

Identity in a Self-styled ‘Paedophile-hunting’ Group: A Linguistic Analysis of Stance in Facebook Group Chats

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This article contributes a linguistically informed perspective to a growing body of work describing the nature and practices of self-styled ‘paedophile-hunting’ groups. Their reliance on publicly exposing suspected child predators in live-streamed confrontations poses significant moral and practical challenges for UK law enforcement, even if their evidence has proved significant in the conviction of sex offenders. In this article, we extend extant insight through the linguistic analysis of 18 months of private online group chat data from one of the UK’s most prolific hunting teams. Specifically, we explore the group’s collective linguistic identity performance through a corpus-assisted analysis of stance. Our analysis foregrounds the significance of social bonding and community identity and nuances current understanding of hunters’ negative view of the police. It also suggests that the entertainment value of the detective work involved in hunting may be more significant than the emphasis on hunters’ self-proclaimed moral superiority in extant work suggests.

INTRODUCTION

Few things are more universally abhorrent than the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Yet it is endemic: UK police receive one claim every 7 min of a child having been sexually abused, while US child protective services receive one every 9 min. By their own admission, it is a problem police cannot arrest their way out of. High profiles cases of abuse involving grooming rings, celebrities, and clergy have forced the threat of abuse front of mind and led members of the public to take matters into their own hands. Social media has given them the means to do so by ‘baiting’ predators in online chatrooms and then confronting them in live-streamed spectacles of humiliation.

Unbound by the legal constraints and regulations that govern police investigations (e.g. the Regulations of Investigative Powers Act), hunting groups' operations pose manifold risks which raise serious moral and ethical concerns around the treatment of suspected predators, and present significant practical challenges for the legal system (Hadjimatheou 2019). Targets may be subjected to harassment and physical violence (Sorell 2019) and decide to take their own lives to escape the humiliation of having been exposed as a paedophile (Burke 2019). Such 'secondary victims' as non-offending partners and family members (Duncan *et al.* 2022) often experience public humiliation, ostracization, and deep psychological trauma following stings (Hadjimatheou 2019). Hunters have been accused of undermining ongoing police investigations and putting the judicial process at risk by compromising issues of evidentiary value and admissibility. As Hadjimatheou points out, hunters typically pursue those within 'the scope of their own resources and skills' (2019:13) leading to the diversion of already limited judicial resources away from the most prolific offenders towards the 'low hanging fruit' (2019:10). Questions around entrapment (or the UK legal counterpart to the US defence known as *agents provocateur*) further complicate successful prosecutions (Gillespie 2019; Purshouse 2020). Together, these factors have contributed to a widespread condemnation of hunting groups and activities by police (Gillespie 2019).

Nevertheless, paedophile hunting has proved popular among segments of the UK population. Following the 2014 BAFTA award-winning documentary 'The Paedophile Hunter', a small handful grew into 191 active hunting groups in just 5 years, and there is little sign of waning (de Rond *et al.* 2022). Moreover, they are not trivial: in the UK in 2018, 60 per cent of all child sex offense convictions made use of evidence provided by hunting groups (BBC 2019), raising questions around how the activities of these groups can be harnessed by police and other legal bodies to good and lawful effect.

Improving relations between hunting groups and law enforcement requires a greater empathic understanding of what motivates hunters beyond a pragmatic aim to compensate for the failings of police. As such, scholars in law, criminology, and organization studies are beginning to build a clearer picture of such groups through close scrutinization of their practices (see, e.g. Huey *et al.* 2012; Campbell 2016; Gillespie 2019; Hadjimatheou 2019; Purshouse 2020; de Rond *et al.* 2022). Given that hunters rarely ever meet except to confront predators in 'stings' and, consequently, how most of their practices occur through online communications via Facebook or other social media platforms, linguistics can play a useful role in advancing our understanding of these modern-day witch hunts. Linguistic analysis of online community interactions in forensic and social justice contexts is a growing area of academic enquiry, providing insights on issues such as the strategies involved in the exchange of indecent imagery on the dark web (Chiang *et al.* 2020) and misogyny in online Twitter communities (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016). While we do not compare hunting groups to those examined in these studies, we share the general aim of improving the delivery of justice through linguistic analysis, in this case by furthering our

understanding of the nature of hunting groups in support of the development of a safe and amicable co-existence between hunters and police as each seeks to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse and exploitation (CSEA).

Based on a wider project first reported in [de Rond et al. \(2022\)](#), this study takes a corpus-assisted discourse analytic approach to specifically explore stance and identity as expressed in the online group chats of one of the UK's oldest and most active groups. Theoretically, we establish expressive interjections (e.g. *haha*, *lol*) as a useful type of marker for examining stance and one particularly suited to the analysis of online group interactions. Exploring expressions of identity through collective stancetaking can further our general understanding of how such groups operate, and the issues that surface as being most important to them.

This article is structured as follows: we begin with an overview of the literature relating to stance and identity before describing our data and methods. Following this, we present our analysis of stance in group chats and show how stances contribute to the performance of the various identities involved in paedophile hunting. We also discuss observations foregrounded by our linguistic analysis that were not picked up in the original phenomenological ethnography based on the same dataset. We conclude with recommendations for future research.

Stance and identity

As [Gray and Biber \(2014: 219\)](#) put it, stance is '...the linguistic means by which speakers and writers convey their personal attitudes and emotions, their evaluations and assessments, and their level of commitment towards propositions'. Built upon a number of related concepts about the way we orient towards particular propositions and ideas through language, including evidentiality ([Chafe 1986](#)), hedging ([Brown and Levinson 1987](#)), affect ([Ochs and Schieffelin 1989](#)), evaluation ([Thompson and Hunston 2000](#)), and appraisal ([Martin 2000](#)), stance has been of interest to linguists of various subdisciplines since at least the 1980s (see e.g. [Biber and Finegan 1989](#); [Halliday 1994](#); [Conrad and Biber 2000](#); [Martin 2000](#); [Bucholtz and Hall 2005](#); [Du Bois 2007](#); [Englebretson 2007](#); [Jaffe 2009](#); [Johnstone 2009](#); [Gray and Biber 2014](#); [Kiesling et al. 2018](#)). It is widely held that all utterances necessarily convey some expression of stance, for even an affective stance of neutrality must be interpreted in relation to other available positions ([Jaffe 2009](#); [Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012](#)). Being a fundamental aspect of human communication, and thus much discussed and debated, associated definitions and terminology are numerous and diverse ([Englebretson 2007](#); also see [Jaffe's \(2009\)](#) summary of stance terms). Early work by [Biber and Finegan \(1989\)](#) and [Biber et al. \(1999\)](#), provides a useful distinction between two types of stance:

- 1 *Epistemic stance* is rooted in work on evidentiality ([Chafe 1986](#)), which concerns the status of knowledge contained in a proposition, that is, its reliability (markers include e.g. *maybe*, *certainly*, *definitely*) how it was gained

(e.g. *evidently, obviously, presumably*), the evidence underpinning it (e.g. *I hear, it sounds as though, it seems*) and how adequately it is encoded in language (e.g. *sort of*).

- 2 *Attitudinal stance* arises from work on affect (e.g. [Ochs and Schieffelin 1989](#)) and accounts for expressions of emotions and feelings (e.g. *happy, angry, scared, upset*), as well as evaluations and judgments (e.g. *good, wonderful, lovely, outrageous, terrible, intelligent*).

Du Bois (2007) conceptualizes stance as a ‘linguistically articulated form of social action’ (2007: 441) involving language users evaluating an object, and in so doing, positioning themselves in relation to that object and others, either by aligning or dis-aligning with them. [Bucholtz and Hall \(2005: 595\)](#) take this further by suggesting that language users thus ‘position [...] themselves and others as particular kinds of people’, highlighting the potential of expressions of stance in the study of identity.

Sociolinguists tend to agree that language is one of the richest resources available for identity construction ([Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005](#)), and that this is done partly through repeated and conventionalized stancetaking concomitant with particular identity positions ([Jaffe 2009](#)). Identity positions refer to both broad level social categories like age, gender, and socioeconomic status, as well as to temporary and interactionally situated roles such as friend, customer, or engaged listener ([Bucholtz and Hall 2005](#)). Much of the sociolinguistic work in this area draws on [Ochs’s \(1992\)](#) work on indexicality, the process by which linguistic stances index (or ‘point to’) certain identities, either through overt self-labelling, or indirectly by association. In these ways, identities are viewed as emergent, dynamic, multiple and *performed* through language, rather than as innate and unchanging in the individual. [Grant and MacLeod’s \(2018, 2020\)](#) recent work on linguistic identity in undercover policing contexts also recognizes identity as a linguistic performance, even if the authors take issue with the idea that individuals can adopt any role at will. Rather, their ‘resource-constraint’ (2020) model outlines the various types of resource (sociolinguistic, physical, situational) that we draw on to perform identity, explaining how they shape and constrain our repertoires of available roles. For hunters in the context of online in-group conversations, the most available and relevant resources will likely be their historical experiences of anything CSEA and hunting-related (sociolinguistic), the other hunters with whom they are conversing, and the group’s core purpose of hunting predators (situational).

Identity and hunting groups

A particularly salient issue for hunting groups is that identities do not wholly reside within the individual (or individual groups), nor are they wholly ascribed by outsiders. [Bucholtz and Hall \(2005\)](#) discuss this notion as an aspect of the ‘partialness’ of identity and its accounting for the many ways that ‘identity

exceeds the individual self' (p. 605). That is, identities may be partly intentional, partly habitual (and thus not fully conscious), partly an outcome of interaction, and partly a construction of outside perceptions and broader ideologies. This matters for hunters because their self-perceptions seem particularly at odds with the labels they are often ascribed, meaning that they face constant challenges to their sense of self and purpose. A prime example of this is the term 'vigilante', which is largely resisted by hunting groups but reserved for criticism of other, 'lesser' hunters (Hadjimatheou 2019).

Goffman's (1956) differentiation between social actors' 'frontstage' and 'backstage' identity performances (i.e. those deliberately shaped for an audience vs. those that are private and uninhibited by external expectations) provides another interesting perspective. In Goffman's terms, we can conceptualize the two main sites for hunting group identity work as the frontstage on which hunters confront suspected offenders in full public view (both physically and by live-streaming online), and a form of backstage constituted by the private in-group online conversations in which anything hunting-related is discussed and where sting operations are planned. While the online conversations cannot be described as backstage at the individual level (as group members are clearly still performing for each other), we may consider them to reflect something of a 'collective backstage' whereby the group can converse freely, uninhibited by the expectations of large audiences of onlookers. Operating in a combination of physical and online spaces, hunting groups are a demonstration of online environments having 'extend[ed] the types of social organisation available to people in a pre-digital era...' (Tagg 2015:166). Our present focus on the online private conversations that constitute the hunters' backstage requires consideration of the aspects of digital environments that impact linguistic identity. Online platforms offer various functionalities that allow users to strategically foreground certain aspects of identity and suppress others (Tagg 2015). According to Sargeant and Tagg (2014), this heightens the importance of *authenticity* in online identity performance which they define as 'the extent to which an online persona is seen by interlocutors to relate to the person behind it' (2014:7). Authenticity, too, is socially constructed and highly dependent on the perceptions of others (Page 2014). Where physical characteristics associated with identity (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.) are stripped away by online communication platforms (such as Facebook Messenger), the linguistic effort to create and preserve authentic identities must be even greater (Sargeant and Tagg 2014). For members of the group in question, it seems likely that the successful projection and maintenance of coherent, authentic, hunter identities, even on the backstage, is crucial to the group's cohesion and has contributed to their longevity relative to other hunting groups.

Only a few studies have directly explored identity construction in hunting groups. Like de Rond *et al.* (2022) but based on a 'cyberethnography', Hussey *et al.* (2021:1316) found that hunters typically position children as innocent victims to be saved from dangerous monsters to establish themselves 'as brave child saviours' (2021:1320). As with de Rond *et al.*, these archetypal characters

reinforce each other: the more impotent the police are perceived to be, the more vulnerable the child, the more beastly the monster, the more heroic the hunter.

METHODS

Data and ethics

The wider research project from which the data was sourced was approved by the University of Cambridge Judge Business School Ethics Review Group. Ethical considerations for this were considered in respect of: The British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice, The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth Ethical Guidelines and the University of Cambridge Research Codes of Practice. In addition to this guidance, the current study was approved by the Aston University Ethics Committee. The main issues arising from the project include the following:

Participant consent. Consent has been obtained from all participants by Mark de Rond of Cambridge University. Participation was based on full, informed, voluntary consent, which participants were able to withdraw at any time.

Anonymity and confidentiality. All information which could compromise anonymity has been omitted or altered. All textual examples of language use are carefully selected, sufficiently clipped or replaced with appropriate approximations to ensure that participants cannot be identified through their language, while ensuring the preservation of original meaning and function.

Data protection. Throughout the analysis, all data files were stored on encrypted devices only throughout the analysis.

Our corpus comprises the chat logs of one hunting group, spans an 18-month period between October 2018 and April 2020, and covers 54 private Facebook Messenger chatrooms. The multi-user interactions are quasi-synchronous, so while users are not all necessarily communicating at the same time, conversational turns are taken quickly and frequently, reflecting, to some degree, spoken conversation (Meredith and Stokoe 2014). Where stance research often focuses on monologic, single-author texts, these interactions provide a rich site for exploring interpersonal and group stancetaking. The dataset includes interactions from two general-purpose, whole-team chatrooms, 10 sub-group, purpose-specific chatrooms (e.g. decoy training, sting arrangements) and 42 target-specific chatrooms (details of which are summarized in Table 1). To preserve anonymity, chatrooms are not named but functional descriptions are provided.

One of the general-purpose chatrooms was particularly active, generating enough interaction that the resulting chat log was split up over several web-pages, in contrast to the single page produced by other rooms. In this instance, collection was limited to just the first page which contains 8,342 conversational

Table 1: Summary of chatroom data

Type	Number	Functions	Turns	Types	Tokens
General purpose	2	General, topic non-specific discussions	9,271	8,446	96,827
Specific purpose	10	Topic-specific discussions around decoying, hunting, sting operations, cases involving real children, child safeguarding, chat platforms, team merchandise, personal issues of team members	17,818	11,232	180,835
Individual target	42	Target-specific discussions around suspect and hunting strategy	7,861	7,039	81,493

turns and arguably captures a reasonable snapshot of the typical activity occurring in this room. At the time of collection, rooms had between five and 25 participants, and display between 13 and 8,342 conversational turns (videos, voice clips and images and automated functions (e.g. **name* has started a call*) were not included in the analysis). At 359,155 words, the dataset is modest, but as [Koester \(2022\)](#) notes, smaller, specialized corpora can enable the researcher to interrogate all occurrences of the terms of interest rather than a random sample that would need to be extracted from a larger corpus due to the potentially unmanageable volume of high frequency items, and generally allows for a more contextualized and detailed understanding of the discourse. Our small corpus captures a substantial and detailed depiction of ongoing participation in a UK hunting group in a range of communicative contexts and offers unique insights into collective stancetaking and identity performance.

Selecting stance markers

Our analysis is based on the premise that identifying common stance markers in group chats can lead to the identification of salient topics and issues for that group, that is, those topics that group members take strong stances towards. We therefore begin by focusing on a predefined subset of the most common lexical stance markers in the data. The investigation is limited to lexical items because the informal, conversational nature of the online chat data in general results in a high amount of reduced and non-standard forms, incomplete clauses and stylistic innovations through creative orthography ([Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan 2005](#); [Jones and Schieffelin 2009](#); [Herring 2012](#)), making complex grammatical constructions difficult to identify consistently.

To capture stance in a range of forms, three different marker types were selected: adjectives, adverbs and expressive interjections. Adjectives and adverbs are well accounted for in stance research (see, e.g. [Biber and Finegan 1988](#); [Swales and Burke 2003](#); [Gray and Biber 2014](#)), and offer insights into the

group's opinions and evaluations of various topics (attitudinal stance), and capture expressions of certainty, emphasis and likelihood among others (epistemic stance). Expressive interjections are less explored, but by functioning as 'linguistic gestures' that 'express a speaker's mental state, action or attitude or reaction to a situation [...] interjections are expressive of attitudinal stance (Ameka 1992: 106), and are particularly well suited to the analysis of CMC genres often characterized by informal reaction and response terms (e.g. *lol*, *omg*, *haha*) (Jurafsky *et al.* 1998; Tagliamonte and Denis 2008; Jones and Schieffelin 2009; Herring 2012; Pavalanathan *et al.* 2017).

Procedure

The corpus of 54 chat logs was uploaded to Sketch Engine—a suite of software tools for analysing large bodies of texts (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014)—and, following an inductive, corpus-assisted approach (Baker *et al.* 2008), searched for uses of the three marker types using word frequency lists. Resulting items were included only where they expressed some kind of epistemic or attitudinal stance (i.e. adjectives like *happy*, *wrong*, *excellent* were included, but ones like *yellow*, *last*, *few*, etc. were not), and that the evaluation belonged to a group member (i.e. reported speech and conversational contributions by the researcher embedded in the group were discounted). As arbitrary cut-off points, markers with over 50 uses were selected for examination, except expressive interjections which were so abundant that only those with over 100 uses were analysed. Search queries specified lemmas rather than words, yielding a word list comprising 40 markers: 20 adjectives, 10 adverbs, and 10 interjections:

Adjectives: *good*, *sure*, *safe*, *bad*, *happy*, *amazing*, *great*, *nice*, *wrong*, *lovely*, *hard*, *beautiful*, *brilliant*, *sick*, *awesome*, *funny*, *sad*, *normal*, *nasty*, *proud*
 Adverbs: *really*, *always*, *about*, *maybe*, *hopefully*, *probably*, *actually*, *apparently*, *possibly*, *definitely*
 Expressive interjections: *lol*, *oh*, *omg*, *haha*, *wow*, *bless*, *lmao*, *ah*, *ffs*, *aww*

To identify high-importance topics, every instance of each term was examined in its local context using both the original online chat logs and concordance lines which were coded according to the topical referents and functions observed. Unclear topical referents and instances in which the term of interest did not serve the function of its category (e.g. several instances of 'lol' do not function as an expressive interjection) were discounted. Table 2 details the total instances of each stance marker identified, and the number of instances discounted in each case. In total, 9,516 concordance lines were examined, and of these, 2,750 (roughly 30%) were discounted from the analysis.

Limitations

First, hunting groups are not homogenous, and operational approaches vary (Purshouse 2020). In examining the collective stancetaking of a single

hunting group (even one of the most active), findings are not generalizable. Second, this study includes only positive constructions, that is, negative uses of the markers like *not good*, *not always*, etc. are not included, despite their potential to expose further realizations of stance that may be explored in future work. The methodological decision to look only at single lexical items means other stance constructions will not be explored, and irregular linguistic forms mean that not all uses of each term will be picked up in the

Table 2: Stance marker frequencies

Type	Stance marker	Total instances	Discounted instances
Adjective	Nice	185	45
	Good	1,202	132
	Wrong	162	17
	Lovely	135	25
	Bad	222	21
	Sick	87	1
	Funny	62	12
	Happy	200	8
	Sad	58	8
	Awesome	78	3
	Normal	50	7
	Proud	52	4
	Safe	265	15
	Amazing	208	7
	Great	166	17
	Hard	121	16
	Beautiful	105	15
	Brilliant	87	9
	Nasty	55	6
	Sure	156	66
	Total	3,656	434 (12% of total)
Adverb	Always	226	14
	About	217	128
	Maybe	212	25
	Probably	87	5
	Apparently	59	5
	Possibly	54	5
	Actually	79	6
	Definitely	51	1
	Really	398	95
	Hopefully	95	5
		Total	1,478

Table 2. Continued

Type	Stance marker	Total instances	Discounted instances	
Expr. ints	Omg	412	42	
	Bless	242	52	
	Wow	248	52	
	Lol	1,912	1,548	
	lmao	195	89	
	haha	350	173	
	ffs	121	3	
	aww	136	20	
	oh	688	46	
	ah	78	2	
	Total		4,382	2,027 (46% of total)

analysis. As demonstrated, though, this study is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive account of every expression of stance. Rather, it is best viewed as a starting point for better understanding how hunting groups perform identity through their stancetaking in relation to the central topics and issues that motivate their controversial activities.

ANALYSIS

High-interest topics

Quantifying topic mentions in relation to the stance markers led to the identification of a set of key topics of interest to the hunting group. This section gives a brief overview of those topics and distributions of the three marker types. Individual topics are discussed in terms of the 25% most common stance markers used in relation to that topic.

Figure 1 presents the topical categories and the frequencies with which they are referred to across the corpus in relation to the 40 stance markers presented above and illustrates marker-type distributions. Topical categories include (in descending order of frequency of mentions): External topics, Group member(s), Suspect(s), Hunting work, Sting, Self, Other (hunting) group(s), Police and the legal system, Public, Case Outcomes, Victim(s), Online platforms, Blown cover, Media, and Team Merchandise. We acknowledge that there are 'grey areas' between some of the categories and terms; that said, the categories are presented purely to aid the description of salient topics and should not be considered discrete.

As shown, the three most discussed topical categories include external topics (2,592 instances), other group members (1,158), suspected predators (1,152), all of which will be discussed in detail. Arguably one of the most surprising findings here is the scarcity of discussions around victims given they are the

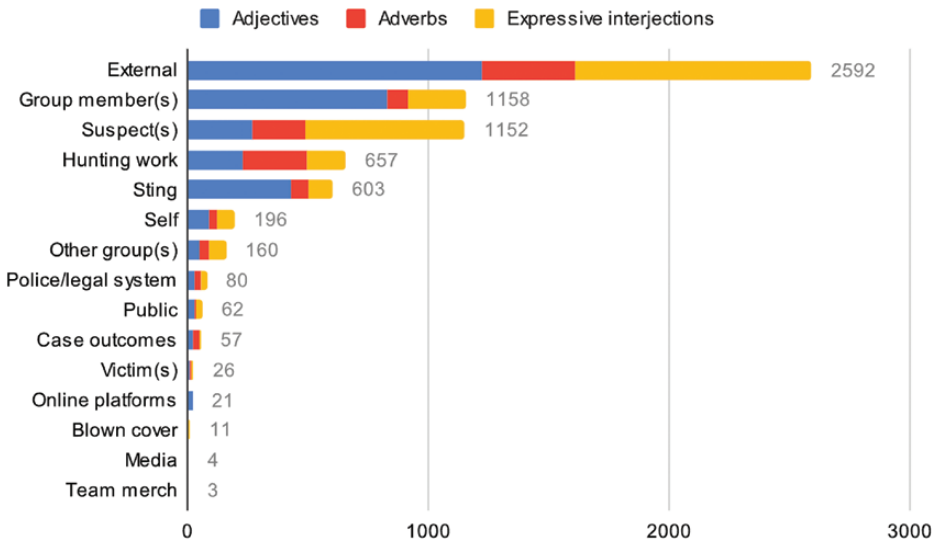


Figure 1: Topic frequencies by stance marker type.

ostensible reason such groups engage in hunting at all. While it is understandable that suspected predators are central to the group's discussions, it is less clear why victims seem to remain at the periphery. It may be that the group largely operate using decoys and so real victims are almost never involved. It is also possible that it is taken as given that real victims are central to the group's cause and so do not require frequent discussion.

Also striking is the frequency of references to *external topics* compared with other categories. *External topics* is slightly different to other categories in that it encompasses all topics outside the sphere of hunting activities, including everyday activities and hobbies, television, politics and global affairs, and personal issues around family, jobs, and very often, health. Collected between October 2018 and April 2020, the dataset spans the beginning and first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has various personal and hunting-related implications for the group, and inevitably features as a prominent issue.

Figure 2 shows the most commonly used (i.e. top 25%) stance markers in relation to external topics.

The adjective *good* is by far the most frequent item, occurring more than twice as much as the next most common (*lol*). Because this category acts as a kind of catch-all for any discussions unrelated to hunting activities, its functions and topics are wide-reaching, and so *good* has several uses. The most common of these are evaluations and judgements, general well-wishing, expressing happiness for other group members, and describing health and wellbeing:

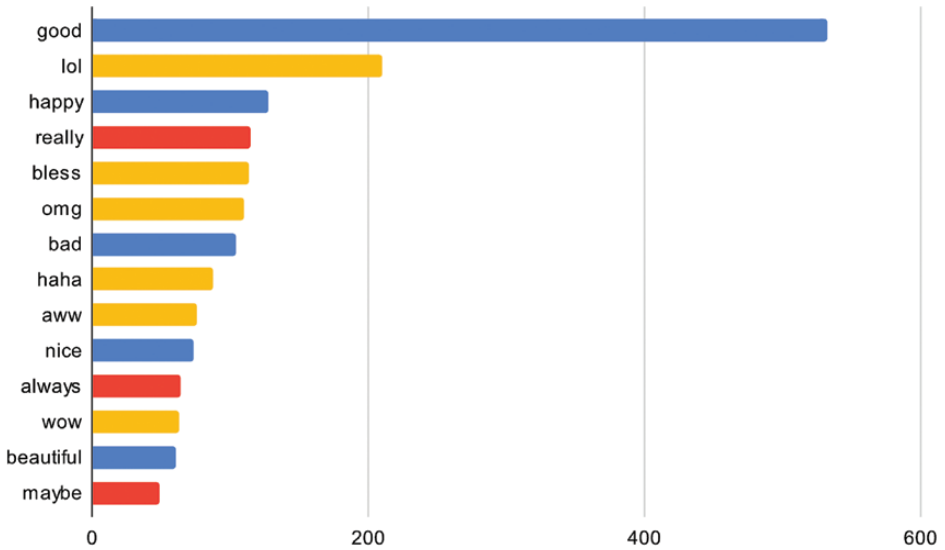


Figure 2: Common stance markers relating to external topics.

Good news from Boris they are testing people so we can go back to work
 Wow good for you
 Get better soon

Notably, most adjectives relating to external topics are positive (*good, happy, nice, beautiful*), and there is frequent use of expressive interjections, many of which also have socially positive functions (*lol, bless, omg, haha, aww, wow*). These reflect the informal, familiar nature of these general chats that occur alongside the more focused discussions around predators and hunting work. By expressing stances of care and kindness, these markers also work towards a performance of friendship. The breadth of the external category goes a long way towards explaining its high frequency in the data, but it is interesting nonetheless that external topics are mentioned more than twice as often (2,592 instances) as the next most frequent hunting-related topic (*group member(s)*). Given that the pursuit of potential child predators is what brings this group together, both the volume and friendly nature of discussions unrelated to hunting demonstrate the strong social relationships enjoyed by its members.

People and groups

Around half (7/15) of the salient topics involve other groups of people, which suggests much of the group’s interaction is concerned with identity in terms of their role as it relates to others associated with hunting and CSEA. This section,

then, focuses on stancetaking specifically towards *group member(s)*, *suspected predators*, and *police and the legal system*.

Group member(s)

Figure 3 shows the frequencies of the top 25% of stance markers that group members use in reference to fellow group members or to the group as a whole.

Common adjectives in reference to fellow group members include *safe*, *amazing*, *great*, *good*, *lovely*, and *awesome*, which generally function to compliment individual members or the whole team, or to praise efforts and contributions regarding some aspect of hunting work:

you're so lovely
what an amazing team to be a part of
Good work everyone

The most common adjective—*safe*—is slightly different, however. Rather than describing group members, *safe* mostly functions as part of an instruction to 'stay safe' when dealing with predators, usually prior to an upcoming sting (74% of all instances of 'safe' in the corpus are preceded by imperative verbs 'stay', 'keep', or 'be'). This was also noted by [de Rond et al. \(2022\)](#) who point out that this advice seems unusual and unnecessary when hunting group members tend to far outnumber the suspected predator during stings, facing minimal physical threat. The authors relate its frequent use to deeper motivations for hunting, including a personal history of child abuse common in hunting teams.

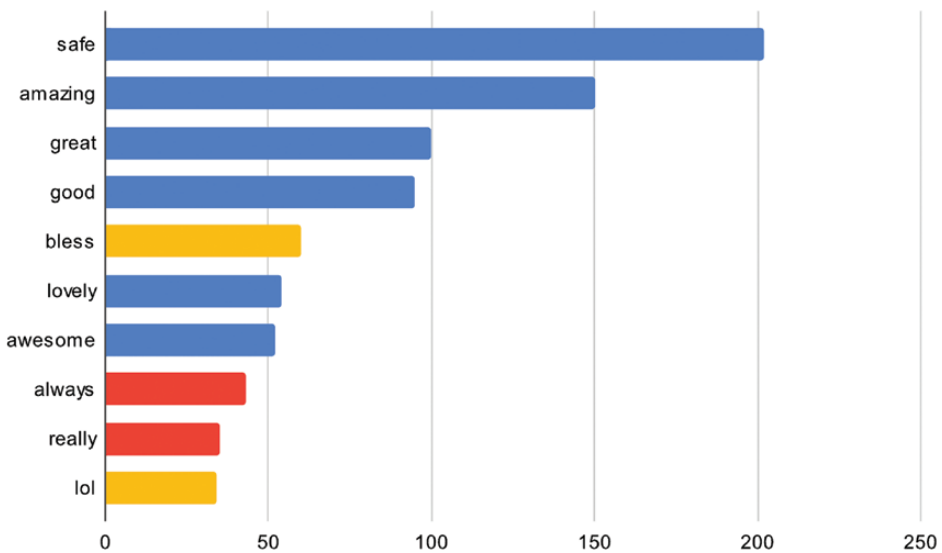


Figure 3: Common stance markers relating to group member(s).

The two highest frequency expressive interjections are *bless* and *lol*. *Lol* is often used as a phatic backchannel indicating a positive evaluation of the previous conversational turn, or a response to another member's joke, whereas *bless* tends to express sympathy or empathy regarding difficulties faced by another team member, as well as appreciation:

: it's so hard to put a child's voice on
 : Bless you x
 : [You're] the best adult ever!
 : Bless you hun x

The most common adverbs referring to fellow team members are *always* and *really*. *Always* has two main functions; to express praise or appreciation, or to offer support:

great work as always
 we can always count on you
 always here if you need any help

Occasionally, *always* is also used to describe some characteristic behaviour of another member, demonstrating familiarity:

you always need a wee
 name is always busy

Really is mostly used as an intensifier in expressions of praise, gratitude or sympathy:

you really are an angel
 I really appreciate it
 Oh babe you really do get them

The final example here illustrates sympathy being offered to a group member for dealing with an especially difficult suspected predator; a frequently observed context for the expression of sympathy.

The high frequency of positive adjectives shows that praising, complimenting and self-congratulating other group members are routine linguistic activities for this group, and coupled with the concern shown by the constant reminder to 'stay safe', reflects further performances of friendship and a collective display of a caring, supportive community. Common adverbs emphasizing these messages or demonstrating familiarity between group members further reinforce the strength of relationships and sense of community enjoyed by this group. Community strength is further reinforced by the lack of negative stancetaking towards other group members. Negative terms are used only rarely in reference to others (4 instances of 'bad', 12 instances of 'wrong', and 3 instances of 'nasty'), and where this does occur, it tends to be in jest as some form of teasing or banter, or as part of a light reprimand.

Suspected predators

In line with the hero/villain narrative outlined in [de Rond *et al.* \(2022\)](#), it is immediately apparent from the chat logs that members of this hunting group consider themselves diametrically opposed to the suspected child predators they pursue. [Figure 4](#) shows the most common stance markers in relation to suspected predators.

Unsurprisingly, attitudes expressed towards this group are overwhelmingly negative. High-use adjectives include *bad*, *wrong*, and *nasty* and are typically used to describe characteristics and behaviours of suspected predators:

all he's looking for is white young teen girls he's bad x
 Jesus wept that's so so wrong
 Nasty bastard x

The final (epistemic) adjective—*sure*—serves to express confidence in assertions about suspected predators, usually in reference to their identity, accessibility, or notable features:

[...] I'm sure that's him
 I'm sure he had a newer car than that

Particularly noteworthy is that half of the high-use markers are expressive interjections (*omg*, *lol*, *wow*, *oh god*, *ffs*, *oh dear*). Aside from external topics, *suspected predators* is the topic most often referred to with expressive interjections,

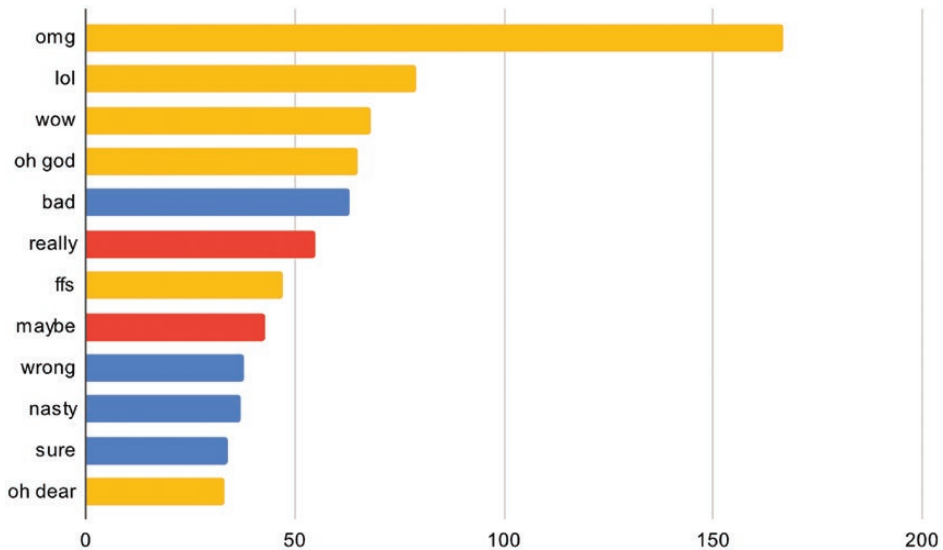


Figure 4: Common stance markers relating to suspected predator(s).

and by a large margin. With 660 instances, interjections are used more than twice as much as adjectives (271), and three times as often as adverbs (221) in relation to suspected predators, highlighting that they, more than any other topic or group of people, are *reacted to*. This shows one way in which suspected predators are not just there to be pursued and captured, but to be held up for close examination and judgement by the group.

The most common interjection referring to suspected predators is *omg* ('oh my god') and most often expresses a mix of surprise and disgust at the actions, behaviours and physical appearances of suspected predators:

Omg sick twisted bastard
 Omg now he wants me to sleep with this friends
 Omg disgusting

The interjections *wow* and *oh god* also largely function in this way:

: 12 year old and he wants to be in her bed is he kidding
 : Wow
 : Here he is again with another account my stalker
 : Oh god hun x

Less frequently, *omg* conveys excitement associated with getting closer to identifying or catching a suspected predator:

: *Got it* (in reference to a suspected predator's Facebook profile page)
 : *Omg I'm getting all excited*
 : *We got the driving licence xx*
 : *Omg omg*

The second most common interjection is *lol*, which often expresses a positive response to an insulting comment or joke about a suspected predator:

: he's so boring
 : lol
 : I upset him
 : lol

The first example is one of several instances in the data in which suspected predators are labelled 'boring' due to their apparent lack of interest in sexualized conversation, raising a question around the possible entertainment value in hunting work for this particular hunter.

Interjections are also used to express disappointment and frustration at difficulties or failures regarding the pursuit of a suspected predator. This is done particularly with *oh dear* and *ffs* ('for fuck's sake'):

: looks like he got spooked
 : oh dear
 : ffs *predator name* has blocked me
 : Ffs no

The most common adverbs referring to suspected predators are *really* and *maybe*. *Really* is mostly used to intensify negative evaluations of suspected predators, or the negative feelings a group member experienced as a result of the interaction:

Ok we have 2 [predators] Sunday who's free plz one is bad really bad
He was really dangerous
he's really annoying me

A less common use is as an expression of actuality around the identity of a suspected predator:

Lol I wonder what he really does for a living
I think he used a fake pic so will now be the friend who is really him

These examples reflect that group members (especially those involved in research and decoying) are generally primed for dishonesty from the suspected predators they interact with, and regularly face the challenge of identifying individuals who engage in deliberate identity obfuscation and deception, often tracking them across multiple online platforms.

Research and information gathering comprise a large portion of this group's hunting work, and these tasks are often undertaken jointly between multiple group members and openly discussed among all decoys and researchers. This leads to a large amount of discursive speculation regarding suspected predators' identities, characteristics, whereabouts, jobs, vehicles, physical attributes, and so on, accounting for the frequent use of *maybe*:

maybe his account was closed
Omg looks in his 30's takes drugs maybe
maybe he's going through a divorce

While it makes sense that predator speculation would be a common linguistic activity for the group, it is difficult to see the direct relevance of some of these speculations to hunting work (e.g. references to drug taking and divorce).

In general, the most common adjectives and expressive interjections in relation to suspected predators are used to scorn and ridicule, and to display shock and disgust at their behaviours, actions and physical appearances. These are rarely solo activities; once a group member comments negatively on a predator, other group members often join in, adding their own insults. Through this socially sanctioned, even celebrated behaviour, the group collectively performs their position of moral superiority over suspected predators. The constant display of surprise and shock at what are likely familiar behaviours from predators is interesting in that these are experienced hunters, many of whom spend hours daily in conversations with and about suspected predators and have done so for years.

Police and the legal system

Stances towards police and the legal system are expressed even less often (82 instances) but understanding them is vital if we are to explore the possibility

of a coexistence between police and hunting groups. Figure 5 shows the most common stance markers in relation to the topic.

This category encompasses references to the police and any other aspect of the legal system, such as sentence lengths for convicted offenders and the various processes that hunters are involved with in the course of hunting work, including passing over information on suspected predators and giving evidence in court. Common evaluative adjectives include *nice*, *good*, *wrong*, and *lovely*. Starting with the only outwardly negative term, *wrong* tends to be used as a comment on sentence lengths and conditions for convicted offenders:

No something needs to change it's all wrong
 [...] sneeze or cough in Tesco.....bigger sentence than a predator....
 sowrong!!

Occasionally, it is also used to castigate the police for perceived incompetence, or, as in the following example, laziness:

wtf is wrong with them lazy dicks

Surprisingly given the well-documented tensions between hunters and the police, the majority of adjectives are positive. Closer inspection of these adjectives in context, however, shows they are not always used in a straightforward display of praise or appreciation.

Positive evaluations are never issued to ‘the police’ in a generic sense; the closest a group member gets to this can be seen in the following:

Police are sum times good an get um sum just sit on them

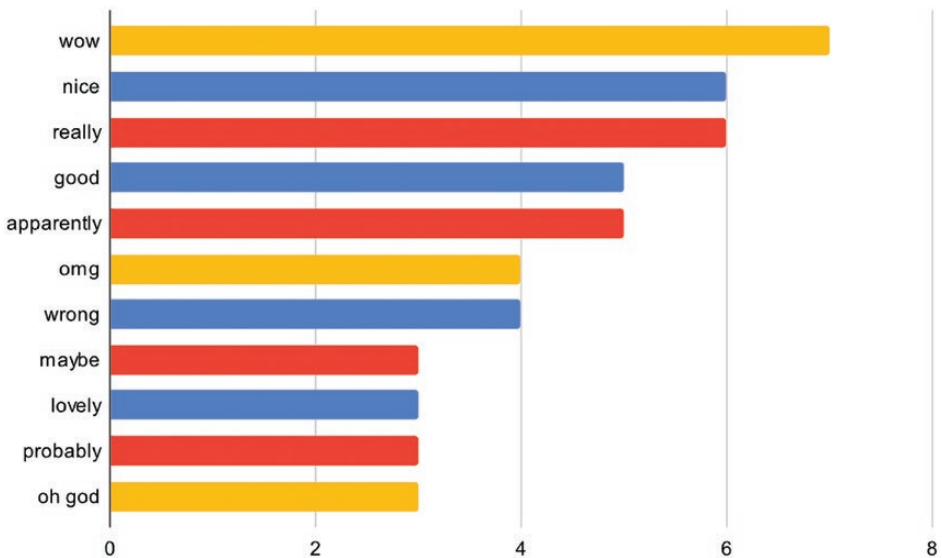


Figure 5: Common stance markers relating to police and the legal system.

This statement clearly expresses a mixed view of the capabilities and strength of motivation of police officers to deal adequately with cases of suspected child abuse. When it comes to genuine praise, this is largely reserved for individual officers:

really nice guy
She was quite nice though
yeah this one's good.

But as can be seen, this praise is often issued with caveats. The post-evaluative 'though', in the second example implies the niceness of the officer in question is against expectation, and the construction 'this one' in the third example implies the officer being referred to is an exception, standing out against a general backdrop of 'bad' (or at least 'less good') police officers. Similar comments are made of individual police forces:

I've stung there before they are good xx
: Can we do more stings there I like them police
: They were lovely weren't they

While comments like these show that group members have experienced amicable and cooperative working relationships with some police forces, the fact that these forces were notably 'good' and 'lovely' further suggests this is not taken for granted.

The most common expressive interjections are *wow*, *omg*, and *oh god*, which are generally used to express surprise, disapproval, or a combination. First, they are used in response to the police's perceived incompetence, inadequacy, or lack of concern:

Wow big fuck up
: [...] still waiting for devices to b down loaded x
: Wow from April x
: [...] they said stop speaking to him I have found out more this week
and theyhavenothing
: Omg really

Second, interjections express dismay at group members' personal involvement in police processes, particularly around evidence collection:

: [...] I have to make a statement tomorrow
: Oh god hun.
: [I've] got to write mine
: Omg nooooo. Its gonna take ages....
: [police] would like a list of all decoys names so she can work out who
aredecoys and who are real kids.
: Oh god

On two occasions, groups members express disapproval at the police's request to hand over personal devices to obtain evidence:

Wow
Omg that's terrible

Finally, expressive interjections also emphasize the confusion felt regarding certain aspects of the legal system:

: Nope he is bailed till then they then have to have charges from the cps
: Oh god so confusing lol x

The most common adverbs relating to the police and legal processes are *really*, *apparently* and *probably*. As with several other topics, *really* is mostly used as an intensifier of judgements. There is an interesting split, however, between positive and negative evaluations:

He was really nice
The police have been a complete nightmare over this guy they really have
They really are taking their time

Similar to the adjectives, these examples show that positive evaluations are reserved only for individual officers, while police forces or the police in general are presented as obstructive and difficult to work with.

Apparently has two main uses regarding police. One indicates uncertainty that the police will carry out certain expected actions or duties:

apparently *police force* are gona come to my house and down load it for*suspected predator* case [...]

They are trying apparently to get a international arrest warrant
The first example indicates the group member has less than full confidence in the police's commitment to visit them for evidence collection, and the second expresses doubt that police are even attempting to carry out the task of obtaining an international arrest warrant. Both examples remind us that the police, pivotal to hunting and depended upon by hunters to see their work through to a criminal charge (Hadjimatheou 2019), are entirely outside of the hunters' control; police have no legal responsibility to inform or update hunters regarding ongoing cases, leaving hunters unsure of what to expect in terms of police action, and their own expected involvement.

The second main use of *apparently* is to introduce the police's ostensible views of the hunting group's motivations.

Apparently we are ONLY doing what we do for our own importance and to getpower over so called predators □
Apparently to exert power and boost self importance over the predators.

The use of *apparently* here works to distance the police's view of the hunters' motivations for engaging in hunting work from their own. The examples

make clear that a sense of self-importance and power over predators are outright rejected as motivations for this group's participation in hunting.

It is worth noting that there are only three uses of *probably* in reference to police and the legal system, but all of these express that police ineptitudes, failings, and misunderstandings of hunting work are routine and to be expected:

- Exactly so they will probably lose [the evidence pack] anyway
- [...] as we know the police will probably do sod all with the logs.
- : What were [other hunters] arrested for?
- : Breathing
- : Probably

The stance markers related to police and legal processes point to mixed views and a complex relationship between this hunting group and law enforcement, although perceptions are largely negative. The police in a generic sense are constructed as incompetent, unreliable, and sometimes uncaring, and any individual officers and forces considered helpful and unobstructive to hunting work are considered rare. This positions the hunting group by contrast as both capable and caring. Expressive interjections express stances of reluctance and unease about group members' personal participation in some legal processes, and possibly that hunters feel their time gets wasted in an overly bureaucratic system. The high-use adverbs further suggest a general lack of confidence and understanding around police practice. Expressing mistrust and caution around police and the legal system is a routine linguistic behaviour for this group, and another way that they construct law enforcement and the legal system as incompetent and inadequate, while positioning themselves as prudent and careful. But the uncertainty and sense of nervousness around personal engagement with legal processes seems incongruous to the typical performances of confidence and assuredness with which the hunters discuss other aspects of their work.

DISCUSSION

While it is hard to imagine a context for linguistic production that does not involve some form of stancetaking, conversations within a group of self-styled 'paedophile-hunters' arguably constitute a particularly stance-saturated corpus. Our corpus-assisted analysis of 18 months of in-group online chats between members of one of the UK's oldest and most prolific paedophile hunting groups finds strong support for collective identity performances identified in prior work, and particularly in [de Rond *et al.* \(2022\)](#) and [Hussey *et al.* \(2021\)](#). That is, our linguistic analysis supports the observation that hunters position themselves as selfless knights who ride out to save their communities from an evil threat that formal institutions are unable, or unwilling, to manage. However, it also identifies certain features of hunting that were missed in these prior studies, including the significance of social bonding and community identity, the extent to which hunting is an entertaining as much as a moral pursuit, and attitudes towards police and the legal system.

Social bonding and community identity

The most popular topics discussed by paedophile hunters within the group have little or nothing to do with suspected predators, victims, police, or really anything germane to hunting. Rather, the most popular topics involve personal challenges and daily updates to changing circumstances related to health and work, everyday activities and hobbies, television programmes and political developments, and shared gripes and sharing of amusing memes. In fact, the demonstrated strength of the social bonds shared between individual members and the whole community appears to be a fundamental aspect of the group's identity. Close friendships and relationships are performed through stances of kindness, care, familiarity and support as frequently expressed through the linguistic acts of complimenting and praising, laughing at each other's jokes and reminding each other to 'stay safe', even in situations that pose little danger. The sharing of support commonly plays out through the reporting of 'horror stories' about suspected predators' behaviour, which invariably garners responses of sympathy and kudos for the group members 'having to' deal with them. Some of the strongest evidence for the group's tight-knit nature is that concern for other members' wellbeing extends well beyond the sphere of the hunting activities that bring them together. The continuous expressions of friendship and community identity doubtless serve to sustain and strengthen interpersonal relationships within the group, and while the conversations analysed here are private, it is possible that the strength of a well-bonded, harmonious team might be unconsciously conveyed (or in Goffman's terms, *given off*) to suspected predators, police and physical and online audiences when the group are operating in public, demonstrating their strength and power as a collective. Moreover, the absence of discussions relating to child victims is noticeable given that child protection lies at the heart of their declared mission. Of course, it may be that the innocence of children is taken for granted and, unlike the evil status assigned to predators, does not need to be continuously reaffirmed. What this suggests is that hunting might perhaps be considered a social activity much like any other in that social bonding and community belonging is as (if not more) important to hunting groups as is their ostensible goal of keeping children safe. That they focus on child sexual abuse probably means that they attract 'survivors' who find within the group the resources to deal with their own abuse. While reliable figures are difficult to come by, the National Crime Agency believe that survivors are disproportionately well represented among hunters.

Hunting as entertainment

Our analysis highlights the extent to which hunting provides entertainment value not just for the viewing public but for decoys and hunters themselves. A significant amount of chat details their excitement around the detective work required to identify suspected predators, including frequent speculation and gossip-like chat about intimate but impertinent details of predators' lives and

circumstances, and expressions of boredom where online conversations lack sexual content. It is possible that 'boring' is used in a sense akin to 'irrelevant' here in that these potential predators may not have been deemed worthy of pursuit, but nevertheless, this type of comment demonstrates a clear expectation for sexualized conversation that sits starkly against the usual expressions of shock and disgust. Moreover, the dataset contains many examples of decoys sharing snippets of chat just to show how vile 'their' predators are, as if they were competing in a race to the bottom for the worst, most explicit, predator. It seems theirs is a game as much as a charge, detracting somewhat from the image of altruistic volunteers motivated purely by moral duty.

Police, the legal system, and vulnerability

Our analysis also identified a clear distinction between how hunters relate to police. While prior research has found strong evidence of police being caricatured as impotent and uncaring, this is not true of individual police officers. To the contrary, those with first-hand experience of individual officers in the context of hunting find them on the whole to be helpful and caring. That is, the majority of adjectives used to describe individual police officers are positive. This contrasts with the strongly negative views on police in prior studies where a consistently negative evaluation was required to maintain the caricature of police as incompetent and open up a space for hunters to assert themselves as a last line of defence. That said, the performance of vulnerability in the context of police is noticeable. Despite being routinely involved in processes like writing witness statements or handing over devices for evidence collection, some group members expressed low confidence in their understanding of legal processes and what is personally required of them at specific stages. Stances suggested uncertainty, nervousness, mistrust, and a lack of agency; that hunters felt something was 'being done to' them. Expressions of vulnerability are not particularly common or pronounced, and it seems likely that this performance is neither conscious nor deliberate, especially when considered against the prominent identities associated with moral superiority and community strength.

CONCLUSION

The chat logs have provided a privileged, unique window onto the hunters' stancetaking practices, and how these work towards the collective co-construction of identities that enable social action. Analysing stances towards important discussion topics has exposed the attitudes of a UK hunting group towards other group members, the suspected predators they pursue, the police, and legal processes. Through repeated stancetaking towards these topics, the hunters perform identity positions associated with friendship and social bonding, suggesting that community participation and may be as important for some as the hunting itself. Additionally, the excitement expressed around the detective

work involved detracts somewhat from the prominent performances of moral superiority reported in this and other work. This research has also shown that alongside traditional stance markers like adjectives and adverbs, expressive interjections are particularly fruitful for investigating attitudinal stance in CMC genres, being especially suited to capturing interlocutors' immediate reactions to the issues being discussed.

At a practical level, and as evidenced in the hunters' conversations, positive working relationships between hunting groups and the police have, on occasion, been achieved, especially at an interpersonal level. Stances expressing vulnerability in relation to bureaucratic and perhaps intimidating legal processes demonstrate that hunting groups could benefit from education around the police response to suspected CSEA cases, the potential impact of certain hunting activities on victims, and especially transparent explanations regarding hunters' personal involvement in legal processes. Effective collaboration, rather than co-existence, would likely require hunters to be bound by the same restrictions in data gathering as police are (as per the Regulations of Investigative Powers Act) and for them to give up live-streaming. Moreover, police might work to destabilize the caricature-based narrative enacted by hunters, for example, by showing themselves to be more competent than hunters assume and by humanizing those inadvertently caught in the crossfire: the families of suspected predators who, in the main, had no idea what their husband, partner or father was up to.

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