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Pedophile hunters and performing masculinities online

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Pedophile hunters and performing masculinities online

Pedophile hunting – abetted by digital technologies - has spread rapidly, resulting in detrimental outcomes, including suicides of hunters' targets. The scant research on these groups adopts a functionalist argument that they have emerged to fill a security deficit – to undertake work that police are incapable of due to resource and skill deficits in policing the cybersphere. This paper adopts a critical approach to argue that the expressive nature of such activities must be incorporated into explanations for their rapid spread across the globe. Specifically, pedophile hunting can be understood as embodying the performance of masculinities in the digital realm.

Keywords: Pedophile hunting; digilantism; performance; masculinities

In 2017, 43-year old David Baker of Wickham, England, was found dead, barricaded in his own home, following a suspected drug overdose. Two days prior, the soon-to-be-married man had been confronted by the Southampton-based online "pedophile hunter" group TRAP in a supermarket carpark (Press Association, 2019). Baker had arranged on the internet to meet what he believed to be a 14-year-old boy in the carpark. Unbeknownst to him, he had really been engaging with a TRAP decoy. He was subsequently arrested by local police, kept in custody overnight and released the following morning. Two days later, he was found dead in his house, having left two suicide notes behind (Seymour 2018). Baker's family relocated soon afterwards for fear that their address may have been leaked online and that they would be targeted by vigilantes. In the ensuing coronial hearing, Graham Short, the Senior Coroner for Central Hampshire, stated that although he could not judge TRAP for what they do, it was clear that TRAP's posts on social media contributed to

the stress that Baker felt when he made the decision to end his own life (Press Association 2019; Seymour 2018).

Over the last decade, pedophile[1] hunting – abetted by the advent of digital technologies - has spread rapidly. While the phenomenon can be generally linked to the growth of cyber-vigilantism and associated with a withdrawal of the state from criminal justice functions under neo-liberalism (see, for example, Garland 1996; Huey et al. 2012), the origins of online pedophile hunting have been more directly associated with the popular US reality television show *To Catch a Predator* (2004-07) (Huey et al. 2012; Kozlowska 2019). Such groups first appeared in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia approximately a decade ago and have more recently appeared in the US. An NBC report (Zadrozny 2019) identified over thirty such groups operating on Facebook in 23 US states and Canada, including "Truckers Against Predators", "Creep Catchers" and "PopSquad", all with large online followings. Farrell (2018) puts the figure at 145 groups in the United Kingdom alone. Such activities are common in far-flung parts of the world, including Germany, The Netherlands and Cambodia (Hadjimatheou 2019), as well as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan (Favarel-Garrigues 2019). In Australia, outfits such as the Melbourne-based "Tinder Experiment" (Mills 2015), the "Coffs Coast Pedo Hunter" (Olding 2016) and the "Adelaide pedo hunter" (Prosser 2019) receive considerable public attention and support.

[1]The term "pedophile" refers to an individual with a diagnosable persistent sexual interest in prepubescent children (Richards, 2011). People with pedophilia may or may not act on this attraction by sexually abusing a child; conversely, many or most of those who sexually abuse children are not pedophiles (Seto 2009). Further, those who are either attracted to or offend against pubescent or post-pubescent minors are not pedophiles (Richards 2011). While the term pedophile is highly inflammatory and has been found to exert considerable influence on public perceptions (Jahnke et al. 2015), in the main, the targets of pedophile hunters are not in fact pedophiles.

Purshouse (2020:384-5) defines pedophile hunters as groups of individuals who "pose as children on social media platforms and in online chatrooms and lure potential child sex offenders to an ostensible illicit sexual encounter. Here, the suspect is confronted by the hunters, who then typically report the alleged crime to the police and post video footage of the confrontation on social media". In addition to some groups exposing (or "doxing" (Trottier 2017) the target online, the evidence produced by chatlogs and stings is provided to law enforcement agencies with the aim of instigating a police investigation into the alleged offender (Campbell 2016; Farrell 2018; Huey et al. 2013; Yardley et al. 2018). Pedophile hunting can thus be understood as one form of online vigilantism or "digilantism" (Powell et al. 2018). Digilantism is a global phenomenon that is part of "vengeance culture" whereby citizens - or "netizens" - shame wrongdoing by individuals by doxing their information online (Juliano 2012; Trottier 2017).

As foreshadowed above, pedophile hunter sting operations have led to a range of detrimental consequences. For example, numerous cases have ended in a suspect (and even victims of mistaken identity) dying by suicide (Campbell 2016; Favarel-Garrigues 2019; Gordon 2019) or being violently attacked (Farrell 2018; Favarel-Garrigues 2019; Miller 2018; Trottier 2017). The activities of pedophile hunters also potentially threaten the administration of justice and the application of due process (Purshouse 2020). The limited existing research also notes that pedophile hunter groups frequently hinder, rather than help, police in their efforts to apprehend alleged child sex offenders (Farrell 2018; Huey et al. 2012; Purshouse 2020), and in some cases even become the subjects of police charges themselves (Favarel-Garrigues 2019; Purshouse 2020). While some evidence suggests that pedophile hunting groups have assisted police to obtain convictions against child sex offenders, it is not known how many police investigations have been

hampered by the involvement of these groups, nor whether their activities have led to the unnecessary expenditure of police resources (Purshouse 2020). Some policing agencies appear to support pedophile hunter groups (Huey et al. 2012; Smallridge et al. 2016), seeing their activities as assisting their work, while others condemn pedophile hunting, due to its potential to compromise a case with improperly obtained evidence (Campbell 2016; Farrell 2018; Hadjimatheou 2019; Huey et al. 2013; Purshouse 2020). In Farrell's (2018:86) words, the police response to pedophile hunting has been "confused and contradictory" (see further Favarel-Garrigues 2019; Hadjimatheou 2019). Farrell (2018) recorded the following in his field notes from observing a sting by pedophile hunter group "Creep Catchers UK" in July 2017, in which the target was physically and verbally assaulted by members of the public who had joined in:

> After what felt like an age, two police cars pulled up. [Pedophile hunter] Raz and the decoy in the case went to them and gave them the evidence pack [that they had compiled] and explained who they were. The two police officers must have been at stings previously as they were very familiar with the process. The officers were extremely friendly with the Hunters and thanked them vehemently for the quality of the evidence pack before putting the target into the van. Strangely, however the police officer gave Raz a cease and desist letter at the same time she was thanking them for their work. After the sting I tried to talk to the police officer about how incongruent it was to hand out cease and desist orders while simultaneously praising the Hunters['] work. She put on her seatbelt and drove away (Farrell 2018:85-86).

Policing measures may, however, be becoming more coherent as agencies respond to the issues presented by pedophile hunting. In the UK, for example, the National Police Chiefs' Council ([NPCC] 2019, 2018) recently resolved to build public confidence in official law enforcement activity and existing official reporting mechanisms in order to diminish the appeal of pedophile hunter groups. The NPCC (2018) also established a Working Group to "drive, guide and steer the policing response to OCAG [Online Child Abuse Activism Group] activity" across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Explaining the growth of digilantism

The very limited extant literature has not yet adequately accounted for the rapid uptake of pedophile hunting. In one of the few studies that consider pedophile hunting, Yardley et al. (2018:82) conducted an analysis of news media representations of "websleuthing" – a term they propose is synonymous with digilantism, and that involves "[ordinary civilians] engag[ing] in varying levels of amateur detective work including but not limited to searching for information, uploading documents, images and videos, commenting, debating, theorizing, analyzing, identifying suspects and attempting to engage with law enforcement and other organizations and individuals connected to the cases". Yardley et al. (2018) consider pedophile hunting to be one type of websleuthing. In making sense of the rise of such activities, they point to Seltzer's (2008) notion of "wound culture", or the contemporary public fixation on trauma and violence, as well as of the contemporary phenomenon of "infotainment witnessing", alongside the increased availability of networked media. We concur with Purshouse (2020), however, who argues that pedophile hunting is different from other forms of online citizen-led policing such as websleuthing through its use of proactive and covert methods.

Another explanation is that the phenomenon of digilantism broadly (Campbell et al. 2016; Cheong & Gong 2010; Skoric et al. 2010; Yardley et al. 2018) and pedophile hunting specifically (Farrell 2018; Favarel-Garrigues 2019; Smallridge et al. 2016) is a manifestation of the revival of shame as a form of social control.

However, the primary explanation put forward in the existing literature is that digilante activities, including pedophile hunting, have emerged in response to a security deficit due to traditional policing approaches being inadequate to respond to crimes committed in the cyber realm (Campbell 2016; Chang et al. 2018; Huey et al. 2013; Nhan et al. 2017). Such explanations adhere to a functionalist ethos, which holds that digilantism is a response to a social problem or social disorganization and a void created by an absence of effective regulatory interventions. Essentially the argument put forward is that the overwhelming number and nature of crimes committed online creates a gap in policing that some members of the public attempt to remedy themselves (Campbell 2016; Chang et al. 2018; Huey et al. 2013; Nhan et al. 2017). Digilante activities such as pedophile hunting are thus seen as reflecting the recent shift in policing towards pluralization and cooperation between official state policing actors, private and charitable organizations and individuals such as "netizens" (Chang et al. 2018; Huey et al. 2012; Purshouse 2020; Yar 2012; see Campbell 2016, for a critical discussion).

The rise of digilantism more broadly is also commonly attributed to the increasing availability of digital technologies. As Nhan et al. (2015:342) argue, "the proverbial genie is out of the bottle: the Internet has created an environment in which the public can and will choose to play a role in public criminal and other investigations that capture its interest" (see also Hadjimatheou 2019). However, we consider this something of a reductive argument, and concur instead with Cheong and Gong

(2010:475), who caution against a "technological determinism". In other words, the availability of technology itself should not be considered an adequate explanation for the rise of digilantism generally or pedophile hunting specifically, as digital technologies may influence the range of choices available to individuals, but do not completely constrain them (LaFree 2017). Indeed, it is important to note that civilian involvement in policing child sex offending long predates the emergence of digital technologies (Williams 2006; 2017).

Pedophile hunting may well be a response to the emergence of new technologies and the gap created by the limited ability of police to secure these, and to the revival of shaming as a technology of social control. However, it is clear that the *expressive and performative nature* of digilante activities has been overlooked in existing efforts to account for the rise of pedophile hunters. Only Farrell (2018) and Campbell (2016) recognize the expressive aspects of this form of digilantism. Farrell (2018) conducted interviews with ten pedophile hunters and observations at hunting events, including sting operations in the UK. Farrell (2018) describes pedophile hunting as a "spectacle" and argues that public spectators online act as an audience for which the hunters perform. Farrell makes sense of this phenomenon by adopting Yar's (2012) notion of the "will-to-representation". Yar (2012:252) argues that the desire for self-presentation on new media platforms (ie the will-to-representation) ought to be considered criminogenic; that is, the desire to self-represent on social media can give rise to offending behavior (not just succeed it, as has been the case historically). Farrell (2018) argues that crime *fighting* (e.g. pedophile hunting and other forms of digilante behavior) should likewise be considered as at least partly informed by the will-to-representation (see more broadly Fishwik and Mak 2015). Campbell's (2016) analysis of the UK documentary *The Pedophile Hunter* also situates pedophile hunting in the expressive realm. She argues that

online footage of pedophile hunting creates thousands of "tiny theatres of punishment …. (where) one may at each moment encounter as a living spectacle, the misfortunes of vice" (Foucault as cited in Campbell 2016: 354). Byrne (2013:79) similarly argues that the digilante practice of "scambaiting" should be understood as a "theatrical experience".

In this article, we build on Farrell's (2018), Campbell's (2016) and Byrne's (2013) contention by examining the performative nature of pedophile hunting activities. Of course, the motivation to perform and the desire to witness the spectacle do not emerge in some socio-political vacuum, but rather draws on specific visions and structures of social order. We note here that pedophile hunting articulates gendered binaries, such as a distinction between public and private space. Performance must be situated in a field of power relations with symbolic and material import. The rapid growth of this phenomenon speaks to culturally- and temporally-situated anxieties that compel and make real the spectacle to which they speak. In this way, we examine in particular masculine will(s)-to-representation (Yar 2012) or performances of masculinity enacted in the course of online pedophile hunting activity. While not all pedophile hunters are male (Farrell 2018; Favarel-Garrigues 2019), their targets mostly are; further, it is clear from even a cursory look at pedophile hunting websites that pedophile hunting activity is highly masculinized regardless of gender (and in the current study, the frontline activities undertaken by pedophile hunters are largely conducted by men, with female hunters playing more limited "decoy" and administrative roles). Representations of pedophile hunting are thus, in the main, representations of masculinity. Such activity does not represent masculinities but contributes to the construction of masculinities. The interaction between the hunter and their target can be understood as a form of boundary maintenance (see

Erikson 1962) that shapes masculine norms and reinforces masculine configurations and hierarchies.

This article expounds this argument by presenting a cyberethnographic analysis of two key pedophile hunting websites. It is comprised of four main parts. The part that follows outlines the theoretical context in which the research was embedded. Following this, the methodology utilized for the study is described. The remaining parts present the key findings from the cyberethnography and explicate our argument - that pedophile hunting must be understood as performative, and as a performance of masculinity in particular – and consider the implications of this in practical and theoretical terms.

Theoretical context

Erving Goffman's (1967; 1983) theoretical perspective of "dramaturgy" posits that social lives are a dramatized performance of "impression management", in which individuals not only project a "self" but portray an idealized, desired self (Hardie-Bick and Hadfield 2011). His notion of "impression management" – i.e., efforts made by an individual to shape audiences" belief in their performance (or presentation of self) is especially relevant in digital contexts (Birnbaum 2008; Davison 2012; Ellison et al. 2006). Online environments, with their wealth of both textual and visual representations provide rich sites for examining self-presentation and impression management (see e.g. Birnbaum 2008; Davison 2012; Ellison et al. 2006). Goffman's theoretical tools are thus being revitliased in what has been labeled "technoself" studies (Liu and Sui 2017; Luppicini 2013). Online social lives can be perceived as an extension of the dramatized performance of impression management (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). (Indeed, scholars increasingly

refute the existence of any genuine distinction between online and offline lives, arguing instead that these are inexorably intertwined in the contemporary historical moment (Powell et al. 2018). Goffman's perspective is especially relevant to the performance of identity in digital spheres as he posits a subject that makes conscious decisions about what to reveal to which audiences, based on expectations of audiences" responses (Van House 2011). Online selves are thus deliberate and heavily curated; as Van House's (2009) research on online image-sharing documented, posters' behaviors cohered with a Goffmanian sense of the subject in that they deliberately curated different versions of their selves across image-sharing platforms such as Flickr and Facebook.

Goffman's (1967) concept of "action" is especially salient for our current purposes. Goffman (1967) argues that social activities are either *problematic* or not, and *consequential* (i.e. may have significant effects on the individual's future life circumstances) or not. "Fateful" actions are those that are "consequential, problematic, and undertaken for their own sake" (Goffman 1967:185). Individuals may be unable to avoid or may even deliberately elect to participate in fateful pursuits, such as policing, military, or criminal careers. For these individuals, a key defensive mechanism is a performance of virtue. It is not that those who engage in fateful actions are necessarily more courageous, self-assured and altruistic than others, but that this is how they make sense of, justify and perform their fateful roles (Goffman 1967:182-184). For the actions of a pedophile hunter to be noticed, understood, rationalized and accepted they must be seen as virtuous both by the individual engaging in such action and their audience. According to Goffman's (1967:218-227) concept of action, risky behaviors are perceived as being undertaken for their own sake, including by those who pursue them; however, they might be more aptly understood as demonstrations of "character" – that is, they demonstrate desirable personal traits such as courage, gameness,

gallantry, integrity and composure (see further Lyng 2014). Demonstrations of character are linked to the broader social context, since in undertaking action, individuals "model the qualities that all societal members must exhibit to some degree if the existing social order is to persist" (Lyng 2014:447). Action is undertaken to (attempt to) display character and build or sustain reputation: "[Action] is an end in itself only in relation to other kinds of purpose" (Goffman 1967:238). This is relevant for our purposes as it encourages a consideration of how individuals' online performances are shaped by and shape social context and existing social structures, such as patriarchy.

Goffman (1983) also raises the domain of *audiences* as critical to understanding social interactions. As Birnbaum (2008:72) puts it, "whenever individuals are before an audience (i.e., people are aware that others are able to observe them either directly or indirectly) they are careful about the types of impressions they want to give and actively shape their self-presentation accordingly". Further, audiences are themselves excited by observing demonstrations of action and can experience it vicariously. Goffman (1967:262) gives the example of James Bond films, but we might also apply this to action in the digital realm. As Birnbaum's (2008) research demonstrates, impression management increasingly occurs in online contexts, and Goffman's lens can thus be useful in analyzing performances in digital spaces (see further Davison 2012).

While Goffman's concepts are useful in explaining the "what" and the "how" of performance, he neglected the "why" question; the temporal and cultural context that animates actor and audience interactions is not well-articulated. Explanations of pedophile hunting have ignored gendered power relations; we contend that these are fundamental to making sense of this phenomenon. Male

performance is normatively evaluated and hierarchically situated according to a range of socially- and culturally-variable measures. Here Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity can assist in understanding male sexual abuse of children *and* reactions to it. Hegemonic masculinity is mostly produced by men in relation to other men and masculinities, as well as in relation to women and femininities, and hegemony exists as both external (in relation to women) and internal (in relation to other men). It is with respect to this relational account of masculinity that hegemonic masculinity aligns with the interaction that Goffman highlights, but embeds such interaction in a field of unequal relations and conflict. Inequality in digital realms can be considered in terms of scripts, their availability and the relative power of groups to perform, animate and communicate such scripts. For example, it may be that pedophile hunters are highly organized and well-resourced groups whose targets are incapable of constructing a counter script or narrative.

Research into how masculinities are articulated in online spaces dates back to the growth of the worldwide web as a popular cultural forum (Kendall 2000; Koch et al. 2005). New media research has examined how gender is performed online through either reinforcing hegemonic 'scripts' (Harvey and Ringrose 2015; Van Doorn 2010) or through subversion of hegemonic masculinity (Manago 2013; Mowlabocus 2010). Drawing on Connell's work, Harvey and Ringrose look at how forms of masculinity are articulated according to forms of social and cultural structuration. They argue that forms of masculinity that become hegemonic in a particular context are locally specific and subject to ongoing negotiation and resistance. They argue that Goffman's notion of performativity assists in clarifying such processes and grounding them in social life. For Goffman, the performance is always performed by someone, although that person self is always reflexively constructed through interaction with others. Further, the articulation of masculinity does not occur

in a social vacuum, drawing from a cultural inventory of masculine behaviors and the symbolic resources available. While Connell's work is useful in understanding how specific articulations of masculinity are ontologically privileged, Goffman' work is useful in understanding the action and interaction essential to performance (Brickell 2005).

A critical lens allows us to ask the question, how does masculinity happen and how do masculine hierarchies take shape? This may allow for an understanding of the diverse strategic directives of masculinity. Yet, following Goffman, rather than being an object to be maintained or recovered, masculinity is practised, exercised and exists only in action. Strategies through which masculinity is produced are historically and culturally contingent. Masculinity is a complex and diverse historically grounded psycho-social product of dynamic social relations, played out in diverse spaces, including digital realms (Gadd and Jefferson 2007). Focusing on relationality or dialogue incorporates both the performance and the perceiver of masculinity (Campbell 2016; Kahn et al. 2013; Reeser 2010), as we argue that pedophile hunting is inseparable from its audience.

Methodological approach

To examine how pedophile hunters perform masculinity online, a qualitative study was undertaken using cyberethnography. A cyberethnography is an adaptation of traditional ethnography, involving research conducted in online environments (Black 2016). Cyberethnographies not only observe communities in online spaces but view online communities as a "library of people" in both real and archived time (Adler and Adler 2008; Teli et al. 2007). Cyberethnographies have the advantages of being unobtrusive, allowing the researcher to observe community interactions

without disturbing the environment, and to access specialist communities (Gajjala 2002) – in this case, pedophile hunter groups. In addition, cyberethnography is inherently concerned with the "production of self" and lends itself to examinations of the performative nature of identity (Billman 2010).

Data were collected from two online pedophile hunter sites: the Facebook page of the Scotland-based group "Wolf Pack Hunters" (hereafter WPH) (https://www.facebook.com/WolfPackHuntersUK/) and the USA-based "Perverted Justice" (hereafter PJ) website (www.perverted-justice.com). WPH conduct "sting operations" after interacting with alleged offenders using a "decoy" profile where a member will pretend to be a vulnerable child. WPH often obtain confessions from the alleged offenders in video evidence, and once the police have received the chatlogs and videos, make Facebook posts about the incident. Alternatively, PJ uses "decoy" names in online chatrooms to entice unsuspecting "offenders" to chat with them, posing as vulnerable children. After obtaining condemning chatlogs, pictures and information from the would-be offender, PJ hands over the evidence to the police and leaks this personal information online. These two sites were selected as they are both well-established pedophile hunting groups in their respective countries, with long histories of pedophile hunting activity and large public followings dating back to 2004 (PJ) and 2017 (WPH), allowing for a wealth of data to be collected. The data consisted of every post (23 videos of sting operations made by WPH during the six-month period from 1 December 2018 to 31 May 2019, and all material (e.g. Frequently Asked Questions) on the PJ website as at 31 May 2019. (PJ were not actively posting new material during this period). Posts are typically made by group administrators, but this varies across the two groups and also over time, especially as group membership changes.

Comments from both sites (n = 21,405 comments comprising text posts, text interactions with followers of the groups, and memes) were also analyzed. These were made by followers of the two groups and ranged from one word responses through to several paragraphs in length. It is important to note that these sites are not representative of all pedophile hunting groups. As noted above, such groups are highly diverse. The findings presented below thus are not generalizable but provide a platform for future research.

All data were imported into qualitative data analysis software program NVIVO prior to coding and analysis. Coding is the process of "indexing or mapping data, to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make sense of them in relation to their research questions….[in order to]… render it into something we can report" (Elliott 2018:2851). As is often good practice when conducting qualitative research (Creswell 2015; Elliott 2018), the data were coded inductively (i.e., not according to pre-determined themes) (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) in order to allow for the identification of key emergent concepts and themes within the dataset. Following this process of coding, the data were analyzed using a narrative analysis approach. This allowed for the exploration of stories as representations of lives and focused on how these stories reflexively reshape past events and project the future (Frank 2016). Furthermore, narrative analysis can be specifically applied to the understandings of self and identity (Linde 2009; Polletta 2006), which was key to the study. In contrast to thematic analysis, which is more commonly utilized and focuses on illuminating patterns *across* data, our narrative analysis focused on the overall story – or process of "meaning making" (Floersch et al. 2010:412) - *within* an individual's online posts (Narendorf et al. 2015). Our analysis thus involved an examination of the expressive nature of the posted material, allowing us to situate narratives discursively, here with reference to masculinity.

Following Mason (2018), care has been taken to indicate to readers how representative findings are of the larger dataset.

Performing masculinity on pedophile hunter sites

Analysis of the data collected from the two selected websites suggests that pedophile hunter groups not only project and perform particular forms of masculinity but do so in a number of interconnected ways in order to sustain a masculine image online. Masculinity is performed in four main ways, which are outlined in turn in the remainder of this section.

Villains, victims and fairytales: Pedophile hunters and the hero/rescuer narrative

First, the pedophile hunter groups position children as "innocent" subjects to "save", thereby implicitly establishing their own role as masculine saviors, and reinforcing the "damsel in distress" stereotype characteristic of fairytales. Consider, for example, the following post by WPH in which children are framed as "precious" and "innocent", implying a need for guardianship and protection:

> [Pedophile] Hunting here in Scotland was always going to be a dangerous [activity] but the [importance of the] cause will always outweigh the danger and we the Wolf Pack will go anywhere in any situation to shine the light on any man or woman looking to steal the precious innocence of children. We go out in the knowledge our safety is in jeopardy but we do it because who else is??

Here, the pedophile hunters position the child as the victim or subject to save, and themselves as saviors or heroes. By stating that their work is intrinsically dangerous and establishing themselves as brave child saviors, they demonstrate "character" in Goffmanian terms. The notion that they are putting themselves at risk or making a personal sacrifice for the greater good is a common trope in discourses of hegemonic masculinity and is common to justifications of practices such as colonialism and militarism. The quote also suggests a desire for the hunters' activities to be viewed as altruistic and particularly so in the constructed context of a failure on the part of other individuals or bodies to act in defense of the innocent.

In response to one poster, who revealed her own past as a survivor of child sexual abuse on the site, WPH state:

> [NAME] you are amazing and it's my honor to call you friend and family. You'll always have a place in my Pack and you'll always now lead by example and save the young princesses who at this very moment believe the goblin behind the keyboard is real[ly] a prince.

This post draws on imagery commonly utilized by pedophile hunting groups, including framing potential victims of child sex offenders as (female) princesses. In one chatlog transcript posted on the PJ website, the username adopted by the decoy pedophile hunter is "princezz_paris". Princesses are classically innocent, sweet, and in need of saving in fairytales, demonstrating the hunters" adherence to this storybook narrative. This narrative is in line with the child sex trafficking narrative identified by O'Brien (2019), involving a triumvirate of characters: the victim,

the villain and the hero. O'Brien (2019) identifies the child as the ideal victim and ties the notion of heroism broadly to ideas of masculinity. In this case, the proverbial princess (the child) suffers at the hands of the villainous potential child sex offender, referred to in this instance as a "goblin". By characterizing the child as the "victim", and the offender as the "villain", WPH counter-position themselves as the "hero" to their audience and in doing so, perform (dialogical) masculinity.

Using a storybook narrative, pedophile hunting groups construct alleged child sex offenders as the proverbial monster that needs to be vanquished or exterminated in order to elevate their own masculine status online. To do this, they utilize derogatory and dehumanizing language, and endeavor to humiliate the alleged offenders by doxing their information and images online in the form of posts and memes. For example, WPH and PJ both frequently use the terms "beast", "monster", "animal" and "predator" to refer to alleged offenders online. In using such terms, the targets are positioned as animalistic, conjuring images of predators using online forums as their hunting grounds to catch and devour their innocent prey (see also Favarel-Garrigues 2019). Of course, hunting itself has been long associated with the construction of masculinity, considered as a gentrified masculine sport, a form of masculine honor and achievement and a rite of passage (Boddice 2008; Cohen 2005; Fine 2000; Proctor 2002). In Russia, pedophile hunting stings are commonly referred to as "safaris" (Favarel-Garrigues 2019), a similarly traditional, gentrified masculine pursuit.

"You are not a man": Feminization of targets by pedophile hunters

Pedophile hunters go to considerable lengths to visually dismantle the reputation of the alleged offenders they pursue. In particular, the creation of memes and use of humiliating images of

alleged offenders is employed to demonstrate their inferior status by positioning them as weak and feminine. In the following posts taken from the WPH website, WPH administrators make a particularly potent example of one offender multiple times. By shaming this target repeatedly, WPH reinscribe traditional heteropatriarchal masculinity by using feminization as a tool to establish their masculinity in front of an online audience. The alleged offender they disparagingly dub "Vicky" not only challenges norms by allegedly grooming children online, but by rejecting traditional heteropatriarchal masculinity by sending photographs of himself dressed in women's clothing, thereby becoming a target of the pedophile hunters" ridicule. In the post below, WPH not only feminize and shame "Vicky" by referring to their target by a feminine name, they also use a photograph of their target dressed in lingerie and mock him for wearing female clothing: "Day Two of a week of Wolf Pack trials. Vicky aka [NAME] will be appearing at [LOCATION] today, hopefully not in a bra". This is another instance of WPH othering opposing masculinities, and thereby performing their own superior, heteronormative, masculine status in contrast.

The following post concerning "Vicky" similarly seeks to humiliate the target via feminization:

> Renowned beauty VICKY aka [NAME] pled guilty today and will be sentenced following social work reports and a bikini wax….
> He couldn't walk and he has what looks like a slash mark on his face and cuts on his head. Any way great result…
> #AnotherOneBitesTheBullet #JailHouseBitch

Here, the pedophile hunters trivialize the feminine by making reference to female grooming practices (bikini waxing) and thus position themselves as more masculine than their target. Their

construction of a cross-dressing male as being more akin to a woman - and one deemed unattractive at that - demonstrates the hunters" presentation of self in opposition to this subordinate masculine image. Use of the hashtag *#jailhousebitch* further signifies the subordinate masculine role ascribed to the alleged offender. It crudely implies that "Vicky" will engage in homosexual activity with other inmates either willingly or by force and will adopt what they view as a passive or feminine role in sexual activities. Literature on prison rape consistently finds that the label of "bitch" or "fag" following a rape incident is leveled on inmates who are considered weak and feminine, and no longer seen as "real" men (Haney 2011).

WPH further reinforce their performance of masculinity by the feminization of their targets in the post below, in which the alleged offender is ridiculed by being given the moniker "Mr E.D." (Mr Erectile Dysfunction). Here, they are alluding to the problem with impotency the target revealed in his interactions with the hunter decoy in chatlogs. Virility and impotency are often used in conjunction with images of masculinity, whereby a virile male is looked upon as strong and in contrast, impotent males are seen as weak (Del Rosso 2012). In the post below, the alleged offender is presented to the audience as less than a man to the online audience. In opposition of this feminized masculinity, WPH position themselves as dominant masculine actors:

> You all remember Mr E.D? Mr Erectile Dysfunction [NAME] who travelled up from England to film a documentary but ended up starring in a Wolf Pack Hunters UK live video after trying to lure out a young girl for sex? Well Mr [NAME] pleaded guilty to all charges and will be sentenced on April the 11th!!

In a post typical of the content of their site, the WPH emasculate another alleged offender by posting an image of him captured during a sting and in which he appears scared and intimidated by the hunters. The still-image of the alleged offender seemingly cowering is used to suggest that the offender is weak, in opposition to the tough image usually associated with masculinity (Hansbury 2017; McGinley 2015). The caption that accompanies the image mocks the offender for "acting like a pussy". The word "pussy" has multiple connotations, often being used as a derogatory feminizing insult used to emasculate men (Hansbury 2017). WPH again perform their masculinity in opposition to this subordinate, weak other.

In one sting video, WPH film a confrontation between a younger alleged offender and members of WPH in which they intimidate him to the point of tears. In this video, the team members ridicule the offender for crying, going so far as to continue filming through the window of his house and laughing at him for crying in his mother's arms. This can be heard when the main hunter in the video says "Boohoo, sad [NAME]" and "Could you look any sorrier for yourself? Oh my God", followed by laughter from the other hunters present. This offender is also ridiculed for being a "virgin pedo" – a reference to his youth. Male engagement with emotional expression is restricted by heteronormative constructions of masculinity (encapsulated by the maxim "boys don't cry" (McGinley 2015). Emotional expression is commonly viewed according to traditional heteronormative constructions of masculinity, whereby women are given greater freedom to express a range of emotions than men, and the expression of emotion is associated with women and girls (MacArthur and Shields 2014; Motro and Ellis 2017). When WPH ridicule their young target for crying, they feminize him for deviating from masculine norms and for displaying effeminate behavior. Similarly, by using the label "virgin pedo", WPH members "virgin-shame" the offender. Virgin-shaming denotes that having had sexual intercourse is a marker of masculine

achievement (Fleming and Davis 2018). In this context, it is used to position WPH members as more masculine than the alleged offender, rendering him lower in their imagined masculine hierarchy.

In many sting videos, male pedophile hunters are seen and heard belittling their targets on the basis of their penis size. In one such example, WPH members ridicule an alleged offender for working as a beauty product salesman, feminizing him for what they consider his less-than-masculine career. As a corollary, WPH members confront the offender for sending "tiny willy pictures" to the decoy. One hunter wags his little finger in front of the camera in order to illustrate the size of the alleged offender's penis. Later in the video, the same member refers to the target's penis again, stating "your wee willy... I'm not saying that to embarrass you, but it is tiny", implying that a small penis is something to be ashamed of and denotes a subordinate masculine subject. In another sting video, a WPH decoy accuses the offender of sending "wee willy pictures" and tells the offender "you are not a man." In popular culture, large penises are a marker of masculinity and are often considered a "visual spectacle" that is celebrated, for example, in both advertising and pornography (Del Rosso 2012). WPH consistently use these small penis insults to denigrate and emasculate the offender, further performing their own dominant masculinity against this feminized version.

The feminization of suspects in these ways might simply be understood as shaming, as previous authors on pedophile hunting (Farrell 2018; Favarel-Garrigues 2019; Smallridge et al. 2016) have argued. However, utilizing a Goffmanian lens prompts us to consider how performing these acts of shaming contributes to pedophile hunters' presentations of the self: how does shaming others online shape impression management for those doing the shaming? This advances understandings

of pedophile hunting centered on shaming because if shaming others was the primary goal, why do pedophile hunters represent themselves online at all? Why not remain anonymous? The feminized shaming of targets does not only shape how targets are perceived but how those doing the shaming are perceived. By feminizing their targets, pedophile hunters reinscribe their own (superior) masculinity.

"The largest and best": The use of braggadocio and machismo by pedophile hunters

Another way in which pedophile hunters perform masculinity in their online activities is by enacting the traditional masculine traits of braggadocio and machismo. Braggadocio and machismo are the ways in which males dominate women and "other" men in order to establish a hierarchy (Gilmore 1990). Braggadocio specifically refers to the idea of bravado as a gendered masculine performance (King 2018). Machismo refers to the extension of masculine performance commonly attributed to Latino men, who are deemed to be in possession of hypermasculine traits such as aggression, dominance and bravery (Torres et al. 2002). Pedophile hunters perform masculinity as braggadocio and machismo in a number of ways, but perhaps most significantly by denigrating members of other, apparently rival, pedophile hunter groups. In doing so, they perform the masculine roles of aggressor and competitor, which are traditionally accepted forms of the display of masculinity (McGinley 2015; Navaro and Schwartzberg,2007; Ricciardelli et al. 2006). This is often seen in the socializing form of sporting events, as aggressive conflict and the perception of domination leading to an increase in social standing and potential resource acquisition (Ricciardelli et al. 2006; Watkins and Jones 2012). In the world of pedophile hunting, the disparaging label "glory hunting" is frequently used to derogate members of rival groups who

are deemed to be involved in pedophile hunting for the "wrong" reason – that is, the fame or "glory" (see also Farrell 2018). Posts such as the following are common:

> These 2 scumbags were warned to stop their idiotic practices by [pedophile hunter] Gordon ages ago or he was gonna go and live sting them! Now they've got real problems and WPHUK will be confronting them about their glory hunting off the backs of REAL HUNTING TEAMS here in Scotland
> #Scum #ForTheFame #Clowns #ChatLogsAtrocious #NoSenseBetweenThem

This post, and many others like it, demonstrates both braggadocio and machismo, via the denigration of pedophile hunters from another group for glory hunting. In displaying these characteristics, the hunters position themselves in contrast as real and genuine and highlight their own competence. By doing so, they attempt to position themselves higher in the masculine hierarchy despite similar hunting practices. Consider further the following extract from the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section of the PJ website:

> Q: Are you affiliated in any way with any well-known child advocacy orgs?
>
> A: We don't really like other groups in general. In the website's evolutionary period, we were often attacked by other child advocacy organizations….We do our best to stay out of the "child protection scene" as unfortunately, many in that scene care more about being seen as "the one!" rather than cooperating effectively with others….As a whole, most other websites are extremely passive while we, on the other hand, pride ourselves on being very aggressive. We wish all other organizations the best of luck and if contacted, will definitely hear them out.

Notably, PJ describe their approach as "aggressive", once again demonstrating character in the Goffmanian sense and positioning themselves in the dominant and superior masculine position in contrast with their competitors, who they feminize here by characterizing them as "passive". PJ go as far to say that they will "hear out" other organizations, signaling that the onus is on the other organizations to reach out to them from their inferior position. Another consideration to make during these posts where hunter groups position themselves above other similar organizations is that hunter groups may believe themselves to be in competition with one another. Contest and competition are commonly understood as hypermasculine pursuits and are displays of braggadocio and machismo (Hurtado and Sinha 2016; King 2018). Masculine status is often determined by assessing achievements via competition (King 2018; Navaro and Schwartzberg 2007). In this response to the FAQ, PJ use words such as "pride" to convey that they believe themselves to be the winners in the hierarchy of hunters and render themselves as superior masculine figures. Indeed, PJ's tagline is simply "[Perverted Justice is] the largest and best anti-predator organization online". The PJ website offers the following description of their pedophile hunting activities, again underscoring their "aggressive" and "confrontational" nature, positioning themselves as superior as a result, especially in contrast with other (feminized) groups, who are merely involved in "hand-wringing":

> This is a foundation unlike most, if any, other foundations you'll ever run across. We're a foundation that does not simply thunder about a problem, we don't merely advocate or preach against an issue from a distance. No, our foundation is a pro-active endeavor. We're aggressive. We're confrontational. We believe you have to be to make a difference in the fight against predators and pedophiles. We don't

> wring our hands and say "they're so evil, what can be done!" We find a way to get things done.

Here aspects of hegemonic masculinity that have been subject to public criticism, such as aggression, are posited as having social utility. (Masculine) action is also prioritized over (feminine) passive talk. PJ further perform competitive masculinity in the following post, in which they position themselves as superior not only to other pedophile hunting groups but to official law enforcement organizations:

> We have also perfected the art of the "large-scale" police sting. We've done numerous predator stings across the country with hundreds of predators being arrested. Prior to our involvement in large scale stings, the record for the most predators arrested in one night, in one location was five. We now have broken that mark nearly two dozen times with the new record for the most internet predators arrested in one night…during a sting that saw 51 predators arrive and be arrested over 3 days.

Another key feature of the PJ website that clearly demonstrates braggadocio is the presentation of chatlogs with alleged offenders. The website contains hundreds of such chatlogs, many of which contain a running commentary from the pedophile hunters, designed to draw to the attention of the reader to their skill and cleverness in ensnaring the alleged offender. Consider the following excerpt from a chat between the alleged offender ("armysgt1961") and the decoy ("peekaboo1293"). The sections in bold are the commentary provided retrospectively by the

pedophile hunter decoy. As is typical on the PJ website, this commentary seeks to highlights the skill and superior intellect of the hunter:

7:14:37 PM peekaboo1293: so dad sends me calling cardz hehehe

7:14:50 PM armysgt1961: I CAN BUY U SOME MINS

7:15:01 PM peekaboo1293: relly

7:15:04 PM armysgt1961: YES

7:15:16 PM peekaboo1293: wow thatz kinda cool

7:15:52 PM armysgt1961: I WILL PICK UP SOME CONDOMS IF U WANNA HAVE FUN I WILL BUY U A 50 DOLLAR CARD **[$50 bucks? So [NAME] apparently has this down to a fine art. Pay the kid and she won't dare tell on you. Something you picked up overseas, [NAME]?]**

7:16:08 PM peekaboo1293: omg

7:16:13 PM armysgt1961: IM SERIOUS **[There is no doubt in my mind]**

7:16:31 PM armysgt1961: OR JUST A BLOW JOB

7:16:35 PM armysgt1961: 50 **[yeah I understand. You're just on the verge of jumping off the cliff, [NAME]]**

7:16:46 PM peekaboo1293: i know how to do that

7:16:53 PM armysgt1961: OK

7:17:00 PM armysgt1961: U WANT TO MEET **[Yeppers. There it is. You just sealed your fate, bucko]**

Masculine aggression is not only conveyed via linguistic representation in textual posts, but often more viscerally in sting videos posted online through the corporeal force that hunters use against alleged offenders. In one such video, an alleged offender is confronted by the WPH team after he attempts to walk away from them. The hunters shout, "get fucking down" and threaten to push him to the floor if he does not stop trying to escape. This threat of violence is an example of aggression that WPH at times exhibit when conducting sting videos. WPH team members are even seen wearing bandanas akin to street gang members in an apparent attempt to intimidate the alleged offender, and physically push him against the wall when he tries to move, further illustrating the physical aggression that pedophile hunters commonly perform.

"It takes an army": Masculinity, militarization, policing and pedophile hunting

The final way in which pedophile hunters perform masculinity is through adopting militaristic language. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from the WPH website:

> In the New Year we will be recruiting New Wolf Pack Members to get boots on the ground. We have over 100,000 Wolf Packers who do an amazing job highlighting stings therefore spreading awareness but we are definitely needing men and women who are prepared to put boots on the deck and enter situations that knifes [knives] hammers and raging relatives might aim to cause harm, we need people who will draw a line in the dirt behind them and won't take a step behind it regardless of the situation.

This post, like many others, uses militaristic language to further the (brave) masculine image that pedophile hunters across the two sites consistently project. The use of phrases such as "boots on the ground" and "boots on the deck", as well as the emphasis placed on the potential for danger in the stings that the group conducts conjures images of war, rendering the hunters akin to warriors and military heroes. PJ refer repeatedly to the "fight" or "war" in which they are involved, as well as adopted other military imagery in their posts: "…we've taken the fight to new fronts"; "[we are] working to expand on all fronts in the war against internet predators and pedophiles". Elsewhere, PJ claim that "In the fight against online pedophiles and predators, it does not take a village[,] it takes an army". In doing so, they contrast the feminine ethic of care with masculine militarism.

In another WPH post, two pedophile hunters are lauded for "putting your heads above the trenches and making a stand". This elevates their image of masculinity, as masculinity has long been associated with careers in the military and with militarism generally (Castro 2007; Smalley 2005), which in turn have long been associated with ideas of masculine toughness (Johnson 2010), with military men often presented as heroes and protectors (Johnson 2010; Prividera and Howard 2006). The image of drawing "a line in the dirt" likewise invokes images of war, trenches, and masculine courage. In their posts, pedophile hunters frame their activities as a "war" or "fight" between themselves (as self-appointed representatives of the general public) and child sex offenders.

By employing this language, WPH perform militarism as an extension of their masculine personae. While this excerpt is a particularly potent example of this, other militaristic language is commonly used. For example, WPH commonly discuss their activities using the language of "snaring" alleged offenders and "combatting" the issue of child sexual abuse, referring to their followers as "troops".

They "salute" one another's bravery and even refer to fellow pedophile hunters as "brother": "[NAME] brother I salute you". These are powerful demonstrations of character in Goffman's terms; pedophile hunters present themselves as engaging in dangerous but necessary actions, thus highlighting their masculine courage, gallantry, and so on.

As with the military, policing remains a deeply masculine endeavor, characterized by hierarchies, an emphasis on the (pack) collective and perceived public good (McGinley 2015; Rawski and Workman-Stark 2018). Indeed, performances of masculinity are central to policing, and in studies of police culture, "proving masculinity has been identified as a persistent theme" (Rawski and Workman-Stark 2018:608). Policing rhetoric is employed by pedophile hunters in much the same way as military rhetoric in online performances of their masculinity. For example, WPH refer to themselves as a "squad" or "full squad", conjuring the image of a large professional police force. In a number of sting videos posted by WPH, the pedophile hunters wear security vests and even use walkie-talkies. These items are corporeal performances of their masculinity as they express and illustrate behavior typically associated with traditional law enforcement.

Moreover, both WPH and PJ engage in a type of contest with official law enforcement agencies, performing their masculinity by positioning themselves as variously similar to, or superior to, policing authorities. As noted earlier, WPH go to some lengths to highlight the weaknesses and limitations of police in addressing the problem of grooming children online. PJ go a step further, including a dedicated webpage on "Info for police", and even offering a "training academy" for police: "At absolutely no cost to you or your department and with classes on a flexible schedule, our Academy balances the need for training and information along with your need to not have such

training impact your current case-load". This might be considered a different type of contest, in which PJ position themselves as superior to police by offering their expertise and services rather than insulting the ability of police more explicitly, as WPH frequently do.

Discussion and conclusion

Analysis of the phenomenon of pedophile hunting must account for the way in which the performance and spectacle of masculinity reinforces power relations, reinscribing masculine hierarchies and norms. A common aspect of the narratives identified above is the adult male body, positioned in relation to a vulnerable child or feminine body and a "degenerate" male body. The signs of the degenerate male body are typically physical, such as impotency and passivity. In contrast the hunter is performed as active and strong. The body of the "pervert" comes to represent broader social malaise and disorder that cannot be addressed by traditional forms of social control. In this void pedophile hunters represent themselves as organized and effectual. The "normal" man takes on the role of a protector of the weak and vulnerable, while the "abnormal" man is a dangerous predator who exists outside the community of normal men. Feminist scholarship has challenged the notion of such a divide, making a direct link between "ordinary" men and their everyday activities and "deviant" ones, positioning gendered violence as a manifestation of mainstream masculinity rather than an aberration from it. As Angelides (2005) argues, therefore, the identity category of the "pedophile" is used by men to reinscribe mainstream masculinity in counter-position to it (see also Wacquant 2009). Pedophile hunting presents a particularly potent expression of this counter-positioning, reinforcing the divide between mainstream and deviant masculinities.

As noted above, the limited existing literature on pedophile hunting argues that pedophile hunter groups have emerged to address a policing deficit or to shame suspects – in other words, for pragmatic or instrumental purposes. This study therefore contributes to the literature by beginning to document the performative nature of pedophile hunting activity and grounding this in power relations. Pedophile hunting may well fill a security gap brought about by the proliferation of digital technologies and the inability of police to secure the online realm. It no doubt can also be understood as an expression of shaming as a form of social control. However, this study demonstrates that to consider pedophile hunting solely in these terms is to discount the significant symbolic and expressive aspects of this phenomenon that have a socio-structural basis in existing normative orders.

As the preceding discussion clearly demonstrates, much of the content that pedophile hunters post on their online sites is superfluous to the aims of addressing a policing deficit or shaming suspects. Why post footage of sting videos, for example, if the "evidence" needed for police to arrest a suspect has been provided to them by pedophile hunters? How do the self-congratulatory posts and accusations of "glory hunting" leveled against rival groups address a security deficit or shame suspects? If these are the principal goals of pedophile hunting, why don't pedophile hunters remain anonymous online? There may be a range of answers to these questions; however, this article contends that the performative nature of pedophile hunting cannot be overlooked if we are to more fully understand this phenomenon and the actions of those involved in it. Indeed, we argue that pedophile hunting represents a performance of masculinity, in which a series of "me's" and "not me's" (Reeser 2010:41) are constructed by hunters in counter-position to themselves. It is not merely pedophiles who are being policed, but through such activity, masculinity is policed, and

the normative boundaries of masculinity publicly reinforced through spectacle. These performances might be considered compensatory to resolve the manifold contemporary challenges to the traditional articulations of masculinity. Performing acts that exaggerate male physicality and strength are one strategy available to defend men's positioning in traditional fields and rearticulate subordinate masculinities within hierarchies.

Understanding pedophile hunting is important in light of the problems that this activity creates for state policing authorities (e.g. the disruption of police investigations), as well as for the general public (e.g. vigilante attacks). The current article makes a preliminary but important contribution towards this aim. Understanding the expressive elements of pedophile hunting activity advances current knowledge and can thus inform state responses to this phenomenon. Given the rapid proliferation of pedophile hunting groups around the globe, and the consequences of their activities for police and the public, future research should build on the current study to further illuminate this topic.

Limitations and future directions

As noted above, pedophile hunting groups are very heterogeneous. This preliminary study has used a small and unrepresentative sample size, limiting the generalizability of results. The performances of masculinity detailed here may not occur in all pedophile hunting groups, especially those with higher numbers of female participants. Future research should adopt larger samples and undertake comparisons across pedophile hunting groups. In particular, examining how women perform gender in pedophile hunting activities would complement the current study.

Another logical next step would be to build on Farrell's (2018) research and to conduct interviews with, and observations of, pedophile hunters themselves. Future research could consider, for example, whether pedophile hunters' own views of their online selves concur with those presented in this article.

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