Offender Stigma: A Textual Analysis of Law Enforcement Social Media Presence

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Introduction

- Offenders can face a great deal of stigma, especially with the inclusion of social media in modern times
  - i.e., stigma exacerbated by online discourse
- Perceptions of committing a crime (i.e., informal sanctions – shame, guilt) tend to hold much more influence over formal sanctions (e.g., prison sentence, fines; Kahan, 1997)
- Reintegration to home communities becomes incredibly difficult, particularly in a rural context, and yet:
  - Approximately 95% of offenders return to their communities (Martin & Garcie, 2022).
- There remains a need to understand community bias and stigma against offenders shared on social media, particularly in the context of small, rural communities

Purpose

To explore themes surrounding offender stigmatization as they appear on public Facebook posts (most dominant platform, especially for community news; Li et al., 2015) in the context of a single, rural Northern New York police department.

Methods

Qualitative analysis of textual data in public Facebook posts

- "Passive" analysis: existing posts rather than active recruitment (Franz et al., 2019)

Participants:

•Commenters on public arrest posts from 2022-2024 (including mugshots) of one specific agency with a Facebook media presence in rural Northern New York

•User-directed (to original post) and bidirectional (to other commenters; Franz et al., 2019)

Extraction Method:

•Public comments on posts will be manually copied into a spread sheet – no identifiers, offenders themselves not of interest

•30-40 arrest records total (100s of individual comments)

Data analysis: Thematic textual analysis

•Text of the social media comments read for familiarization

•Open coding, with intersectional analysis (Christensen & Jensen, 2012) as only additional lens (i.e., exploring how aspects of offender identity intersect, resulting in different biases among commenters – specifically gender, race, class)

•Identify patterns in data

•Group into larger themes, will be analyzed and coded for themes relating to gender, race, class (as examples)

Implications

This study will reveal themes surrounding race, class and gender. It is the goal of this study to follow:

- Whether there are specific gender, class, or racial themes in the comments of the selected Northern New York police department's social media posts.
- If comparison can be drawn by gender between the themes evident in the social media comments.
- Whether further study may be necessary in larger, more generalizable populations, concerning the extent to which alleged offenders experience gendered, class-based, or racial stigma via social media platforms.
- Whether analyzing dehumanizing comments made toward alleged offenders allows for a more humanizing lens through which to view their experiences.

Limitations

- A study of this nature cannot be generalized to other, broader populations.
- The interpretations and themes will be developed by one researcher, subjecting the study to individual bias.