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“Prison TikTok”: Incarcerated Life Shared on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Different areas of the criminal justice system interact with social media, but not much is known about how those incarcerated may be using it. A thematic analysis of "Prison TikTok" videos was conducted in order to gain a better understanding of what those incarcerated are sharing. The most represented themes in the sample are *performance*, *food*, *prison*, and *pains of imprisonment*. *Performance* and *food* demonstrate creativity within the sample, and highlight how those incarcerated may be looking for creative outlets. *Prison* and *pains of imprisonment* include the realities of life incarcerated, and contain messaging that those incarcerated may be trying to communicate within the sample.

Introduction

In today's world, social media is a present force, accessible to anyone with a smartphone or similar device. Social media platforms allow individuals to create content that can be shared with anyone. This experience provides a more intimate form of media production and consumption. Social media is popular due to the human need for social interaction, and inspires feelings of wanting to be included (Roberts & David, 2019). Social media is also prevalent in the criminal justice system. Between courts, law enforcement agencies, and corrections, social media usage can be seen by criminal justice actors and the general public alike.

It is known that incarcerated individuals are using the Internet and smartphones to create content, such as posting videos on a social media platform like TikTok. Separated from family and friends, incarcerated individuals may be drawn to use social media platforms such as TikTok as an easy way to connect with others, and could help ease the reality of life incarcerated (Jewkes & Reisdorft, 2016; Sykes, 1970). With this usage of platforms such as TikTok in prisons, questions regarding their content come to mind. What are incarcerated individuals sharing on TikTok?

With social media being an influential part of society today, it is important to understand what is being shared in these spaces. Furthermore, observing what incarcerated individuals share about the prison experience allows for a better understanding that is coming straight from the source. Individuals that are incarcerated traditionally do not have technological outlets for sharing (Jewkes & Reisdorft, 2016), and it is important to understand what they are communicating to

those in the free world. By analyzing TikTok videos created by those incarcerated, information can be gathered regarding what is being shared.

Literature Review

Social Media Use

In today's society the use of social media is common for many, whether it is using Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok. The Pew Research Center reports that in 2020, 72% of adults in the United States use social media, with the most common social media platforms being Youtube and Facebook (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

Research has identified a number of different reasons in which people use social media. Based on interview data, Whiting and Williams (2013) came across a number of different themes as to why individuals use social media. Two of the most common themes were social interaction (88%) and using the technology to locate information on products that are for sale and events (80%) (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Another theme that emerged was using these platforms to express opinions, which respondents reported doing through making comments and liking others' posts or pictures (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Social media provides a medium for individuals to interact, gain information, and share online.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are platforms that both allow users to participate in social engagement, but differences exist in what is shared on these platforms. Manikonda and colleagues' (2016) analysis of 963 social media users indicated that the main type of social engagement on Instagram is the number of likes one gets. In regards to what is shared on these platforms, there were more negative things shared on Twitter, whereas there were more positive things shared on Instagram (Manikonda et al., 2016). This finding can also be seen in the types of visual images that are shared. Instagram once again was found to be more positive with people sharing personal moments, which were generally happy things (Manikonda et al., 2016). Twitter's most common images included activity such as news, events like concerts or sporting events, with quotes, opinions, and more negative emotions being shared more than Instagram (Manikonda et al., 2016). While differences exist between the platforms, it is clear that individuals are using social media to express themselves in various ways.

TikTok is a newer application that allows users to upload and watch videos. This application allows users to select areas of interest, which would provide videos for the

user to see (Anderson, 2020). Interests include but are not limited to travel, food, beauty, and education. The application also allows users to message one another and to comment and like videos. Like Twitter, hashtags are prevalent on TikTok. A recent study examined the use of TikTok and users' motivations for using the app. The sample included 385 TikTok users, with the majority located in China (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Findings suggest that social interaction was related to the consuming behavior of using TikTok such as viewing various types of lifestyle videos. It is important to keep in mind that the study consisted primarily of individuals from China, which has a culture of collectivism (Omar & Dequan, 2020). While TikTok is a more recently developed application, it is growing in popularity and use.

Social media in Criminal Justice

The criminal justice system is an area that uses and is impacted by social media use, ranging from people using social media to share news, police departments using social media as community outreach, and even using social media to punish those who break the law (e.g. Dai et al., 2017; Rose & Fox, 2014). As we discussed above, a significant portion of the population uses social media, and the consumption of news is one the purposes of social media (Manikonda et al., 2016). It is important to understand how social media impacts and interacts with the various elements of the criminal justice system.

Courts. Social media is prevalent among court actors and this raises some concerns. Those who work in the legal profession are no strangers to using social media, with many using it for networking (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011). However, there is a concern that this form of communication could possibly impact the reliability of the courts (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011). In reaction to different criminal justice actors such as judges, law enforcement officers, and attorneys being friends on these social media platforms, some worry there may be discussions that could impact cases (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011). Others argue that these friendships could be beneficial to creating good relationships within the community (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011). Social media usage concerns also exist in the context of juries. Issues that have occurred in regard to social media use are instances of juror misconduct, which includes posting updates on the case before any verdict is addressed by the court (Janoski-Haehlen, 2011). Along with individuals directly involved with court proceedings, social media can impact the general public and media.

The general public and media are both influenced by social media related to criminal justice, especially in the case of courts. Social media opens the public to be able to

quickly consume online news of criminal proceedings, which could impact the public's understanding of the criminal justice system (Rose & Fox, 2014). Rose and Fox (2014) surveyed 2074 individuals online, finding that about 45% of the participants get news from social networking sites. Additionally, about half of the sample had read about one of the high-profile cases asked about (e.g. Casey Anthony, Jerry Sandusky) on social networking sites (Rose & Fox, 2014). As social media also allows individuals to share news stories, this study found that between 10 and 15% of the sample shared information on one of the cases (Rose & Fox, 2014). Social media also allows the opportunity for journalists to share information about criminal proceedings such as court cases (Small & Puddister, 2020). Journalists providing the public with updates allow a glimpse into what is happening in the court but it does not facilitate any engagement between this branch of the criminal justice system and the public (Small & Puddister, 2020). The court system is one aspect of the entire criminal justice system that interacts with social media usage.

Law enforcement. Along with courts, law enforcement agencies and officers engage with social media usage. Upon analyzing 6,825 Facebook posts from large police agencies in the US, researchers found that the agencies used Facebook to network and post about incidents of crime, traffic, ask for information, and build a relationship with the public (Huang et al., 2016). Law enforcement agencies are not limited to only Facebook, as they use different types of social media applications like Twitter as well (Dai et al., 2017). A content analysis of seven departments throughout the US demonstrated different ways agencies use social media (Dai et al., 2017). The agencies used Facebook and Twitter to provide information about crimes, ask for tips from the public, provide information about weather, give traffic updates and engage with the community (Dai et al., 2017). Dai and colleagues (2017) describe how the numbers show that there were more Facebook posts asking for tips, whereas there were more posts on Twitter sharing information about the weather and community events. The results also show that the public uses these social media platforms to engage with these agencies (Dai et al., 2017). The public also has the ability to monitor law enforcement behaviors with the use of personal recordings and social media as well (Hanley, 2011). Law enforcement agencies utilize social media to actively engage with the general public.

Corrections. Individuals incarcerated also may be familiar with and use social media. Those who are incarcerated do not have regular access to technology and social media as those in the free world do (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). Additionally, those incarcerated face isolation from loved ones and friends that many of us stay connected

with using social media (Jewkes & Reisdorft, 2016). Understanding the benefits of technology, especially the kind that allows for communication, highlights why those incarcerated may search for ways to contact the outside world (Jewkes & Reisdorft, 2016). It is known that cell phones are being used in prison, but similar to the "dark figure of crime," it is unclear how many cell phones are currently being used, and how large of a problem it is (Grommon et al., 2018). The idea of contraband in prisons is not a new phenomenon, but cell phones present a new version of the issue.

With imprisonment creating a variety of pains, incarcerated individuals may utilize contraband—including cell phones—as a way to alleviate some of the loss of control (Grommon et al., 2018). Social media and cell phones are used by those incarcerated, and understanding what may be shared is important. As explored by Sykes (1970), those incarcerated struggle to continue to connect with those in the free world. Utilizing cell phones and social media such as TikTok may aid in adaptation to prison life. Sykes (1970) also highlights the tolerance of some rule breaking to gain compliance with larger areas of "custodial regime" (p. 58). This usage of cell phones and social media may maintain some order within facilities.

It has come to our attention that those who are incarcerated are finding ways, like using contraband cell phones, to participate in social media. "Prison TikTok" has become a popular "category" on TikTok where those who are incarcerated are sharing videos from inside correctional facilities. Knowing that incarcerated individuals are posting videos on TikTok while confined highlights how they are in control of the content that they share on this platform. It is important to understand what is being posted as these individuals may be using TikTok as a way to communicate and mitigate pains of incarceration. These videos give the public a glimpse into the lives of those incarcerated. Other elements of the criminal justice system are using social media, but not much is known about its use in corrections, specifically by those actually incarcerated. The purpose of this study fill the gap in literature by analyzing TikTok videos made by those who are incarcerated to gain an understanding as to what they are sharing in these short videos—insight that has not been as accessible to the general public before now.

Methodology

Data collection. The sample consisted of TikTok videos which were collected using the search feature on TikTok. After observing a few "Prison TikTok" videos, several hashtags were identified. Six hashtags were used in an effort to identify a sample of videos. The hashtags included: #prison life, #prison, #jail, #locked up, #jailtiktok, and

#prisontiktok. Each hashtag was searched in its entirety, and videos were "favorited" (i.e., saved) on the application in order to collect the sample. If a content creator had a video that could be included in the sample, the researchers looked at their account to see if they had other videos that fit the sample criteria. If so, those videos were saved as well. The sample was collected between May and July of 2021, and finalized in August of 2021. A total of 210 videos were initially collected. After further analysis of the initial sample, five videos were removed, as there were doubts about if actual incarcerated individuals created the videos. Removal from the sample was determined based on the user's other video postings. Before the first round of coding, nineteen videos were removed from the application (either by the individual user, or TikTok itself), leaving the final sample of 186 total videos.

Analysis Approach. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to examine the TikTok videos. As described by Braun and Clark (2006) a thematic analysis is used to observe, analyze and report patterns (or themes) from the data. A thematic analysis approach was fitting for this research question as Clarke and Braun (2014) put forth that thematic analysis is useful for examining behaviors and practices of individuals. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, a descriptive coding method was used in order to determine video themes. As described by Saldaña (2009), descriptive coding is useful for research aimed at answering basic questions about what is happening. This descriptive method is also beneficial for following inductive research schemes, as there is no theoretical basis that is being utilized. Instead, the descriptive and inductive methods allow for the identification of common themes to be discovered within the data. With the goal of developing themes in mind, coding procedures were developed.

Coding Procedure. For coding, two investigators performed two separate rounds of coding. The investigators independent of each other completed an initial round of coding. The goal of the first round was to observe what was happening in the video and assign descriptive themes based on patterns found in the content. Once this first round was completed, the investigators compared results to determine reliability. The next stage of coding utilized a code book that had been developed based on the initial results wherein descriptive codes were defined that categorized main themes and sub-themes.. Main themes and sub-themes were all labeled according to the code book. Some videos fit into multiple themes, as they are not mutually exclusive. The investigators then compared results for a second time. The inter-rater reliability was 94%.

Table 1 here

Prison TikTok Results

Main themes emerged from the data that are descriptive of what incarcerated individuals are sharing to TikTok. These main themes include: *contraband* (N=12; 6.45%), *food* (N=50; 26.88%), *narrative* (N=9; 4.84%), *performance* (N=59; 31.72%), *pains of imprisonment* (N=38; 20.43%), and *prison* (N=38; 20.43%). Sub-themes were also determined to further elaborate on the main theme. Table 1 depicts the main themes discovered, including the total number of videos for each theme. The totals for each theme and sub-theme reflect the number of incidents of the theme occurring, and some videos demonstrated content that fit into multiple themes, and were coded appropriately. Table 2 reflects the total number of videos in each sub-theme. The following results will have a description of the main theme, sub-themes, and examples to demonstrate the theme.

Table 2 here

Contraband

Contraband was described as a depiction of item(s) not allowed in prison such as a cell phone or alcohol, or the act of hiding an item in prison. There were twelve videos in total that fit this description, as seen in Table 1. Sub-themes were also developed that included *how-to* and *alcohol*, as many videos contained these similarities. Videos were found to fit into one or both of the sub-themes.

How-to. Videos in this sub-theme were described as displaying and/or explaining how to hide items within prison, or from others, and had a total of seven videos (3.76%). One example of *how-to* can be seen in a video in which an individual is demonstrating how to hide a cell phone in a notebook. This individual shows off several notebooks, and mimics flipping through them to demonstrate how the cell phone is not easily found, as the phone is hidden in the back flap. In many videos, the content creator is eager to share hiding spots, demonstrate how to hide items, and answer questions from viewers.

Alcohol. The depiction of making or consuming alcohol was found in six total videos (3.23%). One such video shows a bottle of what appears to be juice from the outside, but once poured looks darker and thicker. The individual filming pours the liquid into a cup and holds it up to the camera. In this sub-theme, there are examples of individuals

in the process of making alcohol, pouring alcohol to consume, and actually consuming it with others.

Food

The theme of *food* developed after seeing a pattern of videos pertaining to the creation, consumption, and explanation of food in prison. As seen in Table 1, there are a total of 50 videos in this theme (26.88%). *Food* is the second most common category after *performance*. The sub-themes of *cooking*, *how-to*, and *eating* were developed based on variation in the food sample.

Cooking. A visual display of preparing food was categorized as *cooking*. In total, 31 videos were coded into this sub-theme. Many videos were described by their creators as a "prison" version of the food (e.g., "prison pizza" or "prison tacos"). One video demonstrates cooking "prison tacos," showing the gathered ingredients, cooking packaged food in a bucket of water (with electric cord to boil water), mixing the ingredients in a bag, grilling over an open flame, and grilled soft taco shells on a metal bunk. Another *cooking* video shows a montage of different things: grilling bacon over a grill constructed from a can, grilling a patty, adding cheese, constructing a sandwich, and cutting the sandwich. The captions throughout read, "Even though I'm in prison....I'll find ways to remember the good old days." The various *cooking* videos portray many examples of different cooking methods such as boiling water in buckets, heating over an open flame, and grilling on different surfaces. There was an overall ingenuity of ingredient usage and recipe development.

How-to. As opposed to only visual demonstrations of cooking, the how-to subtheme was created to capture videos that contained verbal explanations of the process, including step-by-step instructions and recipes. 17 videos were categorized as *how-to*, as seen in Table 2. One individual follows a similar format to a cooking show in one video, going over each ingredient, what someone following along would need, and walks the viewer through each step of the process. The video cuts to different points in the process to help demonstrate how to cook exactly like the content creator. Like the *cooking* sub-theme, there are a lot of examples of various cooking methods, recreations of well-known dishes in prison (e.g., pizza), and utilization of limited ingredients. Many of the *how-to* videos are reminiscent of cooking shows or videos that can be seen in the free world. Many Prison TikTok creators appear eager to share information and respond to questions about how they accomplish certain tasks in prison, such as grilling, boiling water, and using raw ingredients. There are also

comparisons between the food served in the facility versus food that can be created by the individual themselves.

Eating. The sub-theme *eating* was created to categorize depictions of eating and discussions of food in prison, as these videos did not fit into the themes of *cooking* or *how-to*. 15 videos were found to fit into this category. In one video, the creator is showing three personal size pizzas and three soda cans, presumably about to be eaten. The food and drinks are set up in front of the television in the room. Many of these videos display food that is presumably about to be consumed, and other videos display stashes of packaged food stored in the prison cell.

Narrative

Videos that had individuals talking or lip syncing to sound bites directly to the camera/audience were labeled as *narrative* to differentiate from an individual singing, or lip syncing to a song. Nine videos (4.84%) were categorized as *narrative*, and fell into sub-themes of *positive*, *negative*, or *neutral*. These sub-themes were developed based on the content of what the individuals were saying or lip-syncing, as the overall tone varied across the sample.

Positive. *Positive* videos were labeled as such if they demonstrated someone talking or lip syncing in a way that was positive in content or linked with positive emotions (e.g., encouragement, hopefulness, happiness). Only one video was found in the sample. In the video, the individual is replying to a comment saying that he has gang tattoos. The individual states how they like to keep positive vibes in their videos, and finds it funny that someone would accuse them of being in a gang. The individual shows that they do not have gang tattoos, points out tattoos and explains them. They further discuss how everyone should keep negative vibes away, as they want to emit and be around positive vibes only. They explain that not everyone in prison is a bad person or is part of a gang. With only one video being found, it is clear there are not many positive videos in the sample.

Negative. If the talking or lip syncing in a video was found to be negative in content, or linked with negative emotions (e.g., sadness, self-deprecation, and depression), it was labeled as *negative*. Five videos in total were found to fit this category. In one video, an individual is lip syncing to a sound bite that states, "it's not easy being the disappointment of the family, but here I am, gang gang bitch." This sound bite is used more than once in the sample. In another video, an individual asks the viewers if there are any questions:

Sup TikTok, broadcasting live from a prison cell...I'm here to keep it real, keep it a hunned, y'all got any questions, feel free to ask man, you know this shit ain't all it's cracked up to be, it's a lot of bullshit, lotta politics, lotta just dumbass shit that come with this prison life.

These videos often comment about the negatives of prison life, and some users express interest in answering questions viewers may have.

Neutral. Other talking/lip syncing that was neutral in tone and did not fall directly into positive or negative connotations/emotions was labeled as *neutral*. Three videos fit into this category in the sample. An example of this can be seen in one video in which the individual seated on their bunk discusses when they will be released from prison, what their charge and sentence was, and asks the viewers not to judge them, stating, "...before you judge me, just know that there is a story behind it." In another video, the same individual continues describing the nature of the circumstances surrounding their offense. The individual first states:

Alright so, it seems like a lot of you guys are curious about what I did to get here, so I'mma let y'all know. But first I just want to say that, I'm not doing this to gain any sympathy, I'm not trying to justify what I did, I fucked up, and I'm here paying for it. With that being said, storytime.

Neutral videos tended to be about discussion information about the content creator, their crimes, and answering questions.

Performance

Examples of creativity were labeled as *performance*, and were then split into the sub-themes of *dancing*, *music*, and *skit*. These sub-themes were developed after patterns emerged of different ways individuals were "performing" for the audience on TikTok. Table 1 displays how this main theme was the most represented in the sample, with a total number of 59 videos (31.72%).

Dancing. Movement (whether choreographed or not) was considered *dancing* for this sub-theme. There were 26 *dancing* videos found in the sample (13.98%). One example of this sub-theme demonstrates two individuals dancing in a common area to a trendy song on TikTok. Another video shows an individual in their room, roommate laying down, and the main subject is dancing a choreographed routine to a song. The caption includes, "cause I'm locked up in prison don't mean I have to suffer." Some dances

were seen to reflect popular dance trends on the application, whereas others were presumably more freestyle.

Music. If an individual was seen lip syncing to songs, singing songs (published or original), or playing music (with or without an instrument, published or original), the video was labeled as *music*. In total there were 17 videos found in the sample that fit this category. In one example video, an individual is seen sitting in a prison cell and singing lyrics that include, "I was institutionalized, I ain't come out the same, wit' a bag on my brain." In another, an individual is standing in what appears to be a bathroom (or other similarly tiled room) rapping original lyrics. Many songs performed are written by those incarcerated, and others are covers of published songs.

Skit. Videos showcasing an individual or individuals lip syncing or performing an original script depicting an action not actually occurring (e.g. fake phone call or conversation) were labeled as *skit*. As seen in Table 2, ten videos were found to fit this theme. An example of this can be seen in one video in which an individual is pretending to be on a phone call in which they are accusing the other person on the line as being a snitch, warning that they will retaliate once out of prison. The caption of that video reads, "when your supposed to be homeboy snitched on you." Another video mimics a phone call, and the caption reads, "when your locked up for being loyal to the gang." The video shows an individual pretending to speak to a girlfriend, and after explaining that they would not snitch, the individual hears what they think is a fellow gang member in the background of the girlfriend's house. Many skits range from serious to funny to romantic, and all appear to be for entertainment purposes.

Pains of Imprisonment

The term "pains of imprisonment" is borrowed from Sykes' (1970) work *The Society of Captives* which details various aspects of prison life in a New Jersey State prison (p. 63). In it, Sykes (1970) defines the pains of imprisonment as the loss of liberty, desirable goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. Any direct or indirect reference to any of these losses was categorized as *pains of imprisonment*, and a total of 38 videos were found within the sample (20.43%). Sub-themes of *scared straight*, *relationships*, and *goods and services* were developed under this category to further detail specific patterns that were found.

Scared straight. A reference to the television series *Beyond Scared Straight* (2011-2015), the sub-theme *scared straight* captures any video that references hardships of prison life that are used as cautionary messaging (much like the premise of *Beyond*

Scared Straight (2011-2015)). Videos were included in this theme and sub-theme if pains were described as a way to dissuade anyone watching from glamorizing prison life, and to use their reality as an example. A total of 19 videos fit into this sub-theme (10.22%). One video showing a full view of a prison cell captures the hardship of prison life while also attempting to warn others. The creator states:

When I first started my term, an old man told me this would get easier with time, but now that I've been here for a few years myself, I can honestly tell you that it doesn't. Every day wasted in here is a day you never get back, and the truth is, some of us are going to make it home, some of us are going to die in here, in a cell just like this one.

Many videos demonstrate similar cautionary messaging in narration or in captions, with warnings about coming to prison, not taking freedom for granted, and showing the reality of life inside a facility. Some videos ask the viewer questions such as, "would you want to live like this?" or "would you like this view" with corresponding shots of cells, common areas, or grounds outside. In one video, the caption reads, "Wanna wake up to this?" with shots of the bunk and common area, and continues, "No, right? Stop hanging out with Idiots then." Some creators state that their videos should be shared with individuals going down "the wrong path" as a warning.

Relationships. The loss of heterosexual relationships is a pain of imprisonment according to Sykes (1970), and the sub-theme of *relationships* includes videos with references to romantic relationships inside or outside of prison. Eight videos in the sample were classified as this sub-theme. In one video, an individual is seen laying in their bunk and the caption reads, "when women say your in prison what can you do for me?" with a reply of, "like damn conversation don't matter no more??" Another video shows an individual laying on their bunk and contemplating the caption that reads, "HER: when can we meet? Like damn how I tell her I'm in prison??" Most of the videos in the sample reference heterosexual relationships and talking to a significant other outside of prison. Sometimes the partner is portrayed as being aware the content creator is in prison, other times it appears the partner may not know.

Goods and services. Videos portraying attempts to recreate goods and services in the free world (e.g., work out equipment, tattoos, haircuts) were categorized as the sub-theme *goods and services*. A total of 11 videos were labeled as such, and the videos display a variety of recreations (Table 2). In one video, an individual shows the broken sole of a shoe and details the steps to repair it by sewing it back together. In another

video, an individual goes through the steps of cutting hair in prison. Many different tasks are accomplished through nontraditional means.

Prison

One pattern that emerged in the data was depictions of various parts of prison as the main focus of the video. *Prison* was developed to categorize videos demonstrating this pattern, and a total of 38 were found, shown in Table 1 (20.43%). Under *prison*, the sub-themes of *prison cell*, *inside view*, *outside view*, *incarcerated individuals*, and *correctional officers* were created to differentiate variance within the main theme.

Prison cell. *Prison cell* describes a depiction of a prison cell and belongings as the main focus, often as a tour, and 15 videos were categorized as this sub-theme (8.06%). One video exemplifies this sub-theme as the creator records a view from their bunk, pans over the space of the room wherein the viewer can see a television, toilet, and window. The caption reads, "Prison cell living!" In another video, the creator starts at one end of their cell and walks towards their window to the outside. In the video their bunk, table, stool, and shelf can be seen. Some creators focus on showing their belongings in the cell, whereas others give a visual tour of their cell.

Inside view. Any depiction of the interior of the facility (e.g., dorm rooms, common areas) as the main focus of the video was labeled as *inside view*. 16 videos were found in total in the sample (8.6%). One creator shows a view through their window on the cell door that overlooks the communal area and other cell doors. Some individuals are seen lingering around and/or talking to others, and the caption reads, "We off lockdown." Throughout the sample, different types of facilities and arrangements can be seen, with some videos showing dorm-style living, prison cells, hallways, communal areas, and bathrooms.

Outside view. Depictions of the exterior of the facility (e.g., yard, fencing, other buildings) was considered to be the sub-theme *outside view*. Five videos in total were found in the sample. One video shows a view from a window in a cell, and the outside view including a sunrise or sunset and barbed wire fence can be seen. In this sub-theme, the outside views include surrounding buildings, fences, and grass. The locations are non-descript, and are not easily distinguishable.

Incarcerated individuals. The sub-theme *incarcerated individuals* was created to categorize videos that depict other individuals in prison aside from the creator (whether they know they are being filmed or not) as the main focus of the video. 15

videos fit into this sub-theme (8.06%). In one example, a fight is in-progress, but is eventually broken up. Many individuals are seen in the sample playing games, standing, and talking.

Correctional officers. Any depiction of a correctional officer was labeled as such, and two videos were found in the sample. In one of the videos, the view appears to be from the inside of a cell looking across the hall at another cell. A correctional officer team is attempting to open the door of the cell in frame, which has presumably been jammed by an individual inside. The caption of the video reads, "When you lock yourself in your cell and won't come out, the cert team is called. They couldn't open the door either." Yelling can be heard. Four to six officers (going in and out of frame) are seen attempting to open the door, at one point sliding something under it, and attempting to talk to the person inside. Officers have protective gear on (face shields, helmets). There are not many videos that fit into this category in the sample, possibly due to cell phone use being hidden from officers within prisons.

Discussion

Various components of the criminal justice system utilize social media in today's world, ranging from court actors to law enforcement. Individuals involved with the courts and law enforcement may use social media as a way to share information or ask for tips (Dai et al., 2017). Furthermore, the public learns about the criminal justice system through social media (Rose & Fox, 2014). Although social media is used in some areas in criminal justice, this study has aimed to gain a better understanding of how those incarcerated may be using social media—an area not as developed.

With cell phone usage in prison continuing to be an issue (Grommon et al., 2018), those incarcerated are using applications like TikTok as a platform to communicate with the general public as well. Rather than information originating from sources such as law enforcement, those incarcerated are the content creators. These videos provide a different perspective for issues relating to criminal justice. Because of this different perspective, analyzing what is being posted is important to understand.

The purpose of this study was to analyze "Prison TikTok" videos and develop themes based on the content. Determining themes is important in learning more about the lives of those incarcerated and corrections as a whole. Based on the sample, the biggest categories for video content themes are *performance*, *food*, *prison*, and *pains of imprisonment*. These themes give the general public a better understanding of what

those incarcerated are posting about, and what is being shared. The themes also provide context into the positives and negatives shared about prison life.

Performance and *food* were the two largest theme categories in the sample. These themes being represented most in the sample suggests that the creators in this sample are engaging with social media in a more positive way. While previous studies have shown that Instagram posts reflect more positivity and Twitter posts are more negative, this sample on TikTok reflects a more positive environment (Manikonda et al., 2016). The creators who are performing demonstrate a desire to follow common trends on TikTok, and seem to be drawn to the entertainment value that TikTok provides. Furthermore, the presence of posts relating to *food* demonstrates that those incarcerated may be using food as a creative outlet, and may be important to them, much like individuals in the free world. As creative programming in prisons has been linked with positive social and emotional outcomes of those incarcerated (Littman & Sliva, 2021), these results should be taken into consideration, as this sample indicates those incarcerated are drawn to these creative outlets. Both *performance* and *food* represent how those incarcerated may be engaging with social media in a positive way. While some positivity exists within "Prison TikTok," negativity is present as well.

Many videos posted in "Prison TikTok" demonstrate various "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1970, p. 63). Several creators discuss these pains, and display everyday life as cautionary tales. Much of the messaging in the sample revolves around prevention—either for the viewer or individuals the viewer may know. Similar to *Beyond Scared Straight* (2011-2015), these individuals incarcerated provide warnings against prison life and the hardships it brings. This focus on negativity demonstrates ways in which those incarcerated may be communicating with the general public. This access to communication may also be used as a way to alleviate some of the "pains" by providing a way to connect with those outside—whether positively or negatively.

This study did not measure or analyze the public's interaction with "Prison TikTok" videos, but interaction is observable in likes, comments, and replies. The public is interacting with these videos, and future research could analyze the extent of this interaction. Incarcerated individuals could be using TikTok as a way to engage with the outside world, with the intention of others consuming what they are posting. As seen in the results, those incarcerated are answering questions posed by the public in themes such as *how-to* or *narrative*. Videos posted in "Prison TikTok" also utilize a feature within the application to embed comments and/or questions in a video response, embodying virtual interaction. While the interaction has not been measured in this

study, it is observable and influential in what those incarcerated are posting. Analysis of "Prison TikTok" videos provides insight into what incarcerated individuals are posting, and how this perspective may fit into what other aspects of the criminal justice system are using social media for.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations, which can aid in directing future research. The investigators are both of similar demographics (age, race, gender), which could influence biases in how they interpreted and coded the videos. The total number of "Prison TikToks" that exist is unknown, therefore it is hard to be able to conclude the generalizability of the results. Without speaking to the content creators themselves, it is also not possible to verify the validity of every video. Videos were selected based on the appearance of being filmed within a facility, but there is no way to determine that with absolute certainty. The sample has also experienced attrition, with videos and entire profiles being deleted from the application (whether by the user or TikTok itself). The world of "Prison TikTok" is larger than just the videos included in this sample. Future research should explore how the audience is interacting with this content via comments and "likes." This study also only focuses on videos created by those currently incarcerated, although formerly incarcerated content creators exist and create videos about their experiences as well. Despite these limitations, exploring the topic of "Prison TikTok" is important to begin to understand this unexamined phenomenon.

Implications

This research has implications for both criminological research and policy. As this study is exploratory in nature, it can be built upon in the future. Analyzing interaction with the incarcerated content creators would be useful in understanding the public's reaction to these videos. Further analysis of videos could explore theoretical ties—specifically observing how adaptation to the pains of imprisonment shape prison subculture as explored by Sykes (1970). These results highlight that creators in this sample are reaching toward creative outlets, and this could influence policy considerations for corrections. Creative correctional programming has been linked with positive outcomes for those incarcerated (Littman & Sliva, 2021), and these results suggest those incarcerated may have a need for programming that provides a creative outlet.

Social media is influential in today's world and the criminal justice system. Incarcerated individuals are using TikTok to create and publish their own content, giving a different perspective in criminal justice messaging. Common themes were found such as *performance*, *food*, *prison*, and *pains of imprisonment*. Analyzing these themes allows for a better understanding of what is shared in this sample of "Prison TikTok" videos. "Prison TikTok" provides a look into an otherwise confined and separate world.

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Table 1: Identified Main Themes

	N	%
Contraband	12	6.45
Food	50	26.88
Narrative	9	4.84
Performance	59	31.72
POI	38	20.43
Prison	38	20.43
Workaround	6	3.23
Other	1	0.54

Table 2: Identified Subthemes

	N	%
Contraband		
How-to	7	3.76
Alcohol	6	3.23
Substance use	1	0.54
Food		

Cooking	31	15.67
How-to	17	9.14
Eating	15	8.06
Narrative		
Positive	1	0.54
Negative	5	2.69
Neutral	3	1.61
Performance		
Dancing	26	13.98
Music	17	9.14
Skit	10	5.38
POI		
Scared Straight	19	10.22
Relationships	8	4.30
Goods & Services	11	5.91
Prison		
Prison cell	15	8.06
Inside view	6	8.60

Outside view	5	2.69
Incarcerated individuals	15	8.06
Correctional officers	2	1.08
Workaround		
How-to	7	3.76
Other		
Subtheme	1	3.23

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