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Thesis supervised by Corinne Rostaing (Centre Max Weber) and Nicolas Fischer (CESDIP). The thesis focuses on the impact of prison policies on conjugal dynamics, putting the French case into perspective with the Italian and Spanish cases.

* This paper presentation may be given in English or Spanish, depending on the preference of the organizing committee.

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Introduction:

In an era where digital evolution profoundly reshapes every facet of society, the question of digital technology access within correctional environments has emerged cannot be avoided. This proposal endeavors to dissect the ramifications of unauthorized smartphone use in prisons on the sexuality and relationship dynamics of male inmates, offering an exploration into how such digital access reshapes intimate connections within the carceral space. It is our contention that this digital intrusion not only redefines sexual relationships and dynamics between couples but also unveils behaviors unique to the prison environment, thereby enriching the sociological discourse on intimacy and incarceration.

Methodological Approach:

Our investigative framework is anchored in an empirical dataset derived from prisons located in France and Spain. This selection is part of a doctoral research project dedicated to examining the evolution of couple dynamics confronting the prison experience. Employing a methodological blend of semi-directed qualitative interviews and participatory observation, we delve into the personal narratives of detainees, focusing on their experiences of sexuality and relationships during their prison time. This inquiry focuses on the inmate's interactions with illegal smartphones, offering a nuanced lens through which to view the complexities of these modified relationships. The comparative nature of this study, juxtaposing French and Spanish penal institutions, provides a rich canvas to highlight the cultural and institutional variances influencing conjugal and sexual experiences within these settings.

Main findings:

In the French context, the clandestine possession of smartphones is a widespread phenomenon among male prisoners, facilitating an ongoing connection with the external world (Molinier, 2000). This technological bridge enables inmates to exert a form of surveillance over their partners, manifesting

in behaviors such as video calls to monitor their spouse's clothing and whereabouts. Such attempts at control, however, are mitigated by the inherent risks associated with smartphone use within the prison, leading to a distinctive pattern of digital interaction (Douris & Roman, 2020).

Furthermore, akin to trends observed in broader society, smartphones have become instrumental in initiating extramarital liaisons through dating platforms and social media (Bergström, 2019). These digital encounters, primarily pursued for (mostly virtual) sexual gratification, underscore a clear demarcation between marital fidelity and the pursuit of sexual fulfillment. This dichotomy accentuates the nuanced roles ascribed to women by incarcerated men, oscillating between maternal figures and objects of sexual desire (Bajos et al., 2008).

The discourse surrounding male sexuality in prison is especially poignant, portraying a narrative where sexual needs are amplified and equated to primal urges. This portrayal reflects a broader societal tendency to view male sexuality as an uncontrollable force, a narrative that gains intensified significance within the prison's hyper-masculine milieu (Trachman, 2021).

The forthcoming comparison with the Spanish penal system, currently under investigation, promises to enrich this discourse further, shedding light on the transformative power of digital technology on incarcerated individuals' intimate lives. We anticipate divergent patterns of access and of influence of smartphones within Spanish prisons, attributable to the comparatively liberal stance of the Spanish penal system towards sexual relations amongst inmates. In fact, the “Comunicaciones Íntimas,” a policy that facilitates conjugal visits, allows for physical intimacy between inmates and their partners, reflecting a more permissive approach to sexuality within carceral environments (Icard, 2020). Contrastingly, the French penal system enforces stringent regulations on sexual activities, permitting them solely within the confines of the “Unité de Vie Familiale” (Rambourg, 2009). These units, available in a limited number of facilities and only to convicted individuals, offer a space for familial and intimate interactions once every three months. This dichotomy presents a unique opportunity to investigate how the differing degrees of openness towards inmate sexuality across these two systems may influence the role and impact of smartphones within penitentiary settings. Such a comparative analysis could reveal the extent to which digital devices serve as a conduit for maintaining relational and sexual connections, thereby illuminating the nuanced ways in which penitentiary policies shape the intersection of technology, intimacy, and incarceration.

Conclusion:

This paper presents a novel sociological analysis, scrutinizing the interplay between technology and intimacy within the penal context of France and Spain. Through an international comparison it aspires to contribute significantly to the ongoing debate surrounding sexuality and relationship dynamics in prisons. By acknowledging and examining the digital dimensions of these relationships, we invite a broader reflection on the implications of the illegal possession of smartphones in carceral settings.

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