yet searched for an online support network discussed the difficulties and uncertainties that she continues to experience during the COVID-19 pandemic: “I feel stupid for waiting on someone who can’t even call me to see if I’m okay knowing damn well there’s a virus going around. I haven’t received any calls from him since last year. I don’t even know if he’s okay!” Having access to others who can provide informational support could help

her find a way to see if her ILO is healthy and also determine if his lack of communication is relationally-based or prison-based.

With the aggregation of significant others of ILOs in one space, informational support becomes much more accessible. On PTO, a lot of information is available, from a broader group than just significant others of ILOs. The site includes lawyers, previously incarcerated persons, family members of incarcerated persons, friends of incarcerated persons, and even some ex-parole officers. The inclusion of anyone who is associated with the carceral system creates a greater breadth of information for individuals to seek and give. Emma, for example, talked with a lawyer to better understand the legal arguments that gave her boyfriend a life-sentence:

On the Prison Talk website, I talked to [a lawyer] and he was able to look up his case immediately and even he said it don't make sense so, I was like okay, "If you really want to tell me what happened, whatever. But it doesn't really change how I feel about you." (Emma, MWI)

Prison Talk Online also provides a separate page that includes informational resources on prison sentencing, capital punishment, criminal justice information, and how to navigate international prisons. Separate sub-forums were also created within each U.S. State forum to discuss prison policy changes during COVID-19. This helped people find information about policy changes for specific prisons.

Relational Maintenance Support. *Relational maintenance support* is present when individuals seek and give advice on relational maintenance strategies. While this could include any relationship (e.g. friendships, parent-child relationships, intimate relationships), most users and respondents focused on how to maintain a romantic relationship with their ILOs. Relational

maintenance was present in both sites, however, the prevalence of this type of support varied slightly between Instagram and PTO respondents.

Some Instagram respondents discussed how they learned ways of maintaining intimacy with their loved ones by finding support groups who were willing to discuss this topic and disclose their own experiences. Jesse, an Instagram user had found a group where she could learn how to be intimate with her loved one even though they met while he was already incarcerated: “Oh, and this is fun. There’s also groups out there that help keep your intimacy and sexuality, I guess together with them, to give you ideas of just silly sex-related things. It’s like an after-dark group” (Jesse, MWI).

Users on PTO sought similar support; however, there are no specific groups to ask about these questions outside of the public forums, which PTO members are asked to keep “family friendly”. Jack, a PTO user who has been on the site for approximately four years calls the public forums, “vanilla”, suggesting that intimate topics such as sexual intimacy are best discussed in private. Samantha has a similar perspective as Jack and therefore, just seeks superficial relational management strategies such as learning how to cope when she cannot talk with her ILO and what to include in packages that she sends to her ILO:

I’ll write like, “He’s in the hole. I’m having a hard time adjusting to it,” or when I put him on time out I was pissed and I wrote that just because I was. Anyway, you can do that and talk to people in a broader sense. Like, “I need some good ideas. Christmas is coming and I’m out of ideas about creative things to do. What have you tried?” And those kind of things. I think mainly what it is you can just have those conversations. (Samantha, MWI)

Overall, support accessibility is dependent on how easy it is to find similar others and how they seek and receive various types of social support on the sites. While more popular social media sites like Instagram can make it easier to find similar others, significant others of ILOs must create their own networks by following individuals and joining groups. They must rely on search algorithms like hashtags, established support groups, and follow popular Instagram accounts to find similar others and connect with them. In contrast, once users find and join PTO, they immediately gain access to the community and the support it provides. If members seek specific groups, they only need to look for a suitable labeled forum. Therefore, the structure of the site impacts how easy it is to find similar others within relationally stigmatized groups. Further, support accessibility is dependent on how significant others of ILOs use the site to seek and receive support. Both Instagram and PTO respondents felt comfortable using the sites for emotional, informational, and relational maintenance support; however, the sites differed in visual and textual cues which appeared to influence how they seek support.

Building Friendships Grounded in Similar Experiences

Most respondents reported actively using Instagram and PTO to create a network of similar others for social support. However, some respondents further discussed the importance of developing new friendships on these sites. These friendships primarily developed through private messaging. Friendships burgeoned when they had informal conversations that moved beyond just the original platform and when they felt comfortable discussing intimate topics such as sexuality.

Informal Conversations. Informal conversations occurred through private, dyadic messages for many respondents. These conversations included asking about visitations, quick “check-ins”, and joking around with each other. Informal conversations often moved beyond the

original sites (Instagram or PTO). Instagram respondents discussed moving to text messages and phone calls while most PTO respondents stated that they moved to email.

Instagram respondents often talked with each other first through direct messaging on Instagram and then moved to text-messaging and phone calls outside of Instagram to “checked-in” with each other. Reaching out and having informal conversations created a greater sense of understanding and feelings of closeness. For example, Jesse, an Instagram user, stated, “We’ve messaged, we’ve talked on the phone. We reach out to each other just because we’re all going through the same thing. So, they understand it more than friends that aren’t part of the same situation.” Similarly, Olivia and Veronica stated that they will see how others are doing through phone calls and texts. Veronica noted that she especially appreciates these informal conversations because of the increased moment-by-moment availability:

Nights can be really hard sometimes so I can like call up [my friend from Instagram] anytime and be like, ‘I miss him so much’ and she’ll get it. I’ve never met her a day in my life but like, we talk all the time whenever we’re feeling down. (Veronica, MWI)

One Instagram user even reported visiting some of the friends that she had made on Instagram; however, co-location does not appear to be a necessity to maintain friendships with similar others for other respondents.

Informal conversations also sometimes included humor: “Me and [a friend from PTO], we talk all the time. It’s a lot of comedy, we make each other laugh and stuff” (Noah, PTO). PTO respondents either use PTO’s personal message function or move on to email. Mason, Emma, and Bill all only use PTO’s personal messaging function to have informal conversations with similar others:

Since I got on PTO, there's a guy on there that I talk to almost every day through [Personal Messages]. It's kinda nice to talk to him because he's going through a lot of stuff. Even worse than my wife. Ya know? I like to be able to say, I feel his questions and comments, like he does with mine. It's almost a—I don't know the man from the moon but, we just have that rapport and stuff.” (Bill, MBI)

Other PTO respondents have moved to email, largely due to the document attachment restrictions on PTO. Respondents, like Jack, enjoyed sharing stories, articles, and pictures with others he met on the site, but PTO restricted this. Therefore, he moved to a different communication tool.

Disclosure and Support of Physical Intimacy. Since discussions about physical intimacy are monitored more frequently on PTO, respondents reported having these conversations through personal messages or email. However, these conversations only occurred between people who had already developed a friendship through previous interactions—both publicly on PTO and privately through textual messages. Respondents would disclose different strategies for maintaining physical intimacy with their ILO or ask for guidance on exploring physical intimacy. Samantha talked about how she and one of her friends on PTO discuss these topics and connect with each other through these conversations:

I can really talk to [my PTO friend] about anything. It's such a giant relief to be able to talk about like, “Yeah, [my ILO] wants to try tablet sex.” ...I laugh about that with [my PTO friend] but I can talk with him about any of that stuff and he gets it.”

(Samantha, MWI)

Samantha later stated that these conversations only occur through private messages with people she trusts. Private messages, according to both her and other PTO respondents, are the most

appropriate place to discuss intimate topics such as physical intimacy and sexuality. Jack states, “PMs enable members to discuss subjects like sexuality that are rightfully off limits to public forums. Outside/inside relationships can and should be sexual but not publicly so.” (Jack, MBI)

Conversations about physical intimacy through private messages were present only within PTO members. No Instagram respondents discussed talking with anyone about physical intimacy through direct messages.

Summary

Overall, the current chapter presented two groups of findings from my field observations and interviews with significant others of incarcerated loved ones who use either Instagram or Prison Talk Online. The first group of findings focused on how significant others of ILOs experience relational stigma in everyday interactions. The second group of findings demonstrated how significant others manage their relational stigma by using either Instagram or PTO. The next chapter discusses the relational privacy concerns and the relational stigma management outcomes associated with the use of social media sites for significant others of ILOs.

CHAPTER 5

ONLINE RELATIONAL PRIVACY MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS

Overall, my findings reveal important privacy management strategies that differed between face-to-face contexts, Instagram, and Prison Talk Online. Specifically, within social media contexts, privacy concerns varied depending on how the site is structured, how easily the respondents could separate audiences, and how much respondents trusted fellow group members. Many of these privacy concerns are due to a fear of being further relationally stigmatized, others being relationally stigmatized, or causing physical harm to the incarcerated loved one.

All respondents described face-to-face situations when they enacted relational privacy management behaviors such as staying silent about their relationship status or avoiding social situations where they might have to disclose their relationship status to others. These strategies differed between respondents who met their loved ones before they were incarcerated and while they were incarcerated.

Respondents also described situations on Instagram or PTO when they were concerned about relational privacy, however, these privacy concerns differed from face-to-face contexts. On social media, concerns stemmed from issues of audience separation, ingroup deception, and threat of physical harm to their ILO. These concerns varied between Instagram and PTO largely because Instagram caters to a more heterogenous group rather than PTO. Because of its narrow focus, PTO can create better structural and community choices to support significant others of ILOs and reduce as many privacy concerns as possible.

The rest of this chapter gives a more detailed account of these findings. The chapter is organized into two sections: Relational Privacy Management within face-to-face contexts, and

Informational and Relational Privacy Management within Instagram and PTO. As noted in the previous chapter, all respondents were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Relational Privacy Management within Face-to-Face contexts

All respondents discussed using relational privacy management strategies within face-to-face contexts. These strategies differed based on how much control of information they had in disclosing their relationship status. The extent of control differed depending on when the significant other met their loved one and what job they had.

Relational Secrecy

Most respondents described times when they kept their relationship or the status of their loved one secret in order to reduce negative judgment about the relationship or about themselves. However, the ability to choose whether to disclose the relationship or keep it secret differed between significant others who met their loved one when they were incarcerated (MWI) and significant others who met their loved one before they were incarcerated (MBI).

MWI respondents had the choice to disclose or keep their relationship private because they met their partners while already incarcerated and thus their friends/family did not necessarily know of the relationship. Often, they listened to friends, family, and coworkers to determine their attitudes towards incarcerated people and towards people who have relationships with someone who is incarcerated before making the decision to disclose the relationship status or not. Camila, for example, had learned over the years to keep her relationship with her ILO secret based on others' reactions:

So at work one time I was super young and I was okay with telling people about my relationship and these were older ladies so me telling them "Oh yeah, my boyfriend's in prison, he has nine years to go," that's when everybody started

making their comments about, “You deserve better,” “You can find somebody else.” So from that experience I just stopped telling people that were around me workwise or just anybody that I started meeting I wouldn't tell them. (Camila, Instagram)

Camila and other MWI respondents often discussed how they *learned secrecy* based on the relational stigma they received when they disclosed their relationship status. Though learned secrecy could result from any disclosure to anyone, some respondents focused on moments when they shared their relationship status with co-workers and received negative feedback that questioned their own decision-making and assumed lack of self-worth:

When I'm at work, I used to hang out with five to six girls at the lunch table. All of a sudden—I don't even hang out with them anymore because it's like, “You guys either start giving me weird looks when I start talking about my situation or you guys start asking too many questions,” Let's just say, we don't speak anymore...I pretty much learned my lesson already with those five so-called friends that I used to hang out with every day at work. So, I just keep it to myself now. (Veronica, Instagram)

Veronica, Jesse, Camila, Samantha, and Olivia, all met their ILO while they were incarcerated. They discussed learned secrecy from disclosures in organizational settings and as well as in some situations when they disclosed the relationship to friends and family. Learned secrecy, however, demonstrates that MWI significant others have the flexibility to withhold or disclose their relationship.

In contrast, for MBI respondents, whose relationships started before incarceration, more people were likely to know of the relationship and make the relational connection when the arrest

was made. Bill, for example, put no effort into hiding his relationship because, “Everybody in the world knows.” Therefore, he had accepted his lack of control over information dissemination and did not care who knew about his relationship; however, he also had many community members support him while his wife was in prison. Other respondents like Jack and his family experienced so much backlash from the community when his wife was incarcerated that he could not keep it secret from anyone and felt forced to move to a different state to reduce the extent of relational stigma. Respondents who had a relationship before their loved one was incarcerated rarely had a choice about whether to keep their relationship secret.

Social Avoidance

Many respondents also noted avoiding situations where they would feel pressure to disclose their relationship or answer questions about incarcerated relationships in general. MWI respondents also avoided people who they knew would likely stigmatize them based on their relationship. However, this only occurred if they had already disclosed the relationship with the individuals in a previous situation. MBI respondents, on the other hand, used social avoidance extensively because they assumed others already knew of their relationship status. For example, since Jack had already experienced a lack of control of disclosing his relationship and had experienced significant relational stigma due to the specific crime that his wife committed, he and his family had moved to another town. He avoided situations that could bring up his relationship status after he moved:

I work at home. I avoid meetings and business travel when I can. I haven't enjoyed being around people since I got rejected so completely. I don't need a lot of interaction. I don't socialize. Nobody knows I'm married. ...My only issue is with my annual review by [my job]. I have to maintain clearance to do my job,

which entails yearly face-to-face meetings with their investigators and possibly some surveillance and/or eavesdropping. Some of the investigators have a problem with my “maintaining an ongoing personal relationship with a convicted felon.” (Jack, PTO)

Other respondents recalled avoiding family members and friends if they did not condone the relationship. Avoidance allows respondents to take back some control over how much they want to disclose or discuss their relationship and with whom. Other MBI respondents mentioned that they could avoid the topic if they could not physically avoid some of their friends and family. Mason said that he does not hide his relationship from his family, but he does not discuss his relationship around them, “It’s just too hard, you know? They don’t get and they never will. They let me make my own decisions, but it’s never brought up when I’m around them.”

Overall, privacy management strategies within face-to-face situations are due to managing relational stigma and having the ability to control informational and relational disclosures.

Informational and Relational Privacy Management on Social Media Contexts

Informational and relational management through communication varied between face-to-face settings and social media settings. Most respondents discussed the need to maintain some form of secrecy about the relationship or avoid situations where others who are not associated with the carceral system might bring up the respondents’ relationship status. Different social media sites have provided spaces for individuals to talk about their ILO, the relationship, and their daily lives of being a significant other of an ILO. Some respondents reported finding comfort on these social media sites by building their own online support network. These respondents reported few privacy concerns. Other respondents have found that using social

media sites created new privacy concerns surrounding what is appropriate to disclose, how it will affect the relationship, and how others will be affected by the disclosure. These privacy concerns differed between Instagram and PTO, largely because of the structure of the sites, the communities the sites build, and the heterogeneity of the users on the sites.

Site-Established Rules and Regulations

Learned behavior and privacy norms are present for both sites. Learned appropriate behavior and privacy norms help users establish an understanding of how to use the site but also what is considered risky to post. These norms are learned differently based on the site that the users use.

On Instagram, rules and regulations focus on, “fostering a positive, inclusive, and safe environment” (Instagram, 2018). Users are not allowed to impersonate others, do anything illegal, or interfere with the intended operation of Instagram. However, there are no specific guidelines for significant others of ILOs. In contrast, PTO has a Rules and Guidelines section created by site administrators who also have some relationship to the carceral system. PTO rules and regulations are tailored for those associated with the carceral system and sensitive to the added social and institutional concerns that arise in this context. PTO guidelines are intended to help users become acquainted with the risks of disclosure before they share something that could negatively impact them or their ILO. Users are specifically warned not to disclose addresses, names, or contact information. Further, PTO members are encouraged to create an anonymous username to keep their identities private. While Instagram users can use pseudonyms as well, there is no system in place to encourage this function.

Audience Separation and Overlaps

Many respondents discussed a desire to separate audiences between the carceral world and the “normal” world. However, decisions about how to maintain audience separation varied between respondents. Users on PTO discussed that the complete site separation was a large reason why they preferred this site over others like Instagram where the audiences were more mixed. For example, Noah, a PTO user who also has an Instagram account, states:

I don't really believe in taking my family and friends and circle through this experience [on Instagram]. If you know me well enough, you know my struggle and what's going on, but I'm not going to put it out there on the Internet like that because I wouldn't be able to engage with someone that wants to stigmatize me. I would probably light somebody up pretty hard; I'd say some things, I'd be really mad. I can understand, some people they're not going to ... It's something you can't share with people that freely. ... [PTO] is a whole society of people that don't know my people, they don't know my friends and family. I have to keep it separated. (Noah, MBI)

The attitude towards site separation suggests that PTO users might prefer to completely withdraw from situations where they could experience relational stigma and move to a space where ideally stigma is not experienced. However, PTO users must only use one account. They cannot create multiple PTO accounts with the same IP address unless they contact administrators. PTO users will be blocked from the site if this rule is violated.

Instagram respondents also stated that they wanted to keep their audiences between their carceral world and “normal” world separate. However, many reported that their Instagram account also includes their friends and family outside of the carceral world. For example, Jesse

explained that she refrains from disclosing too much due to audience overlaps, “Only due to the fact that his mom and family are on my page, so I don’t really like to vent or say too much on there. Yeah, that’s really the only reason why.” Other Instagram users like Aliyah vaguely posts about her relationship in hopes that no one will recognize who she is talking about:

I’ll post things, like I posted something like, “I’m in a good relationship that I know I shouldn’t be fucking around with and I’ve fallen in love with this guy,” I posted something weird like that, or I go to his page, and I put hearts on shit that he posted a year ago. I thought it was a nice picture, I thought what he wrote was nice, so I liked it and I put hearts on it or whatever. But do I put anything about me and him? No, I haven’t done that. And none of our friends know. (Aliyah, MBI)

Other Instagram users discussed creating completely separate Instagram accounts as a way to separate their two audiences. This strategy was used by half of the Instagram respondents. While there is still a chance that their carceral and non-carceral audiences will overlap through random discovery, they were less concerned about this outcome in part because they were trying to accept how others view their relationship:

Obviously, my page [dedicated to her ILO] is public, and I do worry about that because I don't want my coworkers to see it, but at the same time I'm trying to be open. I don't need to tell you my business but if you come across it, I'm trying to be okay with it. I think what messes with my mind is I don't want people to see me differently because that's what happens anyways. I don't want them to see me less professional or less whatever of a person than I may be. Yeah, but I do worry

about that. If my family sees it, I'm just like "Oops, well now they know." (Camila, MWI)

Instagram respondents, as opposed to PTO respondents, must separate their audience using a larger variety of strategies, however, Instagram does provide ways to separate audiences through the creation of multiple accounts. While some create different accounts to freely discuss their relationship with the hope that their non-carceral audience won't see these posts, others completely refrain from discussing the relationship in significant detail. This suggests that maintaining relational privacy between audiences is more difficult on Instagram as opposed to a completely separate space such as PTO.

Relational Disruption Through Intragroup Communication

Finding a space for significant others of ILOs to discuss their relationships and share their daily experiences with similar others are especially helpful for managing relational stigma (as discussed in Chapter 4). However, many Instagram respondents noted relational risks between the significant other and their ILO that stem from the support group that they have created online. There is a concern that if enough information is shared about their ILO, people within the support group might contact the ILO and begin their own relationship. These individuals are labeled "inmate hoppers" or "prison groupies". Therefore, specific information about the ILO such as identification information and pictures were considered risky to disclose. Olivia, for example, discusses her awareness of this risk:

Some of them you have to be careful of because some of them are just women trying to be nosy. There are women out there that'll try to find out your husband or boyfriend's name and the prison he's at and they'll start writing to them and

sending them money and things like that. So there are some that you have to be careful. (Olivia, MWI)

While the relational disruption risk is present for many Instagram respondents, relational trust between the significant others and the ILO can dissipate some of these concerns:

So, I posted a picture of [my boyfriend] and my friend messaged me. She's like, "Girl, you're brave." I was like, "Why?" She's like, "Because I did that once and posted a picture of my husband and he got three letters from other girls and he wouldn't tell me about it." So, you take that chance, but I'm not really too worried about that. I'm pretty confident in our relationship. (Jesse, MWI)

Through observational notes, awareness of and addressing people who cause relational disruption on Instagram can even serve as a topic to bond over between significant others of ILOs. who do not condone these acts. Some Instagram users have created memes to address the risk, reject their behavior, and share similar feelings between other significant others of ILOs (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Inmate Hoppers Meme on Instagram

Relational disruption was a salient concern for many respondents who use Instagram; however, no respondents who use PTO brought up this concern. There could be several reasons for this. First, PTO explicitly establishes itself as a community who support each other as opposed to Instagram where this is not explicitly stated. PTO's homepage states:

Inside the PTO web community you will be able to find support from others who are dealing with, or have been down the same dark road you may currently find yourself, information resources & tools to aid you in achieving your goals, and most importantly, a place to communicate and share your stories.

(prisontalk.com, 2001)

Immediately labeling themselves as a “web community” who share similar experiences creates a sense of commitment and responsibility to help each other rather than create ingroup or romantic relational conflict.

Second, PTO administrators have explicitly created a “PTO Community Purpose, Guidelines, and Etiquette” page that encourage users to be friendly, supportive, and genuine on this site. The Community Guidelines also explicitly state that any “Hoaxes,” or, fraudulent posting on PTO will be removed immediately. Further, they encourage users not to share personal contact information. They state, “Members should not post personal contact information such as home address, work address, home telephone number, work telephone number, etc., in the public forums. This policy is in place for your own protection and to discourage unsolicited contact from unknown persons or companies” (prisontalk.com).

Third, PTO has a “Staff Structure,” which includes moderators, site moderators, super moderators, and administrators, to make sure that people are following the Community Guidelines and Etiquette. If any of the staff believe community violations are occurring, they

will either warn the PTO user of the guidelines or remove the PTO user from the site. These explicit rules and regulations create a sense of trust within the community:

The people who are on [PTO] genuinely have someone in prison and they're trying to figure out how to support them and how to keep going. You'll see a lot of people posting they're having hard days or something on there. And then some people offer them good advice. They have moderators on there to try to keep things from getting into a full-on attack or taking advantage of anyone.

(Samantha, MWI)

The perception that everyone on PTO is part of a community, the explicit rules and regulations of using the site, and the Staff Structure creates a feeling that it is a safe space where users tend to trust each other enough to disclose more intimate details about their ILOs.

Relational Disclosure Ripples

Disclosures of the intimate relationship as well as information about the ILO can also be considered risky due to the potential consequences beyond the discloser. Like a drop in the water, the disclosure can ripple out and affect the ILO or others who are also associated with him/her. These consequences can further stigmatize the ILO, relationally stigmatize anyone associated with the ILO, or create a threat to the ILO's safety. Most respondents who are concerned about the disclosure ripples are often less concerned about negative consequences on themselves but rather negative outcomes on others.

Significant others of ILOs are often aware of the potential consequences for others if they share information about their ILO or their relationship. This occurs often when multiple relationally stigmatized individuals with the same ILO have overlapping audiences on social media and cannot control all information that is shared. For example, Veronica discussed issues

with her ILO's mother on Instagram and having to censor herself on Instagram because of the audience overlap:

Then on Instagram, I'll post a little bit, but I really don't like to post a lot on there, because I do have his mom on my social media. I do remember his mom telling me, being like, "Hey, I don't think it's okay for you to post my son's picture," because she's afraid of the attention that she's going to draw, because she's a very private person. (Veronica, MBI)

Disclosure ripples create a tension between wanting to share their relationship, controlling one's own audience on Instagram, and having to keep it hidden because others want to keep the association or information private. While this concern is strong when relationally stigmatized individuals have blurred audiences on Instagram, it can be dissipated when audiences are separate. Veronica later discusses going on Snapchat to share more pictures of her ILO because, "I don't have [my mother-in-law] on my Snap." Because many PTO respondents discussed using PTO to maintain separate groups, disclosure ripples that affect other relationally stigmatized people by the same ILO are not present.

Disclosure ripples can also directly affect the ILO through further stigmatizing or threatening his/her safety. Disclosing identification such as name, prison I.D. number, or prison location increases the chances of someone taking advantage of or even harming the ILO while in prison. This concern is present from both PTO respondents and Instagram respondents. Noah, a PTO respondent, fears that any monetary disclosures could make his fiancé a target in prison:

I won't give her information out on PTO. I won't talk about the case; I won't talk about it too much. I have a feeling that there's bad people out there. There's a lot of people that would take a crime of opportunity against somebody like—I freely

talk you [the interviewer] how much money I give. That's a direct correlation to power inside. And if some other person's family on PTO knows [that amount], they will try to blackmail or whatever the hell they'll try to do. Or they'll try to write to me. There are crazy-ass schemes out there. (Noah, MBI)

Noah further notes that while he has never personally experienced this or seen it occur on PTO, the concern is still present. Similarly, Emma and Mason both have minor concerns about sharing information that can affect their ILO. However, other PTO users, who have been members for many years, have created a sense of trust within the site. Jack, for example, has been a member of PTO for four years and stated that he felt like there was no reason to not trust other members of the site. He was unconcerned with any unforeseen consequences to his ILO.

Instagram respondents also expressed concern about disclosure ripples that could affect their ILO's safety. These respondents were very concerned with how their disclosures would impact their ILOs given the threat of fake accounts being made and being easily accessible through personal messages on Instagram,. Olivia, an Instagram respondent, even compares the ease of information spread with the quick spread of COVID-19: "You just have to really, really be careful because it is social media and it could spread like the coronavirus." Similarly, Veronica fears the quick spread of information—especially because her ILO was harmed because someone found out where he was imprisoned in the past:

I do have some people that come to me and they message me and they'll be like, "Where's your husband at?" I don't want them to know, because he was involved in an incident probably five months being in prison to where he got stabbed and they almost killed him. So I'm just like, "No." When people ask me, "Hey, where's he at?" I'm not going to tell you because I don't know if you're going to

act like you're his friend and you're really not you're going to go back and tell other people, and the word spreads really quickly. (Veronica, MWI)

Other Instagram respondents, like Olivia and Veronica have had similar concerns but have never experienced outcomes of disclosure ripples like Veronica and her loved one.

Overall, disclosure ripples are less of a privacy concern for the actual discloser, but became a concern when significant others of ILOs were more aware of the potential outcomes. These concerns were less egocentric and more relational or even community-based. Respondents who are concerned about disclosing their relationship status, however, did not discuss concerns regarding disclosure ripples. This is likely because they first fear further personal stigmatization before they become aware of further stigmatization and safety concerns of others.

Summary

The present chapter provided two groups of findings from my field observations and interviews with significant others of incarcerated persons who use either Instagram or Prison Talk Online. The first group of findings revealed two privacy management strategies used to manage relational stigma. The second group of findings revealed different privacy concerns and management behaviors within either Instagram or PTO than in face-to-face contexts. However, the amount of privacy concerns and management strategies differed between the two online sites. This is likely due to structural differences in both the decision and social interactions between the two sites. The next chapter discusses the contributions of these findings to an understanding of privacy management strategies on different social media sites.

CHAPTER 6

RELATIONAL STIGMA MANAGEMENT OUTCOMES

Supportive interactions on social media with similar others helped validate respondents' sense of self, and for some, their relationships with their ILOs. While relational stigma was still present, there was less internalization of this stigma when respondents were able to create a network of support. Further, the act of sharing their daily lives—whether that be disclosing relationships or sharing daily struggles—increased some respondents' sense of emotional well-being. However, continued secrecy of the relationship within social media sites reinforced a feeling of loneliness, social separation, and discrimination. These findings were consistent between social media sites as well as for relationships that began before or during incarceration.

Validation

Experienced relational stigma often made significant others of ILOs question their relationship, their own self-value, and their state of mind. However, both Instagram and PTO helped respondents access similar others who did not judge the relationship based on the incarceration status. Through this support, respondents reported a shift in how they viewed themselves and, for some, their relationship. Rather than being upset that people outside of the carceral system cannot understand their relationship, many of the respondents accepted that not everyone was going to agree with it and that was okay. Therefore, talking about the relationship with similar others helped significant others of ILOs accept their relationship and the choices they have made. Further, because both PTO and Instagram helped others create a larger network than in face-to-face contexts, the increased number of similar others helped them feel like their romantic relationship and selves were normal. This increased acceptance and normalcy of the self and the relationship helped validate respondents' decisions and their romantic relationship.

Acceptance

Creating a support network with similar others who understood and were going through similar experiences and being able to talk about those experiences with similar others helped respondents accept their lives and their relationships. While many recognized that the situation is not ideal, acceptance helped buffer the relational stigma that is placed on them and reduce the internalization of this stigma.

While Camila, for example, has been with her ILO for over 10 years, she had only recently felt better about her life and her decisions after posting about it on Instagram, gaining thousands of followers and helping others through their similar struggles. She remarks:

I've had to learn not to really care if I put myself out there because it is my life and I shouldn't be scared or ashamed about my life, which I feel like that's what people made me feel like before. (Camila, MWI)

Acceptance of their selves helped significant others of ILOs validate their experiences while still recognizing the stigma that surrounds them. This, acceptance reduced the internalization of the stigma and helped users focus on how to cope with the situation and adjust their point of view:

It has made me feel like I'm not a bad person. Because, at first, I felt like, "Maybe I am a bad person by dating somebody who's incarcerated and having my daughter go through this with me." So I felt really down on myself at first. I didn't know if I should pursue it or if I was making the right decision. I felt bad about myself. But then after being involved with these other women and now seeing that there are thousands of people that are going through the same thing. And I'm not a bad person and he's not a bad person. People make mistakes and deserve a

second chance as long as they're willing to make their life right. (Olivia, MWI, Instagram)

Normalcy

Both PTO and Instagram give respondents the ability find so many similar others. However, through online interactions, sharing similar stories and struggles further validate that their choices and relationships are similar to other relationships:

Being in these groups on social media, we're just normal people that have an untraditional relationship, but it is our life and we are not bad people. Social media has changed my outlook on that everything's not black and white. There's always a gray area. (Olivia, MWI, Instagram)

Efforts to find normalcy were reported by both male and female respondents, though there appears to be more online activity within both PTO and Instagram among women who have ILOs rather than men. Jack, for instance, notes that while the "Wives/Girlfriends in Prison" forum on PTO is not as active, through online interactions, both publicly and through dyadic messages, he has learned that his relationship is still normal:

I feel better about myself now that I know some other guys think the way I do about the prison widower experience and our incarcerated LOs. I feel more comfortable about my relationship with my wife for the same reason. I guess I could say I discovered what we have is fairly normal rather than kinky, not that kinky's bad. (Jack, MBI, PTO)

The ability to find similar others, build a network of support, and actively use social media sites such as PTO and Instagram have given significant others the opportunity to validate their own decisions, choices, relationship, and self. Using these social media sites created spaces

for individuals to present their daily experiences and work through feelings of stigma. By having a safe space to discuss topics surrounding the carceral system through mediated contexts, they were able to verbalize their experiences and relationships, and receive support from others. Through online communication, creating a network of support helped respondents feel more secure with themselves and acted as a buffer whenever they experienced relational stigma.

Emotional Well-Being

Respondents who created a support network on either site also reported feeling a more positive sense of well-being and less anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Samantha, a PTO user, remarked that the increased connection had a positive effect on her well-being: “What it gives you is connection, which contributes to your well-being, with people who get what you’re going through, who get where you’re at” (Samantha, MWI, PTO).

Some respondents even noted that the lack of connection and not having an outlet to share their struggles have had detrimental effects on their mental health before using Instagram as an outlet:

I have benefited a lot from it in a positive way because before this—I really don't have any friends that I speak to about my relationship before I started on the social media. I've never really had anybody to talk to, so I've actually gone through a depression and I have anxiety and stuff so going online and actually sharing all this stuff benefited me to be healthier because I'm not holding all these thoughts in my mind. (Camila, MWI, Instagram)

The few respondents who had not yet created a network of support with other significant others of ILOs continued to keep their relationship or the status of the ILO secret due to fear of judgment experienced sadness, stress, and uncertainty for the future. Aliyah has few people to

confide in, which prevents her from working through her thoughts and feelings about having an ILO. Further, her Instagram network is largely comprised of people who she anticipates would judge negatively her if she disclosed her relationship. At the end of the interview, she says, “I’m not necessarily the proudest right now. I’m not harboring shame, but I’m not screaming at the top of my lungs or at the top of the roof like what couples do” (Aliyah, MBI, Instagram).

Summary

Finding or creating a space to feel comfortable disclosing the relationship, share daily struggles, and connect with similar others without the fear of judgment have positively influenced respondents’ emotional well-being. Anxiety, depression, and loneliness are all reduced when respondents find similar others and can share their experiences on either PTO or Instagram. The absence of a supportive network and a space where respondents feel comfortable disclosing about the relationship prevents individuals from having a positive emotional well-being.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how significant others of ILOs manage relational stigma in different social media sites. Specifically, I aimed to understand (a) how significant others of ILOs interact differently between Prison Talk Online (a targeted social media site), and Instagram (a broad social media site); (b) what privacy management behaviors they use to reduce privacy concerns on these sites; and (c) how communicating on different social media sites influences significant others of ILOs' feelings of relational stigma and self.

To explore these research questions, I conducted field observations for eight months on Instagram and PTO and conducted interviews with 13 significant others of ILOs who use either of the two social media sites. I used grounded theory to explore the complexities of how significant others of ILOs use different social media sites and how it impacts their sense of relational stigma.

Overall, my findings suggest that significant others of ILOs experience stigma both at an individual and relational level. To cope with this stigma, they seek different types of support across social media sites. Although significant others of ILOs reported creating friendships grounded in similar experiences on both social media sites, their perceived access to support differed depending on the design of the websites. Moreover, respondents reported informational and relational privacy concerns for themselves, their incarcerated loved one, and other people associated with the incarcerated person. They often used avoidant or secrecy strategies to manage these privacy concerns. Significant others of ILOs who connected with similar others, built friendships, and were able to manage their privacy concerns on social media sites often felt validated and had an increase in emotional well-being. In the following, I discuss the theoretical

and practical implications of these findings, limitations of the study, and future research directions.

Relational Stigma as Layered

Significant others of ILOs experienced different stereotypes depending on when they began the relationship. For those who met their loved one before incarceration, they were often blamed for their loved one's indiscretion or were perceived as accomplices. Significant others who met their loved ones while their ILO was already incarcerated were viewed as victims of the incarcerated person. While previous work has shown that people experience relational stigma differently depending on their role between them and the stigmatized person (Corrigan & Miller, 2004; Corrigan et al., 2006; Pryor, Reeder, & Monroe 2012), my findings show that additional characteristics within different relationships can shift stereotypes of the relationally stigmatized person. These characteristics include when the established relationship began with a stigmatized person and the perceived goal of the relationship with the stigmatized person.

I found that significant others of ILOs who experienced relational stigma stemmed from both their relationship as well as their own personal characteristics. Relationally, significant others were stereotyped as being accomplices or letting their loved ones take advantage of them. Personally, people questioned significant others' sense of moral character or mental stability. Previous work on relational stigma has shown that stigma is transferred from the stigmatized person to people who are associated with that person (Mehta & Farina, 1988). Other work has listed multiple levels of discrimination relationally stigmatized individuals experience (i.e. interpersonal and structural; Angermeyer et al., 2003; Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2009; Luther, 2016; Peterson et al., 2013). Further, research has shown that the intersectionality of stigmatized identities can exacerbate experienced stigma (Luck-Sikorski, Schomerus, Jochum, & Riedel-

Heller, 2018; Nyblade, 2006) calling it “double stigma” (Grossman, 1991), “co-stigmas” (Chan, Yang, Zhang, & Reidpath, 2007), and “layering stigmas” (Lee, Kochman, & Sikkema, 2002). However, my findings show that experiences of relational stigma can have a significant effect on multiple layers of the significant other’s self-concept. Therefore, experienced relational stigma should be examined as an effect on multiple levels of the self rather than just based on the relational aspect of the self.

Online Relational Stigma Management Behavior

I found that most significant others of ILOs found similar others across social media sites with whom they could disclose their relationally stigmatized experiences and seek support. Respondents reported finding similar others by disclosing their incarcerated relationship and by using site-specific features such as search engines and labeled forums. Creating a network of support is consistent with previous work on online social support specifically within stigmatized populations (Rains et al. , 2015; Walther & Boyd, 2002). However, while other previous research has found that people who use broader social media sites like Instagram could receive social support across different populations (Kim & Kim, 2017; Vitak & Ellison, 2013), significant others of ILOs preferred to maintain supportive behaviors with just other significant others of ILOs. This is to reduce any experiences of relational stigma on social media sites.

Once significant others of ILOs established a network of support, many sought informational support, emotional support, and relational support through textual and visual messages within both Prison Talk Online and Instagram. Seeking network, informational, and emotional support are consistent with previous work, which shows that people with stressful or stigmatized identities seek support via mediated spaces (e.g. Tong, et al., 2013; Hinck et al., 2019; Rains et al., 2015). However, based on Cutrona & Russell’s (1990) optimal matching

model of support, people tend to seek either informational or network/emotional support depending on how much *control* people have toward experiencing the stressful situation of having a stigmatized identity. Cutrona & Suhr (1992) further demonstrate that people who can eliminate the source of stress (i.e. the relationally stigmatized identity) will seek informational support on how to do this. My findings, however, show that while significant others of ILOs could eliminate the source of stress by terminating the relationship, this did not happen. This suggests that other variables might better determine what types of support are sought than the concept of control such as commitment or resilience. Because significant others of ILOs' stigma are grounded in their relationship, people often sought information support to better understand the prison system, emotional support to feel comforted, and relational support to learn new ways to maintain the relationship. Research should continue to explore the relationship between the type of stigma and the types of support across different stigmatized populations.

Further, visual cues such as pictures and Instagram stories were also used to seek support on Instagram. These visual cues allowed significant others to disclose their relationship status or share their mood without using as much textual language. While previous work significantly focused on textual messages for support because it is assumed that support relies on textual communication (see Rains et al., 2015; Walther & Boyd, 2002), this study shows that disclosures and requests of support can be implicitly sought through a combination of visual and textual cues rather than just limited to textual messages.

Significant others of ILOs often initially sought weak ties with similar experiences, which helped them seek other types of support and disclose their relationship without feeling relationally stigmatized. This occurred on both Instagram and PTO. The act of seeking out similar others with no interpersonal connection supports previous work that showed people often

prefer weak ties on targeted online support groups than popular social media sites (Wright & Rains, 2013; Walther & Boyd, 2002). While previous research has shown that social support is sought on popular social media sites (e.g. Buehler et al., 2019), less research has focused on specific stigmatized groups seeking support on popular social media sites. However, significant others of ILOs sought similar others that were weak ties in both Instagram and PTO, which suggests that there is little difference to where relationally stigmatized persons seek similar others. Instead, significant others determined which social media site to use based on ease of use and perceived probability of finding similar others.

Further, I found that many significant others of ILOs also reported building friendships from previous weak ties who they had met on Instagram or PTO. This is contrary to previous work on online social support, which showed that that stigmatized groups tend to prefer and often seek weak ties for social support within social media sites and online support groups (High & Buehler, 2019; Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; Wright & Rains, 2013). Findings from the present work suggests that while people might initially seek support from similar others with weak ties, trust can be created between weak ties, which can develop into strong ties. Thus, these findings suggest that social media sites can act as not only spaces to seek support between weak ties, but also can be places to build strong ties that originated from support groups. This is especially important for stigmatized populations because they can build a network that varies in tie strength and understands their stigmatized identity. Further, it might make them feel less othered when they can build close relationships with similar others.

Significant others who actively used either Instagram or PTO to find similar others reported greater ease of finding social support from similar others; however, others who never disclosed their relationship on social media did not know where to start to find similar others.

Therefore, while previous research suggests that the ease of finding similar others increases by using online support sites (Walther & Boyd, 2002), findings from the present study suggest that this is only true if people know where to go or what language to use. Therefore, research should continue to examine how people find social support groups and determine what variables might reduce the accessibility of support groups.

Further, the comparison between Instagram and PTO show differences in how people access support on different social media sites. PTO users frequently searched for similar others first using search engines and then found similar others within the social media site by finding relevant labeled forums. Instagram users, on the other hand, often used Instagram as a starting point because they already used the site but needed to find similar others using the search bar within the site. Due to their design differences, Instagram and PTO appeared to provide a different amount of perceived access to social support from similar others depending on different demographics. While the present study had fewer male respondents, all male respondents used PTO. Further, through observational work, no consistent language was used on Instagram to find other men who have an ILO. Due to the differences between the structures of the social media sites and the stigmatized nature of this population, labeled forums provided clearer access to the specific support population than search engines on Instagram. Previous research on accessibility has focused on ease of access for individuals who have more difficulty using technology given the specific design (Chisholm, Vanderheiden, & Jacobs, 2001). For example, research focused on technological and social accessibility for blind users (Brinkley & Trabrizi, 2017; Gleason, et al., 2019), users with augmentative and alternative communication disabilities (Hemsley, Dann, Palmer, Allan, & Balandin, 2015; Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart, 2014), and people with dyslexia (Wu & Adamic, 2014; Wu, Reynolds, Li, & Guzman, 2019). However, research has not placed

attention on “support accessibility,” or the perceived access to support for different stigmatized groups across different social media sites. Examination of multiple social media or social support sites will help researchers and designers better understand different online support behavior as well as ease of finding similar others.

Relational Stigma Privacy Management Strategies

Privacy management strategies occurred at both the site level as well as the user level. At the site level, community guidelines and community moderators can affect privacy concerns and management behaviors. Prison Talk Online as a site acknowledges specific safety concerns, and privacy suggestions are written within the site rules and regulations. However, Instagram does not include these suggestions because the audience is intended to be broader than the one community. While previous work on community guidelines and community moderators often focus on decreasing hostile communication (e.g. Nycyk, 2016), or policing behaviors and identities (e.g. Zolides, 2020), findings within this study address the positive privacy management strategies from learning about the concerns from the community rather than a fear of sharing too much.

Significant others of ILOs also sought control over their relationship disclosures and the effects of these disclosures on others. Respondents who met before their ILO was incarcerated and who could not control information dissemination, immediately had to forgo control and accept the situation. Respondents who met while their ILO was incarcerated, however, disclosed their relationship status only when they felt like they could trust the other person with this information. This finding supports work within privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002). Status of the loved one’s incarceration is co-owned by anyone who is willing to look up the committed crime because criminal records are public knowledge. Within social media sites,

however, perceived publicness shifted between Instagram and PTO users. Instagram respondents more frequently feared disclosing their relationship than PTO respondents because of the threat of other audiences seeing the relational disclosures on Instagram. This is consistent with previous work that has shown that perceived publicness shifts on social media sites (Bateman, Pike, & Butler, 2011) as well as across social media sites (Litt, 2012). Further, privacy boundaries can shift across sites depending on the audience (Choi & Bazarova, 2015); which is also present in the findings in this study.

Significant others of ILOs revealed those who have blurred audiences between the carceral world and the non-carceral world experience a tension between wanting to disclose their relationship status and posting pictures of each other while also fearing how their larger network might react. However, this only occurred on Instagram. The threat of further stigmatization encouraged individuals to find strategies to avoid people and situations where stigma might be experienced. Instagram respondents adopted a variety of technological and social privacy management strategies. Some created a separate profile dedicated to talking about their ILO, while others used vague or coded language to hide their relationship status in plain sight. A few respondents, however, chose not to disclose anything due to fear of further stigmatization or out of respect for others who might be inadvertently stigmatized. Previous research suggests that social media users are less likely to seek support when they experience face threats (Goldsmith, 1994; Lim et al., 2013). This can occur when multiple groups of people are all collapsed in one space (Markwick & boyd, 2011). These findings are consistent with previous privacy management strategies (Das & Hodkinson, 2020; Buehler, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2014). Audience separation strategies such as creating a separate account for the stigmatized identity or going onto different social media are consistent with other previous work on online stigma

management strategies (Haimson, 2016; Lingel, 2017; Scheuerman, Branham, & Hamidi, 2018). Respondents reported using audience separation strategies because they perceived it to be safer and easier to talk about relational stigma without outsiders questioning their decision.

While concerns of context collapse were present on Instagram, relational and community privacy concerns were present on both social media sites. Significant others, for example, were often concerned of the physical risks that might ensue if they shared information about their ILO on social media sites. Therefore, secrecy was more often enacted to maintain the safety of others rather than the disclosers. This extends previous work on privacy management behaviors (Das & Hodkinson, 2020; Marwick & boyd, 2011; 2014) because current findings suggest that the privacy concerns focus on the individual as well as on the community who might be less visible or salient on social media.

Surprisingly, we found several privacy concerns that threaten the romantic relationship when disclosing to within-group members. Though rarely experienced by respondents, Instagram users warned other users not to disclose identification information because “inmate hoppers” could be trying to steal their ILO. Threat of relational disruptions from within the carceral community challenges findings that suggest online support groups for stigmatized groups create safety, empowerment, and trust amongst similar others (e.g. Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012; Lingel, 2017). In contrast, relational disruptions were not present on PTO. This could be because PTO calls itself a “web community”, which could increase assumptions of trust or social expectations between members within the site. Successfully creating a “web of trust” has shown to increase content sharing and dissemination amongst community members (Kim & Ahmad, 2013). Further, increased trust has shown have a positive association with self-disclosures on online contexts (Joinson, Reips, Buchanan, &

Schofield, 2010). This suggests that without an established “support group” or “web community” where expectations of behaviors and norms are laid out, relational disruption is more likely to occur.

Relational Stigma Management Outcomes

My findings revealed that significant others of ILOs felt validated and their emotional well-being increased when they felt comfortable seeking support on either Instagram or PTO and developed strong relationships with similar others. Online communication behaviors and discussions about the relationship with similar others helped them accept themselves and the circumstances of the relationship. Feeling accepted and normal by bonding with similar others increased feelings of self-validation, which is consistent with previous work on stigmatized identities (Meisenbach, 2010; Smith, 2007). Similar to Meisenbach’s (2010) work, online communication about the relationally stigmatized identity helped significant others shift their attitudes towards accepting their identity. However, because significant others of ILOs is a relationally stigmatized identity, it helped them shift attitudes towards accepting both aspects in their personal identity as well as their relational identity. Further, the increased number of people who significant others connected with via PTO and Instagram appeared to be an important factor in feeling normalized. Therefore, the accessibility of the increased number of people through social media sites further helped significant others’ feelings of validation. Research should continue to explore the relationship between the size of support groups, perceived privacy concerns, and its effect on feelings of self-worth within different stigmatized groups.

Significant others of ILOs also showed that those who actively used social media by posting about their relationship and talking with similar others increased respondents’ validation and well-being. This is consistent with previous work on active social media use (e.g. Burke,

Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Verduyn, et al., 2015). This can be further explained from the expressive writing perspective, which suggests that writing out one's thoughts and feelings helps a person re-evaluate their life circumstances, acknowledge emotions, and/or change perspective on emotional or traumatic events in their lives. (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Studies have shown that writing about stressful or traumatic experiences can actually increase well-being, mood, and decrease distress (e.g. Han et al., 2008; Han et al., 2011; Ko & Kuo, 2009; Pennebaker, 1997; Shim, Cappella, & Han, 2011). However, significant others of ILOs show that the addition of receiving positive feedback from similar others further increases feelings of well-being. Therefore, findings from this study suggests that it is a combination of wanting to disclose experiences regarding their relationship as well as be positively acknowledged by others.

Limitations and Future Directions

Findings from this dissertation contributes to research on online relational stigma management, relational privacy management strategies, and self-changes; however, there are several limitations within this work. First, I collected data regarding online communication and reflections of online interactions via interviews and observational work. While findings show that shifts in self-validation and well-being are present, it is unclear specifically what specific linguistic behaviors were used and how it affected self-concept outcomes. Previous research has shown that using specific language can affect shifts in well-being (Shim, et al., 2011) and strength in identity (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Future research should explore how different language use impacts relational stigma management on different mediated spaces.

Additionally, I recruited any significant other who currently had a romantic relationship with someone who was incarcerated at the time of the interview. No questions were asked about the reason for the incarceration or the length of the sentence because this study was intended to

focus on significant others' experiences rather than the incarcerated persons. However, research has shown that crimes such as murder or sexual predators might have different impact on incarcerated persons and families than other crimes such as theft (Fishman, 1990; May, 2000; Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013). In addition, the length of incarceration can affect romantic partners' felt stigma because of the increased time of separation (Massoglia, et al., 2011). Future research should explore how significant others of ILOs use different social media sites and the language they use when the committed crime or length of time of incarceration might impact the extent of felt relational stigma.

Finally, this dissertation focused on just one group of relationally stigmatized individuals within only two social media sites (Prison Talk Online & Instagram). While this extends understanding of the role that different social media sites have on relationally stigmatized groups, this research can only provide an explanation for other significant others of incarcerated persons within these specific sites. Future research should explore other family members of incarcerated persons as well as other relationally stigmatized individuals within other populations to gain a better understanding of the different relational management strategies, privacy management strategies, and relational stigma outcomes. Further, future research should continue to examine the social media ecology to better determine what situational factors help relationally stigmatized groups feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different groups of people use social media and how the design of social media sites influences different communication behaviors.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

This dissertation presented an in-depth field study that aimed at getting a better understanding the role different social media has on relationally stigmatized management. Three general research questions guided this research: 1) How do significant others of incarcerated individuals interact differently with a dedicated social media site (Prison Talk Online) versus a general purposes social media site (Instagram); 2) What privacy management behaviors are used to reduce privacy concerns on Prison Talk Online and Instagram; and 3) How does communicating on social media influence significant others of incarcerated individuals' feelings of relational stigma and self?

I collected field observations on Instagram and Prison Talk Online and interviewed thirteen significant others of ILOs who use one of the two social media sites. Approximately half of the respondents used Instagram while the other half used PTO. Further, half of the respondents met their loved ones before they were incarcerated, and the other half met their loved ones while they were incarcerated. Data analysis suggests that social media sites can have a positive effect on significant others of ILOs when a supportive network is available, and they feel comfortable disclosing their relationship with others. Significant others of ILOs also found that social media are a helpful relational stigma management tool when there is perceived support accessibility and they are able to manage their privacy concerns. Respondents experienced positive effects on their self-concept in terms of self-validation when respondents actively talked about their relationship on the social media site. Further, active online behavior and feedback from similar others increased respondents' emotional well-being. However,

respondents who did not often talk about their relationship or their daily struggles due to privacy concerns, validation and increased emotional well-being was not present.

This dissertation extends research both theoretically and practically. First, I found that significant others of ILOs not only sought social support from weak ties who shared similar experiences, but also were able to develop strong relationships with each other. This extends our understanding of online social support by suggesting that relationally stigmatized populations might seek out a network of support that consists of weak ties and building strong ties. Second, I found that significant others' privacy concerns include concerns for further stigmatization of themselves as well as other individuals who are connected to the stigmatized identity. This suggests that privacy concerns and behaviors are determined by community privacy concerns rather than just individual privacy concerns. Finally, on a practical level, there appeared to be important design differences between Instagram and PTO that resulted in different ways to access support groups. For groups like men who have an ILO, it was difficult to find similar others on Instagram because no consistent language was developed for people to find each other. However, on PTO, men more easily found similar others because of the different labeled forums present within the site. This suggests that the design of social media sites can affect how easily people can find similar others and online social support. Broad social media sites like Instagram might re-examine ways to help people find similar support groups such as shifting the the search algorithm to help find the correct support group more easily.

These findings provide valuable contributions to the study of relational stigma management, social support, and privacy management behaviors within online contexts and provide new considerations for future research. Gaining insights into the online communication behaviors and outcomes provides practical implications to developing targeted interventions or

design of communication tools to help relational management and support be more accessible across social media sites

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Appendix. Interview Protocol

Hi! My name is Alex. Thank you so much for being willing to share your story and time with me. Before we begin, let me just say a few words about me. I study families of incarcerated persons and have really been wanting to work more closely with significant others, which has inspired me to do this project!

The purpose of this research study is to understand how significant others of incarcerated individuals use social media—in particular, [PTO/Instagram]. We'll start the interview by talking briefly about your relationship, how it's been having your loved one locked away, and then get into social media and the role it's had on your relationship. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. While this is a chat, I predominantly would like to hear from you so I'll ask questions but will be pretty quiet other than that. Mainly because, I want to hear your experiences and perspectives! Sound good so far?

I would like to remind you that while I will be publishing topics and quotes based on what is discussed in this interview, everything will be anonymous, and no quotes will be attributed to you. I won't put your name, email, and other personal information in any publication that can lead it back to you directly. If there are any questions that you don't want to answer, that's completely fine. This is entirely voluntary. Further, I might ask some questions that may not pertain to you so and that's okay as well. Finally, I'm happy to answer any questions you have for me.

I would like to record our interview just that so I can more accurately reflect your perspective. If you feel uncomfortable with recording, you may opt out of recording and still participate. Is it okay if I record our conversation?

Do you have any questions for me at this time? (*wait for response*) Do you agree to participate in this interview?

1. *Introduction Question:* Tell me about your relationship. (how long have you two known each other? /how long have you two been together? /How did you two meet?/What's your relationship like?/How has your relationship changed over the years?)
2. Can you tell me about what you were going through when your loved one was first incarcerated or when you learned that he/she was incarcerated?
 - A. How did it impact your view yourself?
3. How much did you know about prisons or how to visit or contact them before your loved one was incarcerated? **How much have you had to learn about prisons since he was incarcerated? **
4. How has your relationship with your partner impacted other relationships that you have (friendships, family, acquaintances, co-workers, etc.)?
5. Who do you talk to about your relationship?
 - A. What are those conversations like? (probe: what do you talk about? Do they tend to be understanding/supportive or more judgmental/hostile?)
6. What does it mean to be a significant other of someone who is currently in prison? Or, what is your role as a significant other?

7. How do you think others would describe someone who has a relationship with another person who's in prison? (probe: What are some words that you think others might use to describe you based on your relationship?)
8. Where all do you talk about your relationship on social media/internet?
9. What encouraged you to go on [PrisonTalk/Instagram] to talk about your relationship while your loved one is in prison?
 - A. What do you do on Prison Talk Online?/what do you post about? And where?
 - B. What do you tend to write about?
 - C. What do you tend to refrain from sharing on PTO?
10. What is it about [PTO/Instagram] do you like when you talk about your relationship?
 - A. What are the general pros and cons to using Prison Talk Online?
11. What concerns do you have when talking about your relationship on [PTO/Instagram]?
 - A. What do you refrain from sharing on PTO?
 - B. Are you ever worried that this your story is ever going to negatively affect you or your sig. other somehow?
 - C. What do you do to try to reduce these concerns?
12. How has [PTO/Instagram] impacted you or your relationship while your significant other is gone?
 - A. How have you benefitted from talking about your relationship on [PTO/Instagram]?
13. Since going on [PTO/Instagram], how has your view of yourself or your relationship changed?
 - A. How has talking about your relationship on [PTO/Instagram] changed the way you talk about your relationship with others?

(Added COVID-19 questions)

14. I know that the coronavirus has been on everyone's minds for a while. I'm wondering, how do you think the coronavirus has affected your relationship?
 - A. How do you think the coronavirus has affected your answers in this chat?
15. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?

In order to get a better idea of what you share on [PTO/Instagram], would you be willing to let us look at what you post and discuss it in our project as well? There are also some demographic questions that I'm hoping to gather. None of it will be directly attributed to you but and you can opt out of answering and of the questions. Would you want to do that now or would you rather I send it to you through PTO?

Instagram Payment!:

Finally, would you prefer to receive the \$20 in a pre-paid Visa or through paypal?

Thank you

Thank you for being willing to talk with me; I really appreciate your time. Do you have any other questions for me? If you think of any questions about this study or would like to hear the results of the study, you are welcome to contact me at ash239@cornell.edu. Have a good day!