Of Internet born: idolatry, the Slender Man meme, and the feminization of digital spaces

Jessica Maddox

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Jessica Maddox

Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines 96 US and British Commonwealth articles on the 2014 Wisconsin Slender Man stabbing. Using critical textual analysis, this study examined how media took a horror-themed meme from the underbelly of the Internet and curated a moral panic, once the meme was thrust into the international limelight. Because memes are a particular intersection of images and technology, media made sense of this meme-inspired attack in three ways: (1) through an idolatrous tone that played on long-standing Western anxieties over images; (2) by hyper-sensationalizing women's so-called frivolous uses of technology; and (3) by removing blame from the assailants and, in turn, finding the Internet and the Slender Man meme guilty in the court of public opinion. Through this tripartite rhetoric, this study suggests that when media set out to curate a moral panic surrounding images and technology, together, the discourse that emerges is one that feminizes the Internet, turning it into technology-as-mother and image-as-child. This study also suggests this is the case because when women receive macro-level structure equality, micro-level inequities and attempts of control against them increase. Digital and image rhetoric are not exceptions.

In May 2014, Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier lured their classmate into a suburban Wisconsin park and stabbed her 19 times. Once caught, Geyser and Weier admitted to attempting to kill their friend in order to please Slender Man, a fictional, horror-themed Internet meme that they believed to be real. The attack received international media attention for the heinous nature of the crime, the alleged weeks of premeditation, and the girls' young ages. But also at work in coverage of the crime was the critical angle through which newspapers were covering the Internet's role in this attack. Because Slender Man came from the so-called "dark" side of the Internet, media needed to create a representational map that would make this character understood once it was thrust into the international limelight. In doing so, media curated a moral panic.

A similar discourse persisted across newspapers—writers made semiotic choices that reflected the odious nature of the crime, which was facile given the grisly nature of Slender Man. According to Whitney Phillips (2015) in her foundational work on the relationship between Internet trolls and more traditional media outlets, a digital culture's genealogy is

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CONTACT Jessica Maddox ✉ jesslh21@uga.edu

born from, and embedded in, dominant offline institutions and tropes. She elaborates, "specifically many [media] outlets are so eager to present the latest, weirdest, and most sensational story," and the Wisconsin Slender Man stabbing was at the intersection of all three (Phillips 2015, 6). In this coverage, a moral panic was reported in three ways: first, by preying on long-prevailing Western anxieties over images, in what W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) calls "benign outbreaks of a very old malady we might call the 'iconophobia syndrome'" (141). Second, the moral panic circulated around the tenuous relationship that has typically prevailed between women and technology, and how women's uses of technology are often policed or deemed inappropriate (Tom Standage 2014). Finally, mainstream newspapers divvied up blame between not just Geyser and Weier, but also the Internet and Slender Man. This discourse moved beyond simple horror tropes and towards an insistence that Geyser and Weier had been led astray by the Internet and by images—or, specifically, by the Internet-as-image, in the form of a meme.

Moral panics over technology are not new, and moral panics over images are not new. However, what is new in the context of the Slender Man stabbing is a moral panic that intersects images *and* technology. By introducing the technological axis to a moral panic over an image, technological images become different from just an image or just technology—in these previous moral panics, individuals were merely sharing or consuming the object of concern. But with Slender Man, there is now *creation*, sharing, and consumption. Memes, such as Slender Man, require rapid production and constant reproduction—qualities that are predominantly made possible by digital cultures (Limor Shifman 2014). The Slender Man meme and subsequent offline crime form an epicenter in which to examine how images *and* technology contribute to media-curated moral panics.

Moral panics typically involve feminized discourses (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2016). In order to push at the theoretical margins of this Internet-as-image intersection, I examine how the feminized discourses that are typically used in moral panics over both images (Mitchell 2005) and technologies (Justine Cassell and Meg Cramer 2008) are augmented when they are combined. Although discussions of memes and digital cultures can coalesce at the intersections of race, class, and gender (among myriad other isms), this article focuses on gender in order to further expand the feminization similarities in question. The augmentation of such feminized discourses in the Wisconsin stabbing blames Slender Man and the Internet as additional culprits in this crime, and this is done in such a way that the Internet emerges as a gendered female, with Slender Man as her meme-child. Through a textual analysis of English-language texts of the US and British Commonwealth, I explore how such newspapers, directed at specific audiences, construct a version of the Internet and of Internet imagery that is consistent with cultural norms; e.g., images and the Internet can be dangerous, and when combined, they are even more precarious. As such, the representational map of the two that emerges is one that feminizes the Internet, which is done in such a way in order to control and ease cultural anxieties surrounding digital spaces, cultures, and technologies.

Text as a site of production

Critical textual analysis is an apt way to disentangle the feminization of the Internet in news coverage of the Wisconsin Slender Man stabbing, since digital cultures and the mainstream media are not separate or ahistorical, but are conjoined and actively inform one another (Shira Chess and Eric Newsom 2015; Phillips 2015). A search of the term "Slender Man" in

Lexis/Nexis yielded 990 results with an international scope. Articles were then reviewed, and content unrelated to Slender Man in terms of the Wisconsin stabbing was omitted. Similarly, hits pertaining only to either of the words "Slender" or "Man" in isolation were removed, and duplicates were also left out. Duplicates were considered to be repeated content, such as that from the Associated Press—one article was pulled for analysis; subsequent ones were discarded (I do, however, note the reach of the Associated Press and how that contributes to reach). Non-English articles were also exempt, which was a factor in determining the geographic region of analysis as the US and British Commonwealth.

Once this was completed, 96 articles remained, ranging from May 2014 through March 2015 (the time in which a judge heard arguments for the girls to be tried as adults). When I refer to "media" or "mainstream media" within this article, I am referring to these 96 articles that covered the crime, not to assume a monolithic media, but for the sake of semiotic clarity. All 96 articles were solely news coverage consisting of articles in and editorials in print newspapers. The range of print articles and their sources suggest the range and diversity of US and British Commonwealth audiences; evidence came from expected sources, such as those geographically close to the crime like the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, as well as from larger-scale sources such as *The USA Today* and *The New York Times*. Additionally, sources came from outside of the United States, from outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The Belfast Telegraph*, and the Australian *Northern Territory News*. Pursuant to Stuart Hall's instructions for textual analysis, I initially read all articles, followed by a "long preliminary soak" (Stuart Hall 1975, 15). Then, each article was read and reread in ways that privileged analyses of stylistic and semiotic patterns. Following Michelle Phillipov (2013), this type of textual discourse analysis can reveal larger social conditions in indirect and emblematic ways—an appropriate epistemological benefit for untangling the metaphor of feminizing the Internet. The dominant forms made available were ones that curated moral panics around the Internet-as-image. Additionally, they were allegorical forms that further feminized the ideas of panic, images, technology, and the nexus of the three.

The Slender Man in changing technological times

Before discussing contemporary idolatry, moral panics and technology, and the feminization of the Internet, a cursory explanation of the Slender Man meme is crucial in order to understand why *this specific* meme was an integral part of the events in Wisconsin. Slender Man was first created on the Something Awful Internet forum on June 10, 2009 (Chess and Newsom 2015). The man who created Slender Man's image photoshopped an extremely tall, emaciated, faceless, shadowy figure into the backgrounds of otherwise normal-looking photographs of children in public places. The Slender Man became instantly popular, and the figure began appearing in fan fiction, myriad photoshopped images, and various YouTube series (Chess and Newsom 2015). According to Chess and Newsom in their work on Slender Man as Internet mythology:

> In terms of visual representation, the Slender Man is almost always male, tall, and slender. He is almost always depicted in a black suit with a tie. His face tends to be blank, blurred out, or non-descript… The Slender Man's body type often has him hidden in trees and in the woods— the long arms or multiple appendages camouflaging him against the fractal patterns of branches, forcing the audience to look harder to find the location of the lurking character… in general, the Slender Man is a stalker character whose primary interest is taking children. (30)

The ethos of the faceless Slender Man came to stand in for the perceived dangers of the Internet—lurkers, those hidden by anonymity, and those who sought to prey on children.

In shifting cultural and technological times, Slender Man became the perfect villain. According to Shifman (2014), "while memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures" (15). Memes come from and are spread within precise cultural moments, and Slender Man emerges against a backdrop of increasing technological prevalence combined with anxieties over those very phenomena. Technology became much more accessible, though more perplexing, when machination shrank and turned inward (Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis 2013). As such, technology—be it wireless or fiber optic—became more perplexing when one could no longer see pistons pumping or wheels churning. This, combined with a meme's propensity for reproduction of a fixed concept in a new context, made the Slender Man inherently unstable. Chess and Newsom (2015) argue that, in terms of Slender Man, "this lack of completion—the constant potential for evolution—is what makes the Slender Man Myth so powerful" (36). It is important to note that even though creation and participatory culture are crucial to the idea of Slender Man, these were largely ignored in mainstream media coverage of this crime. The meme was not created by users but came from the Internet itself, thereby ignoring participatory culture and privileging a traditional media effects argument.

Therefore, because Slender Man is a nebulous horror character that is housed in an equally nebulous digital space, after Wisconsin, mainstream media paradoxically made the faceless meme the face of the Internet—an irony that is not lost in this examination. It almost makes sense for a faceless character to become the metaphorical face of an entity whose inner workings one cannot see or understand without specialized coding abilities. Thus, in parsing out how to understand and make sense of the Internet and Slender Man after Wisconsin, mainstream newspaper outlets made a representational map that preyed on long-standing ideologies—such as idolatry and technophobia—to be repurposed in new contexts. Therefore, in perpetuating their moral panic discourse, mainstream media participated in (but did not acknowledge) the same habits that are indicative of participatory culture, remix culture, and digital spaces.

Analyzing moral panics, idolatry, and technophobia

Herein, I use the definition of a moral panic provided by Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts (2013), who define a moral panic as follows:

> When the official reaction to a person, group of persons, or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered… [and] when the media representations universally stress "sudden and dramatic" increases… and "novelty"… it is appropriate to speak of the beginning of a *moral panic*. (16; italics in original)

The moral panic that was curated by the media in question after the events in Wisconsin centered on anxieties over images and technology, and their intersection. Textual examples from mainstream media coverage of the Slender Man stabbing are interspersed throughout the following sections, and explained, to further demonstrate how these theoretical phenomena were at work in discursive constructions of this crime.

Contemporary iconophobia and idolatry

In contemporary times, idolatry permeates culture in less obvious, probably less religious ways. It is advantageous and strategic for news texts to use an idolatrous tone when curating an image-based moral panic because, as Mitchell (2005) tells us, images "are a popular political antagonist, because one can take a tough stance on them, and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same" (33). Idolatry and iconophobia are repurposed in a manner befitting digital cultures since they are long-standing reactions to anxieties over images (Mitchell 2005; Susan Sontag 1977). While religion was not a main focus of the idolatry and iconophobia at work in these news articles, subtleties were present. For instance, *The New York Times* writes, "today, you can find shards of the Slender Man myth across the web" (Farhad Manjoo 2014). In regards to Morgan Geyser's diary, *The Guardian* comments, "some [pages] just have an O with an X drawn through it, a Slender Man sigil" (Nicky Woolf 2015). While the concept of the sigil is important in Slender Man's mythology, this fact is omitted from the article's publication, thus further demonstrating how a media effects position was privileged over participatory culture. These words like "shard" and "sigil" invoke distinct imageries related to taken-for-granted assumptions—shards, of violence, and sigil, of religious extremism. Such stocks of meanings are used across myriad articles, thus positioning Slender Man alongside the likes of Satanic rituals and fundamentalism (Leonard Greene 2014; Manjoo 2014; Lindy McDowell 2014; Woolf 2015). Writers accuse Slender Man of having "ensnared" the young girls, in hopes they would join his "cult" in a "bizarre tribute" (Sam Adams and Charlotte Waring 2014; Christopher Bucktin 2014a, 2014b; Greene 2014; Steve Robson 2014). This discourse furthers the religious themes, and by describing the assailants as having been ensnared, readers are provided mental imagery of Slender Man capturing the children inside his literal world wide web.

These phenomena may have their roots in religious principles, but Mitchell (2005) reminds us that even sans religion, iconophobia and idolatry are "based on the belief that images will inevitably take on 'a life of their own' no matter how innocent the purposes of their creators" (16). This idea that Slender Man took on a life of his own and overpowered Geyser and Weier was crucial to mainstream news coverage of this crime. An editorial in *The USA Today* asks, "we live in a culture awash with violence, and then wonder why people act out violently… if images don't affect people, then why the move to restrict cigarette smoking on screen?" ("Violent media to blame in 'Slender Man' case?" 2014). Digital images become antagonists that have encouraged individuals who view them to act out—an unsurprising view when considering contemporary idolatry in tandem with moral panics, as both are concerned with preserving the so-called "moral compass" of society (Banet-Weiser 2016; Mitchell 2005; Lori Reed 2000).

Part of preserving the "moral compass" of society involves differentiating acceptable behaviors from deviant behaviors, and when it comes to idolatry, that is done through the use of the second person. W.J.T. Mitchell (1986) writes:

> The grammar of iconoclasm can, in fact, be conjugated rather straightforwardly around the first, second, and third persons, singular and plural—"I," "You," "We," and "They." "I" am never an idolater because I only worship the true God or my images are merely symbolic forms and I am an enlightened, modern subject who knows better than to worship mere images. "They" are the idolators who must be punished, and their idols destroyed. "You," finally, may or may not be an idolater. If you are one of "Them," you probably are. (19)

At their cores, iconophobia and idolatry are beliefs about the beliefs of another, since an individual may feel that others are susceptible to an image's effects while they are personally exempt. This accusatory nature is seen in several articles, which decree, "If you're an adult… it's likely you've never heard of Slender Man before this week. But if you're a kid, particularly an adolescent, you know" (Buce Vielmetti and Raquel Rutledge 2014). Articles also insist, "Since bad news travels fast, most of you have probably heard about the two young girls…" and "Things you do online, come into the real world and they'll haunt you for the rest of your life" (Michelle Goodman 2014). The second person is a mechanism to accuse one of deviance, and in this way, moral panics and anxieties over images emerge with something in common, e.g., similar linguistic structures. Additionally, the second person becomes a way to brand one as an Other.

Another way the tenets of iconophobia and idolatry emerge in this context is through Othering, since individuals are not accused of being idolaters in the same ways or under the same conditions. The individuals who make up the "someone else" who is accused of believing that images are powerful and alive are typically "primitives, children, the masses, the illiterate, the uncritical, the illogical, the Other" (Mitchell 1986, 113). Otherness is used to assert that Geyser and Weier are deviant individuals who believed an image to be alive, but it is also used to situate Slender Man as Other. Chess and Newsom (2015) argue that "monsters are necessarily Other" since horror relies heavily on binaries to obtain its end narrative goal (41). In order to make sense of this character, Slender Man is discussed in tandem with some of the most famous fictional evils in the fear canon; The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* deadpans, "Writer Stephen King has created some nightmarish characters—Crimson Red, Raggedy Man, Pennywise the clown, leatherheads, and Walking Man. But none is as haunting as Slender Man" (Duane Dudek 2014). The *Hamilton Spectator* reports, "To most, he's fake; Like the Grim Reaper, Jason, Bloody Mary, or any other horror figures shared across youth culture, Slender Man is a boogeyman" (Vielmetti and Rutledge 2014). The Slender Man stabbing is framed to activate one's stock of horror meanings, and the meme emerges as "the internet's own monster" (Dudek 2014). Once again drawing on Chess and Newsom (2015), "the monster functions as a scapegoat in both fictional horror and nonfictional true-crime, where we are able to question the most horrific aspects of human nature" (43). Slender Man becomes such a scapegoat for Geyser and Weier in an idolatrous way that positions the meme as the third culprit in this crime.

In making Slender Man a co-conspirator of the events in Wisconsin, "sensationalized headlines under which these articles appeared gave murderous agency to the character" (Chess and Newsom 2015, 2). In contemporary times, media have a confounding role in Othering since they enjoy fetishizing their "own iconoclastic rhetoric, projecting the very idols [they] claim to be smashing" (Mitchell 1986, 113). While mainstream media know Slender Man is not real, they often write about the meme as if it were alive. He is represented as a living monster, even though coverage repeatedly insists that the meme is only "a work of fiction, created as part of an informal 'create-a-paranormal-image' competition" (Woolf 2015). But where this "work of fiction" (Woolf 2015) was created becomes the meme's habitat, and when *The New York Times* examined Creepypasta (a common Internet forum for Slender Man stories), they referred to the site as one of Slender Man's "primary haunts" (Manjoo 2014). This is indicative of Slender Man lurking just around the corner, once again waiting to ensnare children. Slender Man is given living, breathing agency—not just by children, but by mainstream media—and emerges as a meme of fear and intentional violence.

Technophobia and the Internet-as-image

The New York Times reports that the Slender Man stabbing is "something that could only happen in the internet age," thus emphasizing that if it were not for the Internet, this crime would have never happened (Monica Davey and Steven Yaccino 2014). Because moral panics "highlight the interplay between forces of social reaction and control, the mass media, and certain forms of deviant activity," one can see this crime and its subsequent coverage as a nexus of the ways in which digital cultures and activities become marred as deviant (Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery, and John Fiske 1994, 186). Following Hall et al. (2013), this tension shows how the reaction to Slender Man and the events in Wisconsin was indeed *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered by the meme or digital cultures.

One of the ways in which moral panics over technology work is by presenting the scenario, or object, in question in terms of binary logic. It is advantageous to stress such a dichotomous framework since it compresses the issue, and Charles Ess (2014) argues that this has particularly been the case for technologies: "One is caught between having to reject new technologies… or defending [them] wholesale" (3). One can either think technology to be good, or believe it to be bad—there is no gray, middle ground between these two polar opposite, positivist poles. In this particular media-curated moral panic, the Internet is present as such a piece of deviant technology. Citing local Wisconsin officials, the Slender Man stabbing was referred to as "a wake-up call for parents… [who should] monitor their children's use of the internet… which… can be full of 'dark and wicked things'" (Dudek 2014). Additionally, reporters spoke to right-wing radio host Glenn Beck, who said the events in Wisconsin were "a sign that our culture is deeply sick and on the verge of collapse" (Kyle Mantyla 2014). It is important to note that it is not simply the events in Wisconsin that make culture deeply sick—the Internet played a pivotal role in the crime. The either/or framework presented herein was one that indicated this crime would not have happened had it not been for the existence of digital spaces.

Akin to how idolatry and iconophobia swirl around feminine actions, technophobia does the same. Reed (2000) suggests that "with each new technology, there were hopes of a new world connected across space… while others worried about the change in social behavior—including gender and sexual behavior—that may result from the new forms of communication" (165). This ideology dates as far back as the telegraph, when women were discouraged from using the technology since it was feared that they would not know how to use it correctly, or only use it for frivolous means (Standage 2014). In terms of Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier, feminization was conflated with the infantilization of said panic, demonstrating how their uses of technology were doubly problematic. This can be seen in headlines such as "How Kids Fall Into the Internet's 'Black Hole'"; "LITTLE MONSTERS: Two girls of 12 stab friend 19 times in murder bid to join internet ghost cult"; "Young Monsters: Girls, 12, 'stabbed' pal over Web tale"; and "Slender Man: online viewing can haunt kids" (Bucktin 2014a; Miranda Collette 2014; Greene 2014; "How kids fall into the Internet's 'black hole'" 2014; "Proceedings halted in child stabbing case" 2014). Not only did the girls not know how to use the technology because they were female, they also did not know how to use technology properly because they were young females.

One of the most prevalent fears surrounding women and technology is the idea that technology exists as a powerful, all-encompassing threat to white, middle-class, feminine

purity (Banet-Weiser 2016). This is evident in mainstream media coverage of the Slender Man stabbing, as several articles and anecdotes reference Geyser and Weier's suburban, middle-class upbringing and subsequently prey on those fears. For example, *The Irish Mirror* reports that after the attack, investigators "discovered more than 60 drawings of Slender Man in Geyser's bedroom… many of the sketches included notes such as 'not even safe in your house' and 'he is always here'" (Alex Wellman 2015). While Geyser's chilling words seemingly refer to Slender Man, there is a double entendre at play when considered more broadly in the present social and media context—Slender Man makes one not even safe in one's own house, and he is always watching, because the Internet, Slender Man's access point, is always already inside one's home. This idea is reiterated in *The Northern Territory News*, which reports, "the girls came from good families and their parents were responsible adults who doted on their children" ("Cyclist saves girl's life" 2014). This narrow, nuanced backdrop reifies the dichotomous logic of moral panics, in that the Internet is presented by officials, those local and national alike, as a "cesspool" or a "portal to the dark side" in contrast to suburbia (Davey and Yaccino 2014; Mantyla 2014).

With the increase in access to the Internet, it was largely believed that women and girls would be taken advantage of by online predators (Cassell and Cramer 2008; Giselinde Kuipers 2006; Reed 2000), but presently, the Internet *itself* becomes the predator. As previously noted, earlier moral panics had centered around consumption and sharing, but now, the Slender Man moral panic circulated around consumption, sharing, and creation. This added axis of creation further compounds the notion that women do not know how to use technology "correctly." The *Star Tribune* (2014) reports, "News flash: There are countless websites containing material not suitable for children. Some of them aren't going to be as obvious as a porn site" ("How kids fall into the Internet's 'black hole'" 2014). This indicates that technophobia-based moral panics are now moving past the initial fear of online predators and pornography (Cassell and Cramer 2008) because now there are websites that are murkier and more questionable—sites like Creepypasta, 4chan, Reddit, etc., where the Slender Man mythos evolved and was recreated. This kind of mainstream media writing bolsters fear, the kind of fear that makes "the once cautionary disclaimer, 'It's 10 pm: Do you know where your children are?' seem quaint, even naïve" (Dudek 2014). These textual representations prey on parental fears surrounding technophobia and seem to suggest culture has moved in a darker, wicked direction.

Feminine as a means of control

I have reviewed how moral panics and idolatry, as well as moral panics and technophobia, were aspects of mainstream media coverage of the events in Wisconsin. But now I turn to how idolatry and technophobia intersect in this context, and how the Slender Man meme (or Internet-as-image) compounds and augments both of these concepts. Because of the feminized nature of both idolatry and technophobia, and how moral panics are more often than not curated around the actions of women and girls, feminization as a means of control emerges as a third and powerful theme in the coverage of the Slender Man stabbing. By this, I mean the Internet and Slender Man are feminized in a way that attempts to harness and rein in the uncontrollable and nebulous nature of digital spaces and their contents.

Feminizing something is a common way to control, demean, or belittle it, since feminine values are typically considered "lesser" than masculine ones (Sapna Cheryan, Jessica Schwartz

Cameron, Zach Katagiri, and Benoit Monin 2015). Additionally, men may also face stigma when acting in perceived and so-called feminine ways (Laurie Rudman and Kris Mescher 2013). In the case of the Slender Man stabbing in Wisconsin, the alleged assailants' demographics were crucial to the ways in which a cultural narrative of the crime formed. By highlighting such demographics, Geyser and Weier were always already branded as Other. For instance, they were frequently dubbed "Barbie Butchers," "school girls," and "warped youngsters" (Bucktin 2014a, 2014b; Dan Cutts and John Fahey 2015). While this also further demonstrates the slippages between feminization and infantilization, the stark juxtapositions draw on contemporary Western stocks of meaning (such as a child's toy or the hyper-sexualization of schoolgirls) to make the already horrendous attack seem more shocking. Such juxtapositions are further presented by *The Belfast Telegraph*:

> What is surprising—and disturbing—is that at an age when their peers are idolising boy bands or sports stars, these children and presumably others like them, have become fixated with eerie online illusion. Slender Man is a different direction from One Direction. (McDowell 2014)

Their discourse implies that there are certain (gender-appropriate) images that are acceptable, but an Internet-as-image, like Slender Man, isn't one of them. These are some of the ways in which masculinity is discursively, socially, and ideologically inflated to the detriment of the feminine. It is often in times of uncertainty that these values are in flux (Philip Gould 2001), and therefore the feminine emerges as Other. Femininity, and feminine values, become the common enemy for which the larger social narrative can blame its ills.

Peter Tragos (2009) has argued that the muddled relationship between femininity and Othering is wrapped up in "cultural signs representing a nostalgic desire for the traditional masculine identities" in Western culture (542). Presently, the feminine is on the rise, more visible, and aspects of feminism have permeated culture so widely that they have become viewed as nearly common sense (Angela McRobbie 2008). Sara Konrath, Josephine Au, and Laura Ramsey (2012) found that one sexist byproduct and backlash of this is that as macro-level structural inequities decrease for women, the micro-level aggressions towards them increase. These micro-level aggressions can manifest in many forms, and feminizing something is one such way. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's (2008) famous words that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," thus highlights how the feminine is always constructed (301). Herein, if the Internet is feminized, it was arguably not conceived as such but rather femininity was applied in hindsight. Mainstream media coverage of the Slender Man crime criticized Geyser and Weier for believing Slender Man to be real, but as I have already argued, media fetishized their own iconoclastic and technophobic rhetoric (see Mitchell 1986) to write about Slender Man in a similar way that afforded the character living agency. If the mainstream media feminized the inanimate meme and Internet in order to control it, they did so because they believed there was something that was capable of being controlled.

The common sense narrative that emerged across almost all newspapers examined following the events in Wisconsin is that the Internet and Slender Man led Geyser and Weier astray and convinced them to commit this crime. If something has the power to send two seemingly normal girls awry, it must be an agentic (Mitchell 2005). This agency is given to the Internet and Slender Man through the repeated use of just one word—born. Articles analyzed frequently begin with "Born from the Internet in 2009, Slender Man…" or "we all watched in amazement at the creative process that turned the Slender Man from a prank into a legit story born on the internet" (Erin Richards 2014; Vielmetti and Rutledge 2014).

Questions of life prompt questions of birth, so if the Internet-as-image is alive, it could be possible it was the product of an immaculate conception, or a cloning (as may be the case with reproductions). But images are not immaculately born, they are created—memes are no exception. In speaking of memes as alive, it is noteworthy to consider who does the creating. Memes come from, and are housed in, media (Mitchell 2005). And, the typical life-givers in culture, across almost all organisms, are female.

Therefore it is worth focusing on the idea of the Internet as feminine, with Slender Man being the meme-child that came from the Internet. Patriarchy depends on the power to control, more particularly, "*power over others*, beginning with a woman and her children" (Adrienne Rich 1995, 64). It makes sense that, in a time when women have received macro-level advances, micro-level inequities, such as feminized discursive control, permeate culture in less obvious ways. In contemporary Western culture, when patriarchal ideology is being challenged and has had to give up certain amounts of control over women and their children, it makes sense that it would attempt to wield control over substitute women and children—herein, where the Internet and memes stand in for mother and child. According to Rich (1995):

> The one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense—authority over and control of another—has been motherhood; and even this aspect, as we shall see, has been wrenched and manipulated to male control… What we [have] seen, for centuries, was the hatred of overt strength in women, the definition of strong independent women as freaks of nature, as unsexed, frigid, castrating, perverted, dangerous; the fear of the maternal woman as "controlling," the preference for dependent, malleable, "feminine" women. (67, 70–71)

By describing Slender Man as being born, mainstream media draw on controlling, patriarchal ideology to give the meme not only agency, but life. By hailing that the meme was "born" or marveling at the "amazement at the creative process," Slender Man comes forth from gestation and enters the world.

Towards an understanding of the Internet-as-mother, meme-as-child

Patriarchy fears what it cannot control, whether that consists of women, memes, or the Internet. By discursively feminizing the Internet through the rhetoric that has typically surrounded moral panics over images and moral panics over technology, the Internet becomes submissive. The feminine Internet thus becomes dependent on masculinized creators for content and creation, so when one "goes online" or "enters the Internet," they penetrate the digital space. The aim of this article was to push at the theoretical margins of understanding what it means to feminize the Internet in contemporary times, and what is at stake in this discourse. What has emerged shows that media coverage of the Slender Man stabbing was about more than just moral panics—it was a microcosm in which patriarchy, once again, wielded power over the feminine.

Within this context of a media-curated moral panic, the simple metaphor of "born from the Internet" bears immense theoretical implications. Discursively, it casts deviance on an inanimate entity yet simultaneously anthropomorphizes it. Doing so provides the illusion of control to an uncontrollable situation in two ways. First, the violent situation has already happened. We have become powerless spectators in the aftermath. Second, specifically in terms of the Internet, it provides a sense of control to an entity that many use, but do not fully understand. As previously noted, only a certain number of people in particular

professions have the knowledge necessary to make substantial, structural changes to the Internet. Other individuals have the ability to generate Internet content, but that is entirely different than what it means to generate the Internet itself.

But what does feminizing the Internet have to do with this control? When we speak of a meme as being "born from the Internet," we not only speak of idolatry in an ontological sense or of the Internet as a harbinger of moral panic; we speak of the Internet as gendered female. Because "to be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited," ascribing femininity can demean the object in question (Donna Haraway 1983, 304). Cultural anxieties over the inward nature of the Internet merge here with sexism, as media in the Slender Man stabbing feminized the Internet in order to disassemble the fiber optics and binary code, and reassemble it as a deviant, life-giving entity.

The feminization of the Internet is not just used to help make sense of and wield control in a media-curated moral panic; these micro-level discursive choices to feminize the Internet speak to a larger cultural anxiety regarding digital spaces and cultures. It is necessary to feminize the Internet, turn her into a mother, and feminize her meme-children because it provides a sense of power over a technology that is not fully understood. Rich (1995) argues that the depth of patriarchal power is difficult to grasp "because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it. It is diffuse and concrete; symbolic and literal" (57–58). The metaphor "born from the Internet" does not just reveal, vis-à-vis symbolism, where a meme like Slender Man comes from. It perverts said symbolism with literal undertones, implying that the Internet, like most other feminine things, is deviant and able to be controlled (Mitchell 2005; Rich 1995; Haraway 1983).

Such a desire to feminize the Internet, and subsequently control it, is a symptom of larger Western cultural shifts and anxieties that occur when macro-level inequities decrease and micro-level inequities increase. Additionally, such desires take place when hegemony fears losing power to an inanimate entity, like the Internet. By anthropomorphizing the power-challenger in question, one can do to it what has typically been done to those outside the heterosexual, cisgender, white, able-bodied, Christian male. Because the moral compass of society typically points towards such a masculine typology, the feminine emerges as deviant and Other.

The concept of the Internet as a living feminized entity is worthy of future study. There are more metaphors that have become part of the digital-era lexicon that seem to provide the inanimate technological phenomenon with agency. For instance, after Kim Kardashian famously "broke the internet" in a 2013 *Paper Magazine* cover, the phrase "breaking the internet" became a neologism (Amanda Fortini 2014). If the Internet is alive, what does it mean to break it? Additionally, does the concept of the Internet as feminine and alive only exist in a moral panic? Is it discursively and strategically advantageous to align the Internet with different personae in other situations? These limitations to this current study are worth examining in future research.

This idea of the Internet as mother, and the meme as her child, prompts consideration as to whether or not this is some kind of specifically digital, materialistic turn. Regardless, it does show that something fundamentally different has arrived in visual studies, cultural studies, and Internet studies; there are theoretical implications of anthropomorphizing the Internet that permeate research. As shown from the analysis of this media coverage of the Slender Man stabbing, changing cultural and technological climates prompt a retrograde approach in the form of subtle, patriarchal dominance to make sense of, and control, the

inanimate. The digital image, the meme, the Internet-as-image, the meme-child of the Internet—these may be the new norms of digital, visual culture. It remains unsettling—though unsurprising—that the mainstream media examined herein have reverted to an older normal of patriarchal power to make sense of such a turn.

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Notes on contributor

Jessica Maddox is a PhD student at the University of Georgia, studying the intersection of popular culture, visual communication, and digital cultures. She has a BA in English and Sociology from the University of Georgia and an MA in Mass Media Arts from the University of Georgia. She has worked in public relations and social media strategy for over six years. E-mail: jessLH21@uga.edu

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