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# Online Public Denunciation: A Preliminary Inquiry on the Experience of those who Call-Out on Social Media

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## Abstract

Online public denunciations, colloquially referred to as call-outs, have become a prevalent way to expose perceived moral and social wrongdoing in our society. Posting a denunciation online welcomes debate on the *in situ* incident, the participants, preferred outcomes, and the morality of exposure - creating additional issues and embroiling the poster. Research on this phenomenon has focused on public figures, celebrities, or otherwise viral incidents, and despite the prevalence of social media call-outs, little is known about the experiences of those who initiate them. This preliminary study uses a phenomenological lens to understand the desires, experience, and outcomes for those who post initial denunciations of community members online. Believing that call-outs happen because of some kind of *in situ* conflict, where disparate values, norms, ideas, experiences or perceptions about a situation shape the trajectory of the outcome, a conflict theory lens is used to examine this phenomenon. The experience of eight Minneapolis and St. Paul residents who posted initial denunciations that called-out community members is explored. Findings indicate the proximity to the *in situ* incident impacts the experience of the person who posted the call-out. Other salient findings include the participants' needs not being met, surprise with the way the call-out played out, and that social media was not a platform that supported reconciliation or healing. The implication of this study is greater depth of understanding of online public denunciation as a tool for conflict intervention from the perspective of those who initiate call-outs.

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In the following study I explore community-based call-outs from a phenomenological perspective. For the scope of this work, the term community refers to people who are in some kind of relationship in the physical world and have some level of interdependence (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). Call-outs, which function as a way to expose actual or perceived social or moral wrongdoing via denunciation and public shaming, have gained mainstream popularity in the last decade (Romano, 2020). Literature on this topic focuses on celebrities, public figures, or otherwise viral social media posts (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Haugh, 2022; Loveluck, 2019; Marie, 2020; Muir et al., 2022; Ronson, 2015; Tandoc et al., 2022). Call-outs that initiate within communities have not been studied.

Despite the prevalence of online public denunciation (OPD), little is known about the impetus to post and what, if any, outcomes the posters face. Believing that call-outs happen because of some kind of *in situ* conflict (original incident), I've taken a conflict theory lens to examine this phenomenon. For the scope of this paper, conflict theory refers to a way to understand decision making around disparate values, norms, ideas, experiences, or perceptions about a situation and how they shape the trajectory of the situation (Deutsch, 1973). With that lens, the decision making of the participants, the influence of the social media audience, and the wishes for those who posted private incidents to a public platform are all factors contributing to the curious unfolding of conflict online. The purpose of this study is to explore what social, behavioral, and moral considerations one makes when choosing to denounce a community member on social media, what their experience was throughout the process, and what outcomes they faced.

Public shaming literature uses a variety of terms to label people who behave in perceived socially deviant ways. After considering several alternatives, I use the terms "the accused" and

"the denounced" to refer to the subjects of the participants' posts. These terms surfaced as the most relevant to the situation and least problematic.

In the following, I provide a brief history on the popularization of call-outs, define cancel culture, explain the function and impact of public shaming, and describe the features of social media that augment problems. My literature review will highlight original research done in the online public shaming field and identify gaps that my research study will attempt to answer. I will then explain the theoretical frameworks "wicked problems" and transformational conflict theory, which guide my approach to understanding my data. Then I will explain my methods, share my findings, and explain their significance. Finally, I will explain the limitations of my study and make recommendations for future research.

### Statement of the Problem

Social media platforms are a welcome environment for self-expression, information sharing, and a way to control one's personal narrative in a way that has not been possible offline (Hoffman & Novak, 2014). While online, people engage in ways that are more disinhibited than in the physical world (Suler, 2004). These concepts, ease in cultivating one's own self-expression in a disinhibited way and the belief that one can control their online narrative, provides a foundation that supports exposing personal incidents to these public forums (Hoffman & Novak, 2014; Landert, 2017). Making private situations public is a way to escalate a problem (Deutsch, 1973) and opens the opportunity for an online audience to weigh in on the rightness and wrongness of each facet of the problem (Frobenius & Gerhardt, 2017). In addition to the person who initially posted, respondents are also more disinhibited in how they respond, escalating and expanding the scope of the problem (Kravec, 2007; Suler, 2004).

One of the reasons that private incidents are made public on social media is to denounce the behavior of a person who has transgressed a moral or social norm (Romano, 2020). The act of denouncing a person in this manner is a call-out (Clark, 2020). Terms like online public denunciation, online shaming, and canceling are used in various capacities to describe this phenomenon, but each place emphasis on different parts of the call-out. For example, to denounce someone online is to publicly declare their wrongdoing (Trottier, 2020). To publicly shame someone includes denouncing them, but additionally recognizes the declaration of wrongdoing in light of a social or moral norm violation (Klonick, 2016). Canceling, while often relying on corroborated public denunciation and shaming, also includes loss of resources for the accused; for example, loss of job or de-platforming (Romano, 2020). These methods of exposing private incidents to the public are all ways that call-outs happen on social media.

## Background and Context

The national upswing of cancel culture happened during the mid 2010's after The New Yorker magazine published the article, "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories." This article documented the explicit experiences of several women who were sexually abused by Weinstein (Farrow, 2017). Empowered by the publication of this article, and the legal consequences that followed, victims of sexual assault came forward to denounce other public figures online for similar abuses of power (Smith, 2021).

At this time many individuals were actively connecting on social media to share experiences of abuse at the hands of more powerful people and organizations, effectively calling-out those who harmed them (Romano, 2020). The collective power of digital vigilantism during this time influenced and catalyzed mobility for the lower-, working-, and middle-class communities: those who have historically been disempowered by elites. The use of hashtags

enabled survivors to manifest social power by building stories and sharing narratives through

great distance (Dynel, 2017). This corroboration put pressure on elite figures in an attempt to

foster systemic change. This new era of social media was a powerful reckoning for elite figures

who have historically skirted around the law. It was also an influential cultural moment; society

saw that exposing harm-doers on social media had the potential to shift the priorities for cultural

and social norms (Mishan, 2020; Romano, 2020).

Public figures' power and status continued to be inspected in relation to the pain and

harm they had caused less-resourced people and a great period of accountability transpired. For

example, after years of work setting up programs to help victims of abuse, the founder of the

#MeToo Movement, Tarana Burke, saw the destigmatizing effect of her message go viral.

Twenty-four hours after The New Yorker magazine published Weinstein's exposé the #MeToo

hashtag was used more than 12 million times (Brockes, 2018). This resulted in an "extraordinary

outpouring of pain, and a handful of high-profile men losing their jobs" (para. 2). Due to the

accessibility and prevalence of social media, the phenomenon of call-outs was becoming more

popularized in situations where the power difference between accused and accuser was less

severe.

Social media quickly became a centralized space for exposing any and all perceived

social and moral wrongdoing (Romano, 2021; Wirtschafter, 2021). For example, upon the

emergence of the coronavirus COVID 19 in 2020, social media became a platform that

disseminated both expert organizational level analysis of the coronavirus, amateur opinions of

the pandemic, and was a space to expose and shame people who were not adhering to the newly

established social norms of the pandemic (Wong et al., 2021; Elliot & Lever, 2021).

Additionally, racialized tension grew when police officer Derrick Chauvin murdered George

Floyd, an unarmed non-combative Black citizen, resulting in a national uprising - which was in no small part corroborated through call-outs on social media (Wirtschafter, 2021). Exposing wrongdoing and the perception of wrongdoing on social media platforms was becoming ever more normalized. In Minneapolis and beyond, the uptick in social media posts denouncing community member's bad behavior became more common (brown, 2020; Romano, 2020). These posts shamed perpetrators and often asked others to participate in excluding them from communities (Dernbach, 2023; Lenoch, 2022).

News organizations, social activists, and community thinkers were writing and talking about cancel culture (Mishan, 2020; Romano, 2020; Velasco, 2020). Writer and grower of healing ideas, adrienne maree brown, published the blog post, "Unthinkable Thoughts: Call Out Culture in the Age of Covid-19" that invited more accountability in each moment of conflict as a practice ground for reducing systems of oppression (brown, July 17, 2020). Her blog post framed call-outs as a way to "assuage our fears" in an attempt to feel safer by clarifying an enemy, "a someone outside of ourselves who is to blame, who is guilty, who is the origin of harm" (unthinkable thoughts, para. 47). In her article she gives examples of call-outs that include, "embodying white supremacy in the workplace, for causing repeated or one-time sexual harm, for physical, emotional or digital abuse, for appropriation of ideas and images, for patriarchy, for ableism, for being dishonest, for saying harmful things a decade ago, for doing things that were later understood as harm" (unthinkable thoughts, para. 48). Her blog post went viral and she later adapted it and published it as the book, "We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice" (brown, 2020). Her reflections point towards a perspective of call-outs that perpetrate punishment and stigmatization.

Around the same time, community organizer and facilitator, Tassiana Willis, shared about the value of call-out culture and how to center survivors. Their framing prioritized healing for those who had been physically violated, and most importantly, in exposing abusers as an important step in the healing process (Willis, 2020). In an Instagram video, Willis shared, "I do think it is a necessary step to healing, if the victim feels that's what is necessary." They added, naming the harm publicly as being an additional layer of trauma; a burden that one takes on in an effort to expose their abuser.

The intention in sharing these two perspectives is to illustrate the different ways call-outs are framed and valued. These examples specifically illuminate the varied approaches to the appropriateness and efficacy of exposure and punishment via online call-outs. Yet, these perspectives are opinions and do not come from a place of experience. Of a phenomenological practice, Van Manen (2014) says, "opinions, perceptions, or beliefs are only helpful to the extent that they lead or give access to the lived experiences that lie behind these opinions, perceptions, or beliefs" (p. 300). Knowing this paper takes a phenomenological approach to call-outs, my research is not an attempt to validate or diminish the process, rather, it is an exploration of the experiences of those who initiate call-outs on social media and an attempt to understand the degree to which their needs were met through this process.

**Conflicts and Online Exposure**

Relational conflict, defined as the perceived divergence of interest wherever incompatible opposing goals, claims, beliefs, values, wishes, or feelings occur, is present in both in situ conflicts (Deutsch, 1973) and the problems that arise after exposing a conflict online (Haugh, 2022). Therefore, online public denunciation of perceived moral or social wrongdoing can be understood as a conflict (Barnett Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Conflicts serve many functions (for

example, to enforce social norms) and are at the root of personal and social change. While

disagreement between parties about how things went, should go, or are going are part and parcel

to everyday life, exposing a conflict online escalates the intensity and severity of tactics used in

pursuing party interests (Kravec, 2006-2007). Accordingly, exposing a conflict online welcomes

the goals, claims, beliefs, values, wishes, and feelings of both the participants of the in situ

conflict and the online audience (Tandok et al., 2022).

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and LinkedIn are the main

vehicles for exposing perceived moral or social conflicts (Velasco, 2020). Social media

interconnectivity stimulates constant connectedness within the digital environment, encourages

an always-on digital persona, and champions continuous communication (Hoffman & Novak,

2014). Therefore, OPD on social media platforms is a way to denounce a person's behavior to an

easily accessible and vast audience. The most common iteration of OPD is to expose a moral or

social transgression that was witnessed or experienced, rally community support for the person

harmed, utilize the interconnected web of online commenters to shame the accused, and make

demands (public apology, renounce resources, etc.) in an effort to repair community relations

(Lenoch, 2022). Hence, the ease and interconnectedness of social media platforms facilitate a

straightforward approach to expose a harm-doer.

**Cancel Culture**

Online public denunciation is one aspect of cancel culture and an effective way to

publicize undesirable behavior via public shaming (Velasco, 2020). Cancel culture refers to the

overarching coordinated type of cyber-vigilantism that involves minimizing or removing

resources from people who have inflicted harm on others (Hooks, 2020; Loveluck, 2020). The

attempt to expose those harms is colloquially referred to as a call-out; a practice that was

popularized by low-resourced people to interrupt the power imbalance wielded by public figures and organizations (Clark, 2020). It is a socially constructed cultural practice involving regular and repeated online or media ostracization where the power of community networks attempt to force adherence to social norms. The rhetoric of cancel culture has been so overused in mainstream media that it has nearly become a catch-all phrase for any mental, physical, or emotional harm, abuse, or perceived threat (brown, 2020; Norris, 2021; Velasco, 2020). For example, minor social and moral offenses within communities, such as insensitive jokes, double parking, or coughing in public have also been shamed on social media (Haugh, 2022; Ronson, 2016). Cancellation has since become a mainstream approach to name people who violate social norms in public and private relationships.

The effects of cancel culture have focused on celebrity (Garvey, 2021; Lenoch, 2022), influencers (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021), or viral social media posts (Haugh, 2020; Loveluck, 2020; Ronson, 2016). Cancellation attempts within communities has become more commonplace (brown, 2020; Kovalik, 2021; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Norris, 2021), but little is known about how people choose to engage in the online denunciation of people who are their peers, colleagues, acquaintances, roommates, coworkers, etc.

To reiterate, this phenomenon and these practices were built within, by, and for communities who have been neglected, overlooked, and intentionally marginalized by the dominant culture (Clark 2020; Romano, 2021). The internet, acting as a new public sphere, manifested and proliferated the ability of those who have been 'othered' to collectively unify their voice and strategically hold harm-doers accountable within a system that so often views their pain as negligent (Clark 2020; Trottier, 2020).

**Public Shaming**

Shame is described as a social and interpersonal emotion (Frevert, 2020), as opposed to shaming, which is a regulatory practice (Braithwaite, 1989). To denounce someone publicly may not necessarily intend to use shame as a strategy for behavior change, but, denouncing someone publicly likely induces shame in the accused (Nussbaum, 2004). The ability to experience shame has been seen as a marker of the humanity of our species (Burgess, 1839). To feel shame is to be human. What is considered shameful varies from age to age and culture to culture, yet the experience of shame continues to be a barometer to legitimize one's moral and social humanity (Schneider, 1977). Whether by disgust or embarrassment, it is generally understood to be the felt outcome of having one's human dignity insulted (Klonick, 2016). Shame is the emotional state that is activated when we are made aware that certain norms are valuable, and we have failed to live up to them (Nussbaum, 2004). Even the suspicion that one transgressed a social norm is enough to induce shame and can manifest via internal or external stimulus (Goss, Gilbert, & Allan, 1994). Therefore, shame is both an internal and external barometer of perceived defects and imperfections that sit deep within one's being.

Public shaming is the act of denouncing a perceived deviant in an attempt to mitigate a real or perceived social norm violation (Klonick, 2016). It exposes characteristics, behaviors, or intentions that deviate from certain community norms and the culprit who committed said offense. Klonick (2016) adds that exposing a person for their behavior or choices, done in an effort to uphold social norms, makes public shaming distinct from bullying and harassment.

This practice has been foundational and long practiced in the U.S to protect the morals of communities while punishing perceived deviants (Frevert, 2020). Public shaming was frequent during colonial times via the use of stocks and pillories (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Nussbaum, 2006). Exposing a perceived deviant, understanding that exposure is part of the

punishment, not only serves to influence the future behavior of the deviant but is a lesson to other community members. This consequently reestablishes the value of certain social norms in front of the entire community. Thus, harnessing the ability to use shame against another is a powerful tactic in attempting to control behavior (Kahan, 2006).

Notwithstanding the prevalence of public shaming via private citizens, the morality and effectiveness of shaming as a government sanctioned punitive practice is still under debate (Braithwaite, 1989; Kahan, 2006; Klonick, 2016; Nussbaum, 2006). One of the reasons for this debate is that using shame to control behavior effectively corrupts one facet of humanity that some believe should never be manipulated: dignity (Nussbaum, 2004). Further, using shame to alter the behavior of a perceived deviant must be done in a carefully curated way so they are embraced back into society's good graces, ensuring the marks of shame are not everlasting (Braithwaite, 1989). Kahan (2006) believes that the true detriment of shaming penalties, when the powers that be pick them, is that they are partisan. He goes on to say, "modes of punishments that are equivalent in their power to convey moral disapproval might still convey radically conflicting messages about the nature of the ideal society" (p. 3). Therefore, if shaming sanctions are to be both citizen- and government- approved, they might fare well to be imbued in robust individuality that is shaped by the norms of each community.

Still, the practice of shaming others on online platforms is prevalent (Velasco, 2020). The way people produce and comprehend meaning through language on social media contributes significantly to the way online shaming plays out (Hoffman & Novak, 2012). In the next section I will discuss patterns of behavior that transpire in online spaces and how those behaviors interplay with online shaming.

**Pragmatics of Social Media**

One of the reasons the public convenes on social media is to express their opinions on the outcomes of social and moral controversies (Hoffman & Novak, 2012). Yet, social media platforms do not necessarily facilitate constructive ways for that expression to take place (Hardaker, 2017; Velasco, 2020). Exposing a moral or social transgression online allows participants to debate the morality of exposure, morality of the incident, morality of other commenters, and the ways in which the conflict and the debate should be handled (Haugh, 2022; Klonick, 2016). The ability to engage in conversations with a diverse audience supports discursive conversations, yet many aspects of social media complicate the ways people negotiate conflict online (Suler, 2004). The following section will further illustrate some of those dynamics.

*Collective Consciousness*

Social media allows for a digital public sphere where people can be connected no matter the vast physical distance. Regardless of the physical distance between people and the opportunity for discursive dialogue, engagement on social media tends to be with similarly minded people (Hoffman & Novak, 2012; Velasco, 2020). One of the outcomes of this connection on social media with similarly minded people is a collective consciousness (Velasco, 2020). A collective consciousness forms when an audience of similarly minded individuals is able to filter, collaborate, share, edit, and spread information for and with each other (Meraz, 2009; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Therefore, shaming another online in a space where homophily dominates is likely to manifest an outpouring of additional comments from many similarly minded denouncers.

*Collaborative Narratives*

The ability to reshare, make comments, use hashtags, and craft stories over vast distances enables the accounts of events to be crafted by multiple people. Ahuja and Kerketta (2021) describe the influence of social media on public narratives as something that has never been possible before. Clark (2020) writes that for so long social elites within the arts, media, business, and politics were insulated from the desires of those deemed 'other' and effectively reinforced their own insular narratives. This insulation from a discursive dialogue about access, equity, and justice is no longer possible in the multicultural collective narrative that is crafted in online spaces. Mueller (2021) describes the former gatekeepers of 'truth' as no longer wielding exclusive power over narratives. Intersectional, multidimensional, and less restricted methods of participating in online discourse equip people to execute digital vigilantisms for all participants on and off social media (Trottier, 2020; Tynes et al, 2012). The contributions by those of all social classes to craft collaborative narratives is shaped by social media platforms.

*Nonlinear Narratives*

The expanding capabilities of social media allow narratives to be crafted and viewed nonlinearly. Viewing posts from multiple people or in order of most recently posted, as opposed to chronologically first to last, allows the timeline and narrative of the reader to be nonlinear (Presswood, 2017). This notion is further exacerbated when content or events are read through the use of hashtags. An entire narrative can be read backwards or intermixed with community comments, making the storyline more complex, meta, and fantastical. This organizational logic differs wildly from the mainstream news feed, which tends to be linear, adhering to the ideological beliefs of the news network. Nonlinear narratives influence audience participation in that they may view an online conflict at any point in its construction, shaping their understanding

of the story. Also, witnessing the narrative unfold in complex dynamic ways alters one's

perception of the incident (Tandoc et al., 2022).

### Cyber Panopticon

Presswood (2017) uses the term cyber panopticon to describe the broad deep inclination

and ability of all users to monitor the misdeeds of fellow individuals. It is a phenomenon in and

of itself to participate in the constant hypervigilant surveillance of both public and private figures

(Staples, 2014). Depending on the interconnectedness of a social media user, along with the

presentation and power behind their post, many may rally with them. Rallying can look like

reposting that situation, making comments on that feed, sending direct messages to others, or

making an original post reflecting on that main narrative (Placencia & Lower, 2017). Therefore,

when one person accuses another of a moral transgression it is par for the course for the cyber

panopticon to heed that call and participate further. Whether or not the original poster continues

to participate in online shaming, and in what ways, is not known.

### Decontextualizing

One of the potential detriments to resolving conflicts online is that issues can become

magnified to a degree whereby participants divert their attention to broader underlying issues

(Veil & Waymer, 2021). Decontextualizing an issue and redefining it as a societal moral flaw

(which is legitimate when the issues concern racism, homophobia, sexual harassment, etc.) get

more attention from an online audience (Bail et al., 2018). This rarely supports direct

reconciliation between the harmed and harm-doer (Velasco, 2020). Haugh (2022) found that

commenters of online shaming posts created additional conflicts while attempting to vet various

perspectives of the initial conflict. This behavior moves the conversation further away from the

original incident, further decontextualizing the conversation.

### *Whereas an Apology is Not Enough*

One of the observed phenomena that happens during online denunciation is that an apology is not enough to cleanse the digital record of a perceived assailant (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). An apology to one person does not function well within a nonlinear collaborative narrative. Nor does it make a dent in the pervasive online torment when several accusers become involved (Marie, 2020). Additionally, when hashtags, nonlinear feeds, and a global audience are engaged in a denunciation process, one apology does not have the power to support resolution. Social media escalates conflict both by opening up the moral and social misdeed to a large homophilic audience and by welcoming a shaming spiral that does not support the original participants' reconciliation (Tynes et al., 2012; Trottier, 2020). Garces-Conejos Blitvich (2022) adds that to forgive and forget is an impossibility within the digital archives.

### *Endless Cycles of Public Shame and Humiliation*

One of the consequences of online public denunciation is an endless cycle of public shame and humiliation (Ronson, 2016). In a qualitative and quantitative study on media humiliation and misrepresentation Marie (2020) found serious detrimental traumatic consequences to those who experienced public humiliation online and in the media. One of the consequences of media humiliation and misrepresentation was that the accused no longer felt worthy or embraced as part of a cared-about community, or society in general (p. 240). Marie notes that this experience infects every corner of the denounced's world. Hooks (2020) describes a hauntingness that persists in the modern age, knowing that people are able to access an online archive and resurrect a past digital self. Screenshots of deleted comments make the digital shadow even more glaringly obvious. Canceling was at one time an act of ostracizing another, it has now become the destruction of one's future (Mueller, 2021). Paresky (2020) analyzes this excommunication as a contagion. Pareksy describes it as such:

If we come in contact with a morally impure person or idea, we ourselves will be

rendered morally polluted. So, the more firmly we believe something to be morally true

the less willing we are to permit any discussion that contradicts that truth, the less willing

we are to engage with anyone who doesn't share our view and the more likely we are to

feel unsafe in the presence of dissenters. This experience leads to the belief that others

and their ideas are dangerous and threatening. (para. 15)

As with a contagion, public denunciation is a way to effect mass destruction on those it inhabits.

Public denunciation, experienced as a contagion, polarizes, shames, and further isolates those

who have been touched by it.

### *Private vs. Public*

Private incidents are more and more being negotiated in the public eye and with the

public's input (Haugh, 2022). The overlap and integration of private and public life has been

magnified since the advent of social media (Laidlaw, 2016). Therefore, conflicts that in the past

may have been handled privately between the active participants in the dispute are now put on

display. This act welcomes acquaintances and strangers alike to engage in vilifying the

disputants online (Tandoc et al., 2022). Putting private incidents online opens up the opportunity

for the publics' condemnation, indifference, resentment, and/or approval. The anonymity of

users responding, and the pervasive polarization manifested by social media (Garimella, 2018),

allow for an audience's untethered ability to respond online.

The aforementioned aspects of social media complicate the ways people negotiate

conflict online and should be considered influential aspects in how call-outs unfold (Suler,

2004). Dynamics such as a virtual collective consciousness, collaborative and nonlinear

narratives, the cyber panopticon, decontextualization of narratives, inability to cleanse the digital

record, endless cycles of shame, and the publication of private events all impact the trajectory of

social and moral controversies online (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Haugh, 2022; Mueller, 2021; Tynes et al., 2012; Trottier, 2021). In the following section I review research that analyzes online shaming and the ways my research both intersects and diverges from that research.

**Literature Review**

Active online shaming occurs when someone makes a post on a public platform to denounce another's behavior (Tandoc et al., 2022). This practice is not based on one specific intention or desired outcome, rather, research points to discursive intentions such as needing to uphold moral values within a community that are outside judicial oversight and/or dismantling systemic corruption (Lovelock, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022). These online tactics to intercept perceived bad behavior can include psychologically, socially, or physically punishing the target. In-depth research of active online shaming is scant and studies on the phenomenon of cancel culture, and its corollary online shaming, are in their infancy (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Haugh, 2022; Lovelock, 2020; Marie, 2020; Marguez-Reiter & Haugh, 2018; Muir et al., 2022; Skoric et al., 2010; Tandoc et al., 2022).

Critical inquiry on shaming, online shaming, and the consequences to the shamed have looked at specific angles of these practices. The philosophical moral rightness and wrongness of shaming as punishment has been studied as it relates to punitive legal strategies to maintain community control (Braithwaite, 1989; Duff, 2001; Foucault, 1975; Garfinkel, 1956; Nussbaum, 2004). Critical analysis on the uses and phenomenon of online shaming interprets this long-standing practice with a more modern lens (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021; Billingham & Parr, 2020; Klonick, 2016; Laidlaw, 2016; Wuschner, 2017; Presswood, 2017; Velasco, 2020; Trottier, 2020). Additionally, journalists have reported the impact of shaming perceived moral deviants outside of the judicial system (Jacquet, 2015; O'Neil, 2022; Ronson, 2015; Velasco

2020). All of this literature has been founded in experiential, observational, and/or with a philosophical perspective.

Current phenomenological and philosophical research of non-legally sanctioned online shaming have focused either on passive shaming (for example, liking denunciatory posts or quietly unfollowing someone online) (Tandoc et al., 2022; Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022), consequences to the shamed (Marie, 2020; Ronson, 2015), hypothetical shaming situations (Muir et al., 2022), or otherwise viral social media posts of strangers (Haugh, 2022; Loveluck, 2019). Research thus far has not looked specifically at online shaming that happens within communities or between people who have an established relationship. Much is to be gained from pointed research that focuses attention on the behavior, intention, and outcomes of an initiator who actively shames a person online from within their community.

In the following, I discuss salient aspects of public online and offline shaming and identify gaps in the literature, which my research study will address. The term online public denunciation will primarily be used to describe these practices, which includes online shaming and call-outs.

## OPD as Interpersonal Conflict

Social power differences between groups, access to resources, important divergent life values, and/or other significant incompatibilities are interwoven in the interpersonal conflicts that play out online (Fisher, 2014). Due to the established interpersonal proximity of community based call-outs there is the potential for direct influence on the resolution or escalation of that interpersonal conflict.  Loveluck (2019) found that when OPD targets either strangers or public figures, conflict includes an assortment of moral criticisms, condemnations, and indirect complaints - made in response to the online condemnation. Research done by Haugh (2022) and

Garces-Conenos Blitvich (2022) analyzed thousands of social media comments and additionally substantiated those findings. Muir et al. (2022) found that OPD was intended to identify and punish those who violate social norms. My research will add to these findings, but from the perspective of community based denunciations.

## Escalation on Social Media

Online communication shows that users are less inhibited than when communicating face-to-face, perpetuating the use of moral indignation devices (Westaby & Redding, 2014). Moral indignation devices refer to phrases that represent shock and anger at perceived unjust or unfair actions (Collins Dictionary, 2023, October 26). For example, in the comment section of OPD posts, participants most commonly used ought-statements, imperatives, assessments, sarcasm, and evaluation-relevant descriptions to show their moral disapproval (Haugh, 2022). Passive participation in mob pile-on, such as 'liking' OPD posts or writing a comment on someone else's post, additionally show the use of moral indignation devices as a means to shame the accused (Gunthner, 1995; Haugh, 2022). Mob pile-ons happen when multiple individuals collectively target a single person via comments or direct messages on social media (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021). Disinhibition and the ease with which the social media audience can participate enables mob pile-on behavior (Suler, 2004).

Research also found a heightened frequency of examples where online interactions escalate into destructive, counterproductive dialogues (Lee, 2005).  Escalating reactions, the cycle of emotional arousal, responding impulsively, and aggression continue to spiral a conflict out of control (Mischel, DeSmet, & Kross, 2014). Passive pile-ones therefore influence the trajectory of in situ conflict (Tandoc et.al, 2022), but tell us nothing about the impetus and experience of the person who actively initiated the online shaming. Nor does it provide

information about the initiator's continued participation in how the online conflict played out. My research will help us understand the language use and potential escalation patterns that happen when people call-out community members online.

**Counter Norm-Enforcing Responses**

Another aspect of OPD that adds complexity to conflict is active shaming of the accused (affiliative) and shaming the person who made the post (disaffiliative) (Haugh, 2022; Loveluck, 2019). These affiliative and disaffiliative responses show both a discursive struggle within online communities and that conflict continues to shape shift within the comment section (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Klonick, 2016). Therefore, responses from the online community target both the accused and the accuser, which is documented in the mob pile-ons (Tandoc et al., 2022). Yet, research does not document the outcomes for those who posted the initial denunciatory posts.

Additionally, posting conflicts online changes both who the audience is and the course of conflict. For example, conflicts in the physical world typically manifest with the denounced being the direct recipient of the condemnation and the bystanders positioned as indirect recipients (Haugh, 2020). When in situ conflicts are posted online, the online audience becomes the direct recipient and the denounced is positioned as an indirect recipient. When blame moves from direct to indirect and an audience moves from private to public the objectivity of the conflict, and conflict of interests from all participants, can influence the norms that are being enforced (Fisher, 2014).

These counter norm-enforcing responses, and making the audience the direct recipient of the complaint, likely impact the trajectory of the conflict and impact the poster's satisfaction with the outcome of their call-out, but that information has thus far not been researched. My

research will address this gap by incorporating the experience of those who have shamed others online.

**Stigmatizing vs. Reintegrative Shaming**

Braithwaite (1989) defines stigmatizing shame as an unforgiving practice that upholds a permanent negative stigma and reintegrative shaming as a practice that communicates disapproval for an act but acknowledges the offender as a good person (Braithwaite, Braithwaite, & Ahmed, 2006). Stigmatizing shame asserts a person is bad because of their behavior as opposed to a person being good and doing a bad deed. Online shaming is a practice that perpetuates stigmatizing shame (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Haugh, 2022; Kadar, Parvaresh, & Ning, 2019).

Facets of social media that exacerbate stigmatizing shame and perpetuate a complicated unfolding of conflict are the lack of avowal acceptance within online spaces, escalation by making private situations public, having a perpetual digital record, and welcoming audience participation without disclosing the full context of a situation (Haugh, 2022; Hooks, 2020; Laidlaw, 2016; Lenoch, 2022; Ronson, 2016; Presswood, 2017; Velasco, 2020). Additionally, there is a tendency to use *ad hominem* attacks aimed at the accused (Haugh, 2022; Loveluck, 2019). Ad hominem attacks shame the person as bad and irredeemable as opposed to acknowledging that a particular behavior was wrong, minimizing the opportunity for avowal (Braithwaite, Braithwaite, & Ahmed, 2005). Presswood (2017) adds that sousveillance on social media contributes to a stigmatizing shame. Tandok et al. (2022) states that while one of the reasons people participate in online shaming is in an attempt to control the behavior of the accused, the stigmatizing way in which shame is perpetuated does not support growth and change. Therefore, this research points toward calls-outs being a stigmatizing practice that

targets the whole person, as opposed to a particular act, and minimizes the opportunity for reacceptance by the accused and the community.

Reintegrative shaming allows space for forgiveness, growth, and welcomes the perceived deviant back into society's good graces. However, Garces-Conejos Blitvich (2022) claims that reintegration is not the goal of online shaming and states that people denounce others online in an effort to show they are a threat to societal values and interests. Marguez-Reiter and Haugh (2018) go so far as to say that public denunciation demands the ritual destruction of one's moral self, where the condemners therefore perceive the accused as an entirely new person. This idea of a 'ritual destruction of one's moral self' aligns with Garfinkel's work that purports in shaming others we witness the invalidating of the accused as one of a lower species (1956, p. 421). Therefore, the practice of online public shaming is a stigmatizing practice that creates diminished opportunities for the accused to reintegrate into community and casts them as bad people incapable of avowal (Haugh, 2022; Hooks, 2020; Lenoch, 2022; Ronson, 2016; Presswood, 2017; Velasco, 2020).

Research is clear about the outcomes for those who have been called-out on social media, but little is known about the outcomes and consequences for those who post denunciations. For example, do the people who post call-outs intend to stigmatize the accused? Also, given that research points towards additional counter norm-enforcing shaming (Klonick, 2016), do the accusers also experience any stigmatizing or reintegrative shaming as well? For the purposes of this study, and in an effort to integrate the experience of the accused, my research will incorporate the aforementioned inquiries.

**Digital Vigilantism as OPD**

Research shows that vigilantism is a way to impress and propagate one's superior beliefs onto others in an effort to correct more ignorant beliefs (Saucier & Webster, 2010). Skoric et al. (2010) found that people who shame others online view their actions as necessary to reinforce specific social norms and a way to deter others from committing the same offense. Similarly, Garces-Conejos Blitvich (2022) found that exposing a perceived deviant for who they truly are, making them accountable for their behavior through that exposure, and changing the minds of others who had previously favored them were some of the primary ways OPD was used. These findings reinforce that the purpose of vigilante behavior is to uphold social norms, bolster accountability, and deter others from performing a similar offense (Muir et al., 2022).

The literature indicates that those who participate in online public shaming do not identify their acts as shaming or punitive (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Marguez-Reiter & Haugh, 2018; Muir, et al., 2022; Saucier & Webster, 2010; Skoric et al., 2022). This finding is misaligned with the idea of digital vigilantism. Again, Tandoc et al. (2022) defines digital vigilantism as a "direct online action in response to a perceived civil or moral transgression, crime, or injustice," such as posting a description of a moral wrongdoing of a classmate on social media (p. 214). They state that this unwanted, intense, and enduring act is a form of symbolic violence which can entail real psychological, social, and sometimes physical consequences. Brunton (2013) argues that online public shaming should not be considered a form of vigilante justice. Rather, he describes OPD as an intense form of public humiliation and harassment.

According to Muir et al. (2022), OPD includes using the collective online mob to identify the accused, which falls into Loveluck's (2019) category of investigating. This definition shows an overlap between digital vigilantism and online shaming. Loveluck (2019) identified three other types of ideal digital vigilantism: hounding, flagging, and organized leaking. Hounding

happens when an accusation of wrongdoing is posted online and is intended to punish the

wrongdoer by "naming and shaming" them (p. 227). The other types of digital vigilantism are:

flagging, which aims to shame a behavior but avoids naming a target, and organized leaking,

which aims to use technology to disrupt systemic issues (for example, whistleblowing). My

research will complement Loveluck's findings - community call-outs act as a hounding type of

vigilantism.

**Positive vs. Negative Outcomes**

Research findings show both positive and negative outcomes associated with OPD,

however, negative outcomes outweigh the positive (Tandoc et al., 2022; Garces-Conejos

Blitvich, 2022). Tandoc et al. (2022) identified positive characteristics of OPD as: a perceived

strategy to enforce accountability, a means to call for reform, a way to educate the public about

an issue, a way to present new perspectives, and to provide a sense of justice that is sought

through punishment. These positive outcomes emphasize the use of social media as a public

platform to expose issues and a way to publicize alternative perspectives. Yet, data do not

corroborate actual systemic reform, a felt sense of justice by the accused, or what accountability

strategies were successful upon a public shaming campaign. My research will shed light on the

ways these outcomes came to fruition for people who posted call-outs of local community

members.

On the other hand, negative perceptions of OPD are reported as: a practice that is toxic in

nature, one that does not provide any support for the accused, where insincere reformations are

made, one that does not impact the accused's character growth, and has the potential to easily

destroy a person's life (Marie, 2020; Tandoc et al.).

An additional negative outcome is that moralizing others' behavior tends to be a 'zero-sum' game (Marguez-Reiter & Haugh, 2018). This is negative because it reflects the notion that one person's moral superiority is another person's moral inferiority. Further, denouncing another's behavior inherently frames the accuser as having superior morals (Saucier & Webster, 2010). This 'zero sum' morality approach diminishes a nuanced and subjective interpretation of an incident and prioritizes one person's approach over the other.

These positive and negative outcomes focus on the immediate response of online networks, awareness of issues within communities, and impact to the denounced (Tandoc et al., 2022). In this context the word immediate reflects the short-term scope of study. For example, a predictive factor as to whether or not someone will participate in OPD was their perceived ability to control someone else's behavior. Yet, Tandoc et al. (2022) identified that the behavioral reformations made by those who were denounced were insincere and that growth of character was not even considered. Therefore, the immediate desire to control someone else's behavior is prioritized even though long-term behavior change is not measured, recognized, or considered.

The above literature review captures current research on public shaming perspectives and outcomes. Online public denunciation, understood to be based in conflict which escalates online, is a stigmatizing vigilante practice that results in both positive and negative outcomes, where the negative consequences outweigh the positive (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Haugh, 2022; Lovelock, 2020; Marie, 2020; Marguez-Reiter & Haugh, 2018; Muir et al., 2022; Skoric et al., 2010; Tandoc et al., 2022). These findings are based on call-outs of public figures, viral posts, or otherwise hypothetical situations. My research will add to this literature by gathering qualitative data from people who posted initial denunciatory posts on social media of community members.

The following section will explain the theoretical frameworks that guide my understanding of community call-outs from a conflict theory perspective.

## Theoretical Frameworks

For this study I use two frameworks to illuminate the phenomenon of community call-outs. First, Rittel and Webber's (1973) "wicked problems" framework, which will shed light on the protracted development of conflict throughout the call-out process. Second, Baruch Bush and Ganong Pope's (2002) transformational conflict theory, which perceives conflict as a crisis of human interaction. In the following sections I will further explain the meaning of these frameworks, along with their purpose and applicability for studying online public denunciation.

### Wicked Problems Framework

Social media provides access to an expansive audience and supports the construction of collaborative narratives amidst fragmented storylines that lack context and nuance. These characteristics exasperate the 'wickedness' of conflict in social media spaces. The concept of "wicked problems" was coined by Rittel and Webber (1973) to address complex planning problems that resist traditional solution patterns.

Traditional problem solving is based on gathering data, analyzing data, formulating solutions, and implementing solutions to address the problem (Conklin, 2005). Wicked problems are complex in a way that inhibits problem solving with traditional models. The term wicked in this context relates to a problem being uncontrollable; developed, maintained, and influenced from many perspectives; interconnected and tricky; existing in complex social dynamics; and one that is shifty and unreliable in obtaining its full scope. Wicked like a tangled ball of string that only tightens upon pulling any loose end. Rittel and Webber make the comparison, wicked as opposed to tame.

Honeyman and Coben (2010) applied the concept of wicked problems to complex

negotiations. Based on the original understanding of the framework, Honeyman and Coben

define wicked problems as those that include a combination of several features. These features

are:

> being ill defined due to the social, political, and moral properties of the problem whereas
>
> each proposed definition of the original problem incorporates the values of those who
>
> define it; each solution is perceived based on the values and judgment of each person and
>
> their respective position within the social context of the problem; where no solution is
>
> good or bad, rather better, worse, or good enough; the social, political, and moral
>
> components are unique and context specific; whereas every proposed solution to a part or
>
> a whole contributes in some way to the original problem or adds additional problems; and
>
> the only way to address wicked problems is to try solutions. (p. 440)

These features give way to the complex relational dynamic that happens upon posting a public

denunciation to social media. The theoretical framework "wicked problems" will be applied to

the phenomenon of online public denunciation as a way to understand the pernicious unfolding

manner of call-outs and the exacerbation of conflict in online spaces.

**Transformative Conflict Theory**

Transformational Conflict Theory (TCT) views human interaction through a relational

lens and focuses on the *tendencies* of human interaction throughout the course of conflict

(Baruch Bush & Ganong Pope, 2002). Baruch Bush and Ganong Pope describe the tendencies of

human interaction during conflict through the lens of a 'negative conflict spiral.' Meaning, no

matter what initial 'power positions' people are in, conflict brings about self-absorption, self-

centeredness, and relative weakness for the individuals engaged in conflict. Additionally, the

susceptibility we have as human beings to experience weakness and self-absorption in the face of sudden challenge tends to escalate as an interaction degenerates; hence, the 'negative conflict spiral.' They note that engaging in conflict actually "forces people to behave towards themselves and others in ways that they find uncomfortable or even repellent" (p. 71). Without intervention, this vicious cycle of disempowerment and demonization perpetuates the 'negative conflict spiral.'

Another applicable feature of transformative conflict theory is that it does not prioritize solving a problem. Rather, because this theory views the main crisis as the 'interactional degeneration' of participant interaction, changing the interaction is the most functional aspect of conflict management. Exposing a deviant on social media is one approach to conflict intervention that may or may not prioritize *solving* the initial conflict. Therefore, this theory provides an opportunity to illuminate the aspects of online call-outs that impact conflict intervention, including what ways interactions throughout the call-out led (or did not lead) to the degeneration of the conflict.

## Method

This qualitative study focused on the phenomenon of community call-outs from the perspective of those who initiated call-outs on social media. While this is not a phenomenological research study, heavy emphasis is placed on a phenomenological approach to understanding what this particular human experience is like. In the rest of this section, I will further explain the methods for my research, expanding on my phenomenological approach, my reflexivity as a researcher, recruitment approaches, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis methods.

**Research Design**

My approach to this qualitative study was phenomenological, which is a process that attempts to get below the surface of individuals' meaning making and is distinctly existential, emotive, relational, embodied, situational, and temporal (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 2014). Patton talks about phenomenological research as uncovering the essence of a shared experience. Yet, Van Manen points out that phenomenology, based in experiential reality, is not necessarily rational, logical, or noncontradictory. Therefore, it is the researcher's duty to be sensitive to the various ways people are able to express their experiences; perplexing, irrational, or bewildering as they may be.

I showed my sensitivity to the participant's experiences in several ways. For example, after connecting via zoom I reiterated that I would not be asking them detailed questions about the in situ conflict that inspired their call-out. I did not want to put the participants in a position where they felt they needed to defend their choice to call-out, nor did I want them to unnecessarily share potentially traumatic, harmful experience of the in situ incident. While the in situ conflict has bearing for their impetus to call-out, this study focused on their experience *after* putting the incident online. Nonetheless, as we talked through the interview questions many participants explained the in situ conflict, which added depth and context to their story. When they did this, I reiterated that their experience of the in situ conflict had no bearing on my understanding of their experience of how the call-out played out online. Additionally, as sensitive content came up during the interview I would pause, acknowledge their experience, offer condolences as appropriate, and gratitude for their willingness and vulnerability to connect and share their experience.

**Reflexivity**

Getting to the essence of initiating online public denunciation has required reflexive inquiry around the participants' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and ideas of their personal experience and the ways my insider/outsider status is woven through the qualitative process. This is especially critical in a phenomenological practice (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Hence, an essential aspect of my work has been to honor and practice reflexivity.

Reflexivity is the act of making known, monitoring, and responding to one's thoughts, feelings, bias, identity, and actions as one engages in research (Corlett, 2018). Reflexivity differs from reflection in that it brings about change; it is reflection with the intention to act, in good faith, to diminish the researcher's own experience onto the interviewee (O'Leary, 2021). Still, the insider/outsider relationship of researcher and interviewees must be constantly negotiated throughout the entire process, as these are relationships being negotiated on the spot, where even the 'declaration of research' brings out a certain formality and power dynamic (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

As someone who uses social media, I have witnessed people be denounced and shamed online. Therefore, I come to this research with an experiential lens, notwithstanding having never participated in any act of online shaming. Accordingly, it was vital that any previous opinions or expectations I had as an observer of this process not influence my ability to receive the rich and subtle experiential details from the interview participants. I did come to call-outs with a certain bewildered curiosity and a naivete about the desire to use social media in this way.

Beyond that, my goal for this practice was two-fold. First, I hoped to be neutral throughout the recruitment and interview process, giving no bias or preference regarding the phenomenon of call-outs nor to any of the accused or accusers. Second, I hoped to convey a sense of compassion around the choice to call-out a community member. This compassion

extended to the incident that inspired the call-out; recognizing both the burden of calling-out perceived bad behavior and the emotional vulnerability needed to process both the initial incident and their engagement with social media. My hope was to create a space for thoughtful sharing and reflection, without judgment, where each interviewees' perspective was valued.

**Recruitment & Participants**

Practicing reflexivity with a phenomenological lens, I approached my recruitment with humility and gratitude, and viewed all potential participants as experts on their own experience. I attempted to build an authentic relationship with potential participants by first introducing myself and my interest in this study, which included a genuine desire to understand if their needs were met through the call-out process. I validated their choice to call-out by recognizing the burden and responsibility of naming a perceived social or moral harm-doer online. Acknowledging that little is known about the experiences of those who call-out others online, I aimed to honor the nuance of their experience throughout the interview process and data analysis - a strategy that I named before and during the interview.

Knowing that, I used purposeful sampling to ensure all participants self-identified as someone who posted a denunciation of a person from their local community. Purposeful sampling is a way to ensure a diverse participant pool and gather a variety of perspectives, while still prioritizing recruiting participants who experienced the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2021). I accomplished this in several ways. First, I reached out directly to people via social media who had made public call-outs. Second, I reached out to professional and personal contacts for any leads about community call-outs and followed up with the references directly. Third, I cast a wide net by making a flier that I posted on Instagram, which was reshared many times. Lastly, I sent a recruitment flier out to my professional email listserv. From these efforts I

successfully recruited 12 people from the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area to participate

in my research.

I applied for a financial incentive to distribute amongst participants and was awarded

$250 from the Graduate Student Advisory Board at St. Catherine University. On my recruitment

flier I advertised incentives - two $100 and one $50 gift card for raffle winners. I reiterated this

incentive when I met with participants on Zoom and confirmed that they wanted their email

address included in the raffle. Every participant opted in, so all 12 people were included in the

raffle. I used the electronic platform, Viral Sweep, to pick three winners. I distributed the gift

cards in sequential order as determined by Viral Sweep. Gift cards were sent directly from the

Graduate Student Advisory Board office.

Due to the parameters identified for my research subjects, I only used data from eight of

the twelve interviews. Interviews were omitted because the participant either lived outside of

Minneapolis-St. Paul, Mn, had not yet called-out a community member but was planning to, or

because they had not called-out a community member by name. The remaining eight interviews

fell into three different categories. Three people made a post about a person they had a direct

negative interaction with. Three people were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to

make a post on their behalf. Two people were witnesses to incidents, one incident happened on

social media and one incident happened in the physical world, but the participant learned about it

on the internet, and made call-outs on their own volition. For the purpose of this study, I will

refer to the participants in the last category (those who witnessed something online that they

perceived to be morally or socially wrong) as cyber-bystanders. See Appendix A for

demographic information, including participant identifiers that I use throughout my "Findings."

**Data Collection**

      Participation in this research study was voluntary. I reiterated the voluntary nature of this study several times throughout the process - during recruitment and at the time of the interview. In the 'Consent to Participate' form I specified that this study was voluntary and that participants could opt out at any time with no repercussions. Also, in the 'Consent to Participant' form I included detailed information about my research project and contact information for my thesis advisor and IRB.

      I collected data via one-on-one Zoom interviews during August 2023. I recorded the interviews via the Zoom 'record' feature and later used the recordings to produce text transcripts. Interviews were semi-structured, including open-ended questions, and lasted between 45-60 minutes. The 'Consent to Participate' form and demographic data was collected at the time of the interview. The questions were about the motivations to post the denunciation, intended outcomes, actual outcomes, community engagement, and unexpected consequences. The 'Consent to Participate' form can be found in Appendix B. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

**Data Analysis**

      I used open coding in MAXQDA to start to analyze the data. To further organize and assemble themes, I later uploaded the codes into Word. Initially, I used inductive reasoning to ensure the raw data was the foundation that allowed the story to develop (O'Leary, 2021), and subsequently identified 38 codes. Later, each code was separated by the three participant categories, so I could identify themes within each of these groupings. From this coding system I identified four themes and 12 subthemes, which will be explained in my "Findings" section.

**Validity**

As previously mentioned, researcher reflexivity was an important part of understanding and interpreting the data. Throughout the data analysis I made it a practice to recognize how I came to this process as a researcher. Pillow (2003) prioritizes an 'uncomfortable reflexivity' whereby rote acknowledgement of positionalities and values is a wasted endeavor. Leaning into that 'uncomfortable reflexivity' means that throughout the analysis I allowed the messy and uncomfortable parts of interpreting experimental data from others to be present. I sat in, and welcomed, the myriad thoughts of power, identity, otherness, extraction, and relationships that was this process. Beyond that, I prioritized keeping a neutral frame and understood the experiences shared with me as real, valid, and nuanced. Reflexivity within the methodology adds to the validity of data analysis.

## Findings

In this section I present my findings, which include: proximity to the incident, framing, consequences to the poster, and participant realizations. I describe the themes and use data from my interviews to substantiate and illustrate my findings.

**Theme 1: Proximity to Incident**

The first theme I identified was participants proximity to the in situ conflict. I use the word proximity to indicate how near and/or close the participant was to the in situ incident; both in physical and functional distance. Participant proximity to the incident impacted their desires and experience during the call-out.

Recall from my method section that participants fell into three distinct categories: those who had direct personal experiences with the person they called-out, those who were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to post a call-out on their behalf, and those who were cyber-bystanders of a social or moral wrongdoing and posted a call-out on their own volition.

Participants from each of these three groups all had some desire to expose parts of the incident and find closure, but the exposure and closure they wanted was different based on their proximity to the incident. This is relevant because it reveals discursive desires for those who call-out community members. In the following sections I will explain and compare the desires for each of the three categories of participants.

### People who Experienced a Social or Moral Harm

Four relevant desires surfaced for the people who experienced a social or moral harm. Those desires are to: expose the accused, expose their wound, find resolution, and get retribution. In the following section I describe these desires and give examples to substantiate my findings.

Exposing the true character of the accused was one of this group's main priorities. For example, Au (they/them) made a post explaining the behavior of the accused and described their behavior as racist. This behavior included not being paid in a timely manner compared to their white colleagues. Their desire to make a post was a "...hope to let other people know,...mostly,…Black and brown people having that information moving forward" as being important to them. This work, posting a call-out, was also framed as "doing labor explaining what they [the accused] did was harmful." These quotes reflect the need to expose the accused based on personal interactions with the accuser and for the audience to know the truth about the accused.

Kr's (she/her) impetus to expose the accused was that she did "not want that person to be allowed into certain spaces." Notwithstanding having never experienced harm in those certain spaces, she shared several negative experiences she had with the accused, including physical alterations, as their rationale. This quote reflects a certain knowing about the accused's potential behavior and an interest in others making decisions based on the participant's experiences. These

examples point to a desire to use social media as a tool to expose the accused in an effort to influence others' decision making.

All three participants in this category also had a desire to expose their wounds and for others to witness their pain. The hurt they described were from physical altercations, sexual assault, negative racialized incidents, or generally not having their needs met or being heard. Kr described this need as wanting to "draw in eyes and voices" and that "a big part of it [posting an online call-out] is wanting to be seen." She went on to say, "I was looking for somebody who can....look at me and say, no, you are good, capable…." Beyond exposing a wound, there was an additional need for validation about her pain. Au also described exposing their wound as an effort to not internalize the experience. They did not want the negative feelings about the incident to be directed inward, rather, they wanted the pain revealed, to be seen and held by their community.

Further, participants had the need to manifest some type of resolution, specifically a desire to find solutions for themself and the accused. For example, both Mg (they/them) and Kr stated they wanted to "help find change." Additionally, Mg framed their desire to find resolution by wishing there would be movement towards reconciliation by the other party. Mg said they wanted to "seek accountability," Au wanted the accused to "acknowledge...how messed up anything that what they were doing was…," and Kr hoped that "maybe someone would have a conversation with him." These statements point to a desire to resolve the problem by offering to help find resources, hoping for acknowledgement, or that making this problem public would encourage restorative community intervention.

Lastly, the people who experienced a social or moral harm and chose to post about it on social media wanted retribution. After experiencing sexual-based violence Mg made a call-out

and stated, "I feel like you…do it to cause harm in reaction to harm that was caused." This reflects both a knowing of the power of exposure on social media and a hopefulness that negative consequences will materialize from their call-outs. Additionally, they hoped that retribution would look like severe consequences to the accused. Mg wanted the accused, "run out of town and to never work in the industry again." In response to being taken advantage of by a business owner Au said, "the dream would be that this place no longer functioned and was no longer open." Hence, there was an expressed desire for the accused to experience repercussions for the physical and emotional damage that was caused.

### People who were Asked to Call-Out

People who were asked to post a call-out by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague desired resolution between the participants in the in situ conflict. They did not express a desire to expose the accused, expose a wound, or to seek retribution. This perspective speaks to their interest in participating as a social obligation, due to the specific ask, and for participants in the incident to find a resolution. Hs (they/them) shared their desire to be a good ally, but also that their obligation came from an additional sense of fear; the person who asked them to make a call-out had a large internet following, and they were afraid to get blasted themselves.

These participants said they wanted to see cooperative movement from both people towards agreement. Their posts reflected a desire to get healing for both parties. Hs shared, they made the posts to, "....see if we could come to an agreement to do things differently." Y (they/them) shared they wanted to rally community support and "...that he [the accused] would be held accountable by his friends."

### Cyber-Bystander

This section identifies the desires of those who posted call-outs of situations they were privy to, but were not directly involved in. One of the participants saw a colleague post

statements online that they morally opposed, and another participant read an expose about a local

performer and made a call-out based on that. Similar to the above groups, I developed three

categories that relate to the desired outcomes for these participants: expose the accused, find a

resolution for the parties, and for the accused to experience retribution.

First, cyber-bystanders posted their call-outs in an attempt to expose the accused. This is

a similar desire for those who experienced a social or moral wrongdoing. Ni (he/him) reported

posting a call-out "....in hopes that they [community] would be aware." Additionally, in

reference to exposure, but not retribution, Xe (she/her) reported, "I just wanted to draw attention

to it without necessarily needing people to, like, start stoning the person." There was a desire to

expose the accused but hope to restrict severe repercussions. Yet, this effort to control the

audience's response is unlikely given the unwieldy nature of the social media environment. A

certain amount of shaming, perhaps disproportionate to the offense, cannot be controlled by the

poster (Klonick, 2016; Marie, 2020).

Second, participants in this group reported posting on social media in an attempt to

encourage the accused to make things right. Ni even talked about the willingness to accept the

accused handling the situation privately, not on social media, as a means to find resolution. In

alignment with their impetus to post, Ni talked about a desire for "some sort of justice."

Paradoxically, while Xe shared a desire for exposing the accused without them

experiencing retribution, she also said, "I didn't care if they were mad at me, or if they were

upset. I was like, well, good, if you're upset. I hope you are." Additionally, regarding a local

performer, Ni said, "I don't want to see this person on stage" and talked about feeling righteous

anger. These comments reflect the participants' interest in the accused experiencing severe

consequences and the belief that they deserve those consequences. Furthermore, this response

reflects that the decision to post was justified. In this example, vigilante justice seems to both compel the desire to seek retribution and the righteousness for wanting to seek it.

**Theme 2: Framing**

The second theme I identified was framing, with two specific issues: how the participants framed themselves and how they framed the impetus to post. For the scope of this study, I refer to framing as a rhetorical process that attempts to denote a certain point of view, established by the speaker (Kuypers, 2010). Composing rhetoric in a way that prioritizes the speakers' viewpoint can be done consciously or unconsciously. The concept of framing is important because it helps us understand how the posters came to these call-outs and what is most salient for them to impress from the outset. In this context, framing sheds light on the participants' perspective of self and others, which in turn informs how conflict theory can be used to understand these phenomena.

Participants framed their impetus to post in two ways: a call for justice and as a last resort. This framing communicates the values that underlie their decision to call-out a community member, which helps elucidate their priorities and the metaphorical motors that drive their actions. Participants stated that posting a call-out to social media was a last resort in an unfolding negative back-and-forth of unmet needs. Describing their positionality in such a positive moral frame, along with descriptors that allude to a well-thought-out decision-making schema, contribute to a certain amount of moral correctness. It also shows a righteousness in their willingness to take on the burden of seeking justice when the system and community had not done so. In the following section I give examples to substantiate these findings.

***Positive Self Frame***

Five participants, one to two from each of the three identified categories, framed themselves as good people. The other three participants happened to not speak to their framing. This description establishes a positive moral foundation for their call-out. For example, in regard to knowing the call-out won't affect great change, Au described themselves as *realistic*. They went on to say, "I don't believe call-outs, generally, most of the time, have that much of an impact." While this framing may also be an attempt to minimize any negative consequences that the accused experienced due to them posting this call-out, it also reflects a certain amount of credibility in their ability to judge the outcome. Mg described themself as *very picky*. This descriptor was referencing their discernment in choosing what issues to fight for. They explained that the "personal is political" and that they "try to pick [their] battles"; hence, they are *very picky*.

Not only did several participants frame themselves in a positive way, but they also described their choice to post in a positive way. For example, the same person who described themself as *realistic* also described themselves as *logical*. Au said, "I feel like I'm a very logical person. Like, I'm emotional, but I'm also a very logical person. So, it took … years to get to the point of even saying something." Their description of self-restraint also frames their choice to post with a certain responsibility, as if their choice to make this post now was the only logical decision to make.

Ni said, "I'm not really an attack out of the gate person, I'm often asking questions that I hope to get answered." He continued to explain that even if it amounts to someone handling their issues privately, his intentions in asking questions and making things public is to effect change. The implicit message in framing himself as a *not an attack out the gate person* is that he did a substantial amount of internal processing and concluded that posting a call-out was the right

choice. He did not make this decision in haste, rather, he thought long and hard about what the right thing was to do. As a result, this framing points to the ways he views his behavior as a positive choice.

### Impetus to Post

Participants framed the impetus (the catalyst which influenced them) to post a call-out on social media in two ways: in response to a perceived injustice - either because the system was not working for them in the way they hoped or because the behavior of the person they called-out seemed unjust - and because they were out of other options.

Participants shared about perceived injustices, which fell into two categories - distributive and retributive. In this case, distributive justice means the posters were anticipating support from the social media audience (community members) in determining punishment for the accused. Retributive justice was used to restore some amount of rightness into community relations.

Participants used social media to rally community support to distribute justice. They perceived that systems were either not adequately providing justice or as not available to them. Ni and Y framed their call-outs as an issue that *needs to be addressed* and Y specifically stated their intention was to, "get help for the accused" via therapy, getting friends involved, and encouraging their inner circle to talk to them. These statements indicate the participants were relying on their social media network to engage others in an ongoing effort to support the accused. This effort to rally justice via a social media call-out can be seen as an intervention. This initial hope does not reflect their awareness in the interactional degeneration conflict manifests, especially in the 'wicked' environment of social media. Whether or not their initial hopes came to fruition is discussed in the last theme "Participant Realizations."

Retributive justice was used to restore some amount of rightness into community relations. From the perspective that the behavior of the accused was unjust, seven of the eight

participants used social media to reveal the injustice of the accused's behavior. For example, Xe, who was a cyber-bystander, described her feelings prior to posting as, "...pissed off, because I felt like this person was a leader in the community" and that, "I wanted to say something in that moment, because they were getting so much attention." These statements reflect the poster's desire to enact some sort of rightness into community relations with the help of the social media audience.

The second impetus to post a problem online was based on feeling that they did not have any other options. Hs, who was asked to post a call-out, shared, "I knew in my gut that it wasn't the right choice" but felt at a loss of other ways to move forward. Kr described her impetus to post as being, "an act of desperation," because they were, "at their wits' end." Lastly, Ne (she/her), who was asked to report, attempted to engage with her friend about their desires for the call-out, but shared she "knew to stop asking questions about their choice or they would turn on me." This participant was interested in a more nuanced conversation but realized there was no conversation to be had; posting the call-out, on her friend's terms, was the perceived only way forward.

## Theme 3: Unanticipated Consequences to the Poster

People who posted call-outs on social media experienced an array of consequences. The most commonly reported consequences were social or emotional in nature and were both positive and negative. Details and examples of these two categories continue below. Notably, negative social and emotional consequences were talked about more often than positive ones.

### *Social Consequences*

Social consequences refer to the way the poster's personal relationships were affected by the call-outs. Cyber-bystanders and those who were asked to post (as opposed to the posters who

experienced harm directly) did not report any positive social consequences. This may reflect that the closer in proximity one is to an incident, the more social investment they have in the process, and the more likely they are to experience both positive and negative consequences throughout the process.

The people who experienced positive social consequences were the three people who posted about incidents they personally experienced - Mg, Au, and Kr. All three reported receiving words of support from community members, which was received positively. Additionally, Kr reflected that she "got to know the community on a deeper level."

The people who experienced negative social consequences represent each of the three categories of respondents (those who had direct personal experiences with the people they called-out, those who were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to post a call-out on their behalf, and cyber-bystanders who posted a call-out on their own volition). The negative social consequences do have an emotional component to them. I chose to report them in the social category because they were relational incidents that happened between community members, resulting in an emotional experience.

Kr reported receiving negative messages from community members about making her story public. This observation also relates to the counter norm-enforcing comments noted earlier (disaffiliative responses). Three participants reported receiving both physical and verbal threats. Ni reported "damage and fallout on all levels" and Y received one death threat in response to their call-out.

After disclosing some aggravating and emotionally charged work dynamics to a professional trainer, Hs was asked by them to post a call-out. Hs, along with every other person

at that place of business, lost their job. This consequence affects much more than a social relationship, given the financial impact of losing their employment.

Ni shared that the person he called-out filed a restraining order against him. The restraining order was dismissed but the social and emotional impact of that experience continued to permeate their life. While the restraining order was dropped, the court ordered the participants to attend mediation, which the participant found ironic: Ni, a cyber-bystander, would be attending a mediation session with the person he called out. He described the upcoming mediation as "reverse harassment" and did not mention addressing any potential consequences, resolution, or retribution with the person who experienced the in situ incident with their harm-doer in the mediation session.

### *Emotional Consequences*

This section makes note of the salient emotional consequences that the posters experienced during and/or after the call-out. These responses tell us more about the internal feelings the posters had and are windows into the inner world of the people who made call-outs.

The people who reported positive emotions after the call-out were those who had experienced harm and made a call-out themselves. Au said they felt "accomplished" knowing that other B.I.P.O.C. (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color) were aware of the denounced. Kr reported feeling "validated" because of the supportive comments she got from the community. Lastly, Mg shared there was a catharsis in telling their story. Although there were only three positive comments, the sense of feeling accomplished and validated are positive emotions that should be recognized as a salient part of the overall experience of those who called-out online.

Participants reported feeling several negative emotions throughout the call-out process. As reviewed, the people who felt the most negative emotions were those who called out a harm

they had experienced themselves and those who were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to post a call-out. Kr recalled being told the person they called-out was "a good person" and Au remembered being passively told, "sorry you felt that way" about sharing a racially charged incident online. Both of the participants stated these responses minimized their experiences and invalidated what they were sharing.

The people who were asked by a friend to call-out also felt negative emotions. However, those emotions were related to the unfolding of the process as opposed to any comments they received from the social media audience. Ne reported feeling dismayed by the lack of progress from the call-out. She explained that the person who asked her to make a post "didn't really want repair, they wanted revenge…and there was always a next level that had to be achieved," in regard to the accused's apology. Additionally, Ne felt like the process did not make sense, nor was it fair, in that the expectations of the person who asked her to post the call-out seemed to change as the process went on. In this case, Ne described the expectations of the accuser changing from wanting resolution to only wanting retribution.

**Theme 4: Participant Realizations**

My fourth finding is participant realizations. There are five subthemes within this finding: the realization that once you post a story on social media you must henceforth relinquish control of the narrative, awareness of the stigma, an apology is never enough, of being the 'exposer,' and (dis)satisfaction with the process. The personal observations of those who called-out others online is the most significant finding because we learn directly from the respondents whether or not the call-out concluded in satisfactory or unsatisfactory ways and what parts of the process were most salient to them. These reflections primarily indicate that their needs were not met, they were surprised with the way the call-out played out, and that social media was not a

platform that supported reconciliation, growth, or healing. In this section I will provide examples that substantiate these subthemes.

### *Cannot Control the Narrative*

Data from my interviews showed there were two ways that participants observed their inability to control the narrative: the breath and reach of the narrative and its escalation.

Four participants reported seeing their story reshared and witnessed online conversations about their post. Mg noted there is "no control over the social media conversation" and Ni observed that "social media allows for that longevity and adding to the narrative." Not only were people able to add to the narrative and reshare it with their own additional narrative, there was no limit to the audience reach. Participants mentioned seeing it be "reshared on people's timeline" and noticing that "everyone's position is complex." The reflection about the complexity of everyone's position shows an awareness of the 'wickedness' of putting problems on social media.

Participants who denounced others on social media also observed the escalation of the problem. Hs reported witnessing the "pile-on" and noticed the conversation becoming "more and more hostile." Several participants commented on how the inability to control the narrative resulted in more tension, more hostility, and more people targeting the accused in a negative way. Mg specifically referred to the growing hostility of the conversation as escalation.

Participants additionally noted escalation via disaffiliative responses. Disaffiliative responses are comments made by the social media audience that are about the poster, as opposed to the accused. Ni shared, "When you post a call-out, you open yourself up to people making claims about you, saying stuff about you that isn't true." These responses are also known as counter norm-enforcing behaviors and tend to shame the poster. Making private situations public, or shaming people who others have a positive relationship with, may compel people to

shame the poster for violating their perceived social norms (Klonick, 2016). Disaffiliative responses are one of the ways conflicts can escalate when problems between individuals are posted online.

### Stigma

Kr, Mg, Xe, and Au shared that they were aware of the stigma surrounding social media call-outs, yet were still willing to post them. The need to make their situations public exceeded the internal shame that arose because of the stigma attached to this process. The participants who reported feeling stigmatized were posters who called-out people they had a direct negative interaction with and one cyber-bystander. This may relate to the previous finding where they reported being 'out of options' and were therefore willing to risk the stigma associated with calling others out in an effort to get their needs met. It also indicates that the people who called-out others on social media may in fact feel a certain disgrace with their own behavior.

Kr reported, "I knew I was going to have to sacrifice….a part of my reputation." Mg shared that the experience was like being put on trial. The most salient and potent expression of stigma was Kr's observation that, "it's almost worse to shame a person publicly than to be privately abused." This observation is quite meaningful and points to the social norm that people should keep private situations private, regardless of when abuse is involved.

Au shared the realization that their behavior may reinforce racialized stereotypes and said, "I hate being viewed as the angry brown person, but I must protect the people I love and it doesn't matter how I am viewed." These statements reflect an awareness of transgressing a social norm (exposing a private incident) and the willingness to tolerate any negative social consequence that may arise because of it.

### *Never Enough*

Three interview participants, one in each category (those who had direct personal experiences with the person they called-out, those who were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to post a call-out on their behalf, and a cyber-bystander who posted a call-out on their own volition), made observations about how an apology from the accused was not enough to move towards reconciliation. This points to two things. First, it validates the finding that reconciliation was not always the priority or desire for those who posted call-outs. Second, it reflects the social power of the online audience to influence the trajectory of a publicized dispute; while some might support acceptance of an apology, many others may not. Therefore, avowal from the accused may not have the power to affect positive change for the harmed.

Hs, Ne, Y, and Au reported experiencing the apology from the denounced as not being enough. The literature surrounding this concept refers to it as "lack of avowal" acceptance and is a recognized phenomenon embedded in online call-outs (Presswood, 2017). To that point, Y said, "Once the narrative is online, whether or not healing or resolve happens between parties, you cannot control others' response." This reflects their understanding that whether or not there is avowal, atonement, or resolution between the in situ participants, the audience may not be privy to that information and/or they may have different expectations and desires for how the conflict would play out. Additionally, because social media call-outs are a relational experience, which depend on the responses of an audience to enforce a social norm, the audience's receptivity to an apology matters.

Another reflection on the quality and acceptance of an apology was from Ne, who said, "the accuser, upon getting an apology, wanted more" and "it seems like they [the accused] needed to get a PhD in apology before the accuser would accept it." Au, who posted an incident they had experienced directly, shared that the apology felt like "it was a script." They described

the apology as not being individualized nor worthy of acceptance. These aforementioned examples provide evidence that an apology is not always enough to encourage positive relational momentum.

### *Of Being the 'Exposer'*

Four people, two who experienced harm and chose to post about it and two cyber-bystanders, shared their experiences of being the 'exposer.' This finding is different than stigma because there is not a shame element, nor is there an awareness that what they were doing goes against a social norm. Rather, they shared responses that were a reflection on what it meant for them to be the one that was exposing the denounced online. Participants shared a sense of burden, responsibility, and relief in posting a social or moral violation to a social media site.

Kr, who posted about an experience that happened to her, said her experience of being the 'exposer' was burdensome. She reflected, "victims must support each other, and that's fucked up." She shared this perspective in response to receiving comments from community members who had been in similar situations. Paradoxically, Mg shared that, "it was such a privilege to be able to be someone that they [people who responded on social media] feel like they could tell that [personal experiences of harm] to for the first time…and… the one healing piece of this is that I ended up getting a lot of other people's stories of their own sexual violence." The posters became privy to just how often other victim's needs were not met and how few resources there were to support people in similar situations, but appreciated being the one who others could share their stories with. Mg observed, "the burden of responsibility to make changes falls on the person harmed." These statements similarly validate the earlier finding that explains these posters feel they are out of options and henceforth must support themselves in finding justice.

In contrast, the cyber-bystanders had a sense of being an 'exposer' that relates to a feeling of righteousness in their decision. This sense of righteousness points to their work as digital vigilantes and a personal sense of duty in exposing the wrongdoer. Ni expressed he "felt justified" in exposing the denounced. Xe, when reflecting on her decision, stated, "I feel at peace with it." These examples are aligned with the literature that points to cyber vigilante justice as the purpose for calling-out others online. Yet, it is worth noting that this perspective was only shared by cyber-bystanders who had not experienced harm themselves.

### (Dis)Satisfaction with the Process

Reflections on the process of calling-out community members online is the final category in this section. All participants reflected dissatisfaction with the call-out process. Significant reflections were that the people participating in the call-out (both active and passive participants) were not competent in the skills needed to mediate this type of conflict, that social media was not the right venue to navigate the social norm violations that they were trying to expose, that an online platform escalates the problem, and that their initial needs for posting were not met.

Regarding the view that participants did not have the skills to navigate these problems online, Y stated, "no one has the tools to talk about it." While reflecting on the way social media influenced the trajectory of the problem, Mg said, "there is a difference between the intent and impact." This statement was a realization that what they hoped to see happen from the call-out was vastly different than what transpired. Additionally, Ne and Hs both commented that social media was not the right medium for serious conversations.

Overall, respondents were not satisfied with the process and outcome of their call-out. While some did feel some positive emotional consequences and experience a few positive social consequences, the majority of the consequences they faced were negative, along with their experience throughout the process. Their needs were not met, they were surprised by the way the

call-out played out, and that social media was not a platform that supported reconciliation, growth, or healing. Contrary to these findings, Mg, Kr, Y, and Xe were affirmed in knowing they were not alone in their experiences and felt good about exposing a perceived social deviant online, regardless of the consequences to themselves. These findings reflect a complicated online unfolding of an in situ conflict that adds to the 'wickedness' of the conflict interaction.

Four people reflected that in hindsight, they would not have chosen to take this path of exposure. Two specifically stated they would have confronted the accused in a private way, but still on social media. Reflecting on the consequences for themselves, Y specifically said, "I would have never done it."

In the next section I further incorporate the "wicked problems" and transformative conflict theory framework, along with relevant research from my literature review to the findings.

### Discussion

In this section I make connections between the online public shaming literature and my findings. Additionally, I incorporate the theoretical frameworks "wicked problems" and Transformative Conflict Theory (TCT) and explain notable correlations.

Recall that the "wicked problems" framework posits several features which contribute to the wickedness of problems. The most salient features, as they relate to online public denunciation, are: the trajectory of the denunciation is uncontrollable; it is developed, maintained, and influenced by many perspectives; it is interconnected and tricky; it exists in complex social dynamics; and it is shifty and unreliable in obtaining its full scope (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Baruch Bush and Ganong Pope (2002) use Transformational Conflict Theory to describe conflict as a crisis of human interaction, where the quality of the conflict interaction is understood to be a driving force in the relational unfolding of the problem. Being in conflict exacerbates certain characteristics that prohibit movement and bring forth mean-spiritedness, insecurities, and smallness. Without a particular intervention, such as mediation, these characteristics tend to exacerbate the interactional degeneration between individuals.

The findings indicate several salient desires, experiences, aftereffects, and observations for the participants who called others out on social media. Yet, these themes were strongly based on their proximity to the in situ conflict and the complex social dynamics that surrounded the incident. Recollect that the participants in this study fell into three categories: those who had direct personal experiences with the person they called-out, those who were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to post a call-out on their behalf, and those who were cyber-bystanders to a social or moral wrongdoing and posted a call-out of their own volition. Each grouping of individuals shared characteristics that relate to their desires, experiences, outcomes, and learnings. For example, all the participants in each grouping shared that their initial hopes were not met and that they faced backlash from the community in unexpected ways. Throughout the rest of this section, I will explicate the desires, experiences, aftereffects, and observations for each category of participants, incorporating the online shaming literature, the "wicked problems" framework, and transformational conflict theory.

**Desires**

This section explains the desires of participants – reflecting on what outcomes the participants hoped to achieve by calling someone out, and the complicated ways social media intercepted those hopes.

### *Direct Personal Experience*

The people who experienced a social or moral harm had more initial hopes for the call-out than the people in the other two categories. This likely relates to their proximity: they had more skin in the game. This group wanted retribution, resolution, to expose the accused, and to expose their pain. Their desires were complicated, based on both punitive (retribution) and restorative (resolution) needs. TCT cites this dichotomy - of being the victim and victimizer - as part of the crisis of conflict interactions. It plays out in these situations by wanting to expose one's pain while simultaneously exposing the accused. Thus, participants closest in proximity to the in situ incident had the most negative experiences with these destructive interactions.

Recall that one of the reasons Kr posted a call-out was in an effort to be seen and affirmed in a way that would help relieve her pain and sense of isolation. Yet, in exposing that pain she opened herself up to the online audience's counter norm-enforcing comments (where the poster's decision to expose a private incident comes under attack). Social media commenters explicitly asked why she put this conflict online, implicitly shaming her decision to involve the public. These dissafiliative responses led her to the pointed observation, "it's almost worse to shame a person publicly than to be privately abused." Not only was Kr being questioned for her choice to share this incident online, she was experiencing her own type of stigmatizing shame. By putting a private incident online, she opened the doors for public condemnation, resentment, and disapproval (Haugh, 2022), which she then described as, "embarrassing herself publicly." Note, many of the comments she received criticized her, as opposed to the accused, revealing the complicated dynamics within this "wicked problem."

This example also points to two important observations about call-outs. First, regardless of the prevalence of online call-outs, many people are opposed to making private incidents public (Bos & Kleinke, 2017; Laidlaw, 2016). Second, regardless of the severity of the

accusation, or perhaps because of the severity, accusations on social media are not automatically seen as the truth. This concept was not present in my literature review. Yet, the concept of 'believability' presents as an important aspect of denouncing people online. In short, while many participants framed their desire to post call-outs on social media to get some type of justice, the diverse audience had not opted into this method of justice-seeking accountability (Frevert, 2020).

### Proxies

Those who posted a call-out because they were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague had one desire: resolution. In their interviews they did not speak to any type of desire for exposure or retribution. Yet, their interest in resolution came from a variety of reasons: commitment to the well-being of a friend, to help community members find healing compassion together, and from intense social pressure. Again, this points to the variety of perspectives and interests that people bring to this practice. While each of these participants spoke to the desire to find resolution, Y prioritized the betterment of their friend, Ne prioritized the betterment of both parties involved, and Hs prioritized their own well-being (not participating in the call-out would have situated them as part of the problem). Each person engaged in a call-out to help facilitate resolution for the person who asked them to, but their relationship to that person (and the person's desires to expose the in situ conflict - which was not a part of this study) impacted their desires to participate.

### Cyber-bystanders

Cyber-bystanders shared similar desires to post as the people who experienced harm directly. One of them was to expose characteristics of the accused that they were privy to. Recall that Garces-Conejos Blitvich (2022) claimed that people denounce others online in an effort to show they are a threat to societal values and interests. Cyber-bystanders clearly saw the

denounced as a threat to societal values and interests and made a call-out, at least in part, for that reason.

This behavior describes a form of vigilante justice, which hopes to uphold social norms, bolster accountability, and deter others from performing a similar offense (Muir et al., 2022). As vigilantes, they felt it was their moral duty to educate the community about these perceived deviants. However, researchers are not all in agreement that online shaming ought to be considered a form of vigilante justice. Brunton (2013), for example, argued that online public shaming should not be considered a form of vigilante justice because OPD is, at its core, public humiliation and harassment.

### Experiences

The "wicked problems" framework helps illuminate the complexity of participant experiences throughout the call-out process.

#### *Grievousness*

All of the in situ conflicts in this study were grievous and complex in nature - accusations of sexual assault, negative racialized incidents, perceived ignorant behavior, or experiences of not having one's needs met by someone with more social or hierarchical power. Participant experiences, from severe to relatively minor, show that the grievousness of in situ conflicts that are exposed online varies from person to person. However, each participant had a different idea of what was worthy of exposure. Beyond their own ideas of what was worthy, they received community comments about the incident's worthiness of shame and exposure, comments about the denounced and themselves, and the morality of navigating justice online.

This complexity is additionally embedded in the "wickedness" of online call-outs. Posting a call-out opened up every aspect of the situation to be critiqued by the cyber

panopticon, the watchful gaze of internet users (Presswood, 2017). These critiques were referenced in an interview as "damage and fallout on all levels," with one person receiving a death threat in response to their call-out. The complex social dynamics of the in situ conflict, and the hostility of the cyber panopticon, exacerbated each of these wicked problems.

### Destructive Conflict Spiral

After posting their call-outs, participants observed a 'destructive conflict spiral,' where the interaction degenerated and escalated. Participants saw the 'pile-on,' noting the complex perspectives being shared and their stories reshared on other peoples' timeline. Participants described having no control over the escalating social media conversation. Also, similar to what Klonick (2016) and Marie (2020) found, they could not control the shaming from the discursive online audience.

Transformative Conflict Theory posits that the tools one uses to get their needs met in a conflict may continue to exacerbate the problem, with Haugh (2022) noting that commenters of online shaming posts create additional conflicts while attempting to vet various perspectives of the initial conflict. The participants' decision to use social media as a problem-solving tool welcomed a seemingly exorbitant amount of contradictory thoughts and beliefs about every aspect of the problem. Using social media as a tool to navigate a social or moral wrongdoing may have only exacerbated the interactional crisis.

### Contagion

TCT hypothesizes that people engaged in conflict tend towards self-centeredness and alienation (Baruch Bush & Ganong Pope, 2002). Recall that two participants reflected on their futile efforts to engage with their friend or colleague about the call-out. Ne, after witnessing the accused make a public apology and take steps towards reconciliation, observed the acquaintance who had asked her to post, intolerant of those steps. After Ne tried to engage in a more nuanced

conversation, the acquaintance became hyper defensive, deep in the 'destructive conflict spiral'

and inflexible to any efforts that seemed to frame the accused as anything other than a deviant.

This situation reflects what Paresky (2020) describes as a contagion - where the moral

impurity of the denounced is contagious and any comments favoring nuance moves that

commenter closer to morally impure. Paresky states, "the more firmly we believe something to

be morally true, the less willing we are to permit any discussion that contradicts that truth" (para.

15). Ne's interest in processing the call-out was perceived as contradicting what the accuser

believed to be morally true.

**Aftereffects**

Participants reported both negative and positive consequences to their call-outs, which

varied based on their proximity to the in situ conflict. In general, participants shared negative

outcomes with more gravity, force, and in higher numbers than the positive outcomes.

*Negative Consequences*

Negative consequences included physical and verbal threats, resistance to their call-outs,

comments that favored the accused, job loss, and court-ordered mediation. All those who made a

call-out based on a request from a friend, acquaintance, or colleague, found it did not play-out as

expected. Recall Ne made a call-out, per their acquaintance's request, in an effort to repair their

relationship. But, after seeing the accused do what they were asked, her acquaintance made more

demands and then changed course. Y was verbally harassed online and offline, including

receiving a death threat.

Indeed, six of the eight participants were distraught with how the call-outs played out.

They were confused, regretful, and bitter. They were left with a sense of loss and displacement in

their community. Some were hurt because they saw the person who harmed them be supported

by community members. Others were dismayed because what they were asked to do, in hopes of repair, ended up not being what the original accuser wanted. Some were distraught because they witnessed the 'pile-on' and were ashamed they had put the accused in a position to receive that negative public attention. Some were scared because they were henceforth attacked.

### *Positive Consequences*

Four of the seven participants shared a sense of satisfaction in exposing the denounced. One person who posted about an incident they experienced, and two cyber-bystanders, reported a sense of validation and righteousness (perceived vigilante justice) about exposing the accused. While Mg shared there was catharsis in telling their story, they did not mention catharsis or satisfaction in exposing the accused. In fact, Au was the only participant who used the word "accomplished" to describe how they felt about informing the community about the accused. However, while five of the participants reported wanting to expose the accused for who they truly were, exposing the accused was not mentioned as a successful part of their call-out.

In the end, the social media audience took hold of the story, manipulated it, and spun it out of control, affecting the posters both negatively and positively, with five out of the eight participants saying the call-out was not worth it.

### Participant Observations

Participants reflected several overlapping themes from the literature review and the pragmatics of social media. First, upon posting a call-out, participants realized control of the narrative was usurped by the cyber panopticon. Second, despite the negative stigma associated with call-outs, participants felt compelled to do so - as a last resort. Third, one person in each category noted that attempts by the accused to reconcile the problem were not received

positively. Fourth, the initiative to find justice is a burden taken on by those who experienced social or moral harm.

### *Relinquish Control*

Participants reported not being able to control the narrative on social media. Mg noted there is "no control over the social media conversation." Indeed, the cyber panopticon monitors the misdeeds of fellow individuals, where monitoring escalates into destructive, counterproductive dialogues (Lee, 2005). The posters could neither control the narrative nor could they control the commenters' hostility towards themselves or the accused. This 'negative conflict spiral' was substantiated in research by Mischel, DeSmet, & Kross (2014), who describe the way participating on social media encourages emotional arousal, often leading to more impulsive and aggressive responses.

### *Negative Stigma*

Participants found that despite the negative stigma associated with call-outs, they felt compelled to use them as a last resort - even when it meant feeling some disgrace about their behavior. In fact, Muir et al. (2021) found an overall trend towards not engaging in online shaming. This finding indicates that these participants, who did post a call-out, are social outliers.

### *Lack of Reconciliation*

My findings and the research literature demonstrate the difficulty of reconciliation for participants engaged in call-outs. Three participants described this directly. Au reported that the person they accused wrote a "scripted" apology, which felt insincere. Ne witnessed the accused make attempts to reconcile the harm they caused, only to see their acquaintance recant their wishes and ask for more. Y observed that even when reconciliation happened between the in situ participants, each subsequent online participant had a different investment in the avowal process.

This points to the "wickedness" of call-outs - where the nonlinear, collaborative, and decontextualizing aspects of social media further complicate the social interaction online.

### The Burden

Participants who experienced harm and chose to post a call-out shared the belief that exposing that harm, and supporting others in similar situations, was both a burden and responsibility. Participants felt less alienated when people reached out to share similar experiences, on the other hand, they expressed receiving that information was burdensome. This additionally points to the paradoxical nature and wickedness of call-outs, where the tools one uses to mitigate a conflict are interconnected with various personal contradictory feelings. While there was a diminished sense of isolation for these participants, more demands and concerns were added.

## Limitations & Strengths

The depth and scope of my data is limited by three important factors: the age demographic of participants, my ability to recruit a racially diverse candidate pool, and that participants fell into three distinct categories based on their proximity to the incident.

First, the age demographic of my participants was limited. All the participants in my study identify as either Millennials or from Generation X - people from these generational cohorts are aged 27-58 years old. This means a significant part of the population who post call-outs were not included in this study. In particular, the Generation Z cohort (specifically those aged 18-26), who are uniquely adept at ensuring the social media audience are aware of intolerable situations (Twenge, 2018), was not included. Data collected for this research therefore reflects a very narrow and specific age demographic.

Second, this study was impacted by my ability to recruit and gain interest from a racially diverse pool of interview candidates (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). This limitation is not surprising, given

my white identity and the exploitative history of marginalized people by white researchers (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This reason was, in fact, cited by an acquaintance who I had asked to participate. This limitation impacts the range of experiences collected during this research process and is especially relevant because of the prevalence of call-outs in the Black community (brown, 2020; Clark, 2020; Willis, 2020).

My white racial identity likely also impacted the interview process (Lamphere, 1994). This limitation is especially relevant because two people reflected on call-outs that involved the negative perception of a racialized event. One of those people was of mixed-Middle Eastern heritage and thus this person may not have felt safe or trusting with me to describe that incident fully and openly. In contrast, the white participant who described a racialized event may have been more open. Therefore, the study is limited by my white racial identity.

Third, I collected data from three different groups of people who posted call-outs. These groups were: people who called-out a person they had a direct experience with, people who were asked by a friend, acquaintance, or colleague to make a call-out on their behalf, and cyber-bystanders who chose to make a call-out of their own volition. While these categories pose some limitations to the study, it is also a strength. Among the categories, there was rich data, enough to allow distinctions to be made between these groups. The ability to make distinctions between participant categories was an asset to the data and added depth to the findings.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study focused on the phenomenon of online public denunciations from the perspective of those who called-out community members. The findings indicate there were myriad experiences, shared and divergent, by those who called others out online. The

frameworks "wicked problems" and Transformational Conflict Theory support understanding the decision-making patterns and outcomes for the participants.

Overall, participant reflections indicate that their initial needs were not met, they were surprised with the way the call-out played out, and that social media was not a platform that supported reconciliation or healing. Participants shared experiences that were misaligned with their intent to post a call-out. They identified that the social media audience did not have the skills needed to mediate the types of conflicts they called-out and that posting a call-out escalated the problems - both for the accused and for the poster.

Each participant shared that finding a resolution was the primary reason for posting a call-out, but no participants shared that they found resolution. Exposing the accused was the second most common reason for posting a call-out, yet only one of the participants shared their needs were met from this exposure. By and large, punishing the accused via online exposure did not support the posters' desires for the call-out.

In hindsight, four people reflected that they would have preferred to not post a call-out on social media. Two specifically stated they would have confronted the accused in a private way, but still on social media. Reflecting on the consequences for themselves, Y specifically said, "I would have never done it," and Ne shared, "I feel like I am a different person than when I did that [call-out]."

Literature on online public denunciation states that call-outs are a punitive, stigmatizing, and vigilante practice that results in both positive and negative outcomes, where the negative consequences outweigh the positive (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2022; Haugh, 2022; Lovelock, 2020; Marie, 2020; Marguez-Reiter & Haugh, 2018; Muir et al., 2022; Skoric et al., 2010; Tandoc et al., 2022). Participants in this study similarly identified online public denunciation as a

practice with both positive and negative results, where the negative outcomes outweigh the positive. None shared that exposure itself was a punitive practice, nor was it talked about as a consequence. Several participants shared an awareness of the stigma of call-outs and received messages from the social media community that affirmed that belief.

Future research is recommended to better understand the experience of those who call-out community members online. As identified in my "Limitation" section, research that has a substantial focus on each particular category of people who call-out, which relates to the poster's proximity to the in situ incident, would likely provide new insights. Research that targets participants aged 18-27 and studies that prioritize a diverse racial participant pool would also provide considerably richer data.

Additional perspectives on call-outs might include grief, 'believability,' and power. People who experienced harm and chose to call-out may have been engaged in the call-out process as a way to make meaning amidst the grief of a wrongdoing. Understanding the manifestation of grief, after someone experiences harm, and the way they move through that grief, may provide important information about the use of call-outs. This is especially relevant given the findings that indicate calling others out is an effort to be seen and witnessed.

Another angle of this phenomenon that deserves more attention is the 'believability' of posters. The participants in this study often received messages that favored the accused. What elements of a call-out impact the 'believability' of the accuser, and to what end? Lastly, the power dynamics of those involved in the in situ incidents, the power dynamics between the accuser and whomever makes a call-out on their behalf, and the power dynamics between the online audience and the poster - all would provide a nuanced lens into the social and relational dynamics of this phenomenon.

This novel study provides a contribution to the online public denunciation literature by incorporating the desires, experiences, and outcomes of people who posted call-outs. The complex, nuanced, and individualized unfolding of these call-outs resist an orderly 'if - then' equation; paradoxical and perplexing perspectives coexist in the experience of those who posted call-outs. Yet, the findings indicate that these call-outs were rooted in the desire for resolution, but that those who posted call-outs did not experience resolution through this process.

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**Appendix A**

**Table 1**

*Participant demographics*

| Proximity to incident | Participant Identifier | Race/Ethnicity | Gender | Age range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Incident happened to them and chose to post a call-out | Mg | Latino/a/x or Hispanic | Nonbinary | 27-42 |
| | Au | American Indian/Indigenous American, Asian/Asian American/Desi, Biracial/Multiracial, Latino/a/x or Hispanic, Middle Eastern/North African, White/European | Nonbinary | 27-42 |
| | Kr | White/European | Woman | 27-42 |
| Incident happened to friend, acquaintance or friend and was asked to post | Ne | White/European | Woman | 43-58 |
| | Y | White/European | Nonbinary | 27-42 |
| | Hs | White/European | Nonbinary | 27-42 |
| Cyber-bystander - posted on their own volition | Ni | White/European | Man | 43-58 |
| | Xe | White/European | Woman | 43-58 |

**Appendix B**

7/23/2023

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study.

I am a graduate student at St. Catherine University working under the supervision of Sharon Press, J.D., Director of the Dispute Resolution Institute at Mitchell Hamline School of Law. I am completing this study as a part of my Masters degree in Organizational Leadership.

In order to make sure that this research is both ethical and credible, it is important that each participant be fully informed of the risks and benefits of the study, as well as of their rights as a participant. Please read the attached Informed Consent Form for this important information. We will review this information at the beginning of your interview, and I will ask you to sign it at that point.

Best,
Margaret I. Montgomery

414-737-0011 mimontgomery934@stkate.edu

If you have any questions about the form or the study you are encouraged to address them with me or Sharon Press at sharon.press@mitchellhamline.edu or by phone, 651-290-6436.

Thank you for supporting my study.

**ST CATHERINE UNIVERSITY Informed Consent for a Research Study**

**Study Title** Online Public Denunciation: A Preliminary Study on the Impetus to Call-Out on Social Media

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is being done by Margaret I. Montgomery, a Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership student at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. The faculty advisor for this study is Sharon Press, J.D., Director of the Dispute Resolution Institute at Mitchell Hamline School of Law. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

**Why are the researchers doing this study?**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about people's motivation to initiate an online public denunciation process. This includes their experience while participating in public denunciation on social media, if their needs were met from this process, and what conflict theory tells us about this process. This study is important because the prevalence, pervasiveness, and impact of online public denunciation is becoming more commonplace. A deeper understanding of this approach to accountability/conflict resolution will help inform both the scholarly literature and provide a richer scope of understanding about the online public denunciation process.

Approximately 5-10 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to participate in this study because at some point you posted an online denunciation about someone else's perceived moral or social wrongdoing.

**If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?**

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

- Consent to participate in this study.
- Participate in a one-on-one confidential interview, either in-person or on zoom,

  consisting of twelve questions.

- Verify the accuracy of your interview transcript.

  In total, this study will take approximately 45-60 minutes over 1 session.

**What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw until August 30, 2023, after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

This study is completely confidential and there are no foreseeable dangers or risks for participating.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**

Your perspective and experience will add richness and depth to the scholarly literature on this subject.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?**

Upon completion of this study you will be asked to enter your e-mail address in a separate screen. **Doing so will enroll you in a raffle to win a $100 electronic Target gift card**. Two total participants will win $100 electronic Target gift cards.

**What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?**

The information that you provide in this study will be uploaded onto an encrypted and secure software program. The researcher will keep the research results on an encrypted and secure data storage program and only the researcher and their advisor will have access to the records while they work on this project. The researcher will finish analyzing the data by October 31, 2023, and will then destroy all original reports.

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, the researcher will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.

**Could my information be used for future research?**

Yes, it is possible that your data will be used for additional research. All collected data will be de-identified and may be used for future research or be given to another investigator for future research without gaining additional informed consent.

**Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?**

If during the course of this research study the researcher team learns about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, they will inform you of these findings.

**How can I get more information?**

If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me at mimontgomery934@stkate.edu. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Sharon Press at sharon.press@mitchellhamline.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I consent to participate in the study.

My signature indicates that I have read this information, my questions have been answered and I am at least 18 years of age.

_____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ Printed Name of Participant

_____

Signature of Researcher Date

**Appendix C**

**Interview Questions**

1. How were you involved in the incident? (i.e. victim, friend of friend, witness to the event, felt called to participate, etc).
    1. Can you explain how you came to be the one who posted the incident online?

2. What were your hopes or goals in posting about the situation online?
    1. Can you tell me more about what you hoped to achieve?
    2. Were there other people close to you or factors that influenced your decision?

3. In what ways do you think social media supported your goals?
    1. Was there anything unexpected that happened during the process of sharing online that you felt went against your goals?

4. In what ways did your hopes come to fruition?

5. How would you describe others' engagement with your post?
    1. Was this different than you expected? If so, how?

6. After more people started engaging with your post, what was your experience of the conversation?
    1. Tell me a little bit more about how you felt.

7. Were there any unexpected outcomes from posting about this situation online? If so, to whom and what were they?
    1. How do you feel about those outcomes?

8. Were there any outcomes of posting this incident online that happened offline? (i.e. calls to job, school, fired from work, person moved, etc)
    1. How do you feel about those outcomes?

9. In hindsight, is there anything that you would have done differently?
    1. If so, what were they and how would you have done it?

10. Was there ever a point where you thought the outcome was not in support of your initial hope?

11. Would you describe the initial conflict as resolved? Why or why not?

12. Is there anything about posting online call-outs that I didn't ask that you think would be helpful for me to know?