

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLICLY DISCLOSING LIFE WITH HIV

## Authors:

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## Background:

People living with HIV (PLHIV) may use social media as a means of publicly disclosing their HIV status. Yet, 'disclosure,' as used in HIV prevention, is fraught with associations of delivering unpleasant information. Alternative understandings of 'disclosure' may be more appropriate.

## Methods:

Semi-structured interviews, including follow-up interviews, were conducted with 24 people recently diagnosed with HIV. This analysis explores how and why participants used social media to disclose positive HIV status.

## Results:

Four participants (eight interviews), all gay men, had used social media to disclose their status. Disclosure strategies included writing a blog and sharing it on Facebook, writing a Facebook post, posting a photo of medication on Instagram, and disclosing through news media and then social media. The act of disclosing symbolised a desire for one's voice to be heard, which one man described as releasing him from the 'sero-closet'. All participants publicly disclosed to take control of their own narratives. However, one participant checked his Facebook friends list to see whether he had been 'unfriended', indicating awareness of the lack of control he had over others' responses. Nonetheless, despite the broad audience reach of social media, three men considered their disclosure strategic, only telling trusted or known networks, with one participant minimising who could see his post using the 'close friends' feature on Instagram. This indicated that rather than 'disclosing', a term often framed in the HIV prevention field as a responsibility, participants were publicly 'sharing' their HIV status with their networks, repositioning their serostatus as a right to share, not a responsibility to disclose.

## Conclusion:

PLHIV share their HIV status to broad, but strategically controlled, social media networks. However, given that norms and expectations condition how people react to stories shared with them, presenting one's status on social media can nonetheless potentially attract the anticipation of stigma.

## Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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