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Hannah Eggett
egge6860@mylaurier.ca

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**“THE POLICE DON’T DO ANYTHING. EVEN WHEN THEY GET TOLD ABOUT
THESE CREEPS”: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW VIGILANTES ATTEMPT TO GAIN
LEGITIMACY AS LEADERS OF STATUS DEGRADATION CEREMONIES**

by

Hannah R. E. Eggett

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Criminology and Contemporary Studies

Wilfrid Laurier University, 2015

THESIS

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

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Abstract

Status degradation ceremonies are a process through which a denouncer(s) and members of a community shift an individual's status within their social group to a lower position (Garfinkel, 1956). Current status degradation ceremony literature primarily focuses on ceremonies that are carried out by formal officials as well as the impacts of these ceremonies on the denounced individuals. This research provides insights into ceremonies led by "pseudo-officials," individuals or groups who hold no formally recognised position but claim to act in the public interest in the same manner as formally appointed officials are expected to. This exploratory case study focuses on the cyber-vigilante organisation Creep Catchers and their attempts to gain legitimacy in their role as a denouncer responsible for carrying out status degradation ceremonies. Using a social constructionist framework, the thesis examines how Creep Catchers constructs the sexual exploitation of children online as a widespread, but hidden phenomenon that has been neglected by the officials charged with combatting it. In doing so, Creep Catchers attempts to establish the grounds by which they are justified in their attempts to act as denouncers in status degradation ceremonies that target online child predators. However, legitimacy as a denouncer must be conferred by the audiences who witness the ceremony. Thus, the reaction to Creep Catchers by their online audience is unpacked to examine both the acceptance and rejection of Creep Catchers as legitimate denouncers.

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Chapter One – Introduction

Vigilantes have existed for many years; the word evokes images of “wild-west” frontier towns, shoot-outs, and lynching (Johnston, 1996; Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016). Modern developments in vigilantism, however, take on a different form of vigilante justice involving confrontations without using physical violence (Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016). While vigilantes address behaviours they view as transgressive (Abrahams, 1998; Brown, 1975; Johnson, 1992, 1996; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976; Smallridge et al., 2016; Tuovinen & Roning, 2007) it is important to note that vigilantes, more often than not, do not hold official positions (Johnson, 1996; Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016). This is crucial as holding official titles or positions, such as law enforcement officer, imbue individuals with legitimacy in carrying out their duties. The vigilantes’ lack of official status affects the legitimacy they have when carrying out their justice seeking activities. In contrast to individuals or organisations who hold official title and legitimacy, vigilante organisations gain or earn legitimacy through the course of their vigilantism. This acquisition of legitimacy is the focus of this research project. In particular, this thesis addresses how vigilantes garner the legitimacy to carry out their justice seeking activities, with specific focus on vigilantism that takes the form of status degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956).

In order to explore vigilante legitimacy, this this project analyses a self-identified vigilante organisation, Creep Catchers, and argues that their activities constitute a status degradation ceremony (Garfinkel 1956). The analysis focuses on how vigilantes who carry out status degradation ceremonies position themselves as “denouncers” who hold authority in these ceremonies. More specifically, this thesis discusses how vigilantes who do not hold formal or official position in communities fulfil the role commonly attributed to formal officials. Several

questions guide this analysis: 1) How do vigilantes garner the authority and legitimacy to conduct a status degradation ceremony?; 2) How do audiences or witnesses of status degradation ceremonies aid in legitimising the non-official denouncer?; and 3) How do audience members or witnesses resist Creep Catchers' attempts to attain the role of denouncer? The analysis is guided by concepts from the social constructionist approach to social problems. In order to expand on these approaches in studying vigilantism and status degradation ceremonies, this thesis consists of a case study of the vigilante group Creep Catchers, in particular, their role as "pseudo-official" denouncers and how they gain their position and legitimacy through a social constructionist perspective.

In order to further the construction of vigilantes as denouncers in status degradation ceremonies, this thesis will follow the pursuant structure: the remainder of this introductory chapter will focus on defining vigilantism and discussing the organisation Creep Catchers. The succeeding chapter discusses the theoretical approach applied in this thesis — the social constructionist approach to studying social problems — and also provides an understanding of status degradation ceremonies as an example of individuals and groups constructing social problems. The third chapter addresses the methodology used in this project; the next two chapters explore the empirical findings in this study. Chapter four examines the role of the denouncer and the denouncer as a pseudo-official and analyses how members of Creep Catchers garner legitimacy in this role. The fifth chapter discusses the role of witnesses in degradation ceremonies, focusing on their role in legitimising pseudo-officials. The example of Creep Catchers' online followers and their responses to Creep Catchers' sting operations is used to examine this. Finally, the sixth chapter will offer concluding remarks on this research project, including research limitations and contributions as well as potential areas of future research.

As shown through the chapters within this thesis, this research project contributes to vigilantism and status degradation ceremony literature in that it provides a new understanding of vigilantes as denouncers in status degradation ceremonies. More precisely, the project provides an understanding of vigilantes as pseudo-officials while carrying out degradation ceremonies, a previously unexplored aspect of status degradation ceremonies.

Vigilantism and Cyber-Vigilantism Defined

This thesis examines the use of status degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956) by vigilante groups. The subject of this study is an online vigilante group that uses the name “Creep Catchers.” The target of this group’s vigilante activities are those they have identified as child sexual offenders who use the internet to lure children into sexual encounters. In order to properly contextualise the relevance of status degradation ceremonies within vigilantism, it is important to understand how vigilantism has been conceptualised in the research literature. Further, given the predominantly online activities of Creep Catchers, specific attention must be paid to how the concept of vigilantism has been updated to account for the impact of the internet, through use of the term “cyber-vigilante.”

In everyday parlance, vigilantes are understood to be individuals or groups who “took the law into their own hands” (Brown, 1975; Johnston, 1992) using violent means, including lynching, mobbing, and attacking individuals who engaged in behaviour vigilantes viewed as transgressive (Abrahams, 1998; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976). While “taking the law into their own hands” has a common-sense appeal, academic debates over the term have focused on issues such as whether or not vigilantism must involve physical violence (Brown, 1975; Culberson, 1990; Johnston, 1996; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976; Smallridge et al., 2016), whether the law must be broken in the commission of vigilante acts (Brown, 1975; Juliano,

2012; Smallridge et al, 2016), if planning activities beforehand is required (Johnston, 1996; Juliano, 2012; Smallridge et al., 2016), if state officials can be vigilantes (Johnston, 1996; Smallridge et al., 2016), and whether the activities are simply reactions to crime or if vigilantes are necessarily part of social or political movements (Culberson, 1990; Johnston, 1996; Juliano, 2012; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976; Smallridge et al., 2016). Of particular relevance to this thesis are the discussions regarding whether vigilantism requires physical violence and whether laws must be broken in the commission of vigilante activities.

The traditional understanding of vigilantes as individuals who “take the law into their own hands” (Brown, 1975) is also a point of disagreement for scholars; specifically, whether laws must be broken in the course of vigilantism. Brown’s (1975) definition considers that vigilantism may take different forms: vigilantes may remain inside the confines of the law in addressing transgressive behaviour, or vigilantes may break laws when addressing transgressive behaviours (Brown, 1975). When discussing vigilantism, Brown argues that breaking the law does not need to be a defining aspect of what constitutes vigilantism. Instead, he asserts that vigilantes need not break a formal law, as long as they violate some social norm or acceptable behaviour (Brown, 1975). For example, individuals gathering and publishing information about other’s transgressive behaviours may not contravene a law; however, the individuals breached a social norm by releasing identifying details (“doxing”) the transgressor and fit many definitions of vigilantism while at the same time remaining within the confines of the law. Regardless of whether vigilantes contravene laws or social norms within their justice seeking activities, Brown noted vigilantes sought to protect the greater good through their activities. Juliano (2012) on the other hand, considers breaking the law an integral part of the definition of vigilantism, and argues that all vigilantes must violate the law otherwise they cannot be defined as such. In a

similar manner to Brown (1975), however, Juliano (2012) recognises that when vigilantes break the law, they believe they do so as a “necessary evil” against perceived wrongdoing. As part of this understanding of vigilantism, Juliano (2012) argues that vigilantes believe the justice system fails in attaining justice. As such, the system is flawed. Thus, breaking the law through the course of their justice-achieving activities is acceptable to vigilantes. The importance of a perceived failing in the justice system will be of key relevance in Chapter Five: Denouncers as Pseudo-Officials.

Until the widespread use of computer-mediated communication, the common-sense understanding of vigilantes as violent individuals or groups who meted out extra-judicial punishment to norm-violators seemed fitting. However, as online social worlds and communication tools proliferated, new means of identifying and punishing norm-violators emerged. To some (Smallridge et al. 2016), these online activities had the “feel” of vigilantism, but they did not meet the standards of violence and law-breaking that were traditionally held to be the hallmarks of vigilante activity. Where, traditionally, vigilantes used physically violent means to mete out their own form of justice (Abrahams, 1998; Johnston, 1996; Juliano, 2012; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976), Smallridge et al. (2016) note that many cyber-vigilantes rarely meet their target face-to-face and do not participate in physically violent activities. Instead, cyber-vigilantism often involves the threat of non-physical harm (Smallridge et al., 2016), including offline harassment, the loss of friends and family relationships, and the inability to obtain gainful employment due to the individual’s personal information being publicised and the reputational harms associated with their outing (Smallridge et al, 2016). In light of this, using physical violence as an indicator of vigilantism is problematic (Smallridge et al., 2016). As such,

Smallridge et al. (2016) suggest including threatening any type of harm, not only physical harm, upon individuals as a crucial part of the definition.

Given these challenges to traditional definitions of vigilantism, Smallridge et al. argued that a new conceptualisation was needed to first define cyber-vigilantism, as well as to differentiate cyber-vigilantism from other “cyber-deviance, such as cyber-harassment, cyber-bullying, and political activism” (Smallridge et al., 2016, p. 65). As such, they created a “cyber-vigilantism conceptual framework” which built on a framework articulated by Johnston (1996), allowing for the inclusion of traditional elements of vigilantism. Johnson’s (1996) definition of vigilantism stated:

Vigilantism is a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force – or threatened force – by autonomous citizens. It arises as a reaction to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups – or to their potential or imputed transgression. Such acts are focused upon crime control/and or social control and aim to offer assurances (or ‘guarantees’) of security both to participants and to other members of an established social order (p. 232).

What is lacking from this definition is any acknowledgment of non-physical harm and the role of state actors. To ameliorate this, Smallridge et al. (2016) proposed the following:

First, at least minimal planning, premeditation, and organization must take place [...] Second, the act must be carried out by private agents [including state actors “working outside their role” without the support of the state] [...] Third, these private agents must not have support or authority granted to them by the state [...] Fourth, [the act must include] the causation of harm, or threat of harm [...] Fifth, the motivation behind the act

must be a response to perceived crime or social deviance [...] Sixth, the goal of the act should be to provide assurances of safety. (p. 65-66).

Smallridge et al.'s (2016) definition has several advantages: 1) the criteria that must be met are clearly identified; 2) the definition moves beyond the simple understanding of vigilantes as 'taking the law into their own hands;' 3) the definition recognises that state actors can also fit the definition of a vigilante; 4) the definition does not exclude activities from being defined as vigilantism based on their legality; 5) the definition involves planning as a key part of vigilantism, thus differentiating vigilantism from self-defence or reactionary responses to perceived affronts; and 6) the definition allows for the threat of harm, as opposed to requiring physical violence as an aspect of vigilantism. As such, it is ideal for research project proposed here.

Types of Cyber-vigilantism

Like traditional vigilantes, cyber-vigilantes are individuals or groups who function as social control agents in communities. However, cyber-vigilantes police behaviours through the use of the internet. This policing may remain focused on behaviours that are carried out strictly online (such as exposing "trolls" who harass others in online spaces) or involve attempts to respond to transgressive behaviour that has both an online and offline component (such as adults who attempt to arrange offline sexual encounters with minors through internet chatrooms and message boards) (Trottier, 2016). In doing so, cyber-vigilantes monitor for behaviours or activities that they believe are transgressive, seek out the perpetrator, and deal with the individual and their behaviours in an effort to prevent the behaviours from continuing (Smallridge et al., 2016). Depending on the behaviours they are targeting, the way in which cyber-vigilantes deal with the transgressive behaviours changes, as does the punishment, which may occur either

online *or* offline (Smallridge et al., 2016; Tuovinen & Roning, 2007). These punishments can take a variety of forms, ranging from taking down offending internet sites, to shaming and humiliating individuals, to publishing personal information online, to threatening (and perpetrating) online and offline harms (Smallridge et al., 2016; Tuovinen & Roning, 2007).

Scholars assign cyber-vigilantes to one of three categories based on the activities that they take part in. The first category is scam baiting, in which individuals or groups target the perpetrators of email scams, baiting the scammers into providing personal information which they then publish online (Juliano, 2012; Kossef, 2016; Smallridge et al., 2016; Tuovinen & Roning, 2007). The second category is hacktivism, in which individuals use technology to hack into others' online accounts and either shut them down or publish the information found within (Smallridge et al., 2016; Taylor, 2005; Vegh, 2002). Hacktivists consider their activities to be an online form of activism which serves to make evident the problematic behaviours of an individual or group in an effort to effect awareness and change (Smallridge et al., 2016; Taylor, 2005; Vegh, 2002). The third category, which is most relevant to this study, is sting operations.

Sting operations were popularised by the group Perverted Justice (PeeJ) due to their tactics and involvement in the NBC television program *To Catch a Predator*. In sting operations, individuals pose as minors in online chatrooms or other social media sites (Cryan, 2015; Juliano, 2012; Kohm, 2009; Kosseff, 2016; Smallridge et al., 2016). They converse online with various individuals on the sites, looking for adults who are attempting to sexually exploit children. The vigilantes attempt to gather information on the adult with whom they are communicating, including “incriminating evidence” (Smallridge et al., 2016, p. 63) of the sexual exploitation they intend to participate in. They then plan to meet the individual (Cryan, 2015; Juliano, 2012; Kohm, 2009; Kosseff, 2016; Smallridge et al., 2016). At the meeting, the vigilantes film the

encounter, asking the individual what they were doing, offering up quotes from the “incriminating conversations,” and later post the video online for public humiliation and shaming (Kohm, 2009; Smallridge et al., 2016). The vigilante group may also provide any information they have gathered to the local authorities to deal with the situation, as Perverted Justice began doing when they worked with local law enforcement on *To Catch a Predator* (Smallridge et al., 2016). Unlike traditional vigilantes who used violence as their primary method of dealing with transgressions, sting-operation vigilantes do not generally resort to violence to deal with cyber-transgressions. Instead, these vigilantes focus on shaming and/or humiliating their target. Thus, the harm caused is reputational, and potentially prosecutorial, as opposed to the primarily physical retributions of traditional vigilantes (Kohm, 2009; Smallridge et al., 2016; Tuovinen & Roning, 2007).

Creep Catchers: An Example of the Cyber-Vigilante

As noted previously, this thesis comprises a case study of an anti-paedophile group known as “Creep Catchers,” created in 2015 in Alberta by Raymond Dawson (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Krishnan, 2017). While the organisation is most active in Western Canada, particularly around Calgary, Kelowna and Surrey, it has since spread across the country with approximately forty different chapters active at the start of this research project (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). The group was inspired by and modeled their activities after Justin Payne, a Brampton, Ontario native who is cited as Canada’s first “pedophile hunter,” as well as Perverted Justice, and *To Catch a Predator* (Krishnan, 2017). Creep Catchers’ vigilantism occurs within the context of their initiation of and participation in extralegal, or semi-legal, sting operations.

In a similar manner to Perverted Justice and *To Catch a Predator*, individuals in Creep Catchers post advertisements and enter into online conversations on adult dating sites, chat

rooms, or other similar sites (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). Much like other sting operations, during conversation the individual, referred to as the decoy, initially presents themselves as an adult. Later in the conversation, they reveal to the discussant that they are a minor (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Krishnan, 2017). If the conversation continues past this revelation, the discussant becomes a “target” for the group. At this point, the decoy generally begins to involve sexual content in the conversations (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Krishnan, 2017). If the target continues the conversation, the decoy works to set up a meeting with the target in a public area, with the intention of shaming and humiliating the target while videotaping the encounter (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). After the meeting, Creep Catchers posts the video, along with excerpts from the conversation, online for their followers or supporters to watch (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). Although various media sources, members of the public, and law enforcement officials consider the activities of Creep Catchers to be vigilantism, not all chapters of Creep Catchers have described their sting-bait operations as such (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). With regards to the definition of vigilantism, however, and for the purposes of this study, the organisation is defined specifically as a cyber-vigilante group, using Smallridge et al.’s (2016) definition.

As noted above, there are six elements of Smallridge et al.’s (2016) framework, all of which Creep Catchers align with. The first aspect is that there must be planning with regards to the activities of cyber-vigilantes (Smallridge et al., 2016). Creep Catchers plans all aspects of their sting-bait operations: how they will contact individuals online, how they will meet the individual, as well as if, and how, they will publish the information gathered through the course of their operations (Grant, 2017). The second aspect of the definition is that cyber-vigilantism must be engaged in by private agents, which also ties into the third aspect, cyber-vigilantes

cannot have the support of the state (Smallridge et al., 2016). Creep Catchers as an organisation is made up of individuals from across Canada who work in various occupations (Krishnan, 2017) and the activities the members engage in do not have state support (Grant, 2017). In fact, a number of law enforcement agencies have spoken publicly about their concerns about Creep Catchers, as well as their cautions against private citizens engaging in sting-bait operations (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017; see also Blaker, 2016; Goodyear, 2016). The fourth aspect requires that there be an outcome of harm, or threat of harm, arising from the cyber-vigilante activities (Smallridge et al., 2016). In the course of their activities, specifically in their meetings with targets, Creep Catchers threatens their targets (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). Their threats involve reputational and prosecutorial harms; however, in some cases, physical assaults have occurred (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). Beyond the threats, Creep Catchers has caused reputational harms by publishing their targets' information online. Creep Catchers, as well as a number of their followers, have contacted employers of targets, who have then lost their jobs; they have also harassed targets online and offline (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). The fifth aspect argues that cyber-vigilantes must be responding to a social or criminal deviance (Smallridge et al., 2016). Through the course of their sting-bait operations, Creep Catchers responds to actions they associate with child sexual offenders, namely child sexual exploitation (CSE) via the internet and child luring (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017) which is understood as both socially deviant and is criminalised under Canadian law. Finally, the sixth element of the cyber-vigilante framework is that the activities engaged in by cyber-vigilantes must be done to provide some measure, or "assurance of" safety (Smallridge et al., 2016). In discussing why they participate in the activities they do, Creep Catchers express that they are acting to protect children from online predators, to keep children safe from harm (Creep Catchers, n.d.; Surrey Creep Catchers, n.d.;

Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). Due to Creep Catchers' alignment with all six elements of the cyber-vigilantism conceptual framework, the organisation can be defined as cyber-vigilantes and will comprise the case study for this thesis. In the next chapter, I discuss the theory and concepts which are used in the duration of this research project.

Chapter Two – Theoretical Framework

For this thesis, I pull on the thinking of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. Of specific interest is the concept of social problems work, which has been developed in the constructionist study of social problems. When beginning research and data analysis, I followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) and in incorporating this approach I started data analysis without a predetermined theoretical framework with which I intended to analyse the data. This approach to coding and data analysis allowed me to garner understanding from within the data regarding which theoretical framework would best benefit the research project. In this case, I came to understand the benefit of analysis through a social constructionist lens. In particular, through the social constructionist understanding of social problems and the social problems work process. In order to understand the connection between my data and the social constructionist lens, this chapter provides a brief discussion of the theory itself, along with social problems work, and vigilantes as constructing social problems through their justice seeking activities.

What is Social Constructionism

As a theoretical perspective, social constructionism borrows liberally from the symbolic interactionist paradigm. This paradigm looks at the way in which individuals make sense of and organise their experiences through constructing and applying meaning (or lack thereof) to categories, objects, people, places, and other items (Best, 2008; Christensen, 2009; Gergen, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). The foremost principle in social constructionism is that our social worlds do not simply exist *a-priori*; instead, individuals “actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). In this perspective, phenomena are analysed in an effort to understand how individuals assign importance and order

to objects around them (Best, 2008). More specifically, social constructionism strives to understand the process by which meaning is constructed and through that creation, how the organisation of social worlds occurs (Best, 2008; Christensen, 2009; Gergen, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). Thus, social actors may perceive the world around them as existing as is, when, in reality, actors construct their social worlds through interaction with others. For example, individuals understand the categories of good and evil as objective realities of their social world. However, individuals and groups create these categorisations and rules guiding how to properly apply these labels to various objects. In applying the social constructionist lens, then, it is understood that the categories, arrangements, labels, and understandings of objects do not naturally inhere in an object, but are constructed through an individual's interpretation of an object and the ensuing categorisation. These interpretations and categorisations do not exist in a vacuum either and are instead influenced and framed by culturally agreed-upon definitions, whereby individuals "do not create the definition" (Goffman, 1974, p. 5) on their own. As such, neither categorisations, understandings, facts, nor arrangements exist pre-classification or pre-meaning application, but are instead interpretations of the social world that have been negotiated between social actors (Hacking, 1999). Due to this principle understanding, analysis through the social constructionist lens focuses on what meaning actors construct and ascribe, as well as the process through which this classification occurs (Best, 2008). One method of categorisation and classification is that of social problems work whereby individuals construct objects in a manner that frames them as problematic (Best, 2008).

The Constructionist Approach to Social Problems

According to Best (2008), the creation and categorisation of conditions as social problems follow a similar path across different conditions. This process includes six stages: 1)

claimsmaking; 2) media coverage; 3) public reaction; 4) policymaking; 5) social problems work; 6) policy outcomes (Best, 2008, pp. 18-19). In the claimsmaking stage actors bring forward their understanding of a condition as problematic, asserting that a specific condition is a social problem. Media outlets then respond to the actors' assertions, by reporting the claims to a wider audience in the media coverage stage. Following the dissemination of the claim by the media, "public opinion focuses on the social problem" (Best, 2008, p. 19) in the public reaction stage. Then, actors in positions of authority who hold the ability to do so, create policies, programs, and/or practices as a measure to deal with the social problem. In the social problems work stage, agencies (or groups) implement the policies, programs, and practices and seek to address the problem as part of their organisation's directive. In the final stage, policy outcomes occur, in which "there are various responses to the new arrangements" (Best, 2008, p. 19) addressing the social problem. These responses may include actors advocating for further change or further campaigns against the alleged social problem.

Social Problems Work

Social problems work involves individuals identifying concrete examples of social problems (Best, 2008, 2013; Loseke, 2003). More specifically, according to James A. Holstein and Gale Miller (2003) social problems work involves any "practices that link public interpretive structures to aspects of everyday reality, producing recognisable instances of social problems (p. 71). The social problems (for example, people, events, places, or occurrences), then, are not inherently problematic, but rather as people collectively analyse a condition and label it as problematic, the condition becomes a social problem (Best, 2008, 2013; Loseke, 2003). As such, social problems work is the process of labelling aspects of everyday life using categories created during claimsmaking. That is to say, claimsmaking creates labels for conditions (i.e.

problematizes them) and following this creation, social problems work consists of applying these categorisations, typifications, and labels. Social problems work is often carried out by people who bear official responsibility for ascribing formal labels to others (*e.g.* doctors, psychiatrists, judges), but is also done in the informal settings of everyday life by those who bear no official authority to do so (*e.g.* a parent claiming their neighbour's child has attention deficit disorder after observing his behaviour during a playdate). (Best, 2013; Loseke, 2003).

The work of labelling individuals is subject to cultural understandings of social problems and the categorisations of problems (Holstein & Miller, 2003). As Holstein and Miller (2003) noted, social problems work “involves procedures for expressing and applying these shared categories to candidate circumstances” (p. 72). These shared cultural understandings of social problems and societal values ensure that when applying a label or categorisation to an individual the social problem becomes evident and clear in everyday life (Holstein & Miller 2003).

While any and all individuals can engage in social problems work in everyday life, it is important to note, however, that “professionals, people working in criminal justice, medicine, education, or other social services” engage in social problems work the most (Best, 2013, p. 257). According to Loseke (2003), however, actors holding different roles within the social problems work process all engage in social problems work. As such, social problems work is not limited to specific individuals or positions, locales, or events (Loseke, 2003). For example, when claimsmakers make a claim about a condition, problematising a condition and attempting to persuade their audience of their categorisation, they are engaging in social problems work (Loseke, 2003). In response, the claimsmakers' audience evaluates the claims and categorisations the claimsmakers provide. This evaluation of claims is also a form of social problems work (Loseke, 2003). Consequently, it is not just one type of actor in the social problems work process

who engages in social problems work, but rather actors filling different roles at different stages of the social problems process who take part in social problems work. Moreover, social problems work does not only exist in claimsmaking activities. Rather, this activity takes place during everyday interactions as individuals “make sense” of the everything around them (Best, 2013, p. 258; see also, Holstein & Miller, 1993, 2003; Loseke, 2003).

Status Degradation Ceremonies

While the above section offers a generic description of social problems work, the following sections focus on a specific example, or type, of social problems work. These sections first describe a status degradation ceremony and then explore how a status degradation ceremony constitutes social problems work. First, I describe Garfinkel’s (1956) original definition and description of status degradation ceremonies. Following that, I touch on the conditions that must be present within a status degradation ceremony and explore Schoepflin’s (2009) contrasting understanding of a degradation incident. From there, I explore how status degradation ceremonies constitute one form of social problems work.

According to Garfinkel (1956), a status degradation ceremony is a process whereby members of a community render an individual’s identity within their social group into one of a lower status. For Garfinkel, an event refers to the transgressive behaviour, activity, or belief that is denounced. Members of the social group, also known as denouncers, complete the degradation ceremony through the redefinition of specific people and events (Garfinkel, 1956) This redefinition involves positioning the individual as lesser than the status they held within the community prior to the ceremony’s initiation (Garfinkel, 1956). As such, the degradation ceremony itself serves to lower an individual’s social status in the eyes of others in response to an incident in which the targeted individual or group transgressed social boundaries (Garfinkel,

1956). It is important to note that the individual need not have, in reality, overstepped a boundary, but rather that the denouncer defined the individual's behaviours as inappropriate and focused their attention on lessening the "perpetrator's" social status in the local hierarchy (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422). This identity transformation within the status degradation ceremony involves four important factors: the "denouncer," the individual receiving or facing denunciation ("the perpetrator"); the "event," transgression, or situation for which the denounced individual is culpable; and the ceremony's audience (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422).

The denouncer is the individual or group who perform the ceremony. These people choose the individual and behaviour or activity that the ceremony addresses, as well as determining the method through which they address the individual. The "tactics" the denouncer chooses "must be designed to accomplish" a full redefinition and transformation of the denounced individual's identity (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422). The "denounced" or "perpetrator" is the individual who is the central focus of the degradation ceremony; this is the individual or group whose identity is transformed through the "communicative work" of the status degradation ceremony (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 420). Garfinkel (1956) also refers to the denounced individual as "the perpetrator" due to their association with an "event" that they engaged in which resulted in the denouncer performing a status degradation ceremony, even though they may not have violated a social norm (Garfinkel, 1956). It is, instead, part of the role of the denouncer to convince their audience that the denounced has committed some form of transgression that is not acceptable in their community, due to his/her violation of community values (Garfinkel, 1956). The event itself is the transgressive behaviour, activity, or characteristic which the denouncers respond to through the ceremony. The witnesses, or audience, are individuals who view the denunciation and for whom the redefinition occurs according to the denouncer (Garfinkel, 1956).

Witnesses to the ceremony need not be temporally or physically present during the ceremony; however, the temporal and/or physical separation of the audience from the ceremony itself dictates the medium and tactics used in the ceremony and how the denouncer presents the ceremony to the audience.

Eight Conditions of the Degradation Ritual

The medium and tactics used within the ceremony itself support the primary aim of the degradation ceremony which, as noted previously, is the “identity transformation” of an individual or group in response to their involvement in a transgressive event (Garfinkel, 1956). As such, the perpetrator’s identity becomes understood as lesser within the group’s social hierarchy. The denounced individual or group, along with “the thing that [they are] being blamed” for, must be “transformed” through the eight conditions identified by Garfinkel (1956).

The eight conditions are as follows

- 1) both the event and the perpetrator must be removed from the realm of their everyday character and be made to stand as “out of the ordinary”; 2) both event and perpetrator must be placed within a scheme of preferences that shows the following properties: A. The preferences must not be for event A over event B, but for event of type A over event of type B. The same typing must be accomplished for the perpetrator. Event and perpetrator must be defined as instances of uniformity and must be treated as uniformity throughout the work of the denunciation. The unique, never recurring character of the event or perpetrator should be lost. Similarly, any sense of accident, coincidence, indeterminism, chance, or monetary occurrence must not merely be minimised. Ideally, such measures should be inconceivable; at least they should be made false. B. The witnesses must appreciate the characteristics of the typed person and event by referring

the type to a dialectical counterpart. Ideally, the witnesses should not be able to contemplate the features of the denounced person without reference to the counterconception as the profanity of an occurrence or a desire or a character trait, for example, is clarified by the references it bears to its opposite, the sacred [...]; 3) the denouncer must so identify himself to the witness that during the denunciation they regard him not as a private but as a publicly known person [...]; 4) the denouncer must make the dignity of the supra-personal values salient and accessible to view and his denunciation must be delivered in their name; 5) the denouncer must arrange to be invested with the right to speak in the name of these ultimate values [...]; 6) the denouncer must get himself so defined by witnesses that they locate him as a supporter of these values; 7) not only must the denouncer fix his distance from the person being denounced, but the witness must be made to experience their distance from him also; 8) finally, the denounced person must be ritually separated from his place in the legitimate order, i.e., he must be defined as standing at a place opposed to it (p. 422-423)

According to Garfinkel (1956) the eight conditions must be present in all degradation ceremonies; should any of the conditions be absent the ceremony is unsuccessful or incomplete. More specifically, without the ceremony meeting the eight conditions, denouncers may not fully transform an individual's identity, which is the primary outcome of a status degradation ceremony (Garfinkel, 1956; Schoepflin, 2009). Without the transformation of the perpetrator's identity, the degradation ceremony then becomes a "degradation incident" (Schoepflin, 2009).

According to Schoepflin (2009), a degradation incident is much the same as a degradation ceremony with one difference: the denouncer's attempts to transform the public identity of the perpetrator fall short. In fact, the "transformation of one's total identity is not a

required outcome of a degradation incident” (Schoepflin, 2009, p. 361) which differentiates an “incident” from a “ceremony.” Rather, an individual is involved in an incident where they are subject to degradation, but the degradation does not pervade their public identity. In expanding upon the difference between a degradation incident and a degradation ceremony, Schoepflin discusses his own experience when strangers (the denouncers) assaulted and degraded him in public. During this incident, bystanders involved themselves by lobbing derogatory remarks at Schoepflin. As well, while the police stepped in during the assault, they failed to aid Schoepflin by ignoring his request for help after the fact, instead employing “civil inattention” (Schoepflin, 2009, p. 367). As Schoepflin noted, “in public I became a man who apparently was unable to defend himself, a man not worthy of the police’s time and concern, and a man deserving of mockery from the audience” (p. 376). The attackers and audience degraded Schoepflin, yet it did not meet Garfinkel’s (1956) conditions for a successful degradation ceremony; primarily, due to the lack of Schoepflin’s identity transformation. When assessing his denunciation and coming to this conclusion, Schoepflin notes that he did not internalise the degrading comments and abuse from the denouncers. Neither did his wider community; as he noted, they continued to treat him with the same regard as prior to his degradation. As such, Schoepflin himself viewed his identity transformation as non-existent, even though he faced degradation from others. Thus, there is an important distinction between degradation incident and a degradation ceremony which both Schoepflin (2009) and Garfinkel (1956) assert must be present within a ceremony: the denouncer’s *total* transformation of an individual’s identity.

Status Degradation Ceremonies as Social Problems Work

As noted previously, the purpose of a status degradation ceremony is to reveal to the audience the true nature of an individual and the identity they have kept hidden (Garfinkel,

1956). The denouncer first identifies and then reveals the individual's true identity by denouncing the individual (Garfinkel, 1956). This problematisation of the individual, their purported transgression, and their identity constitutes an act of social problems work. Specifically, denouncers choose a transgressive individual to address through their denunciation and advocate for the lessening of the individual's status (Garfinkel, 1956). In order to transform the individual's identity, the denouncer brings their alleged transgression into light for the denunciation's witnesses (Garfinkel, 1956). In doing so the denouncer labels the individual (for example, as a child sexual offender), thus grouping the individual within a social problems' category. As such, the denouncers engage in social problems work through applying social problems categories to the individuals they are degrading. Thus, the denounced individual becomes an example of a social problem. As in the example above, in labelling the individual as a child sexual offender the denouncer categorises the person; the individual and their activities become a real-life example of the social problem of the sexual exploitation of children.

Further to the denouncer's social problems work, audiences also engage in social problems work by responding to the denouncer and the status degradation ceremony. In response to the denouncer's categorisation of the individual, audiences use their "practical experiences to evaluate the believability and importance" (Loseke, 2003, p. 29) of the denouncer's commentary and to determine their stance regarding the condition in question. Audience analysis and further labelling of the transgressive individual in line with the denouncer allows for broader understanding of the individual as problematic. If the audience accepts the denouncer's problematisation, then the social problem becomes more widely understood and persists in community understandings of the condition. Thus, it is important to understand the audience's reaction to the denunciation which makes the labelling of the transgressive individual as an

example of a social problem endure. As such, status degradation ceremonies, specifically the denouncer's activities and their interaction with the audience, act as a form of social problems work.

The Creep Catchers organisation determines the breadth and scope of the transgressive behaviour that their vigilantism addresses. Thus, Creep Catchers engage in creating a social problems category by determining the focus of their vigilante justice activities, the way the transgressions should be dealt with, and controlling the information they share for their online audience. More specifically, Creep Catchers 1) draws on a pre-existing social problems category (paedophilia) while also creating a new category (the failure of the justice system to address online CSE) 2) identifies who the alleged perpetrators of such behaviours are; 3) defines the breadth and scope of the issues and provide this information to the public; and 4) draws on "evidence" from their own activities to put forward their conclusion that their activities are needed to stop the progression of the social problem. Thus, while engaging in their vigilantism and related activities, Creep Catchers engage in constructing meaning and categories surrounding their understanding of internet CSE. Following this, they engage in social problems work when they identify the targets of their vigilantism who become the subjects of status degradation rituals enacted by members of Creep Catchers. As such, the constructionist approach to social problems offers a useful analytical lens through which to examine Creep Catchers and their vigilantism. Using this lens, the following empirical chapters provide an in-depth understanding of Creep Catchers as pseudo-official denouncers and the response of the audience and their legitimisation of Creep Catchers.

Chapter Three – Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methodological approaches adopted in this research project which accompanied my use of social constructionism as a theoretical framework. First, I describe the purpose of the study, followed by the research questions which I sought answers to. Next, I describe the process of data collection and analysis. In concluding this chapter, I discuss the ethical considerations associated with my research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide an analysis of the cyber-vigilantism related activities that Creep Catchers engages in with a focus on how Creep Catchers constructs the social problem of child sexual offenders online and their use of status degradation ceremonies as a form of social problems work. The counterclaims made against Creep Catchers' construction of this problem are also examined. The specific research questions I pursued were: (1) How do Creep Catchers garner the authority and legitimacy to conduct a status degradation ceremony? (2) How do audience members or witnesses aid in legitimising Creep Catchers as pseudo-official denouncers? (3) How do audience members or witnesses oppose Creep Catchers' attempts to garner legitimacy as, pseudo-official denouncers?

Data Collection

To properly analyse Creep Catchers and their activities, I gathered videos and comments from four Creep Catchers' chapter websites/YouTube pages, newspaper articles that discussed Creep Catchers' activities, and CTV's W5 documentary *Creep Out*, to complement the videos and online comments. There were numerous Creep Catchers chapters to choose from, at one point as many as forty-five across Canada (Grant, 2017; Krishnan, 2017). However, it was important to select chapters that were still actively engaging in vigilantism related activities and

had individuals viewing and commenting on their various online media. Chapters were chosen for four reasons: (1) they were still actively (within the previous two weeks) setting up meetings and posting videos at the time of data collection; (2) their websites and YouTube pages were still being accessed by audience members who regularly commented on Creep Catchers videos and other posts; (3) their websites and YouTube pages were accessible to the public; and (4) the comments posted by audience members were also accessible to the public.

Data collection occurred between February and March of 2018. As there were more than 150 videos available online, I randomly selected 20 of the most recently posted videos and their respective comments. These videos' initial posting dates ranged from January to March 2018. The shortest video was approximately 3 minutes, and the longest was approximately 28 minutes. The average video length was roughly 15 minutes. The comments on the videos totalled 131 pages when saved as in PDF format. Additionally, I included *Creep Out*, a docuseries produced by CTV's W5 program that followed Creep Catchers and their vigilantism, motives, and activities, as part of my data. Initially published on February 20, 2017, *Creep Out* was included in the data set as it is the only news source to date that includes full interviews with individuals involved in Creep Catchers – including members of the organisation and individuals Creep Catchers targeted, as well as law enforcement officials. Following data collection, Creep Catcher videos and *Creep Out* were transcribed verbatim and video comments and news sources were saved in PDF documents to allow for consistency across data sources, as well as ease of coding. The transcriptions and PDFs were then loaded into the qualitative analysis software NVivo, and coded manually for themes, initial codes, and focused codes as per the constructivist grounded theory approach to coding (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Coding

The constructivist grounded theory approach to coding and analysis allows the researcher to “move beyond concrete statements and make sense of the stories, statements and observations” present within the data (p. 111). Thus, using constructivist grounded theorising of data involved identifying different themes and codes, which developed from the content within the data during the process of coding (Charmaz, 2014). As such, I drew conceptual understanding from within the videos, comments, and news sources, rather than solely imposing previously structured concepts and/or theories onto the data. My coding, in line with constructivist grounded theory, consisted of two stages: the first stage being initial, or open, coding, and the second being focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Memoing was also completed concurrent to the transcription and coding stages, in order to gather my initial thoughts, analyses, and reflections on the data.

In the initial coding stage, I organised the data in a way that “categorize[d], summarize[d], and account[ed] for” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 109) the information present within my data sources. During this phase, through reading the documents, I became aware of and took note of the overarching themes and concepts within the data through reflecting on what was being said, done, focused on, and addressed in the various data sources. In doing so, I created codes based on what was happening, said, or presented within the data, which then formed the base, or foundational understanding, of the data. In this phase I established codes such as “identifying individual’s offence,” “advocating for police presence,” “mocking individual,” and “describing Creep Catchers activities as wrong.”

After completing initial coding, I reviewed the codes for clarity and for any duplicate codes. Any duplicated codes were merged with each other, and I noted the merge in the code

summary. The code summaries were created for each code, in order to briefly explain what was meant by each code, and any thoughts I had during initial coding, for clarity and future analysis purposes. For example, the initial code “Creep Catchers attempting to get individual to talk” had the summary

“In general, individuals do not open up and speak to CC [Creep Catchers] at the outset of their meeting; many individuals either refuse to talk, deny they are the person, or walk away. This code relates to instances where CC tries to get the individual to talk to them, rather than leaving the meeting, using various questions or tactics. For example, CC trying to get individual to talk about their ‘offence;’ CC trying to get individual to discuss why they’re at the location if not for the meeting; CC stating they know the individual is there to meet the decoy, and using chat logs to try to start conversation, etc.”

After merging duplicate codes and ensuring each code had a distinct summary, I entered into focused coding, which “advance[d] the theoretical direction” of my research project (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138).

Focused coding involved analysing the initial open codes in an effort to synthesise the data within, and also to “conceptualize larger segments of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Through this second coding step, I gathered more in-depth theoretical and conceptual understandings of the data through focusing on the most “significant codes” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343) that developed within the initial coding phase and re-grouping them under focused codes. For example, the focused code “Creep Catchers invoking violence” was related to any instances where Creep Catchers advocated that physical violence, public humiliation or shaming be directed towards people they targeted; Creep Catchers mocking the individuals focused on; as well as racism perpetrated by Creep Catchers. Through this process, I began to note the emergent

themes that related to degradation ceremonies and claimsmaking, which further guided my analysis.

Data Analysis

My data analysis developed, in part, concurrent to data collection and coding as I wrote memos about the various themes or patterns I noted emerging from within my data. This memo-writing allowed for reflexivity throughout analysis, as I moved between the different phases of coding at each step reflecting on emerging theoretical and thematic categories (Charmaz, 2014). Memos included general commentary on content within my data as well as commentary on specific themes, concepts, or occurrences within my data. To illustrate this, one general comment noted that Creep Catchers' created their encounters, as opposed to the encounter occurring naturally; whereas a focused, or specific, memo discussed the recurring theme of degradation and how Creep Catchers engaged in, perpetuated, and advocated for the continued degradation of the individuals they target. Memo-writing was particularly important during my analysis of the videos created by Creep Catchers, as it allowed me to write down my thoughts about the style of videography, the individual(s) present, the editing techniques used, among other information that was not present within the video transcript.

When the process of coding and memo-writing was complete, I created concept maps related to each of my research questions, based on connections I was seeing across themes, concepts, and patterns noted within the memos I created. The concept maps allowed for visual representation of my analyses; in particular, allowing for connections to be drawn between the research questions I developed and sought to answer through my research, and the emergent themes within the data. Through noting visually the various connections by concept mapping, I thus determined the structure of my empirical chapters.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was not required for my project due to the data sources being publicly available material; however, due to privacy related issues, I chose to anonymise the identifying features, titles, and names of individuals in all of Creep Catchers videos and online comments. Each video publicly discloses the names of Creep Catchers members, as well as the individual(s) who were caught up in CC's activities, which has resulted in criminal charges and convictions, as well as civil lawsuits alleging defamation, threats, and privacy violations against Creep Catchers (see Azpiri, 2018; Ghousoub, 2017; Givetash, 2017; McArthur, 2017). Thus, I felt it was necessary to anonymise my data in an effort to provide protection and avoid further condemnation of the individuals targeted by Creep Catchers. As such, when transcribing the videos, I anonymised the names of all individuals involved (both those targeted, and members of Creep Catchers), the video titles, as well as individuals' screen names associated with the video comments. To further prevent connecting the quotes used in my analysis to the videos, and thus to the individuals in the videos, the four Creep Catchers chapters were also anonymised in an effort to prevent the continued cycle of shame and humiliation that has resulted from many Creep Catchers video publications.

Chapter Four – Pseudo-Official Denouncers

The following empirical chapters will discuss the denouncer and the audience within Creep Catchers' status degradation ceremonies. This chapter focuses on the role of the denouncer within a status degradation ceremony; in particular, I provide an analysis of the denouncer as a pseudo-official in contrast to Garfinkel's (1956) "professional" denouncer (p. 424). For the purpose of this research project, pseudo-officials are individuals or groups who do not have a formal position within their community, but who claim to be acting as community protectors through their denunciations. With regard to Garfinkel's (1956) understanding of "professional" denouncers (p. 424), scholarly literature tends to focus on officials or official bodies engaging in degradation ceremonies. For example, the following officials effectuating status degradation ceremonies have been the subject of analysis: the justice system and the court (Antonio, 1972; Benson, 1990; Cavender, Gray & Miller, 2010; Cockayne, 2005; Elsrud, Lalander & Staaf, 2015; Gascon & Roussell 2018; Gustafson, 2013; Longazel, 2013; Robbers, 2009); the government and policy makers (Broaded, 1990; Broaded, 1991; Carlson, 2018; Loewenberg, 1987; Longazel, 2013; Murray, 2000; Socia & Brown, 2016; Stoica, 1999); prison guards, management, and other workers (Fader, 2011; Gascon & Roussell, 2018; Riley, 2000; Sapp & Vaughn, 1990); law enforcement officers and agencies (Bittner, 1967; Jacobs, 1993; Lee, 1998; Van Slyke, Benson & Virkler, 2018); employment services/agencies (Berger, 2006); teachers, educators, school and schoolboard officials (McEvoy, 2005; Welsh, 2009); social workers, social services officials, and social services (Gustafson, 2013; Leibetseder, 2014; Lempert, 1977); scientific research officials and bodies (Gieryn & Figert, 1986; Sandrine & Martin, 2010; Sandrine & Martin, 2014); medical practitioners (Goffman, 1961); and news media sources (Bennett, 2009; Bock, 2015; Cavender, Gray & Miller, 2010; Roth, 2005). From this collection of research, it appears implicit

that individuals or groups holding the role of denouncer also hold an official position that allows their performance of the ceremony. This is not to suggest non-official actors cannot or do not enact status degradation ceremonies; rather that there is limited research regarding non-officials, or pseudo-officials, carrying out degradation ceremonies (for examples see, Laidlaw, 2017; Mallén, 2015; Milbrandt, 2017; Schoepflin, 2009). The officials, official bodies, or institutional officials, then, carry out the majority of status degradation ceremonies. To a lesser extent, non-officials, such as individuals with kinship-tribal obligations and community members may also perform this role. With a lack of scholarly research addressing pseudo-official led status degradation ceremonies, this chapter aims to address this particular gap in status degradation ceremony literature. In order to address this gap, I examine pseudo-officials accomplishing status degradation ceremonies using Creep Catchers' sting operations as a case study. To begin, I discuss the role of the denouncer followed by examining the denouncer as officials and/or professionals in society. From there, I define the role of pseudo-officials and their position as denouncers. Finally, I analyse the ways in which Creep Catchers position themselves as pseudo-officials to allow them to execute status degradation ceremonies within their communities.

Role of the Denouncer

In a status degradation ceremony, the primary role is that of the denouncer. The denouncer is the individual or group who carries out the degradation of the perpetrator. According to Garfinkel (1956), as part of their role, the denouncer works in the best interest of the community, its values, and members while at the same time denouncing one, or a group, of the members (the perpetrator) they believe is deserving of a lesser status. Denouncers carry out the degradation of perpetrators by identifying and drawing on community values and arguing that the perpetrator has transgressed these community-held values. The lesser status of the

perpetrator thus relies on the denouncer revealing to their audience that the individual has transgressed acceptable boundaries and is not the person they claimed to be nor whom the community previously considered them to be. Consequently, to avoid an unsuccessful identity transformation, the denouncer must first make evident the values within their community for their audience's view, as well as how or why they are addressing the issue or person that contravened the values. Through this revelation, the denouncer ensures the audience understands the community values and that the denouncer is carrying out the degradation ceremony in line with the values they espouse.

In addition to convincing the witnesses that the perpetrator transgressed the community's values, the denouncer must also establish their legitimacy in the role. This requires the denouncer to assume an "authority" role which allows them to stand up for the community values (Garfinkel, 1956). This begs the question of how individuals or groups gain authority in order to fulfil the role of denouncer and carry out degradation ceremonies successfully. However, Garfinkel (1956) does not detail *how* an individual or group assumes a position of authority, simply that they must hold a position where they have the authority to do so. Authority, then, must be understood as central to one's ability to succeed in denouncing transgressors. If authority is central to successful denunciations, the opposite must also be considered true: without the authority to carry out degradation ceremonies, the degradation and identity transformation remain unsuccessful. In discussing his own experiences regarding public degradation, Schoepflin (2009) notes that the ceremony's outcome – a transformed identity – remains unsuccessful when the words and actions of the denouncer do not carry weight and do not convince the community of their claims. The actions of an individual or group who do not hold authority do not convince the community that the "perpetrator" is deserving of a lesser

status (Schoepflin, 2009). As such, in order for the denouncer's words and actions to carry the weight needed for community acceptance, they "must get [themselves] so defined by witnesses" as the defender of their community and its values (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 423). Therefore, authority can reside in community acceptance and support of denouncers, even if they do not hold a position where the state, institutions, or other official bodies confer authority upon them, so long as the denouncer is defending the community in some measure. Regardless of the ways in which a denouncer garners authority, Garfinkel (1956) notes the denouncer needs to show to their community that they are not denouncing the individual for their own personal gain, but rather for the community itself. Should the denouncer fail to convince the community that they are acting in the interests of the group, their efforts will lack community support and the ceremony will fail.

As an example of denouncers who defend the community and its values, when discussing the role the denouncer holds, Garfinkel (1956) provides "the court and its officers" as the example of an authority who carries out degradation ceremonies (p. 424). As an arm of the state, or a criminal justice official body, the court holds authority that the state conferred onto them which also allows them to carry out the denunciation of transgressors within the community. The court processes individuals who have contravened various laws, ranging from minor to violent criminal offences. Through their processing of individuals in trial, sentencing, and imprisonment, the court accomplishes a degradation ceremony (Antonio, 1972; Cavender, Gray & Miller, 2010; Cockayne, 2005; Elsrud, Lalander & Staaf, 2015; Garfinkel, 1956; Gascon & Roussell 2018; Robbers, 2009). This is not to say that every community member supports the court's decisions or their role in society, simply that the court holds the role of denouncer through its position as decisionmaker regarding legal disputes, and their authority role when dealing with individuals or groups who contravene legal norms.

In a similar manner to the court's provision and assessment of evidence regarding law breaking, denouncers must also provide evidence to their audience that positions the perpetrator as transgressive. In doing so, the denouncer provides proof to their audience which indicates that they are different from the denounced individual: the denouncer is thus "distance[d]" from the perpetrator and their actions (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422). In this way, the denouncer shows themselves as an upright, law and social norm abiding citizen, different from the transgressive perpetrator. Alongside the denouncer's distance from the perpetrator, the audience must also "experience their distance from" the perpetrator (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422). In such, the ceremony's witnesses also understand themselves as different and separate from the perpetrator, existing within a different social status, while also understanding the perpetrator as deserving of condemnation (Garfinkel, 1956; Schoepflin, 2009).

While both the denouncer and the witnesses "experience their distance from" the denounced individual, (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422), the denouncer also "ritually separate[s]" the perpetrator from the community and their previous position within their community due to their transgression (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 423). As part of the separation of the denounced individual from the community, the denouncer asserts the perpetrator deserves a lesser status within the community. Beyond simply advocating for a lesser status, the denouncer argues that the perpetrator's identity has always been what they now are revealed to be. The denouncer claims that the perpetrator had concealed their deviant behaviours in order to falsely claim membership and status within the community that was not deserved. Through managing their identity in this manner, the denounced managed to pass (Goffman, 1986) as a regular member of the group, even though they had not truly conformed to the group's expectations. As such, the denouncer

unmasks or reveals the perpetrator's true character and the perpetrator's transition from an underserved status and membership to a deserved lower status.

This revelation of and transition to what the denouncer identifies as the perpetrator's "true identity" is the most important aspect of the degradation ceremony. As such, it is important to note that the denouncer's primary role is that of working to transform "the public identity" of the alleged perpetrator through their enactment of the degradation ceremony (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 421). Without the denouncer altering the public identity of the perpetrator, the status degradation ceremony is not successful (Schoepflin, 2009). The success of this transformation ultimately resides with the ceremony's witnesses as without their acceptance of the denouncer's arguments, the new, degraded identity, will not persist (Schoepflin, 2009). Schoepflin (2009) refers to situations where degradation ceremonies are unsuccessful because the denouncer fails to transform the perpetrator's identity in full, as "degradation incidents" rather than a degradation ceremony (p. 361).

According to Schoepflin (2009), a degradation incident is much the same as a degradation ceremony with one difference: the denouncer's attempts to transform the public identity of the perpetrator fail. In fact, the "transformation of one's total identity is not a required outcome of a degradation incident" (Schoepflin, 2009, p. 361) which differentiates an "incident" from a "ceremony." Rather, an individual is involved in an incident where they are subject to degradation, but the degradation does not result in a persistent change to their public identity. In expanding upon the difference between a degradation incident and a degradation ceremony, Schoepflin discusses his own experience when strangers (the denouncers) assaulted and degraded him in public. During this incident, bystanders involved themselves by lobbing derogatory remarks at Schoepflin. As well, while the police stepped in during the assault, they

failed to aid Schoepflin by ignoring his request for help after the fact, instead employing “civil inattention” (Schoepflin, 2009, p. 367). As Schoepflin noted, “in public I became a man who apparently was unable to defend himself, a man not worthy of the police’s time and concern, and a man deserving of mockery from the audience” (p. 376). The attackers and audience degraded Schoepflin, yet it did not meet Garfinkel’s (1956) conditions for a successful degradation ceremony; primarily, according to Schoepflin, because a total identity transformation did not occur and the new identity, as pointed out by the denouncer, did not endure. Thus, there is an important distinction between degradation incident and a degradation ceremony which both Schoepflin (2009) and Garfinkel (1956) assert must be present within a ceremony: the denouncer’s full transformation of an individual’s identity, a transformation that must move beyond just the denouncer and endure in the larger community.

Denouncer as Officials

While the above section describes the actions of a denouncer, it does not address who is or who can fulfil the role of a denouncer in a status degradation ceremony beyond providing the court as an example. When addressing the court “and its officers” as enacting degradation ceremonies, Garfinkel suggests that the court has a “fair monopoly over [...] ceremonies” due to their position as an authority within society (p. 424). Degradation, shame, and humiliation are built into the functioning of justice in society, especially in cases where retributive punishments enforce shame as a penalty for deviant behaviour (Braithwaite, 1989; Braithwaite, 2000; Brook, 1999; Brooks, 2008; Karp, 1998; Karp, 2000; Koss, 2000; Martin, 2014; Massaro, 1991); as a result, the court system itself enacts status degradation ceremonies through its own procedures through which individuals are processed. Thus, it is the court’s state-provided authority imbued in their functioning which allows them to enforce consequences for lawbreaking, maintain order

in society, and determine an individual's identity based on the court's judgement of their offence. Without the authority to evaluate whether individuals are living up to their responsibilities and expectations and enforcing consequences if individuals are not, the court's status degradation ceremony does not exist. It is the authority they possess along with the domain in which they function (justice enforcement) that allows for their "monopoly" (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 424) over and success of their ceremonies.

To further expand, while doctors have authority in the medical realm, this authority does not translate into their ability to enact degradation ceremonies that transform an individual in the public eye. A doctor may be able to demean, degrade, or shame an individual privately, but the authority and domain of a doctor does not extend beyond or outside of the examination room and onto a public stage. The court's authority and domain, however, does exist and operate within the public arena in which they publicly perform status degradation of individuals. The court processes individuals in a manner that strips them of their status and reinforces their new deviant identity through various punitive measures, such as serving prison sentences or community service requirements. In fact, prison itself is a complete separation of the individual from their community and meets Garfinkel's (1956) condition of "ritually separating" the individual, leaving them standing in a place "opposed [...] to the legitimate order" as offenders (p. 423). This ritual separation continues beyond the prison walls in moments like job applications, when the individual's character comes under scrutiny and they are required to disclose their degraded status, further evidencing the court's role in and ability to carry out status degradation ceremonies.

While the court is the primary official discussed with regards to legitimate institutions carrying out status degradation ceremonies, Garfinkel (1956) contrasts this institutionalised

understanding of denouncer in describing a “degradation taken as an immediate kinship and tribal obligation” (p. 424). Unlike the “professional degraders” of the court (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 424), the kin or tribal denouncers are community-born denouncers or degraders: individuals who are otherwise not state sanctioned nor officials in other capacities and who have been directly (they have been hurt by the event) or indirectly (their kin have been hurt by the event) impacted by the perpetrator’s actions. Garfinkel notes that kinship or tribal degradation ceremonies are in contrast to ceremonies carried out by institutional bodies such as the court. Individuals or groups with “immediate kinship or tribal obligation” carry out these forms of degradation ceremonies due to their relationship with the victim of the perpetrators’ actions (p. 424). Thus, while “professional degraders,” such as those involved in the court system, have authority to carry out degradation ceremonies as part of their position in society, individuals enact kinship denunciation ceremonies using their community-based and relational authority.

As in the example of the court, the state gives these official bodies power and authority with which they carry out indicting and sentencing perpetrators of criminal activities. In contrast, individuals who carry out kinship or tribal degradation ceremonies have authority to do so as a result of their “*immediate*” relationship with the victim (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 424) or perpetrator and state provided authority or power is not necessarily required in order to do so. In fact, Garfinkel notes that tribal and kinship denouncers have “both the right and obligation to engage in” degradation ceremonies as a result of their relationship with the victim of the offence (p. 424). It is this direct relationship with the victim which elevates the individual to their role of denouncer; more so, they are required to fulfil the role of denouncer. Beyond Garfinkel’s initial discussion of status degradation ceremonies, other scholars follow a similar model when discussing denouncers; often noting that Garfinkel provides the court as an example, but never

explaining how the individual or group gained the authority to become the denouncer (see, Antonio, 1972; Cavender, Gray & Miller, 2010; Elsrud, Lalander & Staaf, 2015; Fader, 2011; Gustafson, 2013; Lempert, 1977; Roth, 2005; Socia & Brown, 2016; Thérèse & Martin, 2010). Instead, the literature focuses on individuals who already hold authority within their community and use their previously garnered position to enact the ceremony. As such, scholars take the position of the denouncer for granted, failing to examine how denouncers garner or justify their position of authority.

So far, then, through the literature we understand the denouncer as an official in some capacity within a specific domain. These denouncers have authority that allows them to carry out the denunciation of those who transgress social norms pertinent to and within their arena. Further, having authority does not mean the official can enact a successful status degradation ceremony; rather, their authority and domain must involve some form of performance within the public arena or in the public view. The importance of the public arena or public view relates to the audience's response to and involvement in the status degradation ceremony. The audience is integral as their witness and acceptance of the denunciation and the newly transformed identity allow for the success of the ceremony (Garfinkel, 1956). As well, without performing the degradation for the public, only the denouncer and perpetrator are aware of the ritual and the denouncer does not fully transform the identity of the denounced for the community at large (Schoepflin, 2009).

Additionally, while scholars almost exclusively analyse officials in the body of literature, there is no definition or discussion that suggest denouncers *have* to be officials or actors from official institutions. Simply put, denouncers must have some form of authority in order to carry out a degradation ceremony; however, there is no delineation *requiring* formal status. Thus, if an

individual is able to garner authority, or have the community view them as such, their “authority” places them in a position where they can carry out degradation ceremonies. As such, pseudo-officials can hold authority which allows them to carry out the denunciation and identity transformation of others within their community. The main difference, then, between officials and pseudo-officials, is the way in which pseudo-officials garner their authority to enact status degradation ceremonies.

Defining Pseudo-Officials

This research focuses on a group that occupies neither formal nor kinship officialdom. Instead, they are what I am referring to as “pseudo-officials.” Unlike formal, tribal, and kinship officials, pseudo-officials are individuals or groups who hold no formally recognised position within their community, but claim they are defending the public from harm by engaging in denunciations. The motivation for pseudo-officials to take on this role lies in their understanding of officials or official action as absent, lacking, or as failing to successfully carry out their duties within the community. In other words, would-be pseudo-officials view themselves as filling a gap where they perceive their community needs some form of protection. In this case, community does not necessarily refer to the pseudo-officials’ immediate surroundings, but rather the individuals and groups with whom they interact, whether that be physically (i.e. face to face) or virtually (i.e. social media) (see, Christensen & Levinson, 2003; Kendall, 2003). These communities are not restricted to geographic location, but the community members share values, interests, or attitudes that link them to each other (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). As they are not formal officials and are not carrying out tribal or kinship ceremonies, pseudo-officials garner their authority as members of the virtual community support their role as the denouncer. Thus, these individuals hold an informal position in their community, accepted by community

members as a legitimate, needed role. Importantly, without community support, these individuals would not acquire the role of a pseudo-official: community support determines the success or failure of their attempt to grasp the “official” position as well as the success of their denunciation. Officials enacting the denouncer role acquire top-down authority, where the governing locale provides them with the authority to carry out specific duties which involve degradation ceremonies. By contrast, pseudo-officials acquire authority in a ground-up or grassroots manner, where the ground-level community provides them with authority to enact degradation ceremonies by providing varying levels of support for their attempts to control transgressions.

Vigilantes as Pseudo-Officials

As pointed out by Garfinkel (1956), people who hold no formal position *can* act as denouncers, specifically individuals who are carrying out tribal or kinship mandated degradation ceremonies. While pseudo-officials similarly hold no formal authority, they differ from tribal or kinship denouncers primarily due to a lack of direct harm from the perpetrator’s actions. Consequently, pseudo-officials are not filling the role of denouncer to avenge family, friends, or themselves; rather, pseudo-officials are those who step up to defend the public from perceived harms in the absence of official action. One example of this type of denouncer, used in this study, are vigilantes.

As noted previously, vigilantes have no formal authority and formal authorities often criticise or condemn them for their actions (Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Cooper-Knock & Owen, 2015; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Sile, 2001; Smallridge, Wagner & Crawl, 2016; Super, 2017). Without formal authority, vigilantes appeal to the public for support of their activities (Cotter, 2012, Gau &

Brunson, 2015; Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014; Zizumbo-Colunga, 2015, 2017) and assert they are engaging in vigilante justice in order to serve the community and keep them safe where formal institutions fail to do so (Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Sile, 2001; Smallridge, Wagner & Cowl, 2016; Super, 2017). Many vigilante activities involve shame, humiliation, and degradation of targeted individuals (Adinkrah, 2005; Byrne, 2013; Chang & Poon, 2017; Cubellis, Douglas & Fera, 2018; Douglas, 2016; Evans, 2003; Jane, 2016; Jane, 2017; Kucera & Mares, 2015; Shih, 2016; Trottier, 2012, 2017; White & Rastogi, 2009; Williams & Thompson, 2004). In particular, many forms of modern cyber-vigilantism focus on exposing the truth about who transgressors “truly are” to the public (Byrne, 2013; Chang & Poon, 2017; Douglas, 2016; Jane, 2016, 2017; Kasra, 2017; Klang & Boston, 2015; Kohm, 2009; Kossef, 2016; Trottier, 2017; Winters, 2009) a key part of a status degradation ceremony. As such, I argue that many of these vigilante justice activities constitute degradation ceremonies, with vigilantes or vigilante organisations holding the position of a pseudo-official denouncer. To illustrate this, the rest of this chapter discusses Creep Catchers as pseudo-official denouncers, analysing the information they share online related to their sting operations. There is no state or official authority conferred onto Creep Catchers that allows them to carry out their vigilante justice activities which act as status degradation ceremonies. Instead, Creep Catchers builds a case which explains and supports their position as pseudo-officials through their vigilantism.

Creep Catchers as Pseudo-Officials

In discussing Creep Catchers as pseudo-officials, it is important to address the ways in which the organisation garners authority to carry out degradation ceremonies. Pseudo-officials argue that formal authorities and officials have failed to protect the public from a threat and that

they need to take action to address these failings. This pattern emerges in Creep Catchers' claims surrounding the sexual exploitation of children via the internet. Creep Catchers make two interrelated claims that justify the need for them to act as denouncers through their vigilantism: 1) the sexual exploitation of children through the internet is a widespread problem that the public is only vaguely aware of, and 2) neither the police nor the courts take this problem seriously. These claims constitute the grounds (Best, 2008) of Creep Catchers' construction of the problem of online exploitation of children. Once those grounds are established, Creep Catchers are then able to leverage these grounds to position themselves as pseudo-officials who must step in to protect the community through their vigilantism.

Constructing Grounds: The Sexual Exploitation of Children Online is Widespread but Unknown to the Public

Within a claim, the grounds provide the foundational understanding of a social problem. As such, the grounds consist of the claimsmakers' construction of the "facts of the matter" that summarise and exemplify what the social problem is and how prevalent it is (Best, 1987, 1990). These facts take the form of definitions, examples, and estimates about the problem's depth (Best, 2008). Thus, the grounds not only identify the problem and its scope, including what is and is not relevant with regards to the problem, but also consists of examples that evoke an emotional reaction from the audience (Best, 1987, 2008; Gusfield, 1981). It is important for the grounds to provide a broad scope and understanding of a problem in order to reach and persuade a greater audience (Best, 1987). In providing examples, the grounds allow a direct link between the claimant's assertion and the social problem itself, thus backing up the claim with facts – even though the facts are also a social construction (Best, 1987). Alongside definitions and examples, estimates provide an understanding of the depth of a social problem in society (Best, 1987, 1990,

2008). If a claim is unsuccessful with regards to grounding definitions, examples, and estimates, the claim will lack strength of persuasion and may not convince the audience of its veracity (Best, 2008). As such, the audience may well ignore the claim.

With regard to their vigilante justice, Creep Catchers frequently described their reason for engaging in ‘anti- child sexual offender vigilantism’ as both raising awareness of the issue of online CSE and protecting the children in their community. The awareness raising operates on two fronts: 1) letting Canadians know there are individuals online seeking to meet with children; and 2) letting individuals seeking to meet with children know that Creep Catchers is going to stop them. Creep Catchers’ awareness raising can be observed within the organisation’s discussions with the purported child sexual offenders they met as well as in their online postings, comments, and discussions with their audience.

Creep Catchers informed “catches” that they were “spreading awareness about people like you” (Video 2, 5, 15) and “show[ing] the world that there’s men out there that are preying on children on the internet” (Video 7) through their activities. Another member noted, “our main thing is awareness guys, so the more people that see, the more people that know about these guys the better” (Woodward, 2017). In letting Canadians know of the existence of individuals engaging in the sexual exploitation of children, Creep Catchers asserted they also brought awareness to other child sexual offenders that the organisation targeted:

So fuck it, we gotta spread awareness, vigilantes, just showing the amount of goofs that’s in the country. The internet is running rampant with rapists, and it’s disgusting, so we decided to show their face to the public and I love it. It’s so needed (Video 2).

While, in some cases, Creep Catchers provided examples of their own or families’ or friends’ victimisation, the organisation did not use these instances as reasoning for their

vigilantism. Instead, the organisation used these discussions as evidence that child sexual offending occurs and thus that there is a problem that needs addressing and that they were protecting other children from this harm.

One theme within Creep Catchers' denunciation and discussion of looking out for public interest is the implicit understanding that victimisation can happen to any child that uses the internet, regardless of how secure and safe their parents, guardians, or community believes they are. Fear of crime is commonplace in everyday life, however, different crimes evoke different levels of anxiety surrounding potential victimisation (Adams & Serpe, 2000; Ferraro, 1995; Fox, Nobles & Piquero, 2009; May, 2000). Often, fear of crime and victimisation is dependent on the locale, context, and circumstance; however, the fear of sex offenders targeting children is widespread and pervasive (Gardner, 2008; Hunter, 2008; Jenkins, 1998; Wright, 2000) and has the potential to develop into sweeping moral panics (Gardner, 2008; Jenkins, 1998).

By focusing on an issue that involves the victimisation of children, Creep Catchers engages with a deeply held cultural feeling rule (Loseke, 2003a) that frames children as sympathetic victims. Loseke (2003b) notes that public perceptions of social problems are based in "plots that serve to construct the immorality of the problem" (p. 7). The public responds to these social problems with fear and a belief in the intensity of the condition (Loseke, 2003b). Creating innocent victims is integral to garnering emotional connections and response from the audience.

Creep Catchers draws upon the emotional connections and cultural meanings surrounding the innocence of children to give urgency and validity to their cause. In particular, Creep Catchers draws upon broad cultural framings of children as innocent as a reason that they are needed to fill the role of denouncer, in direct response to perceptions of law enforcement

failures. Creep Catchers consistently contrasted child sexual offenders to the would-be victim: where the victim was innocent, blameless, or good, the purported child sexual offenders and their activities were bad, evil, or horrific. In these comments, Creep Catchers did not have to explicitly state that children are innocent, rather the organisation evoked the cultural understanding of the innocence of children through their contrast and comparison of the would-be victim and alleged child sexual offenders. Creep Catchers emphasised the victims' innocence when addressing both the purported child sexual offenders as well as when they addressed the audience and emphasising the victim's innocence was always tied to the alleged perpetrator's horrible actions. For instance, Creep Catcher's discussions read:

“What you do is so disgusting. You were trying to meet a child. A child, man. Like.

That's so wrong” (Video 6);

“you're a creep. Trying to have sex with a kid. Gross. That's so wrong. They're a kid...

You put ideas there for them in their heads” (Video, 3);

“we are protecting your kids. People just aren't safe; strangers they're just not good. So we make sure we stop them from meeting them (Video, 4).

As can be seen in these comments, the characteristics of the would-be child victims are not mentioned, which relies on an assumption that the reader will understand and be sympathetic to the general innocence of children. While there are no specific mentions of children's ages, sexes, or physical appearance, the very fact that they are children suggests that they are young and deserving of protection. These commentaries link the guilt of the purported child sexual offenders and their actions, as well. Through their descriptions, Creep Catchers notes the alleged child sexual offenders are adults, that their activities are horrible, and that they should not be speaking to/meeting with children. The purported child sexual offenders are presented as

strangers preying on children, lurking on the internet to trap children, and attempting to carry out horrific acts of abuse on innocent young minors.

From Creep Catchers presentations of self as protecting the community, it is clear that their activities emphasise the innocence of children and the guilt of purported child sexual offenders in attempting to gain legitimacy. The emphasis of the would-be victims as children draws an emotional connection from the audience in response to cultural understandings of children as innocent due to their status as children (Loseke, 2003a). Children are not perceived as culpable in any victimisation they may face and are thus worthy of sympathy (Loseke, 2003a). These cultural understandings of innocence and sympathy lead the audience to develop an emotional connection between themselves and the would-be victim (Loseke, 2003a) and foster support for Creep Catchers' role as denouncer.

Further, Creep Catchers capitalises on the widespread contempt for child sexual offenders to show to their audience that they are protecting innocents from what would be horrific victimisation by an evil person. Cultural and moral values assert that individuals who victimise children are the worst of the worst criminals (Loseke, 2003b). These individuals are deserving of punishment as they transgress highly held cultural values (Loseke, 2003a). They are not deserving of sympathy but are instead deserving of scorn as they attempted to use children to "gratify [their] sexual desire" (Loseke, 2003b, p. 7). As such Creep Catchers places the purported child sexual offenders on the evil side of the good and evil cultural dichotomy. Through asserting they are protecting children and the community at large from the evils of child sexual offenders, Creep Catchers attends to culturally held values to support their aims to garner the pseudo-official position in their degradation ceremonies.

Within the context of CSE and child sexual offenders, the fear of crime and victimisation also plays into the fear of technology and technological advances. Scholars have noted that technology itself is implicated in moral panics (Cassell & Cramer, 2008; Gies, 2008; McLoughlin, 1995). Specifically, perceptions of the internet as unsafe are common: “now in the age of technology, children are being stalked and seduced online [from] the privacy of their own bedrooms. They are lured into a world of sexual maturity by predators using techniques of manipulation and deception” (Marcum, 2007, p. 100). This fear of strangers is not new. It builds on prior understandings of offline stranger danger (Jenkins, 1998; Jewkes, 2010a, 2010b; Mancum, 2007). However, it is the ability of strangers to reach children within their own home that increases the fear of victimisation (Cassell & Cramer, 2008; Grabovsky, 2001; Jewkes, 2010a, 2010b). The internet itself, then, is constructed as a dangerous place for children as they can be safely within their own home and still be victimised. Thus, fear of sex offenders and stranger danger combined with fear of the internet to create a moral panic surrounding children’s use of the internet (Cassell & Cramer, 2008; Yar, 2007).

In attempting to attain the role of pseudo-official denouncer, Creep Catchers draws on both fear of victimisation and fear of internet or children’s use of the internet. Creep Catchers consistently notes, as shown above, that there are predators online simply waiting for or looking for children to prey on. Building on fears and concerns regarding sexual offenders and the internet and/or technology at large, Creep Catchers constructs the issue of internet CSE as pervasive in their local communities, thus providing a foundation for their vigilante justice activities and their role as a pseudo-official in denouncing the purported child sexual offenders. For example, Creep Catchers note that “they’re [child sexual offenders] everywhere online” (Video 4), “anyone your kids talk to could be a paedophile... they’re everywhere” (Video 6), and

“thousands of people online are talking to kids... trying to do stuff with kids. Thousands guys!” (Video 11). Building on already existing tropes and perceptions of child sexual offenders and children’s safety, the organisation makes it clear to their audience that without Creep Catchers catching purported child sexual offenders, children are not safe.

This intersection of child safety and the ubiquitous and far-reaching threat of the internet is where Creep Catchers gains leverage in its claims to authority. By claiming “raising awareness” as one of their missions, they insinuate that this is a widespread yet unknown problem. This is the first step towards positioning themselves as pseudo-officials who can act as denouncers. However, before they can do this, they must also establish the failure of those normally tasked with enacting this role.

Constructing Grounds: The Failure of Officials

While Creep Catchers claims that online child sexual offenders and CSE is widespread, Creep Catchers also needs to show the audience that their actions are needed. It is one thing for Creep Catchers to suggest that a problem exists, and another to explain why they are needed to act as community protectors. The communities where Creep Catchers carries out their degradation ceremonies already have law enforcement officials who deal with crime, including CSE. So, in order to legitimise their position as pseudo-officials in carrying out degradation ceremonies Creep Catchers needs to indicate to their audience that formal officials, law enforcement specifically, are failing to protect the community. If law enforcement is failing, Creep Catchers is then able to move beyond notifying the community that they are protecting them and move into showing that they are actually protecting the community where others failed.

As such, the second claim Creep Catchers’ uses to position themselves as a pseudo-authority is the perceived failings of law enforcement officials in addressing online predators.

According to Creep Catchers, law enforcement officials fail to protect children from predators both online and offline; however, Creep Catchers directs their vigilante justice to alleged online predators who intend to meet with children offline. A number of Creep Catchers comments which advocate for their position as vigilantes addressing child predators address their understanding of law enforcement failing in their duties. When discussing law enforcement, members of Creep Catchers consistently assert that the police do not fully investigate, arrest, or put effort into ensuring children are safe from predators. Often, Creep Catchers ties this understanding to their belief in, or understanding of, the necessity of their vigilante activities:

“the cops are documenting [cases] and you know what they do? They do shit all [...] cause cops sit around and don’t do shit for the people. They don’t protect the people uh children of [the community]” (Video, 3);

“do you know anyone who’s been hurt by this stuff? Cause I do... I get told by parents who watch our videos. They wish we’d been able to help their kids. And the police did nothing. But we do.” (Video 3);

“No one was arrested. They [the police] just let it go. They didn’t even try to stop it. That’s why I do it. Cause no one else does” (Video 3).

Beyond law enforcement agencies and officials, Creep Catchers also noted failures of other criminal justice related agencies and officials regarding sexual offending against children; specifically, the Canadian court system. Creep Catchers’ perceptions of the legal system mirrored their understandings of law enforcement agencies and officials. They perceived the legal system as failing to ensure punishment of predators or failing to provide appropriate punishment for sexual offenders. One member suggested, “you simply can’t depend on the law – they givin’ drug dealers more time than paedophiles” (Video, 2, 3, 4). Various members of Creep

Catchers furthered this commentary regarding failure to provide adequate sentencing, including one member who suggested “they [child sexual offenders] deserve more [longer sentences] but they never get it... they always get out.” (Video 5). The organisation also suggested how they would manage child sexual offenders if they held formal positions and could mete out punishments: “if I was a judge these fuckers would never get out. Fuck them; they would have no rights” (Video, 10) and “I’d throw you in jail and throw away the key... they should have done that before. You shouldn’t have ever been let out” (Video 1).

These claims by Creep Catchers are common to vigilante organisations (see, Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Sile, 2001; Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016; Super, 2017). The failings of law enforcement officials in addressing perceived deviant or criminal behaviour is often cited as a reason vigilante organisations exist within communities and exact vigilante justice (Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Cooper-Knock & Owen, 2015; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Sile, 2001; Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016; Super, 2017). Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Cooper-Knock & Owen, 2015; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014; Johnson, 1996; Sile, 2001; Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016; Super, 2017; Zizumbo-Colunga, 2015, 2017). Law enforcement may not in reality fail in their duties; however, community members may perceive law enforcement actions as not sufficiently protecting them from transgressive behaviours or individuals. Creep Catchers played on existing perceptions of law enforcement failure, as numerous vigilante organisations have before, in attaining legitimacy as pseudo-officials.

In a similar manner to other vigilante organisations, Creep Catchers' commentary regarding law enforcement and criminal justice system failures serve to necessitate their vigilante justice. Understood through their lens, if law enforcement and the criminal justice system were not failing to address the issue of online CSE, their vigilante justice would not be necessary. As such, their comments about law enforcement and the legal system serve to demonstrate to their audience that their vigilante justice is necessary to ensure the protection of children in their communities, and in some instances Canada-wide. Creep Catchers leads their audience to understand and believe that without Creep Catchers' intervention "it'll be predators who talk to kids in chat rooms [...] and meet them" (Video, 13). In this way, Creep Catchers shows that their intervention is necessary for the protection of children and positions themselves as a pseudo-official whose role is to deal with CSE where other formal official bodies have, and continue, to fail.

In making this point, Creep Catchers subtly constructs a villain secondary to the sexual offenders themselves: the uncaring justice system. Creep Catchers communicated to the audience the consistent failures of law enforcement and the courts in dealing with the issue of internet CSE. Much like the alleged child sexual offenders, Creep Catchers implicitly dichotomised law enforcement officials from the innocent children in their claims that law enforcement fail children who need and deserve protection. The organisation noted that law enforcement failed to protect children and were therefore as bad as the individuals who were victimising the children. It is important to note that law enforcement did not just fail but were active in their failure to protect children. According to Creep Catchers, law enforcement agencies and the courts actively chose to ignore victims who came forward, actively chose not to proceed in investigations, and actively chose to give sexual offenders lesser sentences than they deserved. It was not simply a

failure by being unable to reach a proper resolution to a case. It was instead a choice to not protect children. The justice system actors, then, intentionally transgressed culturally held values surrounding children's need to be protected (Loseke, 2003a,b). Therefore, Creep Catchers aligned law enforcement with the purported child sexual offenders on the 'bad' side of the moral and cultural dichotomy.

Creep Catchers aimed to evoke emotional responses from their audience by asserting that their position of pseudo-official resulted from a place of protecting would-be innocent and sympathetic victims from both villainous child sexual offenders and failing justice system actors. Specifically, they aimed to evoke emotional connections between the audience and either their own innocent children or the "relatable," (Loseke, 2003a) innocent victim whom the audience could connect with. In connecting the audience to the would-be victims and the failed community protection, Creep Catchers showed the necessity of their actions, thus actively positioning themselves as the response to both the alleged child sexual offenders and the perceived failure of the justice system.

Creep Catchers' claims also invoke fear in their audiences to justify their position as pseudo-officials. Specifically, Creep Catchers evoked fear in discussing the failure of law enforcement officials to address the problem of CSE. The organisation argued there were safety concerns for children within the community, as the local law enforcement agencies were unable to protect them. In this way, Creep Catchers showed that the innocent children deserved and needed protection from the evil predators, and that they were stepping in to ensure their safety, thus aiming to fill the role of denouncer in their status degradation ceremonies.

Altheide (2002) notes that the dominant discourse surrounding children involves fear. This discourse has developed into "justif[ications] for taking actions" with regards to issues

affecting children (Altheide, 2002, p. 230). Altheide attributes this discourse to the news media as “a dominant source of information about social issues” (p. 229). With the expansion of social media, however, traditional news media no longer remains the dominant or only source of information regarding issues within society (Bandari, Asur & Huberman, 2012; Broersma & Graham, 2012, 2013; Mitchell, Gottfried & Matsa, 2015; Schifferes et al., 2014). While Creep Catchers is not a news source, they act as information providers to their audience members and their community at large by doxing individuals online and illustrating the issue of internet CSE. Creep Catchers frequently asserted that law enforcement failed to protect children, thus indicating that there are safety concerns in the community. Noting that law enforcement is failing to protect children promotes fear for the audience as there is an evident lack of protection. Linking real life examples of law enforcement failure, as noted in their comments above, Creep Catchers were able to promote fear even further as they showed explicitly that there was law enforcement failure. Creep Catchers construct their claims to demonstrate to the audience that there is legitimate reason to be afraid as there were legitimate examples of police failure. Implicit in this commentary, also, is the distinction that without some form of protection children will continue to be victimised. In this way, Creep Catchers indicated to their audience that without further protections in place (more explicitly, themselves filling the role of protector) the victimisation could happen within their own home, family, or community.

Furthering the discourse of fear surrounding justice system actors failing, Creep Catchers linked instances of police failure implicitly in their online discussions, noting that the community requires Creep Catchers to protect them. The organisation explained that they began engaging in these activities because of the reality of prior child victimisation – either their own victimisation, their children’s, or other children they knew had been victimised. Linking cases in this manner

showed to the audience that law enforcement and the courts have a consistent pattern of failing to protect children. It was therefore not a one-off mistake, but rather that justice system actors repeatedly fail in protecting children. This discourse of fear associated with failing to protect children further explains why Creep Catchers need to fill the role of pseudo-official and denounce purported child sexual offenders in order to protect the community.

Beyond linking cases of law enforcement failure via suggesting they knew other victims who police had failed, Creep Catchers also touched upon the enormity of the internet CSE issue at large. To achieve this, Creep Catchers avoided providing specific numbers or estimates of children being victimised, but rather proposed that there are child sexual offenders everywhere and victimisation occurs everywhere. In doing so, the organisation again fosters a discourse of fear surrounding child victimisation, essentially advancing the fear around children and children's safety that existed prior to the organisation's existence (Altheide, 2002). As such, the audience not only needs to fear for safety within the community due to law enforcement failure but needs to be aware that there is greater cause for concern (and thus greater fear) than they understood prior to Creep Catchers stepping up to protect them.

Creep Catchers communicates a discourse of fear to their audience in an effort to garner the position of pseudo-official. In showing to the audience the greater need for concern surrounding justice system failures alongside the before unknown or hidden extremeness of internet CSE Creep Catchers shows that the issue needs addressing. Fear is a common way social problems garner attention (Loseke, 2003a). When individuals fear a social problem, they are much more likely to pay attention to the issue and to take it more seriously (Loseke, 2003). Taking issues seriously aids in developing individual connections to the issue and the responses to it (Loseke, 2003a, b). Fear creates emotional investment in social problems, thus drawing

individuals in to supporting ways to address the social problem (Loseke, 2003a). Evidently, should individuals fear the issue of internet CSE on a higher scale, and understand that there is no real protection against it, they would support Creep Catchers in their efforts as pseudo-official to respond to and reveal the truth around alleged child sexual offenders in their communities. Creep Catchers essentially steps in and lessens the discourse of fear surrounding community safety attributed to criminal justice system failure by revealing to the audience that they are handling the issues where others have failed. Thus, the fear Creep Catchers promotes in their vigilante justice seeking activities aids in their attempts to garner the position of pseudo-official in denouncing transgressors in their communities.

Creep Catchers establishes their legitimacy by showcasing they are *needed* to fill the role of denouncer because of the deficiency of law enforcement and the courts. Their claims about the ineffectiveness or deficiencies of law enforcement agencies and the court system lead to the conclusion that pseudo-official action is needed. They imply that the organisations who *should* have carried out the degradation ceremony of the purported child sexual offenders failed. Thus, it is Creep Catchers' responsibility to denounce the offending individual and reveal their "true identity." It is important to note that Creep Catchers are not usurping formal officials' roles. They do not have the ability to impose formal sanctions and the attempt to do so may reduce their public support. Instead, they impose an informal sanction and, in doing so, expose the perceived failings of official authorities.

Constructing Solutions: Creep Catchers as Protectors of the Community

Once they have established the grounds of the problem, Creep Catchers must then position themselves in the role of denouncers. This must be done in a manner that will garner support from the public. Public support for vigilante organisations often rests on the group's

framing of their activities, the justifications they use and the perceived outcome of their activities (Adinkrah, 2005; Burr, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Girling, Loader & Sparks, 1998; Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014). Should the outcome of vigilante justice appear unwarranted or too violent, the public's support for the vigilantes often diminishes (Adinkrah, 2005; Chang & Poon, 2017; Cubellis, Evans & Fera, 2018; Doty, 2007; Douglas, 2016; Evans, 2003). While the public may support some of the vigilante's activities, taking it "too far" is unacceptable. In this vein, Creep Catchers describes their activities, motivations, and outcomes in a positive manner, avoiding any violence (as well as publicising their measures to avoid violence for their audience), and consistently emphasising the benefits of their activities for the larger community.

To begin, Creep Catchers stress that their actions are being taken to protect the community and its most vulnerable members: children. Creep Catchers noted that they prevent child exploitation through their vigilantism. For example, when one denounced individual asked why Creep Catchers came to the meeting, a member responded "I'm just here to replace whatever child would have showed up to meet you, you know? That's it" (Video, 5). This was reiterated by other members who referred to their activities as preventative: "what we are is preventative [...] you knew her age and that's messed up. Keep in mind it was me [talking to you], and you know next time it's going to be me [not a child] meeting you" (Woodward, 2017). Creep Catchers consistently discussed children as their priority by "work[ing] to keep them safe" through "meeting with you [child sexual offenders] [we're] keeping children away from you [...] keeping them safe" (Video, 3; see also, Woodward, 2017) (Video, 3, 6, 12, 1, 9, 10, 5). In fact, W5 host Jon Woodward reiterated Creep Catcher's perspective when reflecting on and quoting comments from Creep Catchers, noting they "believe they [are] keeping kids safe" (Woodward, 2017). Often, vigilante organisations garner greater community support if they attend to social or

criminal issues that individuals in their locale also perceive as problematic (Burr, 2004; Byrne, 2013; Cooper-Knock & Owen, 2015; Douglas, 2016; Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014; Shih, 2016). Preying on children transgresses deeply held cultural values (Loseke, 2003b). Creep Catchers positions themselves as a response to this cultural and moral transgression and asserts they are stepping in to protect children. This refrain of protection is common to vigilantes (Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Cotter, 2012; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Sile, 2001; Super, 2017) and serves to justify Creep Catchers filling the position of a pseudo-official in their degradation ceremony process.

Creep Catchers' lack of physical violence in their vigilantism also supports their attempts to act as a denouncer. Community support for vigilantes increases when the group refrains from carrying out physical violence when meting out punishment to transgressors (Adinkrah, 2005; Cubellis, Evans & Fera, 2018; Doty, 2007; Douglas, 2016; Evans, 2003; Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014). When involving physical violence in their actions, communities often understand vigilantism as equal to the alleged transgressor in terms of violating social or criminal boundaries (Burr, 2004; Doty, 2007; Jane, 2016, 2017; Miller, 2013; Shih, 2016; Tankebe, 2009; Walsh, 2014). While Creep Catchers advocates for violence against the alleged child sexual offenders in response to their purported transgressions, the organisation does not itself engage in physical violence. As the organisation is not lowering themselves to the level of the purported sexual offender, they indicate to the audience that they are on the same side as the innocent children and the audience themselves. This furthers their aims to act as pseudo-official by positioning Creep Catchers as different from the purported transgressor, thus "distancing" themselves (Garfinkel, 1956) in terms of their actions. Creep Catchers, then, constructs themselves as moral and good, while the purported child sexual offenders are not.

Creep Catchers' focus on law enforcement failure is also in alignment with vigilante justification and legitimacy. Vigilante organisations frequently assert the criminal justice system or the state is failing and that their vigilantism ensures safety for those who have been failed ((Adinkrah, 2005; Burr & Jensen, 2004; Chang & Poon, 2017; Doty, 2007; Dumsday, 2009; Goldstein, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Sile, 2001; Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl, 2016; Super, 2017). In areas with high levels of government corruption, it is common for whole communities to accept vigilantes as legitimate sources of protection (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Meško & Tankebe, 2014; Reisig, Tankebe & Meško, 2012; Tankebe, 2009, 2010, 2013) including receiving support from law enforcement themselves who disagree with state issues (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Tankebe, 2009, 2010). A similar attempt is made by Creep Catchers to justify their position. In arguing the criminal justice system is failing, Creep Catchers positions their activities as necessary to protect the community from harm.

By explaining why their activities are needed and by carrying out those activities in a way that is palatable to the public, Creep Catchers provides the audience with reasons to accept them in the position of denouncer. Not only are their activities constructed as an appropriate response in protecting their community, Creep Catchers positioned their vigilantism as benefitting their audience. This understanding of their activities relates directly to their comments surrounding protecting children and the community at large. For example, when witnesses asked why Creep Catchers engaged in vigilante justice, the organisation's consistent response was to keep their community safe, specifically children. This constant refrain reinforced for the audience the need for protectors and Creep Catchers' as filling the role. This construction of self as working for the community is necessary in order to successfully inhabit the denouncer role. Successful degradation ceremonies are completed on behalf of the community and not for

the denouncer themselves. In showing the public that they are raising awareness and preventing children from meeting possible child sexual offenders, Creep Catchers justified their actions, structured themselves as working for the public, and “arranged to be invested with the right to speak” (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 423) against child sexual offenders and thus hold the position of denouncer.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the ways Creep Catchers attempts to gain legitimacy in their role as pseudo-officials carrying out status degradation ceremonies. First, I discussed Creep Catchers construction of the grounds of the problem: 1) raising awareness of the widespread but unknown problem of online sexual exploitation of children and 2) the failure of officials to deal with his problem. Following this, I explored Creep Catchers use of the perception of law enforcement and the courts as ineffective as support for their attempts to gain legitimacy as a pseudo-official denouncer. The organisation promoted fear of child sexual offenders and the internet as a tool to facilitate child sexual offences, as well as promoting fear around community safety in expounding on justice system failures. Through constructing the issue of internet CSE as subject to community safety concerns, justice system failures, an innocent, sympathetic victim and evil, scorn deserving offender, Creep Catchers constructs their activities as necessary for the protection of children and the community. Through this necessitation, Creep Catchers legitimises their position as a pseudo-official in response to the problem of internet CSE. It is the mix of victimisation, community safety, and justice system failure that allows the opening of the position of pseudo official in carrying out degradation ceremonies – a role that Creep Catchers repeatedly positions themselves to fill. Creep Catchers’ legitimacy, though, is not simply founded in their own opinions of their activities and why they carry out degradation ceremonies.

Instead, a modicum of their legitimacy is linked to audience reactions to their status degradation ceremonies. In particular, audience support of their activities legitimises Creep Catchers' position as a denouncer, even though they do not have the formal authority that allows other officials to carry out degradation ceremonies. The next chapter addresses the audience response to Creep Catchers' status degradation ceremonies and how the audience further legitimises Creep Catchers' position of pseudo-official denouncer.

Chapter Five – Witness Legitimation of the Pseudo-Official

Like the denouncer, the witness plays an important, while perhaps somewhat less active, role in status degradation ceremonies. The denouncer carries out the status degradation ceremony for the witnesses' benefit, revealing to the witness the genuine nature of the perpetrator who is masking their "true identity" (Goffman, 1963). In turn, the witness interprets the newly revealed information about the perpetrator and determines its veracity. Witnesses also interpret and evaluate Creep Catchers' attempts to establish themselves in the position of denouncer with a pseudo-official status. The witness watches Creep Catchers' videos and reads their online comments and discussions, and through this process "perceive[s], interpret[s], [and] evaluate[s]" (Kitsuse & Spector, 1975, p. 584-585) the information, determining if Creep Catchers' claiming of the pseudo-official position is something they accept or oppose.

So, while the previous chapter focused on how Creep Catchers attempts to claim the position of denouncer, this chapter explores the witnesses' role in their degradation ceremonies. More specifically, this chapter explores how some witnesses add to and further legitimise Creep Catchers' position as pseudo officials, while others feel the lack of official status is problematic. As such, I provide an analysis of witness commentary that reveals both support for and opposition to Creep Catchers' vigilantism. To begin, I explore the role of the status degradation ceremony's witness. From there, I discuss the role of the witnesses in legitimising a pseudo-official denouncer and I provide an explanation of why this role of legitimisation is different than the witnesses in official-run status degradation ceremonies. Next, I explore the witnesses' legitimisation through shared values with Creep Catchers. Following this, I look at witness commentary that opposes Creep Catchers' vigilante justice activities, discussing these witnesses' opposition of Creep Catchers as pseudo-officials.

Role of the Witness

When discussing the witnesses in a status degradation ceremony, much like the denouncer, Garfinkel (1956) does not provide an explicit definition of who they are and how involved they are in the ceremony. Further scholarly literature regarding the ceremonies has also provided no explanation of the witness beyond a few scattered comments that suggest witnesses respond in some way to the denouncers' actions. Within Garfinkel's conditions of a status degradation ceremony, however, we learn that the ceremony is performed for the witnesses. In a successful degradation ceremony, the denouncer "must redefine the situations of those that are witness to the denunciation work" (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 422). That is to say, the denouncer needs to show to the witnesses that their understanding of the perpetrator is in fact flawed and inaccurate. The denouncer then redefines the denounced persons' identity for the witnesses. Specifically, the denouncer reveals to the witnesses that the denounced individual is, in fact, deserving of a lesser within the larger community. As such, the witness's role in the status degradation ceremony is to respond to the revelation of the denounced as detailed through the denouncer's work.

Beyond simply responding to the revelation of the ceremony, the witnesses must view and acknowledge the individual(s) who step in and take on the role of the denouncer "not as a private but as a publicly known person" (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 423). This is important as the denouncer is to carry out the status degradation ceremony in support of and in alignment with the community's values (Garfinkel, 1956). Should the denouncer carry out a status degradation ceremony in accordance with their privately held values and opinions, the success of the ceremony may be called into question and potentially not met (Benson, 1990; Garfinkel, 1956; Gustafson, 2013; Schoepflin, 2009). Instead, the community will understand the denouncer as

acting in their own interests, rather than those of the community. An example of this phenomenon exists in cases of revenge. While an individual may set out to reveal a perpetrator's "true identity" to their community, even if the perpetrator has transgressed community values in some manner, the community may understand the individual as embarrassing, humiliating, or shaming the perpetrator as a result of a personal affront, rather than a community-wide issue. Thus, the witnesses' understanding of the denouncer as a public entity acting for the community themselves is integral to the success of the status degradation ceremony. The denouncer is thus defending the community and its values.

Alongside the understanding of the denouncer as a public entity, the witnesses need to understand the perpetrator as deserving of blame as a result of their transgressive behaviour. In particular, the ceremony's witnesses must see and understand their separation from the denounced as well as the individual's transgressive behaviour (Garfinkel, 1956). This knowledge of the perpetrator is revealed to the witnesses through the actions of the denouncer in the denunciation itself (Garfinkel, 1956). In the status degradation ceremony, the denouncer labels the perpetrator as lesser, treats them as such, and informs the witnesses of the unforgiveable transgressions of the denounced and the treatment they deserve due to their problematic behaviour. Through these actions, the denouncer problematises the purported perpetrator and their actions, implicitly or explicitly indicating to their witnesses the differences and distance between themselves and the perpetrator. The witnesses do not inherently understand the perpetrator as blameworthy and separate from themselves; rather, they "must be made to" recognise the perpetrator as such (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 423). As such, the denouncer's relationship with the witness, as well as their need for community support, lay out the role of the witnesses within a status degradation ceremony.

Woven throughout the various aspects of the ceremony, as well as their title, then, is their role: the witnesses fill the more passive role of an observer and respondent. The witnesses do not carry out any of the denunciation-related activities, but instead observe the ceremony and respond to the denunciation, when successful, with support for the denouncer and the newly revealed identity of the perpetrator. As Garfinkel (1956) notes, those viewing the ceremony “bear witness to the denunciation.”

However, it is important to note that Garfinkel’s description and understanding of the witness describes their role in a status degradation ceremony where the denouncer is an official individual, body, or entity. There is no literature that discusses witnesses to a status degradation ceremony where the denouncer is not an official and, as in this research project, is instead a pseudo-official. Consequently, there is need to understand how the role of the witness within a ceremony carried out by pseudo-officials may differ.

Role of the Witness within a Pseudo-Official Enacted Degradation Ceremony

As noted in the previous chapter, Creep Catchers is an organisation that acts as a pseudo-official within their vigilante-related activities. Creep Catchers attempts to position themselves in this role by expounding on the failures of law enforcement and the need for their activities in providing community. Due to Creep Catchers’ status as a pseudo-official, their witnesses’ role in the ceremony is different than the role of a witness who simply observes the denunciation when an official carries out a status degradation ceremony. While the witnesses’ role is still passive with regard to direct involvement in the denunciation itself, the witnesses take on new responsibilities. The witnesses act to legitimise (or reject) the pseudo-official’s position as denouncer.

Creep Catchers must earn their position as the denouncer. In order to successfully carry out a status degradation ceremony, Creep Catchers garners legitimacy by appealing to the ceremony's witnesses. The success of the degradation ceremony is dependent on witness' response to and acceptance of Creep Catchers' role as pseudo-official denouncers. That is not to say that every single witness needs to support Creep Catchers, but rather that their legitimisation as pseudo-officials is subject to witness' responses. In the following sections, I will address the witnesses' responses, discussing both supportive or legitimising witness responses, as well as oppositional witness responses.

Witness Support of Creep Catchers as Pseudo-Officials: Gaining Support through Shared Understandings

This section will focus on witness response and commentary that supports Creep Catchers and their legitimacy as pseudo-officials carrying out status degradation ceremonies. The witness legitimisation of Creep Catchers is not simply witnesses accepting what Creep Catchers does; rather their acceptance lies in their connection with Creep Catchers and their vigilante justice seeking activities. This connection to Creep Catchers' goals evidenced through witness comments that demonstrate shared understandings of 1) the reprehensible nature of child sexual offending and offenders, 2) the presence of "stranger danger" on- and off-line, and 3) formal officials' failings in addressing CSE.

Sexual Offences Against Children as Disgusting

Aside from speaking of child sexual offenders themselves as worthless, unacceptable people, Creep Catchers' witnesses also asserted that their actions are disgusting to them because of the cultural value of children as innocent, sympathetic, and vulnerable (Loseke, 2003a). The witnesses supported Creep Catchers' belief in the innocence, deserved protection, and

vulnerabilities of children through furthering the discourse around children as underserving victims. The witnesses frequently used the terms “minors,” when referring to the victims, contrasted by the descriptions of people who offend sexually against children as “demons;” “sick;” “insane;” and “predators” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 16). In other comments, the witnesses discussed specific actions of child sexual offenders, beyond just describing the person in negative terms. The witnesses unanimously asserted that speaking sexually to and attempting to meet a child, allegedly for sexual contact, was disgusting and inappropriate behaviour. When one purported child sexual offenders explained they were only talking to the child, a witness responded, noting “they’re just a CHILD... you shouldn’t even be taking[sic] to them you dont [sic] know them. You shouldn’t be meeting them for sex. That’s disgusting [...] you’re disgusting” (Comments, Video 13). Another witness suggested “you [Creep Catchers] are on the side of angels! What these people do to kids is horrible. I can’t believe anyone would do that its[sic] just so horrible” (Comments, Video 5).

As noted in the previous chapter, Creep Catchers constructs an innocent and sympathetic victim dichotomised by the villainous predator. In their discussions, the witnesses agree with Creep Catchers’ assessment and further this assessment in their commentary. The witnesses agree with Creep Catchers’ valuing of the victim as innocent, and further denounce the purported offender for their actions.

Much like Creep Catchers, the witnesses respond to their construction of the victims as innocent in contrast to their disgust associated with the purported child sexual offenders. This mirroring of moral values between the organisation and their witnesses is indicated in the way that witnesses repeat and extend Creep Catchers’ construction of the innocent victim by posting comments on their videos. When discussing the victims, the witnesses consistently assert that the

victim did not deserve to be harmed and the alleged child sexual offender's actions were horrible. Present within these comments was the witnesses' implicit agreement with Creep Catchers' moral and cultural assessment of the innocence of child victims. The witnesses further agreed with the distinction between the innocence of the victim, and their inherent goodness, and the inappropriateness of the purported child sexual offender's actions. In doing so, the witnesses categorised the would-be victims and the purported child sexual offenders along moral lines. The witnesses drew on preconceived notions and values around the inherent innocence of children (Best, 1990; Loseke, 2003b) in order to expound upon their innocence.

This understanding of the innocence of would-be child victims also carried over into commentary regarding the alleged child sexual offenders' own families. When commenting on the purported child sexual offenders' family life where information was provided/known, the witnesses advocated that any children be removed to ensure their safety: "I hope your kids get takes away from you" (Comments, Video 1); "kids don't deserve that... your kids should never be allowed to see you. they aren't safe" (Comments, Video 6). In responding to a woman who self-identified as a purported child sexual offender's ex-girlfriend and mother of their child, witnesses continued to assert that the child would only be safe away from the individual. One witness suggested the woman "get the court involved" as "your kids aren't safe around him. don't EVER let them see each other especially not alone" (Comments, Video 1). These comments furthered the moral and cultural understanding of the innocence of children and the inherent danger and disgustingness of the purported child sexual offenders and their actions.

Along with Creep Catchers, witnesses also considered the alleged child sexual offenders dangerous to other individuals around them, beyond the alleged child-victims, including Creep Catchers themselves. One witness warned Creep Catchers of the need to "keep yourselves safe...

I'd want to confront these creeps myself but remember, "SAFETY FIRST!" (Comments, Video 2). Another witness notes, "keep up the great work. But... let's be safe out there too. You really don't know what they'll do to you" (Comments, Video 2). These comments were often written in response to videos where Creep Catchers themselves noted the dangerousness of the denounced individual. For instance, Creep Catchers explained to the denounced that they "record" their interactions with the denounced "to keep [themselves] safe" and to "make sure it's on video if you [the denounced] attack us" because it had "happened to [us] before" (Comments, Video 3). Creep Catchers noted that, while they are not children, they also required protection from the purported child sexual offenders and their transgressive behaviour. The witnesses responded by affirming Creep Catchers' assessment of the individual as dangerous to more than just the would-be child-victim: "many of them [child sexual offenders] are brutal people that not only prey on kids but on adults too. Be safe" (Comments, Video 8); "I knew from the beginning that [he] was fucked up. He has other crimes I bet.... Definitely not safe around ANYONE. Lock him up" (Comments, Video 11); and "man. I'd record everything too. He's definitely crazy. No ones safe around him. Keep recording and keep safe guys" (Comments, Video 4). "You guys have been attacked before? I can't believe these creeps. going after every fucking person. def not good" (Comments, Video 14).

Child Sexual Offenders as Condemnable Villains

When responding to Creep Catchers' activities on their online posts, the witnesses frequently discussed the purported child sexual offender, or child sexual offenders in general, as intrinsically bad people. The witnesses demeaned the individual, typically referring to the individual in the same manner as Creep Catchers had in their initial assessment of the individual and their actions. For example, witnesses consistently reiterated the terms Creep Catchers used

when addressing ‘catches:’ “pedo;” “creep;” “goofs;” “dirt bags” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 4, 6, 11, 16), indicating the witnesses’ agreement with Creep Catchers regarding the perpetrator.

The witnesses also provided their opinions on child sexual offenders more generally and the shared value of child sexual offenders as unacceptable in society. Witnesses also made it clear that child sexual offenders are terrible people and are deserving of dehumanising treatment. As one witness noted, “I can’t stand people who prey on children” (Comments, Video 16) indicating their low opinion of the purported child sexual offender was a direct result of the individual allegedly harming children. This comment was echoed by a number of other witnesses (Comments, Video 1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16). The witnesses also considered the alleged child sexual offenders as “the worst type of criminal” (Comments, Video 16). child sexual offenders were always considered to be in the wrong, as well: “you can tell the truth now and admit you’re wrong” (Comments, Video 13); “you’re so wrong ... that’s [child sexual offending’s] not okay ever” (Comments, Video 13); “you’re one of those sick fucks that tried to meet a child to fuck... that’s gross. So bad” (Comments, Video 16); “lol his excuses! That’s never okay [...] it doesn’t matter who you are or your excuses it’s wrong... people need to quit defending pieces of shit like this. He deserves all the humiliation he’s getting” (Comments, Video 12).

When specific personal information was known about the individual, the witnesses further cast them as horrible people, while tying their commentary to the witness’s own experiences with the individual. As an illustration of this, when Creep Catchers revealed that one individual was a teacher, witnesses who allegedly knew the individual in their personal capacity responded: “OMFG! That was [my teacher] glad they got him, sick perv” (Comments, Video 12); “pretty disgusting pervert... I always knew he was a creep” (Comments, Video 12); “horrible man. Creep. Can’t believe he was my teacher” (Comments, Video 12).

The perspective of child sexual offenders and sexual offences against children as inappropriate was found across all witnesses, whether they agreed or disagreed with Creep Catchers' vigilantism. Individuals who opposed Creep Catchers always made it clear that child sexual offenders were unacceptable in society, for example, when questioning Creep Catchers' motives, one witness noted that they "believe paedophiles are horrible people. They do such horrific things, but I just wonder about Creep Catchers, you know?" (Comments, Video 1). This was reiterated by other witnesses who called Creep Catchers tactics, legitimacy, and justifications into question: "honestly, if the guy is guilty that's horrific. Child sexual offenders are disgusting and should be locked away. But does Creep Catchers' messages that are all blued out¹ show he's guilty of anything?" (Comments, Video 14); "I think it's horrible that these kinds of people get to live in society around kids... they're horrible. I don't think that Creep Catchers should [deal with] them. That's what we have the police for, right?" (Comments, Video 4); "horrible horrible people. I know from experience. Creep Catchers doesn't really stop them tho" (Comments, Video 6).

Expressing contempt towards individuals was a frequently evidenced in witness commentary. Individuals targeted by Creep Catchers were rarely referred to by name; instead, as noted above, they were consistently referred to as creeps, pedos, goofs, and paedophiles among other names linking the individuals to sexual offences against children. These name-calling choices categorised the denounced and served to differentiate between the witnesses, Creep Catchers, and the "other than normal" denounced individuals. This name-calling also directly linked the individual to the purported offence, essentially constructing the denounced as the

¹ In Creep Catchers posts that included their conversations with purported paedophiles, the group covered up information in the conversation using blue marks. Creep Catchers said they were hiding personal information, but the audience did not necessarily agree. The audience referred to the hidden information as "blued out" content.

embodiment of their purported offences. In particular, this linking tied the offender to the fact they transgressed moral values (Loseke, 2003a). Through consistent labelling using terminology that links the individual and sex-related offences, the witnesses reiterated their agreement with Creep Catchers' proposition that sexual offences against children are always wrong. The purported child sexual offenders, then, were othered (Young, 2009) from both the witnesses and Creep Catchers in alignment with their mutually shared values. Values, morals, and the like are culturally created and reinforced and evoke emotional responses when transgressed (Loseke, 2003a). It is this transgression, perceived or not, that evoked the emotional response of moral outrage from the witnesses, legitimising Creep Catchers' position of pseudo-official by further othering the purported child sexual offenders. By distancing themselves from the alleged child sexual offenders, the witnesses aligned themselves with Creep Catchers' values and their position as protector and keeper of the community values.

While not as common as name-calling, mocking and racial slurs also denoted the witnesses' contempt for the denounced. Witnesses often used racist and dehumanising language, including a variety of targeted racial slurs, to mock individuals in videos who appeared to be racialised. Witnesses who commented on the videos of racialised individuals often adopted the same racist slurs as Creep Catchers in their responses to the denounced individuals. As well, witnesses continued exhibiting their racialised contempt by suggesting that sexual interference with children is common among other cultures. In particular, witnesses tied the offence specifically to the individual's perceived or assumed race, ethnicity, or culture. For example, one witness noted that they were not "surprised [he] did this [allegedly attempting to meet with a child]... brown people do this all the time where they're from" (Comments, Video 13). Other witnesses made similar comments, such as noting that a particular racialised group "sleep with

kids all the time. It's horrible" (Comments, Video 13), and "I knew he was a [racial slur] before I even saw him. this is just what they do" (Comments, Video 1). Further, purported child sexual offenders who exhibited any traits that the witnesses interpreted as indicative of intellectual or physical disabilities resulted in mockery. For example, one purported child sexual offenders exhibited a stutter when speaking with Creep Catchers. Multiple witnesses mocked the individual, including one comment that suggested the individual was "messed in the head and needed fixing" (Comments, Video 9). When commenting on another video, in which Creep Catchers' themselves revealed the denounced individual was intellectually disabled, witnesses again tied the individual's alleged transgression to their assumed disability: "he's an adult and shouldn't be meeting a kid... cause his brain is fucked he doesn't get it. he needs to be put away" (Comments, Video 3); "he's obviously sick he cant even speak right. jeez. no wonder he's here" (Comments, Video 3).

These constructions invoke racist and ableist cultural themes. This theme suggests that individuals who are not white deserve lesser treatment, exist lower on the social hierarchy, and are inherently 'bad.' Similarly, constructed cultural values surrounding individuals with intellectual or physical disabilities suggest that they are also deserving of lesser treatment, are abnormal, and lesser people (Coles & Scior, 2012; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Ferra, Burns & Mills, 2015; Lu, Webber, Romero & Chirino, 2018; Scior, Addai-Davis, Kenyon & Sheridan, 2013; Scior, Kan, McLoughlin & Sheridan, 2010; Shifrer, 2013). Essentially, these cultural themes allow witnesses to devalue racialised and disabled individuals in comparison to their 'normal' counterparts (Akintunde, 1999; Bell, Funk, Joshi & Valdivia, 2016; Guess, 2006; Loseke, 2003a; Shifrer, 2013). The witnesses adhere to these social and moral values when expressing contempt towards the purported child sexual offenders. In adhering to these values, the witnesses support

Creep Catchers' assertions that the child sexual offenders deserve condemnation (through denunciation). The witnesses distanced themselves from the denounced "other" by asserting that the denounced individual is "bad" and "abnormal" and engaging in moral outrage responses to the purported child sexual offenders who transgressed culturally held values.

Stranger Danger: Real and Pressing

As stated in a number of their videos and web posts, Creep Catchers' motivations were to protect children and to "show that creeps are everywhere waiting to meet kids" (Video 3; see also, Videos 1, 4, 5, 16, 18). The organisation made it clear that "you never know who the creeps are... it could be your neighbour, or it could be someone you've never met talking to your kids. Putting ideas in their heads" (Video 5), detailing the danger of the "unknown" individual, or stranger, targeting children. The witnesses' understanding and descriptions of child sexual offenders aligned with Creep Catchers' descriptions. Generally speaking, the witnesses' understanding of child sexual offenders revolved around conceptions of stranger danger as a real and pressing problem in their communities. When discussing who child sexual offenders were, witnesses reiterated Creep Catchers' understandings. Witnesses explained they "never let [their] kids online without knowing what they're doing [as] theres too many creeps hiding online preying on kids" (Comments, Video 13). A number of other witnesses reiterated this sentiment, sharing stories of strangers approaching or harming children through online activities/communications. For example, "I know of so many kids who were spoken to by strangers... it's crazy!" (Comments, Video 5); "everytime I hear of an abduction, its always someone the kid didnt really know. how do we stop this and protect our kids? Thanks creep catchers" (Comments, Video 16); "kids don't know who they're talking to. These strangers give them thoughts, just like creep catchers said... they use the kids. They need to be locked up"

(Comments, Video 15). The terms witnesses used in describing purported child sexual offenders also indicated an acknowledgement of fear of strangers in their own communities: “they lurk around here preying on kids right here” (Comments, Video 4); “it’s not safe here with those guys hidden around us” (Comments, Video 10); “you really don’t know what your anyone around you is up to behind their doors, right creep catchers?” (Comments, Video 13). Some witnesses quoted statistics about child predators and their victims, providing number estimates or detailing that they knew “of so many” victims (Comments, Video 3), showing their perception of the issue as real and pressing.

Law Enforcement Failing

One final theme that wove its way through the supportive witness commentary regarding Creep Catchers activities and the perpetrator within the status degradation ceremony was the witnesses’ perceptions of local and Canadian law enforcement agencies failing to protect the children in their communities. The witnesses specifically noted “the police don’t do anything. Even when they get told about these creeps” (Comments, Video 3) and that when they “called the police they didn’t even come to ask me what happened. they’re useless” (Comments, Video 1). A number of witnesses referred to the police as “not helpful” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 16, 18); “letting creeps continue [preying]” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 9); and “never there when needed” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 4, 5, 13, 16). A few witnesses also revealed personal experience with law enforcement in times of need: “I had this stuff happen to me when I was younger. The police did nothing. I told them and he’s still out and around” (Comments, Video 3). In response to the perceived failings of law enforcement, the witnesses commended Creep Catchers for their vigilantism activities that “helped stop paedophiles” (Comments, Videos 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16) in their community.

This view of the police is a reiteration of, or an alignment with, Creep Catchers' perceptions of the justice system failing children. These discussions add to the witnesses' fear of strangers, or stranger danger, as they understand their families and/or communities to be first unsafe from strangers, and second unprotected by those whose job it is to protect them. Cultural narratives posit that the role of law enforcement and the rest of the justice system are to protect the community (Agbibo, 2013; Katz, 2015; Tankebe, 2012; Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 2009; Wood & Watson, 2016). However, perceptions of law enforcement legitimacy often rely on judgement of previous conduct of law enforcement (Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014; Hough, 2012; Jackson, Bradford, Stanko & Hohl, 2012; Tankebe, 2012). Where individuals understand law enforcement as previously failing, their perceptions of law enforcement legitimacy and their willingness to work with or support law enforcement is lessened (Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014; Hough, 2012; Jackson, Bradford, Stanko & Hohl, 2012; Tankebe, 2012). Further, studies of vigilantism frequently propose that perceptions of law enforcement illegitimacy and failures are a common reason for the emergence of vigilante groups in communities worldwide (Asfura-Heim & Espach, 2013; Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Goldstein, 2003; Harnischfeger, 2003; Harris, 2001; Neapolitan, 1987; Newby, 2012; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1974; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Tankebe & Asif, 2016). When law enforcement fails, vigilantes feel they must step in to ensure they are safe, and that their community as a whole is safe. It is out of the community itself that vigilantes emerge, then, as a protector. With regards to community acceptance of vigilantism and vigilante justice in relation to law enforcement, acceptance also lies in perceptions of the local justice system (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Harris, 2001; Neapolitan, 1987; Newby, 2012; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1974; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Tankebe & Asif, 2016). Corruption, prior law enforcement failure, and

refusals to help in times of need are commonly attributed reasonings for community members accepting vigilantes and vigilante justice (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Harris, 2001; Neapolitan, 1987; Newby, 2012; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Tankebe & Asif, 2016).

The witnesses perceived their local law enforcement agencies as failing to both protect them in the past and protect them against the current, evident stranger danger epidemic. Creep Catchers constructed the justice system responses to internet CSE as incompetent, rather than one-time mistakes. This evidence of consistent law enforcement failure within the community necessitated Creep Catchers' vigilantism to ensure their community's safety. The necessitation of Creep Catchers' vigilantism legitimised their role as pseudo-officials carrying out degradation ceremonies. If their vigilante action was not warranted, neither was their pseudo-official position. However, justice system failure led to some of the witnesses accepting and supporting Creep Catchers' vigilantism as a method of community protection, bridging the gap between no protection and that of non-state-sanctioned protection through their vigilantism.

Witness Support, Shared Understandings, and Legitimation: Conclusion

Creep Catchers and their witnesses share the cultural values of the inherent innocence and sympathy deserving status of children; child sexual offenders and sexual offences against children as bad; and the real and pressing danger of strangers within their communities. As well, the witnesses assessed law enforcement as incompetent and failing to protect the community from the present danger. Through expounding upon their shared values, and perceiving law enforcement as failing to ensure their safety, the witnesses aided in necessitating Creep Catchers' vigilantism. Through necessitating Creep Catchers actions, the witnesses further aided in legitimising Creep Catchers' role of pseudo-official carrying out degradation ceremonies. Organisations cannot simply argue for or assert their legitimacy in communities, rather external

support is needed to ensure the community understands them and their activities as legitimate (Beetham, 2013; Ivory, 2013; Suchman, 1995). Without the external support, then, legitimacy is only accepted by the organisation itself. With regards to Creep Catchers it is this external witness alignment and agreement with that provides the legitimation of their status of pseudo-official, rather than a provision of formal authority by the state or other authorities.

As noted by Loseke (2003a), though, the response to conditions does not need to include support for, or recognition of, the social problems process and its results by everyone involved. In the case of Creep Catchers and their positioning of self as a pseudo-official, not everyone supported their position or action as vigilantes. Instead, some witnesses actively opposed Creep Catchers activities in the course of their vigilante justice.

Witness' Opposition

For witnesses who opposed Creep Catchers and their activities, their disagreement did not lie in a difference of cultural values surrounding child sexual offenders or law enforcement failure. Rather, witnesses who opposed Creep Catchers did so in relation to their understanding of Creep Catchers as 1) violating the rule of law by engaging in vigilante related activities; and 2) not able to deliver appropriate or effective punishment to the alleged child sexual offenders the organisation targeted. As such, these witnesses did not view vigilantism operating outside of the justice system as a legitimate alternative to dealing with sexual offenders, calling Creep Catchers' legitimacy as an organisation into question.

Creep Catchers Violating Rule of Law

When discussing the legality of Creep Catchers' activities, witnesses commentary fell into two categories: 1) "following someone and taking videos is not illegal" (Comments, Video 2); or 2) "Creep Catchers is entrapping individuals illegally [and they] should really let the police

handle [it]" (Comments, Video 3). The witnesses who argued Creep Catchers' activities were blurring the line of legality frequently questioned why Creep Catchers did not provide the full details of their investigation and/or evidence against the purported child sexual offenders; asserted the investigation and catching child sexual offenders was a job for the police; and argued that Creep Catchers' actions, particularly harassment and entrapment, were illegal.

With regards to questioning legality, the witnesses frequently stated that Creep Catchers' activities constituted entrapment of purported child sexual offenders. When addressing Creep Catchers' use of social media to contact alleged child sexual offenders, one witness succinctly explained "all their ads on craigs list say they're adults, not children" noting that Creep Catchers set out to "entrap" individuals as evidenced in their online personal decoy descriptions (Comments, Video 12). According to witnesses, the alleged child sexual offenders did not set out to meet with children but were rather "looking to talk to adults and Creep Catchers tried to trap them in talking" with children (Comments, Video 5). Many witnesses reiterated this perception: "you guys sure know how to trap people" (Comments, Video 3; see also, Comments Videos 1, 2, 5); and "trying to make a name for yourself through tricking people into talking" (Comments, Video 13). One individual even provided Canadian Criminal Code references when Creep Catchers responded to their initial comment, arguing the vigilantism-entrapment was "illegal": "this is illegal, it's even written section 172 of the criminal code of Canada" (Comments, Video 1); "so you need more evidence that trapping someone is illegal? Only the police can do it. Look at the Criminal Code of Canada. It's there -police only. Look it up" (Comments, Video 1). When not commenting directly on the issue of entrapment, the witnesses also noted that "harassing" (Comments, Videos 1, 4, 10, 16), "following" (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 16), "taking photos [and] videos" (Comments, Video 4; see also, Comments, Videos 1, 10, 16), as well as

“putting [the purported child sexual offender’s] info online” was at best “inappropriate” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 5, 14) and at worst “illegal” (Comments, Videos 1, 3, 4, 5) in their estimation. One individual compared Creep Catchers to the purported child sexual offenders themselves, asserting that they were all “criminals [who] harass [people] and destroy lives” (Comments, Video 6).

Tied to these discussions of illegality, witnesses also discussed Creep Catchers’ activities as “a job for the police,” rather than “vigilantes” (Comments, Video 4; see also, Comments, Videos 1, 5, 8, 10, 15, 16). Witnesses questioned “why [Creep Catchers] does this” followed up with “I can’t believe they don’t even call the police” (Comments, Video 2). Various witnesses were also quick to respond to commentary about Creep Catchers’ “stings,” noting the difference between the same procedures carried out by the police: “unlike Creep Catchers. Police are permitted to do engage people on the internet in regions on the internet such as craigslist in the same manner police enter into bad neighbourhoods for engaging people known for this stuff” (Comments, Video 1). They also noted that law enforcement “have to follow specific rules or regulations [but] creep catchers doesn’t” (Comments, Video 9), and that “police spend YEARS mounting whats called EVIDENCE... and they are trained and build a CASE... this is not building a case this is flat out entrapment” (Comments, Video 1). With regard to law enforcement procedure and Creep Catchers’ activities, witnesses expressed concerns with Creep Catchers’ methods of investigation and evidence gathering and presentation in contrast to those procedures followed by law enforcement. The witnesses noted that police collected “proper evidence” (Comments, Video 15), furthering that the “police [did] real investigations” where Creep Catchers did not (Comments, Video 3). With regards to the larger legal system, Creep Catchers’ commentary indicated their belief in the faultiness of the broader Canadian Justice

System. In response to this perspective, witnesses noted that Creep Catchers' activities wouldn't fix the legal system and caused more harms than benefits: "So the Legal System let you down when you were a kid and you resort to vigilantism to solve it. This isn't the way to fix the legal system. It doesn't help it or change it. It puts innocent people in harm. Yer Stupid Bud!!! (Comments, Video 3); "let the courts do their jobs, you're just letting people get away with this shit" (Comments, Video 1); "here in canada the courts do this. they keep people from doing this stuff and youre not helping it. So let the law do it" (Comments, Video 2).

When speaking about the conversations, or messages, Creep Catchers posted, allegedly between themselves and purported child sexual offenders, the witnesses consistently brought up the point that Creep Catchers did not disclose the full content of these chats and "hid" information from others: "why don't you share don't share all of the convo?" (Comments, Video 16; see also, Comments, Videos 6, 9, 11, 12); "how about giving us the whole messages" (Comments, Video 6); "why won't you share the blued out; Is it really as bad as you say? youre just hiding stuff to make it seem real" (Comments, Video 13). Witnesses expressed concerns that through hiding the messages from public view, Creep Catchers was perhaps falsifying evidence or making the conversations appear a specific way to readers. As such, witnesses suggested Creep Catchers "need to be 100% open to showing unedited transcripts and video proof that can be submitted to the local authorities. Anything less than this is just a complete hack job" and that Creep Catchers "try posting the entire conversation unedited if you really want people to see the truth. This is pisspoor set up amateur hour" (Comments, Video 16).

In response to the perceived falsification of evidence, some witnesses argued that Creep Catchers were really "creep creators [rather than] revealing the truth" (Comments, Video 5), and that "nobody gets arrested charge after all this. cause its all fake. the law cant be involved in

entrapment Noone gets arrested cause its not real ppl!” (Comments, Video 5). Along with the perception of Creep Catchers “creating creeps” (Comments, Video 12), witnesses compared Creep Catchers’ activities to witch hunts. For example, “we need hard plz... Look a “witch”!!!” (Comments, Video 1) and “they seek to entrap people and ruin their families, all in the name of vendetta and witchhunt” (Comments, Video 3).

Not Delivering Effective or Appropriate Punishment

Another aspect of witness commentary tied to Creep Catchers’ legitimacy was witness’ perception of the organisation’s inability to deliver appropriate or effective punishment to the purported child sexual offenders. Interestingly, witnesses’ feelings regarding what punishment was appropriate diverged into two polarised camps. One group of witnesses echoed the classic vigilante stereotype of violent retribution. They argued that child sexual offenders were deserving of physical violence and that Creep Catchers’ failure to deliver this retribution made the endeavour a waste of time. Comments from this group included: “I would very much like to beat him for trying this. It’s disgusting” (Comments, Video 1); “Post all his info so we can deal with him ourselves” (Comments, Video 7); “As a mom I want to rip him apart” (Comments, Video 12); “Wish I could get my hands on him. he certainly wouldn’t be walking away when I was done with him (Comments, Video 16); “Ah mate just kick the fuck out of him, fucking bitch (Comments, Video 11).

The other group of witnesses pointed out Creep Catchers’ failure to have most of their “targets” convicted of a crime. For example, “do these guys actually call the police? Ffs [for fuck’s sake] if not, you need to... just jail them” (Comments, Video 11); “these catches have led to two convictions. Everyone they have caught are still on the street [they’re] not helping children” (Comments, Video 14); and “leave the sting and justice for the cops you friggin

wannabe vigilante moron. they can actually put away those guys” (Comments, Video 10). Comments also included suggesting Creep Catchers was not providing any form of punishment or discussion for individuals attempting to meet with children but were instead pushing them “underground” (Comments, Videos 1, 8, 14). Law enforcement officials noted that their activities interfered with an investigation explaining that Creep Catchers had caused an individual under investigation to leave the community and start over in another community (Woodward, 2017).

Regardless of which camp the dissenting witnesses fell into, their comments made the point that Creep Catchers’ was failing to address the very problem Creep Catchers had accused law enforcement of creating: allowing the alleged child sexual offenders to “get away with” their actions. Witnesses echoed this understanding in further comments: “hey why don’t you have them all arrested? Seems like most of them are allowed to get away with this crap without the police” (Comments, Video 9); “hey buddy you should let the police handle it... You should got the police so he couldn’t get away” (Comments, Video 10); “let the police handle it, it’s not up to citizens. They’ll actually stop them” (Comments, Video 10); “were any charges laid on this guy or is he still running free? if no charges [this is] “pointless” (Comments, Video 15); “see how flawed your approach is, your not getting these people off the street by doing this bullshit, your driving them more underground and allowing them to be more careful the next time around. Your movement is not helping anything. Stop now and let the proper authorities handle this shit” (Comments, Video 14).

Discussion

As noted above, the witnesses presented numerous points surrounding the illegality of Creep Catchers activities, which fall in line with scholarly literature about vigilantism. In studies

of vigilantism, perceptions of vigilantes range from vigilantes as fully accepted and supported to completely opposed and viewed as criminal activity (Asfura-Heim & Espach, 2013; Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Neapolitan, 1987; Newby, 2012; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Tankebe & Asif, 2016). It is not uncommon for community divisions, then, to emerge surrounding vigilante activity (Tankebe, 2011, 2012). Witnesses who opposed Creep Catchers suggest they are violating the rule of law and thus challenging “real” officials (i.e. police officers) in their duties. They also questioned whether CC were deliberately redacting information from their interactions with targeted individuals in order to “create child sexual offenders” and manufacture support for their activities. As well, the witnesses note that Creep Catchers fail to carry out effective or appropriate punishment of the purported child sexual offenders because they do not have the necessary legal authority.

Violating the Rule of Law

When discussing how Creep Catchers violate the rule of law, the witnesses construct Creep Catchers as the issue of concern, undermining Creep Catchers’ claims of justice system failure as necessitating their actions and legitimacy. In constructing Creep Catchers as problematic witnesses take part in social problems work. Cultural narratives surrounding law enforcement legitimacy are not a simple, straightforward issue (Haas, de Keijser & Bruinsma, 2012, 2014; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Instead, law enforcement legitimacy rests in various aspects of law enforcement activity or characteristics, including police lawfulness, fairness in their actions when carrying out their jobs, and the effectiveness of their activities and the sanctions they enforce against offenders (Asfura-Heim & Espach, 2013; Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Tankebe & Asif, 2016; Tankebe, Reisig & Wang, 2016). Should individuals accept and/or support law enforcement and the aforementioned

areas of legitimacy, they are likely to hold law enforcement in high regard and support their presence, and action, within their community (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Tankebe, Reisig & Wang, 2016). Beyond law enforcement legitimacy is the cultural understanding and narrative of law enforcement and the justice system as societal protectors, peacekeepers, and saviours (Hough, 2012; Jackson, Bradford, Stanko & Hohl, 2012; Tankebe, 2012). In this narrative, the various members of the justice system serve their local community and safeguard it from evil. In the witnesses' estimation, Creep Catchers vigilantism transgressed the narrative of law enforcement legitimacy and saviour-ship.

Further to discussions of law enforcement legitimacy are discussions of vigilante legitimacy. Much like responses to law enforcement legitimacy, perceptions of vigilante legitimacy varies – some people accept and support vigilantism, others reject it outright. One aspect integral to vigilantism legitimacy is the perception of failure, corruption, or problematic behaviour of law enforcement or the state as a whole (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Tankebe, 2011, 2012; Tankebe, Reisig & Wang, 2016). Individuals are more likely to accept the legitimacy of vigilantes if they believe that law enforcement and/or the state have failed; citizens then understand vigilantes as taking on responsibilities where others have failed (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Tankebe, 2011, 2012).

In responding to Creep Catchers' activities, witnesses noted that the organisation transgressed the boundaries of cultural understandings of law enforcement and their responsibilities. Instead of leaving criminal transgressions for the state to deal with, Creep Catchers dealt with them through their vigilante justice activities. The witnesses perceived that Creep Catchers overstepped these legal boundaries, viewing this as a larger problem than law enforcement failure to address the issue of internet CSE. In this way, the witnesses constructed

Creep Catchers' vigilantism, and thereby their role as pseudo-official, as illegitimate due to their lack of formal official role and their overstepping into areas of justice system responsibility.

Tied to this discussion of overstepping boundaries and taking on responsibilities that should be left to law enforcement officials is witness discussions of Creep Catchers' direct interference with law enforcement investigations. The witnesses noted that Creep Catchers' vigilantism prevented the "real" law enforcement agencies from catching the alleged child sexual offenders. This is different from the perception of Creep Catchers overstepping in their vigilantism, and suggests that witnesses perceived Creep Catchers as interfering with and jeopardising ongoing law enforcement investigations, whether by alerting their "targets" to the potential of being caught, thus leading them to be more cautious and difficult to catch or by violating their due process rights and thus making prosecution difficult or impossible. Rather than providing the benefit of public safety and security as Creep Catchers asserted, the witnesses claimed that Creep Catchers' activities had resulted in child sexual offender(s) escaping punishment and remaining within communities able to continue their criminal offences. This alignment and commentary aids in constructing Creep Catchers as illegitimate by identifying the organisation's failures; specifically, their failure to do the one thing they set out to do. Protect the community.

In this discussion of Creep Catchers' violating the rule of law, there is a distinct lack of direct response to Creep Catchers' construction of law enforcement as failing in their duties. The witnesses did not tell Creep Catchers they were wrong about law enforcement failures, nor did they openly state that law enforcement were successful in protecting the community. Instead, as shown above, the witnesses respond by constructing Creep Catchers as the problem. This construction rests on the witnesses' view that the only acceptable punishment is punishment

handed out by the justice system. This is apparent in their insistence that Creep Catchers inform the police. These statements indicate a commitment to the values of due process and the rule of law. Since Creep Catchers can only provide informal denunciation and, in doing so, alert their “targets” to the possibility of being arrested while also making prosecution more difficult by violating their due process rights, Creep Catchers are not viewed as a solution to the problem. This is not to say that these witnesses perceive law enforcement and the justice system as wholly unflinching or perfect, but rather that they hold Creep Catchers as the issue as opposed to the organisation’s constructions of law enforcement dichotomised as ‘bad’ alongside the individuals they target.

Creating, not Catching, Child Sexual Offenders

Where Creep Catchers assert they are the response to the problem of child sexual offenders in their communities, individuals who oppose Creep Catchers disagree with this assessment. These witnesses instead suggest that Creep Catchers is the real problem, in a similar manner to their construction of the organisation as such in relation to their violating the rule of law. There is an important distinction in that the witnesses do not disagree with cultural narratives surrounding sexual offences against children as evil (Best, 1990) but rather that they perceive Creep Catchers’ activities as misleading. In particular, the witnesses imply that Creep Catchers are “creating” child sexual offenders to denounce by entrapping innocent individuals. The lack of clear evidence sharing and the sting operation tactics construct the individuals they target as child sexual offenders instead of finding and punishing “real child sexual offenders”. In this manner, the witnesses problematise Creep Catchers and the sting operations they engage in.

In problematising the organisation, the witnesses highlight how Creep Catchers is unable to effectively deliver on their promises; namely, revealing the ‘true identity’ of the individuals

they target on as part of community protection. The witnesses do not agree with Creep Catchers' revelation in their role of denouncer, instead, suggesting the revelation is false and undermining Creep Catchers' attempts to garner legitimacy. In denying Creep Catchers revelations, the witnesses effectively position Creep Catchers' as illegitimate in their role of denouncer as they are not revealing an identity but rather creating one.

Unable to Deliver Effective Punishment

Another common refrain from witnesses was Creep Catchers' inability to punish purported child sexual offenders for their offences. Specifically, witnesses noted Creep Catchers was unable to either mete out physical violence or ensure the individual was imprisoned for their actions. Further, witnesses commented that Creep Catchers' sting operations served to push alleged child sexual offenders underground in an effort to evade detection. This discussion of Creep Catchers' inability to punish is different from other vigilante groups who mete out physical violence to the individuals they target. While physical violence can diminish support for vigilantism, it also shows that vigilantes were actually dealing with the individual and/or issue they focused on (Tankebe, 2011, 2012). Traditionally, vigilantes engaged solely in physical violence as punishment for transgressions (Abrahams, 1998; Brown, 1975; Johnson, 1992, 1996; Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976; Smallridge et al., 2016; Tuovinen & Roning, 2007) and while this has changed, punishment remains a consistent part of vigilantism. The modern punishments, primarily involving shaming and/or humiliating transgressors, may be perceived as weak when compared to traditional forms of vigilantism (Tankebe, 2012). Witnesses also levelled the perception of Creep Catchers' punishments as 'weak' against the justice system, a common narrative especially in cases of offences against children (Best, 1990). As such, there are concerns around both justice system- and vigilante-effected punishment for transgressions.

Raising these concerns challenges the legitimacy of vigilantes and the justice system. If either group is unable to effectively punish transgressors, then the question rises as to whether or not they are truly responding to transgressions properly.

The desire for strong punishments is rooted in a cultural understanding of children's innocence and their deserving protection from wrongdoers. It is well established that the public feels that individuals who harm children in their offences are deserving of harsh punishments for their actions (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Best, 1990). Offenders whose offences are sexual in nature, thus violating children's innocence, are even more so deserving of increasingly harsh punishments (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Best, 1990). With regard to Creep Catchers activities the witnesses suggest that they are failing to address in full the transgression of sexual offences against children with the attention it deserves. The witnesses assert that the alleged child sexual offenders are deserving of harsher punishment, in line with cultural values of innocent children, and Creep Catchers, in failing to do so, are unable to effectively or appropriately punish offenders. In questioning Creep Catchers' effectiveness in delivering punishments, the witnesses also question Creep Catchers' attempts to gain the position of pseudo-official. Much like the witnesses' questioning in the preceding section, the witnesses question the organisation's attempts to gain legitimacy in relation to their lack of effective punishment. The justice system is understood as carrying out and enforcing effective punishments, primarily through imprisoning the offenders, in contrast, however, Creep Catchers is understood as failing to do so. Thus, their attempts to gain legitimacy are called into question, and witnesses who oppose Creep Catchers' activities also oppose the organisations legitimacy as pseudo-officials carrying out degradation ceremonies.

Witness Opposition, Violating Rule of Law, Creating Child Sexual Offenders, and Ineffective Punishments: Conclusion

In discussing witness opposition to Creep Catchers activities, this chapter addressed three main witness' criticisms. Namely, Creep Catchers violating the rule of law through their vigilante justice, creating and not catching child sexual offenders, and being unable to deliver effective or appropriate punishment to transgressors. In noting these areas of opposition, the witnesses question Creep Catchers legitimacy as they are constructed as unable to effectively denounce individuals, as transgressing cultural values regarding the justice system as well as the deserved protection of children, and are creating a problem that does not exist to the magnitude they suggest it does. In expounding upon these concerns, the witnesses call into question Creep Catchers' legitimacy as a denouncer as they are unable to fulfil their role to the required measure.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the two streams of witness response to Creep Catchers vigilantism: support and opposition. In doing so, I addressed how the witnesses both legitimise and oppose Creep Catchers' vigilantism. First, I explored witness's legitimisation of Creep Catchers' role as a pseudo-official by discussing shared values between the witnesses and Creep Catchers as well as perceptions about the imminent and real threat of strangers. Through the two groups' value alignment, some witnesses further Creep Catchers' attempts to gain legitimacy in their vigilante justice activities. Notably, the witnesses serve to legitimise Creep Catchers through their belief in a common enemy along with their perceptions of a failed justice system reaction to said enemy. Second, I explored witness opposition to Creep Catchers, focusing on how their opposition aligns with vigilantism literature and also opposes Creep Catchers

legitimacy in their role as a pseudo-official. In particular, I touched upon witness' perceptions of Creep Catchers as violating the rule of law, creating not catching alleged child sexual offenders, and interfering with or challenging 'real' officials in their line of work. Creep Catchers use of the perception of law enforcement and the courts as ineffective as support for their attempts to gain legitimacy as a pseudo-official denouncer. The organisation promoted fear of child sexual offenders and the internet as a tool to facilitate CSE, as well as promoting fear around community safety in expounding on justice system failures. Through constructing the issue of internet CSE as subject to community safety concerns, justice system failures, an innocent, sympathetic victim and evil, scorn deserving offender, Creep Catchers necessitates their activities. As there is divide amongst witnesses as to whether or not Creep Catchers and their activities are legitimate, it was important to address both the ways the witnesses legitimise *and* criticise Creep Catchers' in their position as vigilantes/pseudo-officials. The next chapter concludes this research project, briefly summarising the project's empirical findings, touching upon what gaps in prior research this thesis addressed, the limitations of this study, and also suggesting future areas of research which can build off of this project.

Chapter Six – Conclusion

As illustrated within this thesis, pseudo-officials can carry out degradation ceremonies; however, unlike their formal official counterparts, they must seek legitimacy in order to hold the role of denouncer. This thesis demonstrated the ways pseudo-officials attempt to gain legitimacy in their role as denouncer along with audience response to these actions, using Creep Catchers' vigilantism as a case study. In order to do so, this project explored Creep Catchers' sting-operations via their online postings of video recordings of their meetings with purported child sexual offenders as well as any comments they posted alongside them. This thesis also examined Creep Catchers' audience content – specifically, public online comments responding to Creep Catchers' online postings. Through analysing this content, this project provides insight into the ways Creep Catchers seek to earn the position of pseudo-official, as well as the audience response to Creep Catchers' vigilante justice seeking activities. Prior to outlining this project's contributions, limitations, and potential directions for future research, I will briefly summarise this study's findings.

Review of Findings

Findings in this project fell into two categories: Creep Catchers' attempts to legitimise their position of denouncer and audience response to Creep Catchers, which further separated into supportive or legitimising audience responses and oppositional audience responses. A number of themes evidenced themselves within each of these categories. A summary of these findings are presented in the proceeding sections.

Pseudo-Official Denouncers

The first findings chapter discussed Creep Catchers' position as a pseudo-official denouncer carrying out degradation ceremonies through exploring Creep Catchers' attempts to

legitimise their position of a pseudo-official denouncer. In analysing the data, two overarching themes were evident. The first theme was Creep Catchers' claims of looking out for the public interest through protecting the community. The second theme was Creep Catchers' claims about the justice system, in particular law enforcement, failing in their duties.

Protecting the Community and Law Enforcement Failures. The first theme that arose in analysis was that of denouncers aiming to earn the role of pseudo-officials through asserting they protect the community through their activities. This assertion is important with regards to degradation ceremonies as the denouncer must attend to transgressions that reside in the public realm, rather than denouncing individuals for their own private matters or concerns (Garfinkel, 1956), as in cases of revenge for example. In this way, the denouncer must be a public individual (Garfinkel, 1956). In order to show they protected the community, Creep Catchers constructed grounds (Best, 2008) revealing to their audience that the online sexual exploitation of children is not a minor issue but is rather widespread and relatively unknown to the public. In revealing this information, Creep Catchers asserted they were raising public awareness about online predators as well as letting alleged predators know that they were working to stop them from meeting children.

Another aspect of Creep Catchers' construction of their organisation as protecting the community involved the construction of sympathetic victims and villainous perpetrators (Loseke, 2003a). In particular, Creep Catchers drew upon cultural understandings and values of the innocence of children (Loseke, 2003b). Contrasting this innocence, Creep Catchers' constructed the purported child sexual offenders as villains using the innocence and deserved protection of children (Loseke, 2003b) to support their construction. These two contrasting constructions

dichotomised the victims, who Creep Catchers were protecting, and the alleged child sexual offenders who Creep Catchers targeted in their sting operations and denunciations.

Beyond constructing the would-be child victims and the targets, Creep Catchers also constructed law enforcement and justice systems as failing in their official duties. In constructing the justice system as failing, Creep Catchers fostered fear amongst their audience. Fear is a dominant discourse surrounding children in society (Altheide, 2002; Best, 1990) and garners heightened emotional responses to social problems (Loseke, 2003b). In constructing fear surrounding the issue of online CSE and the failures of the justice system, Creep Catchers indicated to their audience that their children and any children they know are not safe from harms. Specifically, children are not safe because those who are supposed to protect them are not doing so, or not in a position to do so.

In concluding the first empirical chapter, this project touched upon findings related to justifications and legitimacy in relation to vigilantism. Creep Catchers' self-identified as vigilantes and carried out their status degradation ceremonies from this organisational understanding. In particular, Creep Catchers' constructed their vigilantism as a solution to the problem of widespread preying on children, in doing so justifying and legitimising their vigilante-justice activities. This discussion touched upon the differences in legitimacy with relation to vigilantism using physical violence and focusing on law enforcement failures. Vigilantes who involve harsh physical violence in responding to transgressions are often understood as violating social or criminal boundaries (Tankebe, 2012). Creep Catchers responded with no physical violence, which may have led to further legitimation of their denunciation. Their discussion of law enforcement, specifically, failing may have served to

further legitimise their pseudo-official position as vigilantism is more often supported in communities where these failures exist.

Audience Response: Support and Opposition

The second findings chapter focused on audience response to Creep Catchers vigilante justice related activities. In analysing the audience responses, I noted the themes of the audience legitimising Creep Catchers through sharing values with the organisation as well as the audience viewing stranger danger as a real and present threat. Further, the audience responses evidenced opposition to Creep Catchers' attempts to garner legitimacy through asserting Creep Catchers challenged the rule of law and were unable to deliver effective or appropriate punishment.

Support: Legitimacy Through Shared Values. With regards to audience and Creep Catchers sharing values, the preeminent value evidenced in audience discussion was their understandings child sexual offenders and their actions as disgusting. This value was evident in the audience's construction of the would-be victims as innocent, in alignment with Creep Catchers' victim construction. The audience supported Creep Catchers' constructions of victims as innocent and furthered this construction through expounding upon their disgust of child sexual offenders thus touching upon the cultural narrative of the inherent evilness of sexual offenders who harm children (Best, 1990). In this way, the audience contrasted the innocence of children with the evilness of the purported child sexual offenders.

Further to these constructions, the audience also expressed contempt towards the alleged child sexual offenders, othering the denounced and linking them to their purported transgression of moral values (Loseke, 2003a). In doing so, the audience distanced themselves from the denounced, touching upon the inherent lessness of both racialised and physically or mentally disabled individuals in comparison to themselves and Creep Catchers. In othering the denounced

individual, constructing innocent victims and villainous perpetrators, and explicating their disgust with regards to the denounced individual's transgressions, the audience aided in legitimising Creep Catchers' role as denouncer.

Support: Stranger Danger – Real and Pressing. Beyond sharing values with Creep Catchers, the audience also touches on their understanding of the dangers associated with online CSE. Specifically, the audience discussed their belief in the real and present danger of child sexual offenders exploiting children within their communities – either their own children or children they personally knew. Stranger danger specific to sexual offences against children is a longstanding narrative involving fear (Best, 1990). This fear, associated with the innocence of children, is part of the villain construction that Creep Catchers' audience engages in. Specific to this perception of stranger danger as real and pressing is the cultural narrative of the unknown evil individual waiting in the shadows to catch their target (Best, 1990; Chenier, 2011; Stokes, 2009). Through understanding children as innocent and deserving of protection and perceiving evilness as waiting for them in the shadows, the audience understood that not only could children possibly be harmed, but instead that children will be harmed. As such, the audience evidenced support for Creep Catchers in dealing with online CSE. This support for Creep Catchers was linked to the audience's understanding of law enforcement as failing, as well.

Support: Law Enforcement Failing. Creep Catchers first constructed law enforcement and the justice system as a whole failing in their duties to protect the community. The audience furthered this construction through sharing their own personal stories of law enforcement failures that directly impacted them and their community. Through discussing law enforcement as failing to protect, the audience constructed officials as failing in their duties and thus leaving their children unsafe. Therefore, in expanding this construction further to Creep Catchers' initial

points and including their own personal narratives, the audience further legitimised Creep Catchers' position as a pseudo-official.

Opposition: Violating the Rule of Law. In contrast to audience support of Creep Catchers, were audience commentary that opposed Creep Catchers' vigilante justice activities. Importantly, while the audience in this section disagreed with Creep Catchers vigilantism, and thus their legitimacy, the audience did not disagree with the organisation's assessment of the innocence of children and the inappropriateness of online CSE. Rather than focusing on the purported child sexual offenders themselves, then, the oppositional audience focused on Creep Catchers' vigilante related activities. Specifically, the audience discussed their perceptions of Creep Catchers as violating the rule of law through their denunciations.

In these findings, the audience asserted that Creep Catches' sting operations, which involved following individuals while videotaping their activities and entrapping individuals, were illegal. The audience also questioned whether or not Creep Catchers was truly providing the full details of what their sting operations involved, or if the organisation was hiding information to slant audience favour in their direction. In connection to this, these audience members also suggested that Creep Catchers' vigilantism created child sexual offenders rather than catching anyone who was truly targeting children. These audience members held to traditional cultural narratives of the legitimacy of law enforcement and their position as community safeguards. As Creep Catchers' overstepped traditional understandings of law enforcement, the audience suggested that they were, instead, transgressing social or criminal boundaries through their vigilantism. As such, the audience suggested that Creep Catchers was interfering and not letting those whose job it is to protect children (in this case, law enforcement) carry out their duties.

Opposition: Not Delivering Effective or Appropriate Punishment. Further to the audience constructing Creep Catchers as violating the rule of law, audience opposition also noted that Creep Catchers is unable to deliver effective or appropriate punishment. Evident in this discussion is audience understanding of shaming and humiliating (through doxing) as an inappropriate or ineffective response to child sexual offenders and CSE. Specifically, the audience called for harsher punishments which included physical violence and imprisonment. The audience noted that Creep Catchers was unable to imprison purported child sexual offenders and did not engage in acts of physical violence in punishing the alleged offenders. Therefore, the audience constructed Creep Catchers as failing to protect the community through failing to truly punish alleged child sexual offenders for their heinous actions. This construction aligned with understandings of the justice system, as well, failing to truly punish sexual offenders due to limited convictions and short sentences of those convicted of sexual exploitation of children (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). These two areas of audience opposition showed that not all audience members agreed with Creep Catchers' narratives and the constructions they put forth in through their vigilantism and legitimacy seeking activities. As such, these audience members did not legitimise Creep Catchers, and instead focused on their failure to protect through their failures in punishing alleged offenders as well as their challenging of the law through their vigilantism.

Contributions

This research project contributed to both the literature surrounding status degradation ceremonies and literature discussing modern vigilantism, specifically cyber-vigilantism. Both Johnson (1992) and Smallridge, Wagner & Crowl (2016) called for more research into vigilantism, with the latter focusing on a need to address cyber-vigilantism as a new and modern form of vigilantism. This study furthered the literature on vigilantism through not only focusing

on a modern vigilante organisation, but also through addressing cyber-vigilantism in Canada. Currently, cyber-vigilantism in Canada is lacking in scholarly literature, with much focus of vigilantism discussing vigilante organisations or activities in areas in Africa (Adinkrah, 2005; Tankebe, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), Latin America (Asfura-Heim & Espach, 2013; Bunker, 2011; Gitlitz & Rojas, 1983; Goldstein, 2003; Handy, 2004; Horton, 2014; Phillips, 2017; Zizumbo-Colunga, 2010), and the United States (Doty, 2007; Hing, 2001; Longazel, 2012; Shih, 2016). In addressing research gaps related to vigilantism, the study also furthered scholarly literature related to the role roles vigilantes fill in their activities, specifically that of a denouncer.

In the context of their vigilantism, Creep Catchers carries out status degradation ceremonies. Prior status degradation ceremony research focused heavily on formal officials carrying out degradation ceremonies and their effects on the denounced individuals. This research project, however, focused on pseudo-official denouncers carrying out status degradation ceremonies and the ways the denouncer aims to secure legitimacy in their role, as well as the audience response to denouncer activity. As such, this project contributed to literature via addressing pseudo-official legitimacy and audience legitimation or opposition of the pseudo-official role.

Limitations

While this research project contributes to both the areas of vigilantism and status degradation ceremonies in scholarly literature, there are also limitations to the current research. First, the sample size (four Creep Catchers' chapters/locations) is limited. As a result, the perspectives, constructions, and experiences of these four chapters and their audience is not necessarily representative of all Creep Catchers' chapters and all audience members. Second, all of the data used for analysis was limited not only to the four groups, but specific to only data

available through online, public postings. I was unable to capture any data shared in private settings (either online or in person) by Creep Catchers or their audience. As such, this analysis is reflective of Creep Catchers online engagements as well as those of their audience. Notably, news sources and various online postings addressed offline activities or events that Creep Catchers and audience members engaged in, however, any data shared within these settings was inaccessible. As such, the analysis is specific to individuals who exist and participate in online activities and not necessarily reflective of the general population's perceptions and constructions around Creep Catchers and their vigilante justice. As well it is important to note that Creep Catchers may have censored their activities (as audience members commented on numerous occasions) which may limit data that is truly reflective of Creep Catchers' activities, and thus limiting full analyses. Finally, in focusing on vigilantes, this study's findings may not be reflective of other individuals or groups (who are not vigilantes) who attempt to earn legitimacy as denouncers carrying out status degradation ceremonies from other roles.

Directions for Future Research

While limitations exist in this research project, there are still opportunities to carry the current findings into future scholarly analyses. Throughout the course of this research, I was able to ascertain a number of suggestions for future research, which aligned with the findings and limitations noted within this project. The first suggestion for research is a broader study of pseudo-officials attempts to garner legitimacy, beyond solely focusing on vigilantes. Vigilantes are not the only organisations or individuals in society who 1) carry out status degradation ceremonies, and 2) have to gain legitimacy in an effort to do so. As such, I believe analysing other individuals' or groups' attempts to garner legitimacy as pseudo-officials would be a valuable direction for future research. Additionally, another suggestion for future research is

analysing other forms of vigilantes who garner pseudo-official status through their activities. While a modern form of vigilantism, cyber-vigilantism is not the only type of vigilante activity that exists today. As such, it would be useful to study different forms of vigilantism, including other forms of cyber-vigilantism beyond sting operations, to understand how different methods, activities, and information distribution affect pseudo-official legitimisation. A third and comparative suggestion for future research is to study the audience legitimisation, or lack thereof, of formal officials and pseudo-officials. While formal officials who carry out degradation ceremonies do not necessarily need to legitimise their position as denouncer, audience response to their denunciation may serve to delegitimise their role and question the success of the degradation ceremony as a whole. Comparing audience response in situations of formal official and pseudo-official denunciations allow for in-depth understand of the ways individuals external to organisations impact legitimacy. In doing so, future study could provide an analysis of the ways in which denouncers can lose legitimacy when carrying out degradation ceremonies.

Conclusion

This conclusion provided a brief summary of the findings within this research project, as well as discussing the contributions and limitations evident within the study. Further, this conclusion made a number of recommendations for areas of future research related to the present study and its related topics. Within the findings' summary both Creep Catchers' and the audience's constructions of victims and villains, othering, and responses to law enforcement are addressed. Specifically, these constructions and perceptions were linked to Creep Catchers' legitimacy as a pseudo-official and, contrastingly, opposition to Creep Catchers' position as pseudo-officials and delegitimisation. Both the audience in response to Creep Catchers and the

organisation themselves legitimised their denouncer role as evidenced in the constructions of protecting the community along with law enforcement failure, sharing values, and understanding stranger danger as real and pressing. However, in terms of audience opposition, the audience constructed Creep Catchers' as the transgressors who challenged the rule of law, created rather than caught child sexual offenders, and not delivering effective or appropriate punishment. As such, then, pseudo-officials garnering legitimacy is not as simple as stepping into the role and carrying out denunciations. Rather, it is garnering legitimacy is nuanced and involves various constructions necessitating or opposing denouncer action from both the denouncer themselves and individuals responding to their denunciation.

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