

GIRLS INCARCERATED: A TEXTUAL AND VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE
PORTRAYAL OF RECIDIVISM AND REHABILITATION BY REALITY TELEVISION
PARTICIPANTS

by
Francesca Nicole Ervin

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Chair of Committee: Summer Harlow, PhD

Committee Member: Dani Madrid-Morales, PhD

Committee Member: John P. Vincent, PhD

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DEDICATION/EPIGRAPH

Dedicated to my mother, Barbara Ervin and in loving memory of my father, Kenneth Ervin.
Thank you for having faith in me when I had none in myself.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the portrayal of rehabilitation and recidivism on the Netflix reality show *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up* as well as the portrayal of rehabilitation and recidivism on the Instagram accounts of eight of the girls who participated in the reality show. In doing so, this study sought to answer how rehabilitation and recidivism were portrayed and to address the morality of involving members of vulnerable populations (i.e. children, incarcerated, members of ethnic minorities) to participate in a reality television show during their rehabilitation.

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Chapter 1 — Introduction

According to the Netflix website, Netflix is a streaming service created by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph that has been providing digital movie and television content to users since 1997. The service slowly grew from online rental to a subscription service in 1999 that provided users with unlimited movies for a monthly fee. In 2000, Netflix began offering a rating and recommendation option to better tailor suggestions to viewers' tastes. Although it was first offered as an online movie rental service, Netflix branched out to streaming television shows and movies in 2007, and original content in 2013. As the company has grown, it has become available in more and more countries and on more platforms. Additionally, Netflix has partnered with electronics companies, such as PlayStation, so individuals can use the service on their gaming consoles. By 2018, two of Netflix's original creations had won two Oscars and several others were nominated for so many Emmy Awards that the number rivaled those of cable giant HBO. The service is available in 190 countries and currently has 158 million members (About Netflix, n.d.).

As with many large companies, Netflix has faced its fair share of criticism. Poteet (2018) detailed 17 controversies involving Netflix, including boycotts, rising prices, shrinking program availability, original programming that reinforces stereotypes, as well as scandals involving predatory actors. In 2018 Netflix was criticized for the creation of a controversial show entitled *13 Reasons Why*, which deals with teen suicide in a way that parent groups and mental health advocates considered to be unsafe (Crum, 2018). Despite this controversy and the possible mental health ramifications, Netflix announced that the show would continue and has since produced a third season. Additionally, the CEO, Richard Hastings, has been quoted as saying

“Nobody has to watch it” and that the show had “been enormously popular and successful for us” (Crum, 2018).

Hastings’ quote, and the sentiment behind it, are relevant to this thesis for two reasons. First, the quote shows the importance that the company places on revenue. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but it also highlights the disinterest of the CEO and, by extension, the company, to cancel successful shows, even if they might be harmful. In the case of *13 Reasons Why*, those purported by parental and other activist groups to be at risk are teen viewers (Crum, 2018). Parents’ concerns about the effects of the show on their teens mirror that of much scholarship, which focuses on the relationship between viewers and shows, whether fictional or “reality” programs (e.g. Brody et al., 1980; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; 1962; Eiser et al., 1978; Hess and Goldman, 1962). Current research on reality television, which is defined by Andrejevic (2004) as “a broad genre with varied types of programming and features individuals performing unscripted and often spontaneous behavior” (p. 62), focuses on the effects that the participants’ onscreen behavior has on viewers. Fewer studies, however, consider the relationship between reality show participants and their inclusion in the show (Cianci, 2008; Podlas, 2010). Considering the continually growing popularity of reality television as a genre (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018), this lack of attention on reality TV participants is a significant gap in the literature that this thesis aims to address. With this in mind, this study examines the relationship between how participants on the Netflix show *Girls Incarcerated* are portrayed and how the participants use social media to discuss their experiences on the show. In the first season, the docuseries follows the students of Madison Juvenile Correctional Facility, a juvenile detention center for young women in Indiana. In the second season, the viewers learn

that Madison has been closed and the facility downsized into a new building named LaPorte Juvenile. The first season aired in 2018 and the second in 2019.

Utilizing textual and visual analyses of the show and participants' Instagram accounts, this thesis employs a critical lens to analyze portrayals of rehabilitation and recidivism in order to understand the moral implications of producing and participating in a show that profits off vulnerable populations. Rehabilitation is the process by which the correctional system attempts to make former offenders into productive members of society while recidivism is "[t]he tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend" (*Recidivism*, n.d.). The girls' analyzed in this thesis have entered a facility in order to be rehabilitated and it is worth investigating their portrayals in order to examine the possible ramifications of being included on reality television. This thesis builds on existing literature through exploration of the morality of reality shows from the viewpoint of the participants, rather than the audience. Additionally, the use of social media allows for an analysis of the participants' portrayals of rehabilitation and recidivism both inside and outside of the show. Finally, this thesis adds to rehabilitation and recidivism literature from a media perspective, as current literature focuses mostly on psychology.

In 2015, Netflix's popularity contributed to about half of a 3% decline in television viewership and analysts anticipated a rise of 14% in Netflix viewership by 2020 (Spangler, 2016). Considering the impact Netflix is making on the television industry, in addition to reality television's growing popularity (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018) and the propagation of a selfie oriented culture (Marwick, 2015) promoted by Instagram and its 800 million-plus monthly users (Etherington, 2017), it becomes all the more important to critically examine how the participation of members of vulnerable populations in a reality show and their self-portrayals on Instagram might play a role in our understanding of rehabilitation and recidivism. Understanding

how rehabilitation and recidivism is portrayed on the show as well as through self-portrayals on Instagram could potentially shed light on the ability of these girls being successfully rehabilitated.

Netflix has already shown a disregard for the negative effects that the company's shows may have on its viewers (Crum, 2018). It is important to take a critical view of the content the company decides to air and promote with its platform, as it may not only be negatively effecting viewers, but participants as well. Examination of the social media of those involved in *Girls Incarcerated* allows for the ability to get to know the image of the girls that they decide to portray. The examination of the public persona is important in examining how rehabilitation and recidivism are portrayed. It is worth questioning, then, how the presence of the Netflix cameras might have influenced how the girls chose to portray themselves on the show, and how their desire to maintain their reality star fame after being released might play a role in how they portray themselves on Instagram. Since the show first aired, at least 10 of the girls have attained followers in the tens of thousands on Instagram. Often on their Instagram pages, the girls tout their place on the show, and viewers praise the girls for their appearance on the show, in effect, praising them for their portrayals as young juvenile delinquents.

The purpose of this thesis therefore is to examine the manner in which incarceration is portrayed in *Girls Incarcerated* as well as the moral implications of including members of vulnerable populations on the show. To do this, the current seasons available on Netflix, as well as the most popular Instagram accounts of the girls who maintain an active social media presence, was analyzed qualitatively to consider the relationship between the girls' appearance on the reality show and their subsequent portrayals on Instagram. This thesis employs critical theory, which is defined as an approach used to examine society for the purposes of criticizing

and changing it (Baran & Davis, 2011). Through analysis of the Netflix episodes and Instagram accounts, this thesis critically questions the morality of Netflix in filming members of vulnerable populations and what the implications are for participants' own self-perception and portrayal on social media. Although Netflix has several other docuseries about vulnerable and incarcerated populations, such as *Jailbirds*, this particular show was chosen because of the participants' presence on social media, which provides a glimpse into their lives after the show that is not always present with other docuseries.

Subsequent chapters of this thesis address previous research highlighting reality television, self-image, celebrity, microcelebrity, morality, juvenile rehabilitation and recidivism, prosocial behavior, critical theory, and consequentialism. Following the literature review, the methods section outlines how the textual and visual analyses of the show and Instagram posts were conducted, followed by findings and the discussion and conclusion with theoretical and practical implications.

Chapter 2 — Literature Review

Reality television

Reality television is an incoherent genre that as of yet resists a formal definition because of the different types of reality television (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Unlike other genres, it has been hard to categorize because it blurs the line between entertainment and news (Fishman, 2018). Because reality television has no formal definition, scholars have explored the “forms, genres, modes of address, subjects, aesthetic characteristics and thematic preoccupations of this field of programming” (Piper, 2006, p.134). While there is not currently a definitive definition of reality television, Godlewski and Perse (2010) identified two common factors of reality television: the (1) participation of non-actors in an (2) unscripted context that purports to depict reality. Reality shows are considered easy to film as there is no set design required and the

budget is generally low (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018). Several subgenres of reality television shows have been identified, including docu-soaps, talent, competition, makeover, and hidden camera (Glascock and Preston-Schreck, 2018). One enduring aspect of reality television is that viewers can view the real world through the perspective of participants (Godlewski & Perse, 2010).

Existing literature has focused largely on the effects of reality television on viewers and neglected to fully analyze the effects of participation on those involved. Reality television shows prey on the natural curiosity of viewers and encourage identification with participants so they will feel involved and continue watching (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). The process of identifying with a character makes viewers more likely to be influenced by the participant and more likely to feel satisfied at the end of the viewing experience (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Identification is influenced by the viewers' perceived realness of the show, cognitive and emotional involvement, and the level of exposure (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Ultimately, this process of identification, while desirable for producers and those involved with the reality show, could be detrimental for viewers if they are influenced to replicate negative behaviors. For instance, findings show that frequently watching reality television shows was a predictor among men and women of self-sexualization, which was defined as the tendency to value sexual appeal and characteristics to the exclusion of other personal characteristics (Ward et al., 2016). Similarly, during a survey of 285 Hispanic college students, Paredes et al. (2013) found that the students generally agreed that reality television glamourized drinking and 74.3% agreed that reality television encouraged alcohol consumption.

In addition to the possible negative media effects that audiences may experience, participants on reality shows also are potentially at risk for negative effects, although research on

participants is limited. Mast (2016) identified drawbacks to being included on reality television shows that are common to all participants. Four specific unethical aspects of reality television have been identified: intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation (Mast, 2016). Intrusion is defined as a violation, not only of an individual's personal space, but also their inner space, which includes their thoughts and emotions. Humiliation is described succinctly as "an act of disempowerment" that brings the perpetrator satisfaction and lowers the other individual's dignity or self-esteem (Mast, 2016, p. 2184). Mast (2016) defined misrepresentation as "any communicative act that deceives or (re)presents a particular state of affairs unfaithfully or misleadingly" (p. 2184). Finally, appropriation refers to the fact that participants generally sign some sort of waiver in order to be on a reality show. Signing this waiver effectively gives broadcasters the right to control the participants' public persona as it pertains to the show (Mast, 2016).

The four possible drawbacks of reality television for participants -- intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation -- are largely connected to the duality that reality television creates (Mast, 2016). The participants are obviously real people, but they also become characters. The characters must manage their on-screen personas, but they are ultimately at the mercy of the editing decisions made by producers (Mast, 2016). In this way, participants and their actions can be manipulated for maximum effect (Mast, 2016). Besides intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation, shame also has been found to be an inherent aspect of reality television (Palmer, 2006). As participants volunteer to be featured on these shows, they are seen as consenting victims who willingly take shame upon themselves (Palmer, 2006). Palmer (2006) introduced shame as a concept that exists within the scope of community and norms. Shame is used as a tool to reiterate boundaries in our society. For example, in reality

television shows like *Cops*, shame is used to reiterate the authority of the police and the wrongness of offenders. This shaming reinforces the bonds of community because it is for the community. Shame is explored in reality television for profit and, depending on the show, participants are seen as “willing victims” who are shameless (Palmer, 2006). Additionally, Boross and Reijnders (2019) addressed the inherent problems with transformative shows that attempt to normalize the status quo and in doing so put those who are different in a subjugated position under the guise of empowerment.

Participation in reality shows can be stressful for adults, let alone children. O’Neill (2013) questioned whether children should be included in reality shows. Celebrities naturally experience a level of stress that can be amplified in children who participate in reality television shows (O’Neill, 2013). As children play themselves, cameras “expose their most private moments –friendship dramas, ugly fights with parents, embarrassing mistakes” for the enjoyment of the audience (O’Neill, 2013, p. 29). These children are often not old enough to legally make their own decisions, but they are expected to be able to handle the emotional strain of being exposed to the world. As the girls in *Girls Incarcerated* are mostly underage, it can be assumed that at least some of them needed their parents to provide assent as they could not legally consent to participate in the show on their own. Jones and Weber (2015) examined the perception of reality television stars who are also mothers and found that mothers who seek fame for themselves through their children, or fame for their children through social media, are perceived by the public as bad mothers who in a way are prostituting their children for attention. Using children for reality show stardom was found to be “a gender crime so extreme that the grotesque reality celebrity mother must be punished through every discursive weapon in the arsenal of the politics of representation” (Jones & Weber, 2015, p.13). While the study focused on public

perception of the mothers, it illustrates how quickly the perception of a manufactured celebrity, or those who gain fame not through accomplishment but through publicity or inclusion on reality television (Furedi, 2010), can change, as the mothers were alternately seen as good mothers, bad mothers, shrews, and puppet masters (Jones & Weber, 2015). The opinions of the public change in relatively short periods of time and as they were reality stars, this is just a further indication of the stress that playing oneself on reality television can cause (Jones & Weber, 2015). This stress would be hard enough for an adult to navigate but could be overwhelming for a child.

Because of such stress, studies have considered the effects of participation in reality television on self-image. For example, Ghosh and Mukhopadhyay (2015) examined the self-image of children participating in performance-oriented reality television shows and found that while the participants were goal oriented in their quest for fame and demonstrated “enthusiasm and quick engagement with [the] new and unfamiliar,” they received criticism from several avenues, which lead to “discrepancy between actual self and ideal self-becom[ing] greater for them leading to low self-esteem” (p.5). In their experiment, the authors concluded that the low self-esteem of the childhood performers as compared to the high self-esteem of the control group was an indication of poor mental health as “people with low self-esteem have uncertain, unstable and contradictory idea[s] about themselves; they usually suffer from self-concept confusion” (Ghosh & Mukhopadhyay, 2015, p.6).

Between the editing decisions of the producers, willingness of individuals to participate despite shame and problems with self-image, intrusions, and appropriation, Mast (2016) concluded that reality television, in its search for commercial success, poses some inherent and unresolved ethical issues. For instance, production companies are known to negatively typecast individuals who are more likely to ensure drama in the show, thus ensuring the presence of some

sort of shame or humiliation for certain participants for the sake of viewership. In the case of *Girls Incarcerated*, it is important to note that all the featured girls had been previously arrested and/or were addicted to illegal substances, therefore it should be questioned whether these girls were chosen to be featured as “stars” of the show because of their criminal records, and therefore the potential for drama. Another ethical concern is the contracts that participants are made to sign before they can be involved in the show. These contracts allow the production team to edit the final product as it pleases and control the narrative. Participants are occasionally misled about the format of the show, their contribution to the show, and possible consequences for appearing on the show (Mast, 2016). Participants are recorded throughout their association on the show through good and bad times, and throughout the course of the show they may be humiliated, shamed, excluded, misrepresented, and exploited through longstanding public exposure and consent that has to last until the show is removed from circulation (Mast, 2016). This thesis thus considers these ethical concerns as they relate to how participation in the show could be related to the girls’ portrayals of rehabilitation and recidivism on the show and on social media.

Self-image

Current literature about self-image pertaining to reality television generally focuses on transformative shows, or makeover television, defined as “reality television shows that seek to cause significant personal or material change in the lives of participants” (Hearn, 2008, p. 495). By this definition, *Girls Incarcerated* is not technically a makeover show, as the purpose of the show is not to cause a change in the girls but to document their time while incarcerated and track how certain participants do after they are released from the facility. Hearn (2008) challenged the assertion that makeover shows are empowering, arguing that they only “[exacerbate] the very conditions of personal and material insecurity it claims to address” (p. 495). These shows capitalize on the performance of insecurity carried out by participants attempting to fit into the

dominant culture (Hearn, 2008). In a way, this is similar to *Girls Incarcerated*, as Netflix is able to capitalize off of the unfortunate stories and struggles of young offenders. This process creates temporary manufactured celebrities that are famous not because of their talents, but because they have been propped up by the cultural industry (Furedi, 2010).

Another aspect of self-image that is important to explore is how social media, particularly Instagram, affects self-image. Since appearing on the show, many of the girls have been catapulted to “influencer” status on Instagram, garnering tens of thousands of followers. Influencers are described as “those who exert influence over their community of followers, combining distinctive self-branding, self-presentation skills and a business approach” (Navarro et al., 2020, p. 2). In studying social media, there has been a large focus on the psychological and behavioral effects of social media, examining the behavioral decisions that lead to certain types of posts. Few studies, if any, consider Instagram celebrity among vulnerable populations or in relation to reality television, and this thesis seeks to fill that gap in this research.

It is worth questioning how reality television participation might influence those who begin the show with poor mental health and how that can further influence their view of self. For example, individuals with low self-esteem tend to experience greater mood swings in reaction to events (Ghosh & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). This finding illustrates the importance of studying possible mental health consequences of participating in reality television as it exacerbates low self-esteem or mood swings in participants, especially for younger participants. Participation in reality television has been found to influence children’s social sense of self, meaning that the way they interacted with other participants on the show was in a more self-centered way that revolved around their own individual goals of being famous (Ghosh & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). This raises another question of whether participation in reality television paired with an

environment that naturally involves some competition or negative influences can exacerbate negative self-esteem and lead to more pronounced self-centeredness. Considering that research suggests certain social media behaviors are tied to self-centeredness and narcissism with potentially detrimental effects on relationships (Chang & Chua, 2015; Halpern et al., 2017), it is worth exploring how *Girls Incarcerated* participants use social media to portray their time on the show.

Studies present contradicting findings on the extent to which users portray their “actual selves” on social media. Some suggest that users turn to filters and other techniques for presenting idealized versions of themselves (Chang & Chua, 2016) as well as to try on potential identities (Bell, 2019). Contrarily, Isaranon’s (2019) study of whether Facebook use can create affirmation of the ideal self and in turn generate ideal-self congruence showed that positive feedback from other users helped individuals to see themselves as, or work to become, their ideal selves. Similarly, Abdul Razak et al.’s (2020) study on using social media to change health behavior found that positive feedback on social media increased self-esteem and increased actual and ideal-self congruence. Isaranon’s (2019) findings are backed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who found that individuals’ desire to control how they are perceived is done in part to receive rewards like approval, but also to create “an image that is consistent with one’s personal identity” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 62). The implication of Isaranon (2019) is that affirmation, or positive feedback, on social media could lead to adherence to goal pursuit, as social media is used not only to maintain relationships but to achieve their ideal selves even if only superficially, and social media could feasibly be used to create some type of campaign of encouragement that boosts self-esteem. Isaranon’s (2019) findings that affirmation on social media could lead to goal pursuit are worth considering in the context of *Girls Incarcerated*. As

such, this thesis examines the girls' Instagram posts, looking for any prosocial behavior indicating they are attempting to do well after their release. While research suggests social media users often present an ideal self that does not necessarily align with the actual self (Bell, 2019), it is worth considering whether in the case of *Girls Incarcerated*, the social media attention might in fact be helping them stay on the right track, or whether indeed they are using Instagram to present an inaccurate view of their lives, through the use of self-presentation which could take the form of lies (Sheldon et al., 2019).

Celebrity

One aspect of reality show participation is the fleeting celebrity that comes with being on a television show. Celebrity is defined as “accumulation of attention capital” and is considered to be a quality that individuals possess (Rojek, 2015). Rojek (2015) acknowledged three types of celebrity: ascribed celebrity, referring to the hereditary celebrity that individuals like royalty would receive; achieved celebrity, referring to celebrity that is gained through the presentation of talent like sports or theatrical ability; and celestoids, a combination of the words celebrity and tabloid, refers to people who achieve bursts of fame. Academic literature within cultural and media studies has looked at celebrity as a combination of cultural and economic processes (Turner, 2004). For example, Turner (2004) suggests such processes include:

the commodification of the individual celebrity through promotion, publicity and advertising; the implication of celebrities in the process through which cultural identity is negotiated and formed; and most importantly, the representational strategies employed by the media in their treatment of prominent individuals. The sum of these processes constitutes a celebrity *industry*, and it is important that cultural studies' accounts of

celebrity deal with its production as a fundamental structural component of how the media operate at the moment. (p. 4)

Marshall (2010) viewed celebrity as a pedagogical tool which aids in the discourse of the self and in turn helps shape the cultural world. The desire for fame and celebrity is tied to the interest in being remembered past death (Greenberg et al., 2010). In fact, the reminder of death can make the need to achieve some sort of lasting impact more pressing (Greenberg et al., 2010)

With the evidence that fame has become more desired than in previous years, one of the reasons posited is that fame seems easier to attain due to the Internet (Greenberg et al., 2010). In addition to an interest in being remembered after death and the desire for fortune, another reason that fame was found to be so desirable was that admiration of already famous people may drive individuals to become famous in order to improve self-worth (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). Social media in particular have facilitated celebrity, turning ordinary YouTube and Instagram users into “influencers,” or online celebrities who display a lifestyle that the average person could not replicate (Chae, 2018). This lifestyle can provoke envy and perpetuate social comparisons, which make the position of influencer desirable to attain (Chae, 2018).

Celebrity, as a concept, can be broken down into two categories: self-made and manufactured (Furedi, 2010). Those who can be considered self-made generally have some sort of talent or reason for fame, such as musical ability. In contrast, manufactured celebrities are those individuals who are elevated and treated as interchangeable by media producers. Reality stars would fall into the manufactured category as they have been elevated to popularity through their appearance on a television show (Furedi, 2010). Manufactured stars are defined as a well-known person who is a product of a cultural industry that prioritizes the interchangeability of stars (Furedi, 2010). For instance, when the audience participates in challenge shows, like the

singing competition show *American Idol*, viewers invest time and emotion into individuals who achieve some modicum of fame, even if only be for a brief while (Furedi, 2010). For the purposes of this study, the girls from *Girls Incarcerated* are considered manufactured celebrities, who gained a small amount of fame through participation on a reality television show. They were later able to amplify their celebrity using practices of microcelebrity. Ultimately, they are young and impressionable individuals who were being used for entertainment purposes who have managed to parlay their time on the show into popularity online. As mentioned by Greenberg et al. (2010), fortune is a credible motivation for achieving fame. Fortune can be a biproduct of fame, the interest in which is similar for those who seek both celebrity as well as microcelebrity.

Microcelebrity

Microcelebrity is a term defined by Marwick (2015) as “a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices” (p.38). Senft (2013), the author who coined the term in 2008, defines microcelebrity as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (p. 346). Similarly, Khamis et al. (2017) address the necessity for self-branding and cultivating a relationship with one’s audience in order to achieve microcelebrity status. Social media has given the ordinary person the ability to achieve fame through the practices of microcelebrity and as they achieve fame, “they redistribute cultural power in both media and marketing: implicitly, micro-celebrity points to the growing agency, enterprise and business acumen of everyday media users” (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 203). With this understanding in mind, for the purposes of this thesis, microcelebrity is defined as the individuals with small spheres of influence who use online self-branding tools such as photographs and videos in order to connect with and grow their audience. In this sense, the participants from *Girls Incarcerated*, whose Instagram posts were analyzed for this study, constitute both manufactured celebrity and microcelebrity.

The purpose of microcelebrity self-branding or self-presentation practices is to capitalize on the attention economy, which assigns value to individuals' ability to attract attention to their output. Social media creates the opportunity for people to gain attention, and thus gain microcelebrity status, through different methods, such as adhering to a niche outside of cultural norms (Marwick, 2015). Microcelebrities may have a small following, but within their spheres they inhabit the celebrity position. Marwick (2015) stated that "in the broadcast era, celebrity was something a person was; in the internet era, microcelebrity is something people do" (p.140). Platforms like Instagram amplify individuals' reach and make it easier to grow a following. The girls from *Girls Incarcerated* who have garnered popularity on social media rise to the level of microcelebrity. Though their fame is not native to Instagram, they capitalize on their personal ability to gain attention in order to maintain the momentum garnered from their appearance on the Netflix show.

Specific to the girls' involvement with *Girls Incarcerated* and their subsequent popularity on social media, is the existence of an intersection between manufactured celebrity and microcelebrity. Anyone who appears on a reality television show could be said to be a manufactured celebrity, but microcelebrity is a practice of self-branding. The term microcelebrity is often used interchangeably with influencer (Navarro et al., 2020). Turner (2013) detailed the conscious decision by television producers to start focusing on "ordinary" celebrities, or people without skills specific to entertainment, such as dancing or acting, made famous because of the internet and self-branding. This is a consequence of what Turner (2013) called a populist turn in mass culture, in which ordinary people are elevated as a result of self-branding practices. This helps explain the rise of microcelebrities through media platforms like

reality television and social media: some of the girls from the show have turned what may originally have been a brief stint in the public eye into a fanbase of thousands on social media.

Morality

In order to look at the morality of turning members of vulnerable populations into manufactured micro-celebrities, it is necessary to consider existing morality literature concerning reality television. The study of morality focuses largely on societal norms and what is considered ethical within those norms (Resnik, 2011). While society is governed by these norms, conflicts regularly arise due to differences in how individuals “interpret, apply, and balance these norms in different ways in light of their own values and life experiences” (Resnik, 2011, p.1). Literature about morality has largely focused specifically on news events or entertainment programs, examining how the perceived level of morality of the program in question has affected society (Maguire et al., 2000). However, there is little to no literature that focuses on how media practices affect participants in the media. Having said that, it is possible to look at previous studies to ascertain society’s general perception of reality television shows like *Girls Incarcerated*. Presumably, *Girls Incarcerated*, because of its content dealing with criminal behavior, violence, and homosexuality, as well as its regular inclusion of profanity, could be considered morally dubious or be seen as having a negative moral effect on society. The question still remains, however, if it was moral to film and air the show in the first place.

Morality scholarship has focused on exploring audience perception of reality television in order to gauge moral objection and the perception that the genre glamorizes offensive content, such as violence and profanity (Scarborough & McCoy, 2016). Scarborough and McCoy (2016) noted that reactions to reality television “have all the hallmarks of a moral panic: the presence of moral guardians or moral entrepreneurs, the influence of the media, the belief that basic core

values are offended, and a call for action in the form of regulation or censorship” (p. 168). Klein (2011) looked at the educational potential of entertainment television as well as the moral responsibility that producers have to get the story right. Using interviews with reality TV producers and directors in the UK and US, Klein found that “[t]he prospect of television that encourages viewers to think and talk is significant whether or not there are direct and measurable effects on attitude” (p. 909). However, Klein (2011) also acknowledged the difference in health-related reality television from the US and the UK, noting that the US has a more sensationalistic approach. Ultimately, Klein concluded that the producers and directors recognized an interest in drawing attention to social issues or creating some sort of change, but they could not always definitively say whether their program had done this (Klein, 2011). The impetus to create some sort of dialogue about the importance of rehabilitation for preventing recidivism through entertainment television could be seen as a worthy undertaking, if that were the intention behind *Girls Incarcerated*, but the sensational aspect acknowledged by Klein (2011) speaks to a system that cares less about educating the public than it does about ratings. Current literature does not address what kind of moral responsibility reality show producers owe to participants nor does it ponder the proper ratio of sensational to critical content. Rather, the literature focuses on how media can affect the audience. This study fills these gaps in the literature by exploring the morality of reality television from the side of the participants, rather than the audience.

Prosocial behavior

Prosocial behavior is described as any helpful behavior, i.e. cooperation or sharing (Batson & Powell, 2003). Current literature seeks to explain why people do or don't practice prosocial behavior using theories such as social learning, tension reduction, exchange or equity, attribution, esteem-enhancement, and moral reasoning (Bandura, 1977; Eisenberg-Berg & Hand, 1979; Krebs, 1982; Patock-Peckham et al., 2018). Motives for prosocial behavior include

altruism, collectivism, and principlism, as well as egoism (Batson & Powell, 2003). Prosocial behavior is hard to measure as there are so many ways that prosocial behavior can be expressed. Having said that, there is an expectation that understanding prosocial behavior could aid in intervention methods for anti-social behavior (Mallah, 2020). Previous literature has focused heavily on younger children and adolescents (Baillargeon et al., 2011; Brownell, 2016; Brownell & Drummond, 2020). Literature that focuses on adolescences is of primary use to this study as the individuals operating the Instagram accounts and featured in the show *Girls Incarcerated* are all between the ages of 15 and 20. Previous studies have acknowledged that prosocial behavior increases during adolescence, in part because of the ability of peer and parent attachment to influence prosocial behavior (Lee et al., 2017; Charalampous et al., 2018).

Schoeps et al. (2020) suggested empathy also plays a part in the development of prosocial behavior during adolescence. Their study of around 800 students ages 12 to 15 measured peer attachment, social and emotional strengths and difficulties, and empathy. The study ultimately found that emotional empathy was a mediator for emotional and behavioral problems, while cognitive empathy was a mediator for prosocial behavior. They concluded that emotional training could improve interpersonal relationships and social functioning (Schoeps et al., 2020). This thesis seeks to examine TV- and social media portrayals of prosocial behavior (or non-prosocial behavior) to better understand their link to rehabilitation and recidivism.

Juvenile rehabilitation and recidivism

Research surrounding rehabilitation and recidivism centers on correctional approaches that are currently practiced by correctional facilities. The literature also approaches recidivism from a psychological standpoint to examine behavioral changes in offenders. For the purposes of this study, it is important to understand typical juvenile rehabilitation procedures to compare the

literature to the practices observed in *Girls Incarcerated* and portrayed on participants' Instagram accounts. Variables that indicate a risk of recidivism have been found to include low grades, risk of expulsion from school, spare time, and socializing with bad influences (Kovačević et al., 2015). There are currently two ideas concerning how to deal with female offenders, one being a gender-neutral approach, which uses the same risk assessment and approaches for both males and females, and the other is gender-specific and focuses on specific female experiences (Scott & Brown, 2018). Blanchette and Brown (2006) criticized the gender-neutral method because previous research has "either focused exclusively on male offenders or failed to disaggregate the data by genders (p. xv). The gender-neutral approach fails to take into account gender specific priorities and bonding factors such as a female's attachment to a child or possible prioritization of healthy relationships (Blanchette & Brown, 2006).

A good indication of whether rehabilitation in the detention facility has been successful is if the girls, once released, are able to avoid previous pitfalls and lead productive lives. To address this, this study compares Indiana's recidivism rates with the frequency with which the show's participants re-offended. Putniņš (2003) examined the use of illegal substances and the risk of recidivism, which is relevant as many of the girls entered the facility with chemical dependencies or having admitted to recreational uses of illegal substances. Mincey and colleagues (2008) addressed the historical perspective of juvenile delinquency and how rehabilitation programs are usually structured, demonstrating the importance of listening to lived experiences in order to reduce recidivism (Mincey et al., 2008). This shows the importance of listening to people who have been through certain situations in order to understand the challenges that these juveniles go through and the temptations they face when they are released.

Without this understanding, the programs that the juveniles are subjected to while incarcerated cannot be as effective as possible.

In practice, previous approaches to juvenile delinquents took the approach of getting tough with the young offenders by lengthening incarceration time and making incarceration as uncomfortable as possible (Matthew & Pitts, 1998). This get-tough approach speaks to a historical focus on punishment, rather than rehabilitation. However, focusing on punishment precludes attention to nuance, such as the reasons for the offense and whether punishment actually removes those motivations from the juvenile's life. While the juvenile system initially hinged on the guiding tenant that juveniles should not be treated like adults, Askew (2013) pointed out that juvenile criminal justice systems are beginning to mirror adult criminal justice systems more and more. The similarities are inherently problematic considering the flaws in the adult system, one of which is the disproportionate focus on African Americans (Askew, 2013). High recidivism rates indicate not only a failure to rehabilitate, but a general disinterest in rehabilitation over punishment (Askew, 2013). The juvenile system experienced a shift in the 1970s, during the War on Drugs, changing the model from rehabilitation to focus instead on accountability, retribution, and deterrence (Askew, 2013). Rather than continuing to acknowledge juveniles as individuals needing to be addressed in manners specific to their situation, the new method led to increased punishment through the implementation of "mandatory minimums and proportionate and determinate sentencing schemes (Askew, 2013, p.376).

Petitcherc et al. (2013) looked at whether going through the court system increases the likelihood of recidivism in both violent and non-violent juvenile offenders. The study followed boys and young men, from the ages of 6 to 25, from low-socioeconomic areas. Of the 1,037 boys

that the study followed, 225 were arrested and 176 were brought to juvenile court. The study found that juveniles who were arrested but did not have to undergo a court case were less likely to reoffend (Petitclerc et al., 2013). This study shows that incarceration is not the only hinderance to rehabilitation. The finding that going to court can contribute to recidivism shows that the label of delinquent can affect the self-esteem and self-perception of juveniles (Jensen, 1972). The literature about the development of and problems in the juvenile system (Askew, 2013) as well as the ramifications of having to go to court (Petitclerc et al., 2013) is relevant to the current study for elucidating some of the contributing factors to recidivism. Understanding more about why recidivism occurs can contribute to analysis of both *Girls Incarcerated* as well as the girls' Instagram accounts.

Previous literature focuses on how reality television affects the audience. Few studies examine the influence those shows have on the participants. Because the participants of this particular show are vulnerable populations, this thesis analyzed the participants' behavior and words during the show and compare it to their behavior on social media once they have been released from the correctional facility. The thesis used social media to help ascertain how participants on the reality TV show used Instagram to discuss their celebrity, crime, rehabilitation, and recidivism. The inclusion of literature concerning reality television, self-image, celebrity, microcelebrity, morality, juvenile rehabilitation and recidivism, prosocial behavior, critical theory, and consequentialism was necessary to cover the scope of the question raised by the production of this show. Celebrity, microcelebrity, and self-image literature was necessary to explain the girls' current position on social media as well as to examine the way they choose to portray themselves. Inclusion on a reality television show can elevate individuals to heights of attention that they had not previously achieved. In acknowledging this, it is

important to examine why the individuals appeared on the show as well as how they portrayed themselves on the show. And while prosocial behavior, juvenile rehabilitation and recidivism are not typically explored in media studies, they were necessary inclusions in order to fully explore and understand the girls' situations and portrayals. With this in mind, this thesis poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How is rehabilitation and recidivism portrayed in the reality Netflix show *Girls Incarcerated*?

RQ2: How is rehabilitation and recidivism portrayed in the Instagram accounts of girls who participated in the reality Netflix show *Girls Incarcerated*?

RQ3: How does the rate of recidivism of the girls featured in this study compare to the recidivism rate of the facility featured in the reality Netflix show *Girls Incarcerated*?

Critical theory

Critical theory is associated with “uncovering the historical and social conditions of human oppression with the concurrent commitment to bringing about emancipation and liberation” (Macdonald, 2014). *Girls Incarcerated* focuses on members of vulnerable populations who already experience some societal disadvantage. For this reason, the show needs to be looked at with a critical gaze. The purpose of a critical theory approach is to reflect on social life in order to determine what is right (Forester, 1987). This is an appropriate approach for the current thesis as it seeks to question whether the filming of *Girls Incarcerated* was morally wrong. Hill (1995) addresses critical theory having been founded on conflict orientation, meaning that social actors “have opposing needs, desires, and goals” (p. 146). While Hill applied this to sensitive information being shared in the course of research by vulnerable populations, the same would be true for participants and producers in a reality show. The goal of the producer is

to create entertaining content while the goal of the participant, especially in the case of *Girls Incarcerated*, may be less clear. The producer of the show is largely in control of the product that is eventually released, making it possible for the participants, needs, desires, and goals to become secondary to the entertainment aspect. The goal in this thesis is to address a genre that has regularly been considered for how it influences the public but has focused less on whether the participants are treated appropriately or whether a waiver is sufficient to film certain situations. With an understanding of the moral implications of filming reality shows taken into account, an addition to what is considered morally right in media practices can be considered.

Consequentialism

Consequentialism seeks to address what makes a specific outcome right. Consequentialism is defined as “the view that an act is morally permissible if the consequences are morally good,” and what is morally good is dependent on the particular views of the consequentialist (Watson & Arp, 2011). Consequentialists typically look at whether an action or decision caused a positive outcome, if so, that decision is made right because of the positive outcome (Hill, 1995). Watson and Arp (2011) examined reality television and the ethics behind whether compensation is enough for the exploitation that participants invariably opened themselves up to when appearing on reality television. In the case of *Girls Incarcerated*, the girls cannot receive monetary compensation for their appearance on the show because of “Son of Sam” laws which prevent criminals from capitalizing on their crime. In this case, the show was analyzed to determine positive outcomes from the show that may be considered compensation for the intrusion of being involved.

Chapter 3 — Methods

This study featured a triangulation of methods and utilized textual and visual analysis to analyze two seasons of the Netflix show *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up*, as well as the Instagram accounts of eight of the girls who participated in the show. Seasons one and two contain eight episodes each, with run times between 37:08 minutes and 47:11 minutes; the average is 43 minutes and 14 seconds. The full run time of the series is approximately 11.5 hours. The eight girls whose Instagram accounts were analyzed appear throughout the seasons they were featured on. Four girls — Brianna Guerra, Paige Mcatee, Najwa Pollard, and Aubrey Wilson — appeared in season one, while Hannah Aberegg, Tiffany Kristler, Jesse Rose, and Leeaeira Stokes appeared in season two. For this reason, all 11.5 hours of the show were textually and visually analyzed. The transcripts could not be found online so the subtitles were downloaded as an xml file and later converted into a Word document (Qnorsten, 2016). After the subtitles were downloaded, the show was re-watched in order to ensure the accuracy of the subtitles and to better mark who was speaking and to accommodate the girls' specific dialects. The show was watched once to correct transcripts and again with the corrected transcripts. The transcripts were also viewed separately in order to analyze instances of repeated or similar statements that indicated themes of rehabilitation and recidivism. While the show was being viewed, the researcher looked at how the girls' emotional state and behavior lined up with or contradicted their words and goal of release.

Of all the girls depicted in the show, there were some who had their faces and identities obscured, some who were identified but were merely interviewed for the purposes of providing background for the main characters, and finally there were 22 main characters who were interviewed regularly and given the chance to tell their story. This thesis focused on eight of the

22 main characters. These eight were chosen because they have at least 5,000 followers on Instagram and posted to the platform at some point in 2019.

Instagram is a photo sharing social media site that was used by 37% of internet users by early 2019 (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2019). Every day, about 60% of Instagram users log into the platform and upload 95 million pieces of media, including photos and videos (Parker, 2016). By late 2017, Instagram boasted 800 million monthly users and 500 million daily users (Etherington, 2017). As such, and because of its focus on images as well as Instagram being second only to YouTube in terms of prevalence with teenagers (*Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018*, 2018), Instagram is a good choice to examine the way that the girls from *Girls Incarcerated* choose to present themselves to the public. By analyzing content from the show and the Instagram accounts of eight girls, this study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between the televised and Instagram portrayals of the girls who participated in the show in order to explore and analyze how rehabilitation and recidivism is portrayed.

Instagram was chosen as the platform of analysis because, as opposed to other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat, the accounts were generally kept public and could be analyzed without sending a follow or friend request. The Instagram account @girlsinn_wherearetheynow was used to locate the Instagram accounts of the girls deemed relevant to the study. The individual who runs the account posts regular updates and has been shown to be in contact with the girls from the show or family members who can provide updates. This thesis looked at all posts (n=758) available on each account at the time of collection, March 24, 2020 to April 5, 2020. Each post was saved as a screenshot in order to preserve the image as well as the caption.

The eight girls included in the analysis were chosen because their Instagram accounts had managed to amass 5,000 followers, and because their accounts had been updated in 2019. Only 15.7% of users manage to amass 1,000-10,000 followers, and only 5.7% are able to get 10,000-50,000 followers (Instagram Follower Rates, 2018). Having 5,000 followers was a criterion for selection because it is substantially more than the average number of followers, and since only 5.7% of the population has 5000 or more followers, it speaks to the level of influence ascribed to these accounts. Choosing 5,000 as a selection criterion also limited the sample size and thereby made the number of pictures that needed to be analyzed qualitatively more manageable.

Choosing accounts that had been updated in 2019, corresponding with the year the second season was released on Netflix, ensured the accounts were still active or up to date. Of the 22 main characters on the show, 16 had accounts as of December 2019, when the girls were identified for inclusion in this study. However, one girl's account was excluded because the last update was in 2018 and another account, which seemed to be growing quickly, was excluded because the account was recently hacked and deleted and had not yet reached 5,000 followers. This left eight possible Instagram accounts to analyze. Posts from each account were screenshotted from late March to early April 2020 in order to preserve the posts. For posts that included video, detailed notes about the caption, or lack thereof, video content, and date of post, were recorded. While not all accounts were screenshotted on the same day, every individual account was completed in a day. This time range was chosen through convenience sampling and, as the girls were chosen in December, but their accounts were screenshotted in March and April, the girls had time to add or delete posts, and it was possible a further incarceration could have occurred between the dates of their selection and data collection. In total, 758 images were saved and analyzed. The researcher looked for similarities in caption topics or repeatedly used emojis. Additionally, the

researcher looked at who was included in the picture, the poses in the pictures, and how that was similar to the other girls' pictures. The Instagram accounts analyzed are listed in Table 1, which details the girls' names, account handles, follower count as of April 13, 2020, the season they appeared on, their ages, previous offenses, and the number of posts analyzed in this study.

Table 1: Instagram and Appearance Information

Name	Age	Account	Season	Arrest information	Follower count	Posts since appearance on show	Total number of posts analyzed
Hannah Aberegg	18	@snownahnah	2	Prostitution	9,786	102	102
Brianna Guerra	17	@thereallbriannag	1	Drug possession Evading arrest	87k	261	261
Tiffany Kristler	16	@317.tiff	2	Fighting Robbery	47.9k	32	33
Paige Mcatee	17	@therealpaigemcatee	1	Armed robbery Fighting Possession with intent to distribute Robbery	36k	154	154

Textual analysis is described as a qualitative analysis tool that examines media content and “focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (Fursich, 2009, p. 240). In gathering and analyzing texts, the researcher is able to explore the role the texts play in “the social construction of reality” (Fursich, 2009, p. 240). Through the use of textual analysis, the researcher uncovers the underlying meaning of the text, rather than the manifest meaning. This thesis did not focus on effects, but rather the mediated “reality” of the Netflix show and the girls’ Instagram accounts. Textual analysis looks beyond the manifest content and examines the content as it exists in the current culture and the extra layer of meaning that consideration gives to the message (Fursich, 2009). It has been referred to as “thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, ideological analysis or more specific types such as genre analysis or cultural analysis” (Fursich, 2009, p. 241). With the use of textual analysis, this thesis focused attention on the meaning in a message, rather than the number of times that message occurs. This was useful while analyzing *Girls Incarcerated* as the situations that these girls were in demand a more nuanced review. Talking about drug use in the course of recovery is different than glorification and for this reason, the themes that emerged through thematic analysis served this research more than a quantitative approach would have (Frey et al., 1999). Thematic analysis is touted by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a flexible method that can be used to find, consider, and report themes in data. Additionally, this approach is not tied to a specific theoretical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Visual analysis of the show and Instagram posts was included to capture more nuance and add more context to the textual analysis. Media have become increasingly visually oriented as time has gone on. In order to fully understand the portrayals of these girls on Netflix and in social media, it was necessary to incorporate one of the most important aspects of the media, the

visual aspect. Visual analysis is typically used in a qualitative manner and focuses on the cultural meaning of different images (Knoblauch et al., 2008). Semiotics, which is defined as breaking down an image in order to piece it into a “larger system of meaning,” (Rose, 2013, p.105) was utilized in order to bridge the gap between the girls’ onscreen portrayal and their self-portrayal on Instagram. The combination of visual and textual analysis has become more common in recent research and though it would be possible to separate them, combining the two aids in the analysis of media content like that of Netflix and Instagram (Knoblauch et al., 2008).

The visual and textual analyses were conducted simultaneously to grant both more meaning. While the textual analysis looked specifically at what was said in the show, the visual analysis focused on the girls’ countenance and the emotion of the scene, as well as considered what the girls were wearing, including the color of the girl’s shirts and sweatshirts. Burgundy tops indicated that the girls were making good grades, behaving accordingly, and had earned two weeks off of whatever time had been added to their stay due to fighting or other conduct issues. Visual analysis of the Instagram accounts focused on who or what was in the picture, where it appeared to be taken, what was happening in the picture, what the girls were wearing, and when the picture was taken. The textual analysis focused on the content and meaning of the captions’ text as well as looked for repeated words or emojis. The @girlsinn_wherearetheynow Instagram account was used to try to identify when or if the girls had reoffended and gauge whether the content of the pictures seemed to change in response or whether there were any long pauses in posting. The analysis was conducted inductively, using observation first, before moving on to create themes that encapsulated those observations. Knowing that the “self” presented on social media does not always line up with an individual’s real or ideal self (Bell, 2019), it was better to proceed with observations rather than proceeding deductively with a hypothesis.

This study takes a critical theory approach to analyze the power dynamics created through media (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). While shifts in media technology have somewhat changed the typical definition of what it means to be the media elite, Chaffee and Metzger (2001) pointed out that the trends of centralizing control of media and expanding control are common to all media, the internet included. The stronger Netflix gets, it is possible that it will be less inclined to change when faced with pushback from the public, which was apparent in the company's approach to *13 Reasons Why*. *Girls Incarcerated* depicts individuals who are members of at least two vulnerable groups—youth and the incarcerated—and they are filmed for entertainment and for the enrichment of the Netflix company. Critical theory is a relevant lens through which to analyze this study because it is important to look at whether Netflix is eschewing safe or ethical practices in favor of making money. With Netflix's level of influence and the disregard Netflix has previously shown toward possibly harmful content (Crum, 2018), the morality of the company's production choices should be considered in order to determine best practices going forward and whether certain shows should be pulled from the site.

Chapter 4 — Findings

Rehabilitation and recidivism on *Girls Incarcerated*

In answer to the first research question concerning how *Girls Incarcerated* portrayed rehabilitation and recidivism, the following themes emerged during analysis: prioritization of the self, restoration and maintenance of good relationships, and reliance on a poor support system.

The themes *prioritization of the self* and *restoration of good relationships* applied specifically to how rehabilitation was portrayed in the show *Girls Incarcerated* and *reliance on a poor support system* was indicative of recidivism. The *prioritization of the self* theme, which

refers to the girls learning to consider the consequences of their actions on their future selves, emerged from the demonstrated necessity of focusing on their own program rather than getting pulled into drama by other girls, as well as their own self-reflection on the choices that led to their arrest. Prior to their incarceration, the girls were unable to prioritize the distant future. They instead prioritized their more immediate wants without consideration for anything aside from their present actions. This theme is exemplified by a stated desire to focus on their futures rather than their immediate wants. Many of the girls entered with the expectation that the facility would not create any lasting change in their lives but leave with clear wants and a hope for life improvement in the future.

Paige Mcatee, 17, who was introduced in the second episode of season one, is one of the girls whose time on the show suggests a re-prioritization of her goals and sense of self. Mcatee had only been at Madison for two weeks but she had been in and out of juvenile facilities since she was 14. The criminal behavior that landed her in detention included playing with guns, selling drugs, fighting, and robbery. In her first interview on the show, she described the life she had previously led as being “exciting” and stated that were she to change, her life would be “boring” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2). The first indication of a shift in Mcatee comes in episode three. A usually stoic person, Mcatee admits “I’ve cried because my dad told me he ain’t want me to come home, and I never cry, like I never be crying here¹” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E3). She says:

Like I know my dad loves me. He just wants me to do good and graduate and do everything I gotta do cuz my dad wants better for me. I’m literally a bad person on the

¹ In order to convey the girls’ sentiments as accurately as possible, the transcripts used were not corrected for grammar and were recorded verbatim.

outs. It's really scary and that's why my dad gets scared, because of the stuff that I get myself into. My dad wanted me to come to Madison because he wanted me to change. Like he wanted me to get respect out of this. He wanted me to learn from my actions out of this. He wanted me to just change as a person completely. And that's gonna be – that's hard. I honestly don't know if I can do it (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E3)

By episode eight, Mcatee has experienced some successes in Madison, including getting to wear burgundy tops, which indicates good behavior and removes time from her stay. She says that every time she succeeds, it is a revelation that she “can do something that doesn't involve fighting, guns, or money” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E8). She transitions from someone who believes that bad behavior comes more naturally to her than good, to someone who considers herself a “good kid” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E8). By the time she is a week from her release date, she says, “I'm glad I came here because I've changed and when I get out, I'm not gonna go back [to the streets]. Imma sign up for college and I'm gonna go to college to be a homicide detective.” Because she knows what it is like to have lost someone, she says she wants to be a detective one day because, “I wanna help people get justice for the people that they lost” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E8).

Similarly, Jesse Rose, 16, introduced in season two, demonstrates this theme of reprioritization of the self over time. When she is first introduced, she is almost universally disliked by the other girls because of her attitude and willingness to fight. She says that when she leaves the LaPorte facility, she is “probably not going to take a lot from it” (*Girls Incarcerated*, s2.ep1). She says, “[w]e just here playing the system. We kissin' ass, follow these rules so we can get out and once we get out we gonna be doin the same stuff” (*Girls Incarcerated*, s2ep1). She had been in and out of trouble for years and had been arrested for driving without a license,

auto-theft, fighting, and robbery. As of her first interview, other than getting out of the facility, her only primary concern was being transferred to the same unit as her girlfriend. In season one as well as two, the staff mention the detrimental effect romantic relationships can have on the girls' rehabilitation because it takes their focus away from their programs. As the season progresses however, Rose focuses less on drama and dating. At one point she says, "I've been trying to lay low and stay out of drama a little bit, just mind my own business and worry about me cause I'm bout to leave anyway so I don't care about none of these girls" (*Girls Incarcerated*, S2/E4). She says, "My family is my everything," and she feels "like I need to be there for my family," to support her grandmother who is occasionally in poor health as well as to be there for her siblings. By the time she is ready to leave, she has built up a rapport with certain staff members and says, "I respect other people more. I'm more mature. I'm gonna try to stay out the streets. I'm gonna try to stop doing drugs. Get a job" (*Girls Incarcerated*, S2/E7). She credits the facility with her high school graduation, as it gave her the ability to focus on school and says she wants to be the first one in her family to get a degree and a career. As Mcatee and Rose illustrate, as the show progresses, the girls' initial bravado fades away. They begin to talk about goals they have outside of the system that require they stay out of trouble, like going to college. As they start to open up and discuss personal goals, it becomes apparent that while they have portrayed in the show's interviews their lives as being fun, or at the very least exciting, many of them do not want to continue doing the things that they were arrested for.

For example, Christiona (Chrissy) Hutchinson, 17, is introduced in the first episode of the first season. At the time she had been at Madison for almost two years and had been arrested for, among other things, home invasion, fighting, and cutting off her house arrest bracelet. During an interview, she showed a very clear example of her shift in thinking and attempt to prioritize

herself through the use of a Venn diagram that she had created to show who she was previously as opposed to who she wants to be in the future. To describe her past self, she used words like “crazy,” “abusive,” “angry,” “cold-hearted,” and “anti-social,” and on the “who I want to be side” of the diagram she wrote down “happy,” “successful,” “respectful,” and “empathetic” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2).

The second theme to emerge concerning rehabilitation, *restoration and maintenance of good relationships*, refers to the girls’ attempts to rebuild a trusting and healthy relationship with their families, as opposed to strengthening relationships with the individuals who encouraged their poor behavior that got them arrested in the first place. All of the girls are able to point to at least one person in their life who consistently wants the best for them and never gives up on them. Additionally, they generally express an interest in doing well and turning their life around for themselves, but also for the members of their support system. One example of this is Hutchinson. When the cameras catch up to Hutchinson after her release, she is shown going out to eat with her mother, a person with whom she had previously had a turbulent relationship. She credits her time in Madison with helping her “touch the restart button” on her life, without which, her relationship with her family would still be “messed up” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2). While she and her mother previously had not gotten along, she notes that they are growing closer and in hindsight, she is able to see that she is the reason for their strained relationship. Additionally, she adds that she does not “even look at [the] people” she’d previously associated with while engaging in criminal behavior (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2). While she does note that the transition is stressful because people regularly contact her to try to get her to do illegal things, she says:

I'm getting used to like, actually, waking up every morning and you know, like, not actually being...having to do negative stuff and like stuff that I ain't got no business doin'. I get up, I go to church, or I go to my grandparents house and go help them cook or like...just positive stuff like actually caring for my life and being supportive of myself even if I ain't got people that support me at that time or that moment. So I feel like Madison helped me a lot. It made me stronger. It builded my self esteem of where I'm at right now. I learned a lot of stuff from there. I don't regret going (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E5)

Amanda Carroll, 17, is another girl introduced in season one. While she had been arrested multiple times, her most recent stint in Madison was due to stealing her mother's car, driving it while drunk, crashing it, and then fleeing the scene of the accident. As we meet Carroll at the end of her substance abuse program, she is self-reflective of the reason she started to get in trouble. Her mom was a drug addict, which led to Carroll being in and out of foster care since she was five. As she got older, Carroll consciously rebelled and started doing drugs. She said, "The reason why I started getting in trouble was because I wanted revenge on my mom. I wanted her to know what I went through like 'You left me, you kept getting in trouble, so now it's my turn to do it to you'" (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E3). Although their tumultuous relationship had a lot to do with Carroll's decisions in the past, it is the restoration of that relationship through counselling that made her want to stop getting in trouble. By the time Carroll is set to be released, she has been at Madison for six months and her mother has been clean for seven or eight years. Carroll sees her mom's change as proof that she is prepared to be a mother, and rather than being angered by their shared past, she finds her mother's stories of struggle to be inspirational. She says:

I wanted revenge. I wanted everybody to feel what I had to feel for all those years. Now, I feel completely dumb because not only did it hurt my mom but it's hurting me because I keep getting locked up...It crushes my mom, knowing that her daughter is growing up like her. And it sucks. If it would've been me a year ago, I would've never have cried over my mom. I would've never cared. And now, like, I have that remorse, and that regret, and that hurt. (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E3)

The openness that she shared with her mother, whom she considers her best friend, encourages her to do well and go to school.

While the first two themes illustrate how the girls think about rehabilitation, the final theme, *reliance on a poor support system*, applies to the girls' habit of gravitating toward people who reinforce their poor behavior rather than those who encourage personal growth. The recidivism theme of *reliance on a poor support system* is primarily seen when the girls mention their previous arrests. Most of the girls from Madison and LaPorte highlighted in the show had been arrested previously. In their individual interviews, it is clear that they were friends with people who had normalized their bad behavior. For example, Guerra says, "Me and my people, we would rob people and put the pistol on em, and, 'Give me your stuff.'" (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E1). When they leave the juvenile facility, they hang out with the same group of friends and eventually fall back into the same behavior. This theme is in direct opposition to the *prioritization of the self* and *restoration and maintenance of good relationships* themes. The bad influences strain the girls' relationships with the good influences in their lives and cause them to change their priorities to things like drugs, as is the case with Aubrey Wilson.

Wilson, 17, is another example of the *reliance on a poor support system* theme. Wilson is introduced and released in season one. She is one of the few girls who is interviewed after she is

released. While she seems changed upon her release, the first episode of the first season ends with her grandfather saying, “We had high hopes when she got out of Madison...thinking that she, you know, was going to do good, but I guess she proved us wrong.” Her grandmother added, “I don’t know where she is. I worry that she’s gonna die” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E1). The show’s cameras catch up with Wilson shortly after her release. Wilson is found with a friend who is being arrested for running away. Had Wilson still been on parole, she would have been arrested. “I’m just glad I’m off papers, I’m off parole, so I didn’t get arrested,” she says. Her grandfather says, “It’s hard to help somebody that won’t help themselves. Every time she runs off, she takes another piece of my heart out” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2). Rather than prioritizing her relationship with her family, who was trying to help her, she preferred to go back to doing the same thing that she was arrested for. She says:

When I was in Madison, I thought about a lot of good things, like I thought about getting my life together, I wanted to spend time with my family. But when I got out, like, reality hit me, and it was just like everything was thrown in my face. Like, I totally forgot that drugs was gonna be around. I totally forgot that the hood was gonna be around. I was doing coke every day. I was on molly. Um...I was drinking. I was just chilling with gang bangers. (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2).

Though she wants good things in her life, she acknowledges, “I don’t have friends that are good for me” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2). Her mom, unfortunately, is also poor support for Wilson. She reveals that both she and her mother are drug addicts. Wilson is highly influenced by her mother’s situation and said that she has previously run away because her mother was arrested. She says, “I was like, ‘My mom’s not here, I might as well run away. (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E1)

She also says that “when my mom’s doing bad, usually I do bad. I put her problems upon myself and I try to help her more than I’m trying to help myself” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E1). Though she recognizes that this pattern of behavior is detrimental, she is unable or unwilling to change and four months after her release, she is arrested again.

Another example of the *reliance on a poor support system* theme is Britanni Reyes, 15, who is introduced in in season two, episode four. It is her second time at the LaPorte facility. She says:

The reason why I got in the system was because I didn’t really have nobody. It was like my twelfth birthday when my mom, like, completely lost it. She was on drugs. Like, I just feel like she ain’t give a fuck about me. I didn’t know my dad at the time. I started being in the streets playing with guns, drugs, you know... I joined a gang because the adrenaline rush felt good. Like putting somebody at gunpoint, I don’t know why. It just felt good to me ‘cause I’m so angry. (*Girls Incarcerated*, S2/E4)

Her involvement in a gang seems to fulfil the need for a support system that her mother was unable to fill. While incarcerated, Reyes continues this habit of surrounding herself with the wrong people, which can be seen through the group of friends she makes in the facility. As it did before her incarceration, the support system that she decides to cultivate proves detrimental to her chances for rehabilitation. Her new friends encourage and participate in her bullying of an ex-girlfriend, Kennedi Aubuchon, 16. At one point, Reyes and her friends are seen taking the posters off of Aubuchon’s wall and removing her personal pictures. Reyes says, “I took Aubuchon’s pictures and I hid them from her because the simple fact of that’s what she adores the most, is her pictures. So, now she ain’t got’em, she gonna be feelin’ some type of way,” (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E7). Her friends also help her take Aubuchon’s glasses and remove her

lenses. Reyes and her friend are eventually disciplined for emailing Aubuchon's mom under the guise of being Aubuchon in order to hurt their relationship and possibly delay Aubuchon's release. While Reyes' friends are not specifically highlighted or identified, it is clear that they do not encourage her to behave well.

Rehabilitation and recidivism on Instagram

In answer to the second research question concerning how rehabilitation and recidivism were portrayed through Instagram, five main themes emerged during analysis: focus on the future, normalization of illegal behavior, prioritization of the family, irregular updates, and lack of professionalism.

The rehabilitation as a *focus on the future* theme is defined as prosocial behavior that indicates an attempt to build a foundation for further successes. Instagram photos that illustrate this theme were characterized by the girls appearing in work uniforms or appearing to focus on a specific career path, as well as captions that mentioned that the girls were on their way to or already at work or school. Pictures that signal that the girls have a job and/or are attending school shows that the girls are not only interested in their future, but that they are also trying to make money via legal avenues. For example, several posts show Paige Mcatee (@therealpaigemcatee), who had been incarcerated in various facilities before arriving at Madison, wearing scrubs. One, posted on January 11th, she captioned as "Love my new job, like seriously." In another, posted August 13, 2019, she appears to be wearing a school uniform and standing in a school bathroom. It's captioned simply "School." Such enthusiasm for work and school indicate a stick-to-itiveness and a legitimate interest in pursuing a legal occupation. While the number of school and work posts are outnumbered by photos of her sons and pictures of her outfits, the work and school posts appear over a period of time, which implies regular, if not steady, employment. This

shows a certain amount of responsibility as she is consistently able to work, go to school, pay rent, and raise her children.

Hannah Aberegg (@snownahnah) similarly posted a picture of herself in a Burger King uniform with visible green, red, and brown stripes on July 15, 2019. She poses close to the camera with her lips pursed, a billed cap and drive through headset are barely visible. Among other hashtags, she captions the post “#workflow.” Another picture posted later in July is captioned “[Struggling] w college. But imma keep trying” and includes a crying face emoji. The emoji indicates her struggle in her current situation, but also that she is dedicated to trying to finish rather than drop out.

This theme also encapsulates nontraditional careers, such as YouTubers or musical artists. While some of the photos within this theme of a *focus on the future* revolve around traditional career paths, it is clear that some view fame and attention as a goal to achieve, which is indicated through captions like #watchme or #famous. For example, one photo from July 22, 2019, is a screenshot Brianna Guerra (@thereallbriannag), 17, posted expressing excitement overreaching more than 100,000 subscribers on her YouTube channel. The screenshot of her follower count was captioned, “THIS WAS MY GOAL I MADE A YEAR AGO! 100k SUBS! THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO HAS HELPED ME OR EVERYONE WHO HAS BELIEVED IN ME. YA’LL MADE THIS HAPPEN FOR ME! NEW VIDEOS SOON!!!” Of the girls included in this study, Guerra easily has the most Instagram followers, at 87k, which is more than double the girl with the second highest amount, Tiffany Kristler (317.tiff) with 47.9k. Guerra’s quest for fame is further evidenced in a post from January 14, 2019, that shows a letter from an MTV casting producer for the show *Young and Pregnant*. The letter reads, “Hi Brianna! My name is Kate and I’m a casting producer with MTV. Thanks so much for writing in! Your

story sounds interesting and I'd love to learn more. Please send us a little about the story of your pregnancy and please include: When's your due date? How old is the baby's father, and if you're selected would he agree to participate? Also, please send us the best phone number to reach you." In her caption, Guerra wrote, "mmmm young and pregnant wants me lol I'm going to do it." While non-traditional career goals indeed indicate a focus on the future, and can lead to levels of success that rival or surpass traditional paths such as academia or a nine-to-five job, an emphasis on reality star fame could potentially lead to recidivism, rather than rehabilitation. After all, the letter Guerra posted indicated she sought out MTV to be on the reality show rather than being scouted, as her caption suggests, which perhaps raises questions as to whether she saw teen pregnancy as her ticket to success.

As another example of a nontraditional route, Leeaeira Stokes (@thats.Leeaeira), 17, dedicated her Instagram account to furthering her music career as a singer. In a video posted August 3, 2019, she is dressed in a camouflage sweatshirt and short blue shorts. She briefly acknowledges someone off screen and nods at them before hiking up her shorts and bending over to twerk, shake her rear end, in front of the camera. The caption reads, "New snippet OF WORTH IT I got a deal GET THIS TO 1000 comments and I'll drop the song tonight right after it hit 1k," indicating that it is one of her original songs that she is dancing to. Rather than simply dance to her music, or let the song play so her audience can enjoy it, she pointedly directs her posterior to the camera. The goal of this type of post seems not only to be to show off her music, but also to sexually entice the audience into following her account and buying her music. This is further indicated by the fact that she repeated this behavior wearing similarly short shorts on November 15, the noted difference being that she did not dance to her own music in that video. Instead, she twerks to the music of Layton Greene in one slide and an unknown rapper in the

second. Her shorts are red and she is wearing a white crop top. Her blonde hair is gathered back to fall down her back and she occasionally reaches behind herself to pat her posterior. The exclusion of her music indicates that the focus of the post is her body, rather than her art. Stokes regularly uses the hashtag #stokesfromgirlsincarcerated with the intention to boost the attention her posts, and by extension her music, receive.

The *normalization of illegal behavior* theme is defined as posts created with the intention to portray a tough image or that boast criminal behavior in a manner that glorifies or suggests that their illicit behavior is in any way fun or attractive. An indication of this theme includes posting photos showing off a lot of cash, or any obviously criminal behavior, like smoking marijuana or drinking while underage. This theme is exemplified by any behavior that glamorizes, normalizes, or implies illegal behavior. Jesse Rose (blu_j06) and Najwa Pollard (@offical_nya843) are both seen smoking marijuana in videos on their accounts. Najwa, who was 15 at the time of her incarceration for either running away or curfew violation, took the time to attach thick, fake eyelashes, gazes into the camera, her face and hair obscuring the background, as she inhales deeply before blowing two jets of smoke out of her nose and mouth. The video employs a filter in which golden flecks of what appear to be glitter randomly appear on the screen. The caption on the video posted December 18, reads, “Sit back and just get faded.” While the focus of the post is obviously her advocating for marijuana, her use of a filter and fake eyelashes indicate an attempt to be cute while smoking, normalizing the behavior.

Additionally, Rose, 16, posted a picture on November 14, 2018, that features her pointing a handgun at the camera. She holds the gun at eyesight and between the gun and her hair being brushed over the right side of her face, her face is mostly obscured. The caption reads, “I ain’t go no where bitch I’m back,” with a smiling devil emoji at the end. Considering that the last time

that she posted before that was in May, and she continued to post regularly in the months following November and had posted regularly before May, this absence indicates that Rose may have been incarcerated and this was her first post after her release. In her first post back, she chose to post something indicative of recidivism, rather than successful rehabilitation. Her decision to publish this specific post minimizes the severity of her arrest and implies that she has not and will not change. Similarly, Aberegg posted a picture of herself on October 21 in which she is posed on a counter with a full bottle of 1800 tequila held aloft in her left hand and a mostly finished bottle of what appears to be beer in her right hand while she was underage. Included in the caption is the hashtag #partygirls. The girls are clearly indicating their continued participation in illegal behavior that led to their initial arrests and could get them arrested again. There is a marked disregard for consequences in favor of maintaining the bad-girl images they have cultivated on social media.

The rehabilitation as *prioritization of the family* theme is defined as a clear focus on loved ones who might subsequently incentivize the girls to stay out of trouble. This is characterized by pictures of the girls posed with family or simply pictures posted of the family. The pictures are often taken full on rather than them appearing to be selfies. The accompanying captions usually reiterate a devotion to or interest in spending time with family members. Additionally, the posts are often accompanied by heart emojis and the word “love.” This theme is especially apparent when it comes to photos they post of their children.

When Tiffany Kristler, 15, was arrested for armed robbery, she already had a baby that she was eager to get back to and raise. Her Instagram account heavily features her daughter, Azaila. In one post from August 15, Azaila, who looks to be about 3 or 4, is pictured in front of a pink wall, possibly at a daycare facility, wearing a purple shirt with a star on the front, a

backpack, and smiling widely. The caption says, “The Best Thing I could ever accomplish was to be your mother I Love You Baby you my [heart],” followed by a heart emoji. Azaila is featured in 17 out of 33 posts, indicating her importance in Kristler’s life. This dedication to her daughter points to an incentive to stay out of trouble, especially since she is already aware of how painful it was to be separated from her child. She alludes to this in two captions saying in one, posted on February 1, 2020, “This photo is my second day home and is also a year ago! GROWTH” and in another posted on August 22 which says, “There’s so much to say Today is Your day & I waiting so long to spend a Birthday w you I kno yo daddy waiting but here’s to you azaila happy 2nd Birthday baby!! I love you so much.” The caption ends with a heart emoji. Kristler is the only one of the girls in this study to reference her incarceration so directly.

Similarly, Guerra and Mcatee, both of whom gave birth after their release from juvenile detention, have predominantly posted images of their children and used the captions to proclaim their devotion. For example, Guerra posted a picture in August 2019, in which, her baby, Cartier, is sleeping wrapped in blue blankets. Guerra’s face is only partially in the shot and the rest on a bed with white sheets with a black square pattern. The caption reads, “It’s you who keeps me going.” From her account, it appears Mcatee is the main caretaker for her two sons. Her posts indicate she works steadily and attends classes in order to better not only her life, but theirs as well. In one post from late December 2019, her son is pictured in a red shirt with large blue and white writing which is obscured because though his head is turned toward the camera, his body is turned slightly away. His shirt has drool marks around the high collar, and he is wearing blue jeans and blue crocs. He does not appear to have been expecting the picture as he is not completely facing the person taking it. In the post, Mcatee says, “I love you my handsome man “the most amazing brother ever!” I [swear to God] I will buy u everything in the world before

I'd spoil myself u literally make me broke and it's okay. You deserve everything and more!" At the time of this post, Mcatee was about six months pregnant with her second son and was excitedly lauding her first child as an amazing big brother.

The *irregular updates theme* refers to the way the girls suddenly stop posting, or take a long break from posting, to previously regularly updated Instagram accounts. The girls generally post at least two to four times a month but in the of Rose and Aubrey Willson (@infamousaubrey219), two girls known to have reoffended after their release, at a certain point they did not post for at least five months. This theme was seen with Rose in her November 14 post which showed her pointing a handgun at the camera with the caption "I ain't go no where bitch I'm back" with a smiling devil emoji at the end. Of the posts she had on her account at the time of collection, there were only two other similar gaps. She seemed to stop posting for a while between 2015 and 2017; because of the length of this pause, it is likely that she simply removed certain pictures from her account as juvenile incarceration does not generally last for years at a time. The other was a gap from February 2019 to October 2019. Aside from these gaps, she regularly posts several times a month, so long gaps of several months could be indicative of instance when she was not allowed to use a phone. Additionally, Wilson maintained a fairly active account from April to July of 2019, before all updates suddenly ceased. She posted six times in April, once in May and June, and four times in July. Her last post, published July 21, 2019, depicted her in what appears to be the bedroom of a private residence. The conclusion that the picture is a private residence was based on the slightly scuffed beige dresser with miscellaneous personal items on top, such as a black hair clip as well as jackets hanging on the back of a slightly open door which appears to open onto a hallway. Wilson stands in front of a mirror in a dark red camisole top and white pants, the edges of a white bra showing. She holds an

iPhone in her left hand. Her head is tilted to the side so that her brown hair brushes her right arm. An indecipherable tattoo follows the line of her collarbone. She is not smiling; her face appears neutral. Through the use of a filter, the outlines of two hollow pink hearts have been imposed over the picture: one over her chest and the other near her hip. According to the @girlsinn_wherearetheynow, after Wilson's release from the Madison facility at the age of 17, she began using drugs again and was arrested seven times and incarcerated five times. According to the @girlsinn_wherearetheynow Instagram account, since her last release in October 2019, she has apparently been posting concerning content on Facebook and was motel hopping with her ex-boyfriend and friends. Most of the girls' accounts appear to be relatively new, as they only display posts from 2020 and 2019. Though Wilson's account follows this trend, it is still remarkably sparse and has the fewest posts of all of the girls included in the study, which is interesting considering her follower count of 10,000 followers. At the time of collection, her account only had 12 posts, meaning that she and the most regular poster, Guerra, have a difference of 249 posts. Only five of her 12 posts' captions contain words; generally, she only uses emojis, and none of the captions give any particular update about her life or what she is going through. The propensity to gloss over long gaps in between posts and ignore major life events, like incarceration, allows the girls to perpetuate a carefree image that is not indicative of the life that they are actually leading.

Finally, the *lack of professionalism* theme deals with actions the girls have taken that may make finding careers harder in the future. Because of their penchant for showing off body modification and drug use, coupled with a general disregard for what they are posting, this was a theme that applied to every girl and was seen in the photos themselves, rather than the captions. Kristler, Guerra, Mcatee, and Wilson sport tattoos that would be difficult to hide in a work

setting. Kristler has a thick black tattoo across her chest, under her collar bone, that appears to say “loyalty.” She also has four black soaring bird silhouettes on her left forearm. As the tattoo rarely appears in photographs, it does not seem as though Kristler dresses to specifically show off her tattoos, suggesting a recognition that the tattoos might make her be perceived more negatively than she wants, especially as she tries to get her life on track for her child. Wilson has a similar tattoo across her chest in a stylized black font. The tattoo seems to say “infamous,” which would mirror her Instagram account name, but the word is hard to decipher. Her tattoo stretches under her collar bone to her shoulders. She regularly wears shirts with low-cut collars, so the tattoo is typically visible, indicating she wants it to be seen in her photos. She also has a large black tattoo on her right hand in the same font that says “216,” which is presumably her area code. Given the placement of this tattoo, it would be impossible to hide from an employer without the benefits of gloves or makeup, but in the photos, she makes no effort to hide it.

Guerra has the name of her baby’s father, Cortez, tattooed in thin, black, cursive letters above her right eye, three pink stars in graduating sizing beginning under her chin and ending at the base of her neck, and two large blue roses on the left side of her upper chest, sitting under another tattoo that says “Cortez,” as well as a rose sitting inside the sliver of a moon on the right side. She also has the beginnings of a tattoo sleeve starting from just above her left wrist and ending at her shoulder, the individual tattoos of which are indistinguishable, an indistinguishable tattoo on the inside of her right forearm, and two other tattoos on her stomach and upper thigh that could be more easily hidden. The latter tattoos were primarily visible when she posed in swimsuits or crop tops, although she often wears shorts short enough to view the dream catcher on her thigh.

Finally, Mcatee has a pink heart at the base of her throat and what appears to be Chinese writing in bright pink slightly below and to the side of the heart. The girls’ decision to get bold and

noticeable tattoos early in their life—especially since generally you need to be 18 to get one—without regard for how it may affect future job positions and limit them to lower-earning jobs, is in direct opposition of the *focus on the future* theme. If the tattoos hinder their job prospects, this could potentially contribute to recidivism.

Recidivism rates

For RQ3, to get a better understanding of the recidivism rate of the facility and how it compares to that of the girls included in this study, the Indiana Department of Corrections website was used to ascertain figures for the youth recidivism rate during the air date of *Girls Incarcerated*, which was 2018 for the first season and 2019 for the second season. Figures were only available for 2018, however. The site monitors the recidivism rates recorded for a three-year period so the figures for 2018 included all juveniles in the state of Indiana who were released in 2015 and subsequently reoffended. The juveniles arrested in the state of Indiana in 2015 were monitored from their release in 2015 to 2018 to gauge the rate of recidivism, which was 33.3% for male and female juveniles combined. Within this three-year period, only 27.9% of female juveniles were shown to have reoffended, and of those, 14.7% were incarcerated in adult facilities as they were no longer juveniles. Female offenders were shown to have a higher recidivism rate in the first year following their release than their male counterparts. The rate of recidivism increased every year after release, so that while only 19.8% of incarcerated juvenile girls reoffended within a year, by the three-year mark 27.9% had reoffended. Juvenile offenders were considered successfully rehabilitated if they were not arrested and incarcerated in an adult facility within three years of their 2015 offense, which puts Indiana's success rate at 85.3%.

It is important to note that the statistics were not specific to any facility, so it was impossible to get the specific recidivism rates for the Madison and LaPorte facilities in which the

show takes place. According to the Instagram account used to track the girls from the show, @girlsinn_wherearetheynow, of the eight girls included in this study, four girls were confirmed to have reoffended since their time on the show: Jesse Rose, Aubrey Wilson, Najwa Pollard, and Brianna Guerra. The other girls, Leeaeira Stokes, Tiffany Kristler, Hannah Aberegg, and Paige Mcatee, do not seem to have been arrested at any point since their appearance on the show. In other words, half of the girls included in this study were arrested again after being on the show. Overall, the Instagram account shows that of 27 girls included on the show who were incarcerated in Madison or LaPorte, 16 were re-arrested since their time on the show. This would suggest that the recidivism rate for the girls featured on the show is around 59%, which is 111% higher than the 27.9% recorded by the state of Indiana.

Chapter 5 — Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this thesis was to investigate the portrayal of rehabilitation and recidivism in the Netflix show *Girls Incarcerated*, as well as in the Instagram accounts of eight girls from the show, via a textual and visual analysis. In doing so, this study also sought to critically analyze the moral implications of producing and participating in a show that profits off vulnerable populations. Netflix is an ever-growing company, the effects of which are so pronounced that regular television viewership has decreased (Spangler, 2016). Netflix's growing place in our society, the popularity of reality television, and the rise of a selfie oriented culture indicate the importance of critically examining how vulnerable populations being depicted in a reality show and how they choose to portray themselves on social media may contribute to our understanding of rehabilitation and recidivism.

When it came to how rehabilitation and recidivism were portrayed on *Girls Incarcerated*, this thesis found that *prioritization of the self* and *restoration and maintenance of good relationships* were linked with portrayals of rehabilitation, while *reliance on a poor support system* was linked with recidivism. This study found that the theme indicative of recidivism, though not inherently criminal in and of itself, was in direct opposition to the themes for rehabilitation. Because of the rigid nature of corrections facilities, where poor behavior is punished swiftly and correct behavior is reiterated repeatedly, it was not surprising that the themes *prioritization of the self* and *restoration and maintenance of good relations* would line up with the staff's message. The girls' treatment plans revolved around changing their priorities and in doing so, changing their behavior. The themes came down to what the girls decided to prioritize in their lives. Healthier endeavors and priorities lead to rehabilitation while elevating time spent with bad influences as a priority was indicative of recidivism. The girls' comments on the show indicated they were aware of the likelihood of a negative outcome if they were to spend time with negative influences, and they recognized that they were incarcerated for prioritizing the negative influences. This study, like Mincey et al. (2008) prioritizes the lived experiences of offenders in order to acknowledge issues associated with rehabilitation. Contrary to Askew's (2013) overview of the justice system, *Girls Incarcerated* presents a juvenile justice system in the midst of reform as is apparent at the beginning of the second season when it is made clear by the warden that the state of Indiana was attempting to use alternative measures to incarceration. These alternative measures ultimately result in the Madison facility being closed and the show moving from a facility that could fit 167 girls to one that could only accommodate 40 (*Girls Incarcerated*, S2/E1). This study provides an updated look at juvenile incarceration and

acknowledges gaps in the literature pertaining to recent strides made in the correctional system to limit the number of juvenile incarcerations.

The theme *prioritization of the self* was indicative of the girls taking control of how they wanted to be seen and working toward making their ideal-self and actual-self line up. Approaching rehabilitation in this manner elevates the importance of growing as a person and finding an identity that suits them rather than focusing on punishment. Hutchinson's venn diagram is an excellent example of this theme. She writes down that in the past she has been "crazy," "abusive," "angry," "cold-hearted," and "anti-social," but she wants to be "happy," "successful," "respectful," and "empathetic" (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E2). In a sense, the venn diagram is similar to the online habits of teenagers trying on personalities and deciding who they would like to be (Bell, 2019). Through analysis of how rehabilitation is portrayed this study addresses the manners in which juveniles search for their own identity in manners outside of social media. It is not, however, enough to want something like success: prioritization of the future must be backed by behavioral changes. In keeping with Schoeps et al.'s (2020) findings that emotional training can increase prosocial behavior, the facility offers course in coping skills, victim empathy, and family relations (*Girls Incarcerated*, S1/E1). While there is no guarantee that the girls will stay out of trouble when they leave the facility, they are given emotional tools to better help them deal with their situations. Successful rehabilitation is demonstrated as an individual changing their behavior in order to change how they and the world see them. Restoration of good relationships was indicative of prosocial behaviors such as co-operating with and helping members of their family (Batson & Powell, 2003). The two themes are closely related because when the girls left the facility, they were usually placed in the same environment that led to their incarceration. Leaning on the good relationships in their lives and holding onto

goals were their best chances of avoiding the pitfall of reliance on a poor support system. It is especially easy to see with girls like Kristler, who committed armed robbery with her baby's father, or Aberegg, who began doing drugs and became a prostitute as a teenager, how association with the wrong people would foster an environment that made recidivism likely. As there were only two instances of recidivism shown in *Girls Incarcerated*, the recidivism theme was uncovered mostly through the girls own acknowledgments of why they have been incarcerated more than once. The fact that there were more themes indicative of rehabilitation was expected because most of the show is shot in the juvenile facilities. The overall message of the show and that each girl who is released appears to attempt to impart is that change is possible. When the girls discuss feeling as though they have grown or discuss careers that they want in the future, they are indicating that they have changed and want to be seen as the rehabilitated individual that left the facility rather than the juvenile offender that entered. Rehabilitation was shown to be a process that is most difficult in the beginning. The purpose of this process is to build a foundation through which the girls would have access to positive support and would be able to avoid reoffending. Contrarily, recidivism is portrayed as a return to old detrimental behavior. Like rehabilitation, it also seems to be a process. It starts with spending time with bad influences and escalates until the girls are in the same situation.

In response to how rehabilitation and recidivism were portrayed on Instagram, this thesis found that *focus on the future* and *prioritization of the family* were linked with rehabilitation, while *normalization of illegal behavior*, *irregular updates*, and *lack of professionalism* were indicative of recidivism. The girls seemed to be presenting their ideal selves by taking pictures at flattering angles or occasionally using filters. However, previous literature has addressed ideal self and actual self-congruence in ways that deal with self-esteem or positive goal-oriented

behavior (Abdul Razak et al., 2020). This thesis acknowledges that little has been done to address how social media use can reinforce an ideal self that engages in antisocial rather than prosocial behavior. The themes related to rehabilitation on Instagram were similar to the themes found on *Girls Incarcerated*. The *focus on the future* theme was indicated by the girls seeking legal employment and going back to school. The theme was basically a manifestation of the prioritization of the self-theme, showing the girls making good, foundational choices in the present, in order to have a more secure future. The *prioritization on the family* theme was indicated by pictures with or of family members and usually revolved around the girls' children. The girls' focus on their children could also be seen as the reason they were so inclined to focus on their future, as the girls with children did not have pictures or videos of anything illegal on their social media pages. They clearly want to be perceived as productive members of society who have grown up and are now focused on their children. The normalization of illegal behavior theme was characterized by casual illegal behavior such as smoking marijuana or drinking while underage. While the girls could not be arrested in hindsight for these posts, it did indicate that they were, again, engaging in behavior that they could be arrested for. This behavior was more likely to be seen by girls who either did not post their family members, or whose family members were similarly engaged in criminal behavior. Jesse Rose, for instance, indicated on her page at different points that her mother and at least one brother had been incarcerated.

The *irregular updates* theme was seen as a result of incarceration. For girls who demonstrated regularity while posting, a sudden and sustained absence was indicative of something keeping the girls away from their phones. The irregular update theme was different than the others, as it was a direct result of recidivism rather than seeming to indicate possible

recidivism in the future. Meaning, this theme is evidence of when a girl has likely been incarcerated rather than a look at behavior that may predict future incarceration.

Finally, the lack of professionalism theme was evoked to explain any behavior that could be detrimental to future chances of employment. The lack of employment themes was not a direct predictor of recidivism nor did it indicate that recidivism was likely, but it did acknowledge behavior or choices that could limit the girls' options in future. Unlike their appearance on *Girls Incarcerated*, the girls tended not to display emotions, such as sadness or anger, on Instagram. Considering their appearances on *Girls Incarcerated* and the typical breadth of human emotion, their portrayals on social media are clearly meant to show them at what they perceive to be their best. Through their portrayals on the show at least three of the four negative qualities of reality television that were addressed by Mast (2016), i.e. intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation, were exemplified. The three qualities being intrusion, humiliation, and appropriation. Without interviewing the girls or viewing the unedited footage it is not possible to gauge the level of misrepresentation, if it in fact occurred. Intrusion was perhaps the most obvious as the cameras were there to capture the girls during low emotional moments. The fact that this is intrusion is readily available is an example of the appropriation involved in reality television as Netflix now owns the girls' public portrayals from the show. Finally, the humiliation in the show may have been performative for the benefit of the camera or it may have taken place with or without the cameras presence but it was generally seen as one girl humiliating another such as Brittany Reyes taking a girls glasses and removing the lenses.

Building on Chang and Chua (2015), the girls in this present study seemed to be attempting to present an idealized version of themselves, such as occasionally using filters to take more flattering pictures. One question that emerged during the analysis of the posts

concerned Isaranon (2019) and the role of affirmation. The girls receive affirmation in the form of their follower count and comments. As affirmation was found to encourage ideal self-congruence in Isaranon (2019), it is worth considering whether affirmation could similarly reinforce poor behavior and what the effects of insults rather than affirmation could be on self-image and subsequent portrayal. Additionally, there is no way to know whether specific aspects of the girls' self-portrayal are accurate (Sheldon et al., 2019). Knowing this makes their choices in how they presented themselves on Instagram even more interesting because it indicates that the image they have chosen to present is, in their mind, favorable, even when it glorified poor behavior.

This study also showed that when it came to how rehabilitation and recidivism were portrayed on Instagram, contradictions emerged. The girls were able to portray themes of rehabilitation in pictures that also portrayed themes of recidivism. For example, the *focus on the future* theme, in which the girls demonstrate that they are seeking employment or cultivating plans for the future, might be seen in the same post as the *lack of professionalism* theme, in which the girls demonstrate behavior that may make future employment difficult. For example, Leeaeira Stokes (@thats.leeaeira), 17, made the decision to pursue a musical career and posted a video on August 3, 2019, that showed her dancing suggestively to her own music, which contained obscene lyrics. As stated above, rehabilitation is a process, and failure along the way can lead to recidivism. While Stokes is attempting to pursue a musical career, should she fail, she could be making it harder for her to attain a more traditional career. The girls have effectively achieved the level of microcelebrity through their inclusion on the show *Girls Incarcerated*. As Khamis et al. (2017) stated, it is necessary, when cultivating microcelebrity, to self-brand and to build a relationship with the audience. The girls' brands and images are the very things that

allowed them this popularity, but similarly may be what keeps them from growing as people. Their followers found them after watching a show in which they were incarcerated and detailed the crimes that lead them there. When fans follow the girls on social media, it is because they are looking to follow the person they saw on television. The girls may feed into this, as is evidenced by the fact that in a May 29, 2019 post, Guerra attempted to sell a shirt that said, “Princess Thug,” a moniker given to her by one of the staff in the show. Holding too tightly to the image they cultivated through the show could contribute to recidivism, as the girls attempt to portray on Instagram a similar version of themselves as was seen on *Girls Incarcerated*.

Throughout the viewing of the first and second season, it was clear that the producers regularly decided to focus on girls who had been arrested and incarcerated more than once. For this reason, it was not entirely surprising when the @girlsinn_wherearetheynow Instagram account reported instances of recidivism. In response to the third research question, this thesis found that the recidivism rate for the girls included on the show was about 111% higher than the recidivism rate for juvenile girls in the state of Indiana. The show's focus on girls who were familiar with the juvenile justice system gives an erroneous perception of the rate of recidivism as the girls interviewed are presented as a norm. This aspect of the show is somewhat misleading: the statistics for Indiana further illustrate that the producers chose to focus on the more troubled girls in the facility, likely for the purposes of entertainment. The show was not filmed to help the girls, but to make entertainment out of them and considering the hardships they had to face, the hardships they still have to face, and the precarious positioning of their rehabilitation, filming them was filming them posed a risk to their rehabilitation that cannot be justified. The popularity that the girls receive on Instagram is manufactured due to their inclusion on the show *Girls Incarcerated*. While for some of them, the show was not released until well

after their time at the facility, the message that any newfound popularity sent would be the same. The girls were given attention and able to grow a following because they had broken the law. Though they legally could not profit directly, in a sense, they were being rewarded for negative behavior.

Despite the girls' unflinching honesty about their behavior on the show, their Instagram accounts were, aside from three posts out of 758, devoid of mentions of previous incarcerations and the goal of the accounts largely seemed to be to post flattering photographs. Because of the girls' previous histories of incarcerations, and the fact that they were not interviewed for this study, it is not possible to tell whether being included on *Girls Incarcerated* negatively affected their rehabilitation nor is it possible to tell exactly why they chose to be included in the show. As most of the girls were too young to consent on their own, their parents must have given assent to be included on the show and their motives can only be speculated at. Future studies should incorporate in-depth interviews with the girls in the show, and with other reality television participants, to better understand how the show impacted them. It is also important to recognize that the girls were members of several vulnerable populations, i.e. ethnic minority, children, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and incarcerated. Additionally, they were unable to receive any compensation for their appearance because of "Son of Sam" laws which prevent a person convicted of a crime from profiting from it. In such a precarious situation, where harming the girls' rehabilitation could have disastrous consequences, Netflix, like researchers, should have the burden of proving that not only are they not doing harm, the consequences of their actions will benefit the participants.

Limitations and future research

One limitation of this thesis is that the first season of *Girls Incarcerated* was released in 2018, meaning that the girls had over a year before this study was conducted to delete posts and/or edit captions. As such, the posts analyzed do not necessarily include everything that the girls originally posted. Additionally, all of the posts to be analyzed were not collected on the same day, allowing for further deletions or edits to possibly have occurred. The girls' follower count could not be analyzed before the show aired, and as such the amount of change that being on the show created cannot be quantified. Specific recidivism rates for the two facilities that appeared in the show could not be obtained, nor could information concerning whether the guards or warden were compensated for their participation. Despite these limitations, this thesis is still a valuable contribution to understanding rehabilitation and recidivism in juvenile females as well as the moral implications of filming vulnerable populations. Future research should seek to interview the participants of reality television as well as producers in order to better gauge motive and address morality. Additionally, Netflix has several programs that center on incarcerated people, both male and female, as well as in different countries. It would be interesting to analyze these shows to see how they inform literature on rehabilitation and recidivism.

Conclusions

This thesis critically analyzed portrayals of rehabilitation and recidivism on *Girls Incarcerated* as well as on Instagram and ultimately sought to address the moral implications of filming members of vulnerable populations. While *Girls Incarcerated* highlights the trauma that lead the girls to their current situation and engenders empathy as well as creates an uplifting message, the show does not create any sort of change because it does not address the effectiveness of the rehabilitation program in general. Ultimately, while the show attempts to

offer an uplifting, redemptive message, it does not seek to affect real change as it does not further examine the specificities of different girls' situations nor does it take a humanitarian approach and explain how the audience can make a difference. Rather, it provides a brief window into the girls' lives and their suffering. St. Félix (2018) addressed the attempt to create an empathic show that ultimately does not specifically challenge or focusing on the broken aspects of the juvenile detention system. The author details her interest in *Girls Incarcerated* but ultimately concludes that the show falls flat in that it introduces the girls and tries to tell their story but in not addressing the ways that the juvenile system is ill-equipped to handle their specific traumas, it not only fails to help the girls, it fails to offer an in depth portrayal of the justice system. In short, the show either failed to achieve its higher purpose of engendering change and was merely entertaining or, the intent behind the show was merely to entertain.

While this thesis did not set out to determine whether participation on the show directly hindered or aided rehabilitation or contributed to recidivism, the critical, qualitative analysis suggests that the girls were, in a way, compensated for their time on the show in the form of Internet popularity. It is possible that both parties benefited from the show. Consequentialism would suggest that their compensation and subsequent seeming happiness would mean that the producers of the show were in the right and did not err morally. Having said that, that is a conclusion that is drawn based on the ideal selves posted on social media, but it is impossible to ascertain whether they are truly happy with their portrayals and whether that happiness will last. Additionally, making a person happy does not mean that what was done was good. The girls may be happy because they cannot anticipate negative eventualities from having appeared on a reality show. As of May 6, 2020, at least two girls, Rose and Kristler, have made their account private and do not seem to be taking follow requests. Kristler specifically told the

@girlsinn_wherearetheynow account that she no longer wants the account's owner to update the public on her life, as the people who reach out to her through her Instagram account make her uncomfortable. This is one example of an unanticipated consequence. While a direct link to appearance on the show and recidivism cannot be drawn, it can be said that half of the girls involved in this study reoffended after their time on the show. Ultimately, this study concludes that recidivism as a concept can be difficult to analyze on social media as the poster is able to decide how they would like to appear online. It is also impossible to know how much congruence there is with the ideal self and the actual self. Pictures involving guns or marijuana could have been taken merely to appear cool and may not at all be indicative of the girls' current day to day life.

This idea crosses over to reality television, as well, as it was impossible to know how much of the girls' behavior was performative for the purpose of the cameras. This thesis builds on existing literature concerning the ideal self-presented on social media and on reality literature through analysis of the portrayal of vulnerable populations. Researchers who conduct studies involving members of vulnerable populations are subject to review to conclude that the study will not cause harm. In the case of reality television, it was not possible to determine if there were more measures in place than the signing of a waiver by all involved. This researcher believes that when dealing with individuals of one or more vulnerable populations, it is important to strive, not only to do no harm, but to help in some way. While the girls can be said to have benefited from their time on the show, it is possible that consequences for their appearance have simply not manifested yet. It is important that reality television producers are held to a high standard when dealing with members of socially disadvantaged populations.

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