SLENDER MAN PANIC
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The last day of May, 2014, in the sleepy Midwest town of Waukesha Wisconsin, 12-year-old's Morgan Geyser and Annissa Weier were discovered splattered with blood and walking along the interstate after stabbing a girl, they called their friend, 19 times. When asked why, they said that Slender Man, a creepy faceless figure from a website called Something Awful (www.somethingawful.com), made them do it (Blank, 2018). This crime was reported about all over the country, and abroad, by top media sources as well as discussed in blogs around the web. Using the existing research on the phenomenon of "moral panic," my research investigates the extent to which news media reporting and parent responses to Slender Man qualify as a moral panic. To qualify, the mythical creature must be reported about in a way that perpetuates fear in a set of the population that believe the panic to be real (Krinsky, 2013). As my preliminary research indicated that Christian parenting blogs demonstrated a strong response to the Slender Man phenomenon, I will explore the subgenre of Christian parenting blogs to gauge the extent to which Slender Man was considered a real threat by this specific group.

Thus, my primary research questions will include:

- Q1: To what degree do mainstream media portrayals of Slender Man fit the characteristics of a moral panic as defined in the academic research literature?

- Q2: In what ways do Christian parenting blogs echo, extend upon, or reject the moral panic framing of Slender Man in the mainstream media?

Since the emergence of Slender Man, a decade ago, concerns about fake news, disinformation, and the power of visual "memes" to negatively shape society and politics have only grown. Slender Man was a forerunner to these contemporary concerns and can help us understand how we got to this point. More practically, however, whether Slender Man was perpetuated by news media as something parents should actually be afraid of is important. In seeking to protect their children, parents bear the ongoing burden of filtering fact from fiction, legitimate threats from clickbait headlines and sensationalized stories meant to drive advertising revenue for news publishers

Moral Panic & Slender Man: The Current Research

Considering my research question revolves around the character Slender Man I must first define the fictional entity. Trevor Blank's 2018 book, "Slender Man is Coming," explains in detail where the online boogie-man came from. Blank reveals what a creepy pasta is, derived from the words copy and paste because the online stories are shared through copying from one site and pasting to another either verbatim or re-imagined, and gives background on how the spooky figure spawned into life on the pages of the internet by a user named Victor Surge (2018). Blank also goes into detail about the crime which put Slender Man on the media's radar. He discusses what the 12-year-old girls did to their victim, how they told the police Slender Man made them do it, and the pre-teens relationship with creepy pastas including Slender Man (Blank, 2018). This resource gives what I am exploring in my paper background and meaning by putting the main actor, Slender Man, into context with the 2014 stabbing.

The next term to define is moral panic. Alice E. Marwick gives an outline in determining whether a moral panic occurred in her 2008 article, "To Catch a Predator? The Myspace Moral Panic." Her piece discusses the way predators' prey on the weak and vulnerable via the social media platform of MySpace. Though, Marwick draws on multiple resources to establish her own

outline, the similarities between Slender Man and online predators, though one is fictional and one is real, and the use of new technology, like social media, makes Marwick's outline particularly useful.

The resources Marwick used to come up with her moral panic, or what she calls a technopanic, check-list are also a useful source to draw on. The check-list includes concern, hostility, consensus, disproportion, and volatility. For example, *'The Ashgate Research Companion to Moral Panics'* says the second point for something to be considered a moral panic is hostility, which is described in the book as "the public, or a segment of the public, believes that certain parties are engaging in harmful or threatening behavior, and designate them as a folk devil or deviant" (Krinsky, 2013, p. 26). Marwick uses this definition for her own check point number two, also for hostility, but says "'the group is collectively designated as the enemy' and viewed as evil, anti–social, and deviant" (2008, "Is this a moral panic?", list). The language Krinsky uses better aligns with religious blogs literally believing Slender Man is a demon, of the devil, or that the fictional character became possessed by a demon after creation. This specific language may be more useful in my paper, though they are essentially stating the same thing. The chapter's I will specifically be using in "The Ashgate Research Companion to Moral Panics" are Part 1 "The Evolution of the Moral Panic Concept", Part 3 "The Media Panics", and Part 4 "Moral Panics Over Children and Youth."

Given the example above, this could also be true for the book 'Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance' (Gooed et. al. 1994). Marwick uses these two resources, Krinsky and Goode, to create her own framework. Thus, they are valuable in determining if the Slender Man phenomenon is a moral panic or to what degree when evaluating news media coverage and Christian parenting blogs reactions to Slender Man.

Samantha Pegg's 2007 thesis, "Child on child killing: Societal and legal similarities and dissimilarities 1840-1890 and 1950-2000," uses the theoretical frame work of moral panic to discuss the thesis question she presents in her work. The child on child killing phenomenon does not always result in a moral panic, Pegg says (2007). The similarities in this research will be valuable to mine considering the two girls in Wisconsin were children attempting to murder another child.

To further address moral panic in the news media I will use the article, "Moral panic: From sociological concept to the public discourse" (Altheide, 2009). The author discusses moral panic being a form of "social control" (Altheide, 2009, p. 79) and explores how the sociological concept is used in other places besides news, such as op-eds and editorials. The author also comments on moral panic being more prevalent in print.

Another source for background information I will use is the HBO documentary, 'Beware the Slender Man.' This film tells the story of the Slender Man stabbing up until 2016, prior to the final court decision (Brodsky, 2016). The history of Geyser and Weier is demonstrated in this film through interviews with their parents as well as video footage from when they were being questioned by police following the crime (Brodsky, 2016) I most likely won't use the documentary as a reference in my final paper but it is pertinent to me as a researcher on the subject to have the knowledge. Some aspects I may use, such as details about the day the actual crime took place, May 31, 2014, to give context to possible news sources when deciphering main stream media content.

Primary Data

To answer the questions I have presented, I will use articles from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* to identify the role of mainstream media in attempting

to cause a moral panic. I selected these sources because I wanted to represent the U.S. by having news sources from both coasts and a popular third source. I selected the *New York Times* due to its high circulation. I have chosen the *Washington Post* due to the location of the paper being the U.S. capitol and also having relatively high circulation. I selected The *Los Angeles Times* because it was one of the top five most circulated newspapers in the U.S. in 2014 and 2015, according to Statista (2018) and Cision (2018), and complements the east coast's *New York Times*.

I will also be using Christian parenting blogs to determine whether a panic was actually caused in a specific segment of the population. The websites, *These Christian Times*, *Summit Ministries*, *Christian Thought Sandbox*, and *Ted Haggard Blog* are some of the sites on which I have found articles concerning Slender Man and his demonic nature.

Qualitative Research Method

After reading all the blog posts and articles I have collected, disposing of any that are unrelated, I will create an initial codebook. As I do a second, third, and more readings of my research texts I will further define the codes I will be using. Through these codes I will uncover patterns and themes that will determine how well Slender Man fits the framework of moral panic. For example, many of the religious blog posts refer to Slender Man as a demon, thus a code I will be using is "Demon," which is defined as any reference to Slender Man being a demon.

After coding the blog posts and news articles I will be able to draw a conclusion about my research questions.

Conclusion

The Slender Man phenomenon and resulting crime is the precursor of what we are seeing in the world today as people struggle to tell fake from reality online. By gaining a better understanding, within the framework of moral panic, of how the media portrayed this generation's boogie-man and how Christian parents reacted, new insights can be obtained. Continued research can provide a better understanding of how groups of people react to the way the news media reports on subjects that involve viral fictional characters, as fresh creatures crawl off websites into mass media more and more. Slender Man is like the patient zero of popular internet folklore. By examining this fictional being, a foundation of how media reports and specific groups react to these scary stories can be laid.

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