Is Communication Visibility a Threat or an Opportunity?
Social Media and Anonymous Social Support Organizations

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The communication visibility afforded by social media is vital to organizing. Although hidden organizations are in greater danger than ever in this visible world, less is known about how communication visibility has affected the organizing processes of hidden organizations. This study uses a framework of hidden organizing and social media visibility to examine how Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members practice anonymity on social media as a core communication principle. The author conducted 16 in-depth interviews with members of four AA groups to analyze their experiences and perspectives. The study aims to provide insights into how hidden organizations navigate the challenges of maintaining anonymity on social media while also utilizing the benefits of increased visibility. By understanding how AA members preserve anonymity principles on social media and how social media enables or constrains key organizing processes, the study may offer valuable implications for other hidden organizations facing similar communication challenges.

Keywords: visibility, social media, hidden organizing

The communication visibility social media affords is vital for organizing across multiple levels, because enabling organizational practices is relatively visible to various stakeholder groups (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). Whether or not they want to be, contemporary organizations must manage visibility to cope with the highly visible, mediated environment surrounding contemporary organizational environments (Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016). Visibility is shaped and managed by communication technologies that also structure and restructure human interactions that affect social order (Brighenti, 2007). Therefore, organizational scholars must treat visibility management as a central organizing concern (Flyverbom, 2022). To explore this new form of organizing afforded by visibility, organizational communication scholarship focuses on relatively visible organizations. They look at how communication visibility facilitates organization with increased social learning (Leonardi, 2014), social support, and knowledge sharing (Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015), as well as openness of communication (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013).

Although communication visibility through social media affords significant benefits, only some organizations actively enact these opportunities. This hypervisible social environment, enabled by social media platforms, significantly challenges hidden organizations (Scott, 2013). Hidden organizations may

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need help to completely control every organizational practice, even though they intend to remain inconspicuous to various stakeholders by not organizing via social media. When organizations cannot strictly control the personal use of social media by organization members, the informal organizational communication that happens between members will remain visible enough to reveal a part of a hidden organization. Although hidden organizations are in greater danger than ever in this visible world, less is known about how communication visibility has affected the organizing processes of hidden organizations.

Using an anonymous social support organization as a case study, this study aims to investigate the distinctive organizational practices of hidden organizations that shelter their members to protect them from the stigma surrounding health conditions. Because anonymity is a subjective notion based on its use in a particular social setting (Anonymous, 1998), perceived differences in anonymity may result in potential harm to this type of organization. Furthermore, the disrupted hidden organization may jeopardize organizational practices that negatively impact members' health. In addition, because of social media's great connections with various stakeholder groups, the hidden organization's external communication may be a threat to managing the organization's desired level of visibility. If hidden organizations are undesirably revealed, their existence may result in significant danger and potentially destroy organizational outcomes. This study aims to provide future directions and practical implications for hidden social support organizations by navigating the organizational opportunities and challenges of hidden organizations related to the communication visibility of social media.

Literature

Social Media and Visibility

Visibility affordance is perceived as a unique attribute of social media because of its potential enabling force to organize (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Because of its positive capacity to organize, the scholarship on communication visibility and social media in organizational contexts was profound in its early studies. Social media visibility primarily refers to information visibility (Stohl, Stohl, & Leonardi, 2016) and socially mediated visibility (Lane, Ramirez, & Pearce, 2018; Pearce, Vitak, & Barta, 2018). Visibility as a positive attribute has been strongly theorized and empirically supported. Communication visibility afforded by the social media of an enterprise increased the awareness of the message and network structure of an individual's organizational network (Leonardi, 2014). Uncovered message flow and revealed network structure made organizational learning substantial and initiated proactive information seeking. Ample research empirically suggests that communication visibility enhances organizational outcomes like boundary spanning for innovation (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018), knowledge sharing, and work efficiency (Yang, Ye, & Wang, 2021). Without formal membership, online community group members can enforce group norms by monitoring others and reassuring or warranting those norms to others through public compliments such as liking and commenting (Gibbs, Rice, & Kirkwood, 2022).

As enabling forces for achieving their goals, social collectives, especially marginalized ones, have used social media to draw the public's attention to their actions. This is because communication visibility enables individuals to build a broad coalition to support social change. Bhatia and Gajjala (2020) describe marginalized Muslim women in India who intentionally use social media to increase the visibility of their

protests that are not covered by mainstream media. Those with marginalized political views join in solidarity to support others with similar ideas (Pearce et al., 2018).

Despite the increasing value of visibility afforded by social media in organizational contexts, there are concerns associated with the negative consequences of communication visibility, which disrupt organizing processes (see Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). Social entrepreneurs in China perceive visibility as a threat to their organizations because visibility might result in unwanted public or governmental attention that may get them into trouble and result in their missions and motivations being questioned (Fu & Cooper, 2022). Young people with marginalized political views in authoritarian cultures worry about the social judgment of their views because their online activities might directly or indirectly interfere with those of others who have opposing political views. As a result, people might get reported (Pearce et al., 2018). The visibility afforded by information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as social media, threatens the visibility of a secret organization that needs to maintain low or zero visibility (Scott & Kang, 2021). The more visible an activist's fight against unethical actions, the more detectable their actions become through increased institutional monitoring of activists (Uldam, 2018).

Hidden Organizations

Scott (2013) introduced a theoretical work on hidden collectives, highlighting how various organizations purposely conceal themselves and/or their members, partially or completely. These hidden organizations are still against the odds of being concealed at the desired level in a democratic society where transparency is idealized and expected to promote accountability and openness (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). For example, among those inappropriately hidden organizations, clandestine organizations aim to minimize their presence to avoid legal responsibility for their acts (Stohl & Stohl, 2011). Terrorist organizations, such as al-Qa'ida, hide in local communities, targeting nonlocal community members (Bean & Buikema, 2015).

Hidden organizing is particularly beneficial for organizations that can properly manage a stigmatized or negative reputation (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). It is also beneficial for organizational members who engage in moral, ethical, and physical dirty work and who wish to secure their organizational identities by hiding from the public (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Nevada's legal brothels constantly move their locations, hide their identities, and provide exclusive organizational boundaries to protect customers and workers from the social judgments of outsiders (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). Many hidden organizations involve interactions with socially marginalized populations, such as homeless shelters (Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015) and community-based, domestic violence and sexual assault service agencies (Macy, Giattina, Sangster, Crosby, & Montijo, 2009). To encourage membership, several self-help groups make their group structure to facilitate anonymity (Kingree & Ruback, 1994). Recently, Van Duyn (2020) described secret political collectives as politically marginalized individuals who safely share their political affiliations without being judged and reinforce their views and social support for each other through social media.

Reviewing these hidden organizations' practices, Scott and Sahay (2018) categorized the various communication strategies that these hidden organizations choose to achieve their desired level

of visibility. These practices include partial or complete concealment, deception, and constant change of the organization's true identity. For example, Yelp's elite squad, an invitation-only group based on this collaborative platform, has concealed itself from the public, managing their identities exclusively (Askay & Gossett, 2015). Among those hiding strategies, one way to control the potential leak of the existence of these exclusive messages and invitations is to restrict communication channels. AA bans social media use when organizing their prominent public events, especially their annual meetings. They do so by displaying posters that promote "no social media use" across the convention center, while announcing that this is done to maintain the anonymity of the meeting attendees (Kang, 2020). To deceive the public, astroturfing organizations—fake-grassroots organizations—completely hide their funding sources and true organizational goals and act like they were organized by citizens (Scott & Kang, 2023). Thus, ambiguity is a popular communication strategy that these hidden organizations exploit to manipulate their public image or avoid social judgment. This is achieved by obscuring the nature of their organization and membership (Scott, 2013).

Alcoholics Anonymous

Individuals who suffer from stigmatized health conditions prefer weak-tie support networks (e.g., social support groups) to strong-tie support networks (e.g., family members and friends; Wright & Rains, 2013). As one of the most successful recovery programs, AA has been the focus of studies on communicating health in online and offline settings (see Campbell & Kelley, 2006, 2008; Ford, 1989; Green-Hamann, Eichhorn, & Sherblom, 2011; Thatcher, 2006; Witmer, 1997; Wright, 1997). From an organizational perspective, AA has a unique organizational structure. Rather than emphasizing the top-down organizing approach, AA values self-organizing at the group level that considers the diverse contextual factors of each group to increase its sustainability for long-term success (Zohar & Borkman, 1997). Using a structuration perspective, Witmer (1997) explained that each AA member in recovery must be an outcome of AA's organizing and an active agent who constantly reinforces AA's organizational principles, norms, and culture in the recommended manner. Model AA members who strictly lead other members to follow organizational directions are likely to have solid organizational identification. Similarly, a strong group and organizational identification can result in one's strong commitment to discipline others who violate group or organizational principles and norms.

Anonymity Principles

AA's anonymity principles require its members to remain anonymous on all media platforms (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2023). This means that members cannot be visually and discursively identified in public. There are several reasons for these core organizing principles. To maintain AA's nature as a hidden collective that needs to avoid social stigma, AA's anonymity principles must be key organizing principles that set communication flow (Scott, 2013). AA's tradition of anonymity also emphasizes that AA's principles need to "place principles before personalities" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2023). This means that the anonymity principles are prioritized over individuals' choice to reveal their AA membership in public. AA implements several organizing strategies to manage the tension between individualism and community-based principles (Thatcher, 2006). The different narratives among AA members are acknowledged in meetings; a community-centered approach limits speaker meetings that would

potentially create "popular" and "celebrity" AA members. Anonymity also makes AA members relate to other members, diminishing individual differences. However, very limited information about the value and the practices of anonymity principles has been explained, because there are no member orientation and written policies for that.

AA and Information and Communication Technologies

Although AA members have practiced anonymity principles in person, AA as a "mildly shadowed organization" can be significantly challenged by ICTs that complicate anonymity principles (Scott, 2013, p. 167). AA members feel "greater" anonymity online than in face-to-face interactions in local AA groups (Green-Hamann et al., 2011). Although anonymity that is enabled in a technology-mediated environment positively stimulates the self-disclosure of individuals with stigmatized illnesses (Rains, 2018), the "degree of the publicness" may help or potentially interfere with supportive interactions that differ from face-to-face interactions (Rains & Wright, 2016, p. 198).

Reporting that "staying connected" by using mobile phones in AA networks facilitates support among AA members, Campbell and Kelley (2008) suggested investigating how strongly these mediated communications outside of the meeting have been encouraged. Because AA members routinely exchange social support on social media, increasing challenges and concerns may constrain anonymity principles for several reasons. Furthermore, since no designated authority figures de-escalate the problems on social media, maintaining anonymity principles on social media can be chaotic. Recently, Gibbs et al. (2022) theorized how visibility features afforded on social media platforms allowed concerted control in online communities. These mediated social interactions among AA members are based on nonwork, voluntary, and open membership. However, the boundaries between individual members and AA as a collective must be difficult to maintain, given the organizational structure of AA.

To discover the complexity of anonymity principles as a core communication principle with potentially increasing identifiability in social media, this study summarizes the limitations drawn from the literature. Existing studies confirm anonymity as an attractor to AA, without describing it as a core communication principle that constitutes AA. Anonymity, as AA's fundamental communication principle manifested across books, steps, meetings, and organizational structures, has yet to be thoroughly investigated. Although communication is central to organizing, anonymous communication principles are factors that convince people to come to AA and disclose their personal addiction-related problems.

The current literature on AA and anonymity needs to be studied, and the complexities of collectively achieving a desired level/type of anonymity/visibility corresponding to individual and organizational goals need to be discussed. Scott and Rains (2005) describe employees' motivations for using anonymous communication because only some individuals know the value of anonymous, organizational communication and how to communicate anonymously in a desired way. The practice of anonymity principles on social media must be negotiated among organizational members. To further explore anonymity practices influenced by social media visibility, the current study examined the 12-step support group that puts anonymity as a core communication principle. The following research questions are proposed:

Research Questions

RQ1: *To what extent do members of a 12-step support organization manage communication visibility on social media?*

RQ2: *How does communication visibility on social media enable organizing a 12-step support organization?*

RQ3: *How does communication visibility on social media constrain organizing a 12-step support organization?*

Methods

Existing studies on organizational culture and the identification of AA derive basically from a single longitudinal group case study (e.g., Witmer, 1997; Wright, 1997). The current study attempts to capture how a group's diverse communication influences the overall constitution of AA as an organization. Collecting a representative sample is unrealistic because of the anonymity tradition. Because AA membership is not recorded (Thatcher, 2006), four AA groups were purposively selected in the Northeast. Among AA meetings listed in a directory of meetings in two central groups in a state in the Northeast, the author contacted AA members before and after each AA meeting. Each AA member was contacted for this study after each group allowed the author to attend meetings and ask people to participate in the study. As a result, two open groups and two closed groups were recruited. After each participant had read the recruitment letter and indicated interest, the author conducted in-person interviews. Participants remained anonymous. To reflect the unique organizational culture of AA, the author attended meetings and proposed relevant questions. AA anonymity principles were questioned to further understand multilevel organizational practices. For example, to identify the benefits and challenges of communication visibility, questions were asked about socialization, identification, the organization's written document, norms/rules, group-level practices, and external communication.

Sixteen interviews were completed; they represented those who attended the meetings in the four groups. Eleven participants were male, and five participants were female. Closed Group 1 met once weekly in a church basement, and Closed Group 2 met once weekly in a church auditorium. Open Group 1 met daily, and Open Group 2 met three times per week in separate AA clubs. Sixteen semistructured interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings. The average length of the interview was 41.25 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and produced on 195 single-spaced pages. Once gathered, the data were separated based on the perceived benefits and challenges of AA that were influenced by communication visibility. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was primarily used to identify emerging themes about organizational/group/individual practices related to practicing anonymity principles in hidden organizations. Following the six steps of data analysis, the author read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data and to notice the codes. When participants described their experiences of connecting with their peers on social media in a way that was constructive for AA, a local group, and personal recovery, this was defined as an opportunity. Meanwhile, anonymous communication that was destructively explained in the interview was considered a constraining force. The author then extracted emerging themes and searched for those themes across the data. Later, the author defined these themes and wrote the analysis.

Analysis

The interview data showed how the communication visibility afforded by social media both facilitated and interfered with the organizing processes of anonymous social support organizations, such as AA. Although AA members' recovery-related activities were visible to others—bringing other AA members together and fostering acceptance/a sense of belonging in AA—members were strategically selective. They had only a selective "Facebook friendship." Rather than comment or use "AA" or "recovery" publicly, AA members chose to use a private message to congratulate others' recovery anniversary and to develop intimacy with other AA members. While describing the general practice of anonymity on social media platforms, participants discussed the benefits and challenges of practicing anonymity. Communication visibility enabled AA members to figure out the common ground of anonymous communication that was acceptable and deemed appropriate by local groups and AA. Social media visibility allowed AA members to exchange informational, emotional, and instrumental support. Most interviewees also discussed the potential threats of revealing their recovery and those of other AA members because of the communication visibility of social media.

Managing Communication Visibility and Anonymity

"Keeping [it] on Me"

Most participants take strict responsibility for preventing themselves from potentially revealing their own AA membership and that of other AA members—by not engaging in activities other than being friends with AA members. Some AA members believe that they follow these principles to preserve anonymity at the maximum level and to remain completely invisible and secretive. Other AA members on social media choose to remain silent about recovery and AA because they perceive two layers of stigma relating to alcohol substance abuse and the 12-step recovery option. Although "being in recovery" indicates one's effort to overcome substance abuse issues, it also reveals one's history of substance use. Healthcare professionals have questioned the effectiveness of these 12-step programs as a health intervention because the scientific data do not consistently support the significant outcomes of the 12-step programs (see Kaskutas, 2009). Several interviewees mentioned that AA was still misunderstood as a cult or a "crazy," religious organization. Those who were concerned about their damaged reputation tied to stigma decided not to connect with AA members on social media. Even if they had AA friends, the interviewees made efforts not to engage with other AA members and to conceal their organizational membership in AA. When considering Facebook as an elevated platform associated with one's professional and personal social network, some members were cautious about connecting with AA members and shared their fear of being "outed."

> I have my real name on my social media. I do have Facebook friends that are in AA. However, I do not post anything about AA. I don't say anything about being in recovery or anything that could be interpreted as that. I don't refer to meetings or—I don't talk about it at all. But my full name is on my social media. (Participant 2)

As interviewees talked about their identities as recovering alcoholics and their organizational identities as AA members, it became apparent that their recovery process in AA was personalized. Once an alcoholic, AA members' self-disclosure about recovery and membership became very private because of the addiction and

stigma. They were explicit about not disclosing their identities as recovering alcoholics. The organizational identification of AA recovering alcoholics was silent on social media because of the anonymity principles and negative judgment from others. They wanted the other group members to refrain from broadcasting their personal lives. Interviewees talked about feeling uncomfortable sharing their recovery journey.

> I have a lot of shame and a lot of guilt from many things I've done in the past. I know I can't carry that around forever. But I know in time, by staying clean, that it'll fade. It's just that these bags I carry, they get so heavy. You just have to let it go. But I don't want to drop them in someone else's lap. I want to drop them in a place where they can. (Participant 13)

Strategically Ambiguous about AA and Recovery

Some members communicated vaguely, rather than completely distance themselves from AA and recovering alcoholics on social media. For example, members used internally accepted codes shared among AA members to protect themselves and others. Rather than using words directly related to AA and addiction (e.g., AA, 12-step, addiction, alcoholics), participants used internal codes on social media so that only AA members could understand what they were posting on social media. Several participants mentioned that they were shy about using the terms AA or addiction on social media. Some participants said nothing about AA if their association with AA could reveal their recovery from substance abuse. To maintain anonymity, some people were open about addiction but not about AA membership. Several participants mentioned that the stigma of addiction no longer existed. Nevertheless, they worried about the "AA image" derived from incorrect information and misunderstandings about AA. Thus, they tried to be ambiguous about their AA membership and recovery.

> I have Facebook, but I don't announce my anniversary-type friends who tell my anniversaries. And I do congratulate them. I'll comment. I'll say, "Amazing." That's anonymity. So many interests that I think he had maybe 14 years without a drink, and I commented, "That's fantastic, John." (Participant 5)

Selective "Facebook Friendship"

By assessing the quality of friendship with each AA member, AA members can control their boundaries and self-anonymity on social media. Some participants said their full names and personal/professional lives were visible on social media. Facebook remains a unique place where they can decide to accept a "friend request" from others in a local AA group. Participants were well aware that members needed to be cautious about their postings and interactions in and out of AA meetings. They mentioned that deviant AA members were not trustworthy. Some people questioned an individual's true identity behind AA's anonymity protections. Participants who had long-term involvement in AA tried to avoid suspicious AA members on social media. Sometimes, participants waited until they felt safe connecting with certain AA members on social media. One of the participants talked honestly about how selective he was on Facebook.

> I don't absolutely say I'm going to friend everybody. I have certain controls within my social media. I don't friend everybody. I don't share everything with every single person. There are some things I share in meetings. There are some things I share with the people—even the people I'm going to be close to here. Again, it's got to do with—you know in that old movie *Meet the Fockers*, the circle of trust. You know what I mean? (Participant 1)

Communication Visibility as an Enabling Force

Transparent Learning through Communication Visibility

Communication visibility allowed AA members to learn how to practice anonymity principles on social media because they could see how others interacted. Before joining AA, all interviewees admitted that they needed to be more particular about practicing self-anonymity and accommodating others because of a lack of organization orientation and formal membership training to figure out anonymous communication as a norm rather than a rule. Communication visibility enabled AA members to figure out the common ground for anonymous communication at an accepted and appropriate level by local groups and AA. Until they felt confident about interacting with others while following anonymity principles, AA members could stay silent.

> Yeah. And on the social media end of it, people kind of know. I mean, you see what people post. You know how willing they'll be to be open. And people who, like myself, don't post anything about it pick up on it. Or you should. (Participant 14)

The participants could figure out the acceptable ground rules without feeling embarrassed. Also, they could identify those deviant AA members with whom they did not want to interact in the future. Social media visibility features enhanced social learning in AA.

Facilitating Emotional and Instrumental Support

Like "staying connected," using mobile phones in the AA network facilitated support among AA members. All interviewees mentioned that they could keep up with the lives of others and maintain their relationships on social media. By expanding their support network outside of daily AA meetings, they reached out to those members who publicly shared their stressful life events and daily struggles as recovering alcoholics. Among the four groups recruited, one group had a meeting house and a private Facebook group for exchanging information (e.g., health information, local information), emotional support (e.g., alleviating any negative emotions, daily reminders), and instrumental support (e.g., sharing a ride). For example, Participant 2 described the support-seeking process: "It's more like people need a ride, or they need to find a dentist, or they need help shoveling, or they need a ride to a meeting. Stuff like that. They don't share personal stuff on Facebook."

Reaching Out to Non-AA Members in Need

Postings on Facebook by AA members about AA membership and recovery may intentionally and unintentionally reach non-AA members in need. While expressing their concerns about breaking others'

anonymity, AA members discussed how they could break self-anonymity to help others in need. Because of the stigma associated with addiction, individuals may not seek help proactively in public. However, when one's recovery journey is shared on social media, others may perceive that as a positive indicator of AA and recovery. Interviewees mentioned that old-timers—individuals with a long-term recovery and AA membership—were more open to breaking their self-anonymity because they were not afraid of the social judgment of addiction and 12-step support groups. Because AA members see the value of helping others in their recovery journey, communication visibility may enable them to achieve their organizational goals. By helping others, AA members can empower themselves.

> Some people post on Facebook a lot. I don't. I don't post my anniversary, but I had a sponsee's sponsee—so a grand sponsee—wish me a happy anniversary over Facebook, which I was a little upset about because I don't do that on Facebook. But as it would have it—and it just brings me back to step three, that somebody I went to school with had read that. Their son struggled with heroin addiction, and they reached out to me. And I was able to help somebody because of that. (Participant 15)

Communication Visibility as a Constraining Force

The visibility of social media potentially constrains AA and its members in several ways. All interviewees were aware of the danger of social media visibility, which broke self-anonymity and others' anonymity. While addressing the dilemma of practicing anonymity, no explicit training on social media use and no consequences for failing anonymity principles were described as challenges that eventually ruined the relationships among AA members. By becoming aware of other AA members' personal lives unrelated to recovery on social media, AA members acknowledge the widened social differences among individuals that threatened group coherence and organizational identification. Embarrassment, criticism, and disapproval were identified as forms of informal sanctions for breaking anonymity principles. However, participants also talked about precarious social media activities that could not be prevented.

Breaking Others' Anonymity

All interviewees mentioned the danger of social media, which breaks others' anonymity. AA members were aware that people perceived the importance of anonymity very differently because they had had episodes of breaking anonymity in person. As a part of that, being identified and revealing one's recovery journey happened while connecting with other members outside AA meetings. Several interviewees mentioned the dilemma of practicing anonymity while protecting the anonymity of all members in a different social setting.

> No, the other is more personal. It's mine and I don't worry about mine. But here, it's important, and it's sacred. And even on Facebook, there's a local group's website [page] where anonymity is a little more loose if somebody posts something on there because everybody that's in there is in the program. (Participant 9)

Widening Personal Differences

Given the visibility afforded by social media, AA members noticed that when appearing on social media, they needed help to achieve strong organizational identification because of their differences. Members' opinions about social issues (e.g., politics) and other recovery options widen the differences among individuals. Being surrounded by other alcoholics, members may normalize themselves. In AA meetings, members are encouraged to be unified, highlighting their common goal—"recovery"—rather than other personal and social issues that are not relevant to "recovery." Meetings are an excellent way to facilitate solid organizational identification, which diminishes individual differences for creating group coherence. However, Facebook makes these differences apparent. In AA, there is an organizational phrase: "Principles before personalities." It means that AA members must prioritize the organizational goal and the principles that unite them to focus on achieving each member's recovery as a collective.

> My sponsor, I'm not friends with her on Facebook, I'm not friends with very many people, only from before because we were friends for a long time, but I don't really friend people a lot on Facebook like that. I have a really solid group that doesn't change too much. Because you don't know my political leanings, it's principles before personalities. So, we could be the best of friends and they go on my Facebook and they're like, "Holy shit, I don't agree with any of that." And it affects you. (Participant 6)

Some participants felt uncomfortable with how other AA members expressed their political affiliations and opinions on social issues. When personal likes and dislikes appeared on social media, those personal matters negatively impacted on their relationships with others in AA local groups.

Sanction

People may encounter undesired group-level consequences when their communication on social media interrupts other AA members on social media. Participants mentioned various degrees and types of sanctions against those who violate anonymity principles. Although there is no official policy or rule associated with breaking anonymity, informal or formal sanctions against deviant group members who violate anonymity principles could be activated if necessary. Still, interview participants all mentioned that these rarely happened in their groups. When there are increasing threats to preserve anonymity principles, old-timers (a.k.a., senior AA members) and sponsors express their concerns about disciplining those who violate anonymity principles. Ford (1989) identified the sanctioning agents that make AA members legitimatize the shared ideology in AA. In the current data, group sanctions made AA members normalize and appropriate anonymity principles by punishing people who violated these anonymity principles. These gatekeepers play a significant role in controlling group norms of practicing anonymity. However, several people talked about how those sanctions did not help discipline deviant AA members on social media.

Interviewees expressed embarrassment, criticism, and disapproval. They displayed unpleasant tones or excessively critical tones toward those AA members while talking about others who risked the anonymity of interviewees. Because of the leaderless organizational structure of AA, the general rules are

relatively well written with limited guidelines, and there are no authority figures breaking communication norms on social media that come with punishing others. However, disagreements about connecting on social media may be a big challenge for maintaining a relationship.

> I think often it's not done by the broader organization. It's done informally within the group's social sanctions. Sometimes the sponsor—like somebody said, "Your sponsee did this." So, a sponsor will be responsible for telling the person or just informally. I think it's taken care of. (Participant 4)

Because of the absence of official consequences for those who violate others' anonymity on social media, the enforcement of an "informal" sanction still becomes challenging. Consequently, local AA groups may lack a consensus on how to address and penalize such breaches. If a sponsor perceives an action as not posing a serious threat to either the group or an individual, the initiation of social sanctions becomes unlikely. This situation can lead to organizational disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Being Stigmatized by Association

The visible ties to other AA members may be a potential threat to those who do not want to be identified as a member of AA and a recovering alcoholic. All interviewees were concerned about using social media, and it became apparent that the stigmatization of alcoholism and AA was a salient threat. Depending on the perceived stigma toward addiction and alcoholism, AA members vary in practicing anonymity, including publicly disclosing their sobriety and AA membership. However, social media's visibility provides potential association with AA members, indirectly revealing one's membership in AA. Social media's visibility affordance may even connect one's association with crime (Lane et al., 2018).

> When I started friending people from my group, some young naive open people would be really happy. Let's say they had their one-year anniversary, and they posted to the general public on Facebook, "I'm so grateful for my"—because then they disclose themselves on their Facebook page to the general public or all their friends. "I'm so grateful for my one year and my sponsor, Michele." And they would tag me, and that's when I quickly in Facebook stopped allowing tags to be on my timeline? [laughter]. And then I would—I'm using that word sanction, I would scold the person and say, "Please don't tag me again or mention my name that I do value my anonymity." (Participant 11)

The participant cynically described others who could jeopardize her career once her addiction and involvement in AA were exposed by others. She knew that her colleagues would harshly judge her, not based on her work, but on her addiction and personal life. She understood that although her addiction was her personal business, those not in recovery would still frown upon her association with addiction and AA. Although she noticed the perception toward addiction change, she knew how people reacted to it. Thus, she wanted to avoid any visible activities initiated by others as much as possible.

Discussion

The current study shows that AA members strategically communicate with AA members who still preserve the anonymity principle as a core communication principle on social media. It confirms that communication visibility challenges are constantly negotiated among organizational members to suit the organization's goals (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). Although they recognize the dilemma of using social media in AA, they choose to practice anonymity as much as possible while also monitoring others' activities on social media. Therefore, the findings indicate several suggestions for other hidden organizations that need consensus on social media practices to maintain their organizational values and norms.

First, the current study illustrates the complexity of a situation in which hidden organizational members' interactions on social media face challenges relating to collectively preserving the anonymity of members, given the increasing use of ICTs. Scott (2013) explained that the increased visibility of ICTs may constrain AA, because it may potentially break members' anonymity and the organization's core value of anonymity principles. Because these challenges are drawn primarily from the lack of the leadership and any concrete directions from AA and its local groups, individual members sometimes feel frustrated and guard their own anonymity. While navigating the visibility features of social media among AA members, AA members need to identify the features afforded by social media and protect themselves from any threats to the preservation of their anonymity. This visibility management burden is often left to individual members. Because hidden groups play a buffering role in managing a hidden organization's visibility at the individual level (Scott & Kang, 2021), the active engagement of some local groups to control deviant behaviors must play an important role in hidden organizing on social media.

The overall analysis aligns with Baym and boyd's (2012) constructive and destructive consequences of social interactions on social media about managing the boundary between the private and the public. For example, AA members remain connected and identifiable to other AA members on social media, even if they perceive a risk of breaking self-anonymity and others' anonymity. AA members' strong network formed in local groups benefits one's successful recovery (Groh, Jason, & Keys, 2008). The current study confirms that AA members still value the perceived benefits of social media about exchanging information and emotional and tangible support. AA members carefully manage the boundary between the personal and the social-on-social media by using several concealment and revelation strategies.

The current study acknowledges several organizational concerns in addition to individual concerns, such as breaking one's anonymity. Visibility potentially endangers individuals by putting them under interpersonal and institutional surveillance, which risks their privacy (Trottier, 2013). Although no designated AA member constantly patrols others' Facebook entries for anonymity principles, those activities and violators are frequently notified and controlled. With the self-awareness of highly exposed communication patterns and the relevant potential control over their communication from the management, individuals may choose not to use enterprise social media to keep their communication anonymous and confidential (see Leonardi, 2014). Mediated visibility would endanger politicians who need to manage their impressions and actions in public because of mediated visibility's unpredictable and uncontrollable power (Thompson, 2005).

The current finding reflects several concerns that organizational members address on social media. Because of the context-collapse nature of social media, employees connect with their coworkers by managing the tension between personal and professional boundaries while being careful about each post's content and its impact on their diverse network and audiences on Facebook (Vitak, 2012). Although the context has changed from when people shared how they became so cautious about putting themselves on social media, they mentioned incidents that showed how tricky it would be on social media.

The role of sanctions in managing these visibility challenges needs further investigation. Practicing anonymity principles on Facebook is highly regarded in the disciplining of peers by other AA members. Gibbs et al. (2022) theorize that concerted control is likely observed when individuals interact online for nonwork-related purposes in a closed membership. Despite having no designated leaders to enforce anonymity practices online, experienced senior AA members or other group members have disciplined other members who violate others' anonymity. Some old-timers said they were highly altered by any precarious actions of certain AA members that may jeopardize AA's anonymity principles. Still, there are no AA police or human resources that could resolve those issues. Addressing the disagreement about practicing anonymity on social media, several people talked about the general gaps between old-timers and younger generations. Old-timers are stricter than younger AA members in enforcing anonymity principles and using social media. It is similar to voluntary organizations that enforce norms and regulations.

One possible area for future study is how communication visibility is associated with "pervasive awareness"—increased understanding of others' activities and perspectives (Hampton, 2016). The studies of pervasive cognition indicate that social media might enhance social support seeking. AA members may identify those who need immediate emotional or instrumental support by keeping up with other AA members' status updates on their recovery and struggles. However, pervasive awareness could have psychological consequences, such as stress, because social media users indirectly or directly need to express their concerns about caring for others online (Hampton, Lu, & Shin, 2016), and because of their constant exposure to others' online activities. AA members may be exhausted or fatigued from increased concerns about others' recovery and their deviant actions against AA's principles. In addition to this heightened stress, their political and social differences on social media may impact their relationships with others. One of the concerns of social media use is widened individual differences. Individuals avoid conversations about politics on social media because their political activities could make their political affiliations and opinions fairly noticeable (Hampton, Shin, & Lu, 2017). Exploring explicit interpersonal and organizational outcomes of pervasiveness awareness in social support organizations would lead to a better understanding of social support.

The current study presents practical implications for AA members/leaders and even individuals who seek help from 12-step support groups and organizations. First, the study offers advice about the importance of AA's socialization and identification process positively enhanced by social media. Because of the lack of formal membership training and societal judgment toward alcoholism and AA, AA members may feel awkward and uncertain about being a part of AA and its programs. However, when people attend AA meetings and become actively involved in AA by building relationships and creating an informal support network via social media, they are more likely to achieve sobriety and the confidence to cope with their addictions. To this end, AA members should suggest that new members be patient and directly communicate with existing AA group members on social media. Also, this study illustrates the importance of both learning

and teaching anonymous communication principles in AA and other 12-step support groups and organizations. If AA members know the value of anonymity rather than just saying their first name only, these individuals may more fully embrace the core values of AA and anonymity so that they can practice anonymity more faithfully on social media. Openly talking about anonymity practices helps AA members comprehend the value of following anonymity principles while maximizing the benefits of being connected with AA members on social media.

The current study has several limitations. First, this finding is based on only 16 AA member participants who were willing to talk about their challenging experiences of using social media. These participants had relatively long-term recovery and strong AA identifications, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the difficulty of recruiting participants is because of the nature of hidden organizing. The author could recruit only participants who regularly attended meetings and had frequent interactions in AA. However, some interviewees were afraid to reveal their identities, even though the author ensured the confidentiality of their identities. Others were worried about how other AA members would judge their participation in this study because talking about AA in any aspect could be seen as a criticism of AA and potentially discredit other AA members. Lastly, the participants of the study limited their interactions solely to Facebook. Considering the age gap in AA and the prevalence of social media usage among young people, future studies could broaden the scope of research to include social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. Because each platform has its unique visibility features that could affect the visibility of its actions, future studies should examine these specific strategies and challenges.

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