Online Criticism of Parents After Child Accidents: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Abstract
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Keywords
trauma, parent blame, thematic analysis, cyber bullying

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Online Criticism of Parents After Child Accidents: 
A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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When a child is harmed, parents frequently experience condemnation and blame from others. This blame is amplified online. Our online worlds reflect our offline ones, and this negative atmosphere toward parents can influence both parents themselves and societal expectations for parents. Previous research on parental blame has either directly asked people about their blame attributions or utilized hypothetical vignettes. Our thematic analysis expands on this research by analyzing unsolicited online comments left on news stories about two, real-world incidents of child harm: A child who fell into a gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo, and a child who was killed by an alligator at Walt Disney World. We aimed to understand (1) What are people’s views and opinions of the parents of the child victims? and (2) Do these views and opinions differ between the CZ and DW events? Our results show three similar themes between these incidents: It Wouldn’t Happen to Me, Parenting Abilities and Actions, and Support, and two themes which differed between the incidents: Qualified blame/Sympathy and Punishment. The position of these findings within the parent blame literature, posited theoretical bases, and potential implications of this study are discussed within.

Keywords: trauma, parent blame, thematic analysis, cyber bullying

Introduction

Parents bear the brunt of responsibility for many of their children’s actions. When a child is injured or killed following an accident (i.e., unintentional injuries and fatalities such as those caused by burns, drowning, falls, poisoning, and road traffic; CDC, 2008), it is often the parents who are blamed, shamed, and hated, even in situations where the parent was not involved in the accident. This blame can have negative implications for the parents and the child experiencing accidents, as well as parents who observe this blame being placed on others.

We focused on two accidents in the United States (US) that occurred within three weeks of one another: one child who fell into a gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo (CZ), and one child who was attacked by an alligator at Walt Disney World (DW). Both incidents received mass media attention and many attributions of parental blame via online comments. We analyzed these comments to understand how attributions of parent blame for child harm take shape in online commentary. Thus, we investigated unsolicited, predominately non-anonymous attributions of fault for child harm in the context of two real-life incidents. We discuss the tendency for researchers to blame mothers for child difficulties, the distress parents’ experience when their child has an accident, how attributions of blame – including those made online – impact parents, and why it is important to study online commentary before describing our current study in more detail.
Accidents are the leading cause of death and injury among children aged 14 years and under in the Western world (CDC, 2008). However, life has become much safer for children. Between 2000 and 2009, death rates from unintentional injuries among children and adolescents declined 30% (CDC, 2012). Beginning in the 19th century, Chavesse (1888), a British medical doctor, presented an understanding of the causes of child accidents that became widely adopted, stating that:

A mother can usually prevent her child from having an accident by strict supervision over him on her own part...Accidents generally arise from one of three causes, namely, either from willful disobedience, or from gross carelessness, or from downright folly. (p. 479)

He further indicated that it was a mother’s responsibility to prevent her child from having an accident. The general understanding was that a mother’s forceful vigilance protected children from accidents, just as her incompetence, weakness, and neglect did the opposite (Gleason, 2005). Parents are held responsible for a wide range of children’s behaviours and experiences, such as delinquent and criminal acts (Wellman et al., 2017), being in residential programs (Ainsworth, 1991), emotional difficulties (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2000), and lack of academic achievement (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Researchers have generally focused on blame assigned to mothers (not fathers; Phares et al., 2005). These blame attributions are extremely broad. Previous researchers show that mothers are attributed blame for outcomes such as psychological and physical disorders (e.g., over-emotionality, intellectual disabilities, asthma, obesity; Caplan & Hall-McCordvale, 1985; Kellerman, 1974), children’s development, such as in Autism Spectrum Disorder (Courcy & des Rivières, 2017), and childhood sexual abuse (e.g., Joyce, 2007; Zagrodney & Cummings, 2016). In addition, researchers have demonstrated that in cases of non-interpersonal trauma (i.e., the death of a child after being accidentally left in a hot car), mothers are blamed more and judged as less competent than fathers (Walzer & Czopp, 2011).

Child Accidents are Associated with Parental Distress

Child accidents can have deleterious effects on parents, which vary depending on the accident outcome. For example, if a child is injured following an accident, parents can experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Egberts et al., 2017), self-blame, stress, and feelings of incompetence in caring for their child (Williamson et al., 2016). When children are injured, the level of fear that the child was at risk for death is related to poorer psychological adjustment for parents and increased risk of acute stress disorder (Kassam-Adams et al., 2009). The death of a child following an accident can result in grief (Riley et al., 2007), low self-worth and negative views of the benevolence of the world (Matthews & Marwit, 2004), negative health-related quality of life (e.g., vision, pain; Song et al., 2010), depressive symptoms and marital disruption (Rogers et al., 2008), and increased risk of mortality (Rostila et al., 2011).

Impact of Attributions of Parent Blame

Parents experience substantial negative effects when they receive blame following child trauma. According to Jackson and Mannix (2004) mothers who felt blamed after their child’s trauma conveyed that the blame was a burden placed upon them by others and noted that they internalized this and subsequently blamed themselves. They further linked this blame to feelings of inadequacy, anger, and self-blame. Together, these suggest that having a child who has experienced an accident can be a traumatic experience for parents, which along with
experiencing attributions of blame from those around them, can have deleterious effects on their mental and physical health. Moreover, blame following some events can lead to lack of reporting (Lovett, 2004) or discontinuation of necessary medical services (Jackson & Mannix, 2004).

Parent Blame Online

The internet has made attributions of blame more readily available, given the globalized and interconnected nature of our world, as well as changing expectations of parents and the idea that children’s well-being is a public concern. With the ubiquity of smartphone cameras, Internet access, and social media, perceived parenting mishaps can be viewed by millions of people globally and at any time of the day, making our humans’ ability to comment easier, faster, and more common. Not only does this increase the scale of people who can comment on one’s parenting choices, sometimes stories of such incidents become widespread in popularity as they are shared from person to person (or covered by major news outlets), a concept known as “going viral.” Social media is particularly effective in spreading news (Kwak et al., 2010). Moreover, child accidents are a dominant focus of media attention. Statistics indicate shocking headlines, such as those related to disaster and death are among the most clicked on and shared on Facebook and Twitter (Newman, 2011). Via the availability heuristic, widespread media coverage of child accidents, abductions, and other unfortunate events has also resulted in people believing that the world is much more dangerous for children than statistics show (Best, 1987; Thomas et al., 2016).

Expectations of Parents

Accompanying the increased global ability to share and comment on issues related to parenting is the modern expectation of total parental responsibility for children. It is expected that every child should be under constant, direct parental supervision (Thomas et al., 2016). Although parental supervision is associated with decreases in child accidents (e.g., Morrongiello, 2005), expectations of constant supervision are implausible and hold logistical challenges. For example, vocational and educational expectations of adults and children encourage separation (e.g., when adults go to work and children go to school) and parents are required to work to support their children. Thomas et al. (2016) noted that parents are arrested and prosecuted for allowing their children to wait in cars, play in parks, or walk through their neighborhoods without an adult (e.g., Brooks, 2014; Dwar, 2014; Gregory, 2015; Schmidt, 2014). Thomas et al. (2016) questioned the logic of these expectations, noting that bringing a child on an airplane or in a vehicle exponentially increases their chances of dying in a crash and that children are more likely to be hurt in car accidents than from playing in a park unsupervised. Yet, parents are not arrested for bringing their children with them on airplanes or into vehicles (Thomas et al., 2016). Thomas et al. (2016) found that this discrepancy is due to beliefs in the morality of the parents’ choices: the less morally acceptable a parent’s reason for leaving a child alone, or putting them in danger (e.g., going on a car ride), the more danger people think the child is in. This suggests that people’s estimates of danger to unsupervised children are affected by an intuition that parents who leave their children alone have done something morally wrong. Morality-based judgments are a common part of online commentary, where people are policed about what they wear (Rentschler, 2015), their values and behaviours (Skoric et al., 2010), and parenting practices (Jarvis, 2017).
Public Responsibility for Children’s Wellbeing

Although childrearing was previously considered to belong in the private sector (i.e., caregivers alone are responsible for safeguarding their children; Burnham, 1996), protecting children and preventing them from experiencing accidents has shifted to a discourse of community prevention via public education and contributions (Gleason, 2005). This changing worldview was expected to alleviate some of the blame and pressure placed on parents following child accidents (Gleason, 2005), by moving responsibility from an individual expectation to a communal, societal expectation. This also means, however, that any member of the public is permitted to pass judgment and express their views on the parenting of any child, regardless of whether they know or are related to that child and/or their parents. Combined with the expectation that parents are responsible for all of their children’s time and behaviour, our interconnected online world, and the frequency of media stories regarding children’s deaths and accidents, an environment for large-scale online commentary on parenting is created.

Impact of Online Commentary on Targeted Parents

Negative online commentary has the potential for detrimental consequences for the individuals being targeted. Cyberbullying is carried out by electronic means such as text messages, online comments, or social networking sites (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Research with children and adolescents shows that malicious online interactions can have deleterious effects on the targeted individuals, such as depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem and behavioral problems (Hemphill et al., 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Although there has been little scientific research specifically into the effects of malicious online comments toward adults, anecdotal evidence suggests that the implications of such comments for this group should not be taken lightly. For example, a former Australian host of a TV program called “Next Top Model” died by suicide in 2013, after being the target of numerous malicious online comments (Webb, 2014).

Why Study Online Commentary on Parenting?

How are online comments relevant to the psychology of families, the general public of parents, or media psychology? First, due to the ubiquity of online space, our online and offline spaces intersect (Burgess & Green, 2018; Hallet & Barber, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2009; Zappavigna, 2018), such that understanding offline behaviour includes exploring online behaviour, and vice versa; this interconnection provides valuable insight from one to the other (Hallet & Barber, 2014; Legewie & Nassauer, 2018; Mishra & Ismail, 2017). Our Humans’ online world reflects their offline world. For parenting, this means if vitriol, shame, and blame exist in online commentary, it can mirror societal beliefs towards parents offline.

Second, parents seek online information and support related to raising children (Dworkin et al., 2013), from both websites and social media (Baker et al., 2017). In one study of an online parenting website, 85.7% of users reported an intention to use the parenting information offered, with 82.4% of users expecting the information to benefit their child (Pluye et al., 2015). Parents of younger children are more likely to seek information online (Baker et al., 2017). Parents who observe negative judgement and blame online might be less likely to seek services or medical care when needed, consistent with the literature on child trauma (Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Lovett, 2004).

Third, malicious online comments can perpetuate malicious attitudes towards parents and further bolster the social construction of this behaviour as normative and acceptable.
Moreover, such behaviour is contagious. For example, participants exposed to uncivil user comments on news articles have shown an increase in their own hostile cognitions as readers (Rösner et al., 2016). In a similar study, participants who read an online article and then were exposed to prejudiced comments posted by other users then posted more prejudiced comments themselves. They also showed more negative attitudes towards the target group, once offline (Hsueh et al., 2015). These studies suggest that reading negative online comments can alter people’s perceptions of the target groups. In the case of parenting, this might serve to increase polarizing judgement of parents. Working towards understanding online attributions of malice towards parents of child accident victims specifically, can be crucial to combatting, and hopefully alleviating, the negative effects that these comments might have.

**Current Study**

We examined online responses to two media stories of child incidents that sparked significant media and societal interest (described below), via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Using online comments allowed us the unique opportunity to analyze unsolicited, predominantly non-anonymous responses regarding parent blame for two real-life incidents of child harm. This is a significant improvement over previous parent-blame literature, which has typically directly asked people about their parent blaming (e.g., a situation in which participants are likely to downplay their views) or utilized vignettes and questions about hypothetical situations (with questionable external validity to real-life behaviour). Moreover, as discussed below, the similarities between these events provided a unique analysis opportunity. Given the close time frame in which the two events occurred, (i.e., within a three-week period) we were also able to compare commentary across events with less concern for the impact of time (i.e., history) as a threat to internal validity. We endeavoured to answer the following two research questions: (1) What are people’s views and opinions of the parents of the child victims? and (2) Do these views and opinions differ between the CZ and DW events?

Answers to these questions allow us to further understand the climate of parent blame online. This is an important avenue of research, as it provides us insight into reasons why people are blaming parents and what factors (if any) influence type and/or amount of blame. We are particularly interested in this topic given the globalized nature of our world and the interconnected and reciprocal nature of society and the internet. As noted above, blame attributions towards parents has the potential to deleteriously affect not only parents (Jackson & Mannix, 2004), but the online availability of this blame can influence online other readers’ opinions and incite a contagion of hatred and further blame attitudes towards parents (Rösner et al., 2016).

**Target Accidents**

The first target accident occurred on May 28, 2016 at the CZ, in Cincinnati, Ohio (BBC, 2016). A 3-year old boy went through a railing and fell approximately 15 feet into the moat surrounding the gorilla enclosure. The boy was reportedly pulled through the moat by the gorilla; the gorilla was euthanized due to concerns it would harm the child and for zoo authorities to remove the boy from the exhibit. The boy suffered a concussion and scrapes/bruises. The second target accident occurred on June 14, 2016 at DW in Orlando, Florida. A two-year old boy was playing in sand along a lagoon when an alligator pulled him into the water and out into the lagoon, drowning him (McLaughlin, et al., 2016). The boy was accompanied by both of his parents and his father attempted to rescue him from the alligator.

There are similarities between the two incidents. Both involve toddler-aged boys, wild animals, and occurred at the same time of the year. However, notable differences also exist,
providing grounds for comparison. First, gender of the parent involved differed, with the mother being the target parent at the CZ and the father being the target parent at DW. Second, in one incident the child was injured whereas in the other he died. Third, race differs between the families, with the family at the CZ being African-American and the family at DW being Caucasian. Last, there is some debate about the presence of wild animals being unknown at DW – at the time of the accident DW had no posted signs on their lagoon beaches about the presence of alligators. However, others argue that alligators are so common in Florida waters that their presence should be assumed without signs (Highsmith, 2023). Some similar unknowns relate to the CZ incident, with some observers claiming the gorilla was trying to rescue the boy and many critics questioning the security of CZ if a child could gain access to the exhibit.

Both incidents were covered extensively in American and international news (e.g., BBC, 2016; Luscombe, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2016) and thousands of people took to social media and comment feeds to express their opinions. Many of these opinions concerned the parents and their responsibilities. Although there have been two other studies concerning these incidents, both focus on media’s framing of the incidents (Coon, 2017; Saunders-Grewe, 2017). No research has investigated the online comments on these media stories.

Methods

Methodological Choice & Epistemological Position

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) is a methodology that identifies patterns of shared meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It is flexible, exploratory, and iterative; the researcher is core to the analytic process, and themes are generated through the active work of the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We chose reflexive thematic analysis as it allowed us to search for such patterns of shared meaning amongst the comments left on the news stories selected that covered both incidents. This allowed us to also compare and contrast these themes as part of our interpretation.

Our study was grounded within a constructionist epistemology; we hold the view that truth and meaning, and by extension this research data, is constructed through interactions with the world and the individuals within it, and these meanings can be diversely constructed, depending on the individual (Crotty, 1998). Opinions towards groups of people (e.g., online commentary in this study) are social processes: they are not developed in isolation (Friedkin & Johnsen, 1990), but are co-constructed through individuals’ interactions with each other and various institutions (Friedkin & Johnsen, 1990). With regards to author reflexivity, we note that no authors were themselves parents.

Data Collection

The chair of the Research Ethics Board at the institution where the project was conducted established that ethical approval was not required for this study. However, it is crucial to recognize the ethical issues unique to online research (Giles et al., 2015). Although the online comments that we analyzed were made by individuals unaware that we used their comments in our study, and thus were unable to provide formal informed consent, these comments were made on publicly available websites and commenters were aware that they are available to anyone who reads the news articles. In writing this manuscript, we did not include commenters’ names and ensured that the quotes we included are deidentified.

We began by searching the internet for original, American news articles discussing the incidents. This left us with articles from USA Today, Consumer News & Broadcast Channel
(CNBC), the Orlando Sentinel, Huffington Post, People magazine, the Washington Post, and the New York Times, for the DW incident, and from Cincinnati.com, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) News, the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post, and USA Today, for the CZ incident. To narrow this section for coding (i.e., to produce a manageable number of comments for reflexive thematic analysis) and to avoid researcher bias in article selection, we randomly selected two articles for each incident: one from a major national news source that had written stories about both incidents (USA Today), and one article from a local news source for each (Orlando Sentinel and Cincinnati.com [a part of the USA Today Network, though a distinct news source]). All websites allowed for individuals to leave comments. Reader comments were copied and pasted into a Word document and printed into hard copies. The news articles selected included thousands of reader comments \( (N = 3571) \), an unwieldy number of comments for the depth of analysis we sought. For this reason, we randomly selected pages of these printed documents, representing approximately 5% of the total comment set. Random selection avoided introducing researcher bias into comment selection. Of those individual pages we only analyzed comments which related to the parent, as the focus of this study was on attributions of blame towards parents (See Table 1 for more information about news articles and comments).

### Table 1

*Characteristics of Included Articles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Total Reader Comments</th>
<th>Reader Comments Analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Reader Comments**

For three articles (two from USA Today, and one from Cincinnati.com), comments were linked to the individuals’ Facebook pages. To comment on these three sites, individuals were required to log in to their Facebook pages and their name and profile picture was displayed next to their comment. The article from Orlandosentinel.com required commenters to create a unique login name, thus providing the option of anonymity in their comments, although some comments used their own name for their login name. We first conducted initial coding on anonymous and non-anonymous comments separately. However, comparison of these codes indicated they were similar between the anonymous and non-anonymous comments, thus we...
decided to analyze all comments together. Occasionally commenters responded to other commenters. In these situations, we ensured that we had access to the entirety of the conversation strain to code, to maintain context for that set of comments.

Analysis

From the data corpus we extracted a particular set of reader comments pertaining to parents of the child who experienced the incident. We strove to be inductive in the sense that we did not go into our analysis with pre-existing ideas about what individuals might say about the parents, but rather allowed those ideas to evolve from the data. We also used a latent approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) meaning that we, as the researchers, identified and examined underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations, and ideologies that were theorized as shaping or informing semantic content of the data.

We performed the thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) six-step technique. To begin, the first author read through the data multiple times without assigning codes, to familiarize herself with the data, and then re-read the data, highlighting and making notes about salient concepts and potential themes. Next, the first author again read through the data and attended to places where people discussed the parents of the child victim. Each data item was then reviewed and provided a potential code to summarize the main point of that data item. Third, the data codes were organized into potential themes. Fourth, these themes were refined to ensure that they formed a coherent pattern, that all data extracts fit within themes, and that the themes were sufficiently different. For the fifth step, the author defined and named the themes. We wrote a detailed analysis for each theme, outlining the “story” being told by the themes and subthemes. The final step from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) consists of producing the report, which is a concise, coherent, and interesting account of the story that the data tells. This step goes beyond description and tells a story of the data in relation to our research questions. Each of the thematic analysis steps were performed first on the two DW articles, and then on the two CZ articles. We compared the resulting themes from both incidents. For ease of comparison and reporting, they are discussed in terms of similarities and differences in our Results.

Verification of Reliability and Validity

We subscribe to Morse et al. (2002) conceptualization of reliability and validity as valid constructs for qualitative research and their use of verification strategies to check qualitative studies for reliability and validity. Such strategies are used at all stages of a qualitative study. Morse et al. (2002) outline five strategies to verify reliability and validity: (1) methodological coherence, or congruence between the research question and method; (2) appropriate sampling of participants who best represent the topic; (3) collecting and analyzing data concurrently; (4) thinking theoretically, with ideas emerging from the data being examined in new data; and (5) theory development to move from the data to more conceptual thinking. We used four of these five verification strategies in our study. First, as previously discussed thematic analysis was deemed the best choice for our research question, demonstrating methodological coherence. Second, we sampled news story commenters who discussed parents related to each incident (i.e., appropriate sampling for our research question). Third, we utilized theoretical thinking via memo writing and conversations amongst the research team, with questions being evaluated against our data by continually examining the data, codes, and emerging themes considering these questions. Fourth, we moved from our data to conceptual thinking, creating a thematic map that accounted for the phenomenon of study present in our data. We note that we did not
collect and analyze data concurrently but that this is, in general, not a strategy used in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Results

Themes that are Identical Across Incidents

Theme 1: It Wouldn’t Happen to Me

This theme represents commenters’ beliefs that they would not have allowed the incident to happen to their own child, and thus the parents are at fault for it. Commenters would often note that they would have done things differently; they brought up the perceived discrepancies between themselves and the parent in the news story, creating a sense of “otherness.” Specifically, commenters made a “direct” comparison between themselves and the parent in the story. Examples of this include: “there is no way I would go close to a Florida lake after dark,” “I have three kids, and have taken numerous kids to the zoo, and never ever EVER once have they gotten away from me, at any age,” and “never could I allow my children out of my sight, anywhere especially the zoo.” These examples illustrate the commenters’ beliefs that such an experience would not happen to them, placing themselves into the situation, hypothetically, and concluding that because it would not happen to them the parents in both accidents are responsible for what happened.

Theme 2: Parenting Abilities and Actions

This theme captures commenters’ discussion of the parenting abilities and duties that were perceived as lacking in both situations, and thus contributed to the occurrence of the incidents. Notably, this theme included comments where people discussed that this singular incident that happened to the child was exemplary of the parents’ entire ability to be a parent. Examples under this theme include calling them: “incompetent parents,” and “bad parents,” as well as mentions of negligence/care being the cause of the incident, such as: “the kid’s parents obviously don’t give a damn about their children,” and “sad this ape had to be shot for the inattention of this neglectful mother.” These examples illustrate how the commenters labelled the parents and their parenting abilities negatively. In addition, two subthemes were subsumed under this theme: Supervision and Expecting.

Subtheme: Supervision. The subtheme of Parenting Abilities and Actions included specific references to how the parents’ lack of watching or supervision methods resulted in the incident’s occurrence. These encompassed the idea that parents should be performing constant, intensive supervision of their children. Examples from this theme included: “once again, parents [not] watching there [sic] kids allowed something terrible to happen,” “how do you not know what a four year old is doing at all times,” “your full time job when out and about is watching them,” and “just because people don’t watch their damn kids this gorilla had to die.” In each of these examples, commenters highlighted the role lack of supervision played in the accidents.

Subtheme: Expecting. The second Parenting Abilities and Actions theme was Expecting, and encompassed the idea that parents should have expected that incident/ been aware of the risk, and worked to prevent it. These ideas were mainly centered on the fact that parents should be expecting that things like alligator attacks and a child falling into a gorilla cage, occur, and thus they should be readily prepared, either by educating themselves about the
area, or by taking preventative measures with their children. Examples included: “parents should be aware of the surrounding when their two-year-old children are playing” and “[the parents] were not aware of the environment and I think that is stupidity.” Both of these examples demonstrate how the commenters believed the parents should have expected the situation and thus prevented it.

**Theme 3: Support**

A final theme common to both articles was Support for the parents. This theme encompassed comments where people discussed support and/or sympathy for the parents of the children involved in the incidents. Examples included: “demonizing the parents here is rather foolish,” “why is it necessary to blame someone,” and “prayers for the family.” This theme also included comments that criticizing the other commenters, such as referring to them as “heartless retards” saying that commenters are “way too harsh” and blaming the institutions, such as “Disney is at fault 100%.” These example quotes illustrate how commenters supported the parents, alleviated them from blame, defended them against other commenters and blamed others for the incident.

**Themes That Differed by Incident**

**Theme 4: Qualified Blame/Sympathy**

This theme of Qualified Blame/Sympathy appeared only in regard to the DW incident. This theme captures how commenters would express sympathy for the parents, similar to Support, but then qualify this sympathy by also saying that the parents had made a mistake or were to blame. At times this was done explicitly and other times in a more subtle manner. For example, it also encompassed comments where people would say that they did not blame the parents, but then later in their comment would use different language that did attribute some level of blame or responsibility to the parents. Examples included: “parents must beware of the surrounding when their two-year-old children are playing. Not blaming the parents,” “my first response isn’t necessarily to blame the parents, but the article did say that there are signs…the two-year-old cannot read, but I’m assuming the parents can,” “I am so sorry for the family…but unfortunately natural selection sometimes gets in. There’s a no swimming sign for a reason,” and “I’m not blaming the parents…but they are responsible.”

**Theme 5: Punishment**

Punishment represents comments regarding the consequences the parents received or should receive due to the accidents. This theme occurred in both incidents but manifested differently between DW and CZ. With the DW incident, the theme of punishment encompassed comments where individuals noted that the parents had already been punished enough, or that the death of their child was enough of a consequence for them. For example: “this family [of] this boy deserves prayers not degradation of what they did or what they should or could of have done as parents. I think there probably beating themselves up enough,” “the parents had to watch their child being eaten and dragged off. They will forever pay for a minute of complacency. No punishment could be worse,” and “it was a bad decision to play in/at the lagoon. I’m sure the parents realize this now. They’ll forever blame themselves for their error in judgment. Let the parents grieve and stop the ‘blame game’.” There was only one comment where an individual commented that parents in the DW incident should be punished, without mentioning the already punishing aspect of their child’s death.
Regarding the CZ incident, the idea of punishment was rampant and more aggressive than what was seen in DW, and no commenter reported that the parents had been punished enough. With regards to this incident comments involved the idea that the parents of the child who fell into the gorilla enclosure deserved some sort of severe punishment. The types of punishment ranged from fines, to jail-time, to death, and are demonstrated by numerous instances throughout the comments. Comments which were encompassed in this theme included: “Who will jail the parents of the boy who did not take care of his behaviour,” “I would have been happy had they shot the parents instead of the gorilla,” and “it would have been better if the parents of this child had been aborted.” All of these quotes, across both incidents, demonstrate the punishments commenters expected the parents should receive.

**Discussion**

We examined a subset of individuals’ online comments on news articles about two well-known incidents of child accidents in the United States. Our results show three consistent themes in comments across the two incidents: It Wouldn’t Happen to Me, Parenting Abilities & Actions, and Support. In addition, two themes differed between the two incidents: Qualified Blame/Sympathy and Punishment, indicating also that there were considerable differences in responses between these two incidents. Consistent with this and the idea of the “public child,” a great number of comments were posted discussing these incidents ($N = 3571$), on the articles that we sampled alone. This does not include comments on other articles or posts on other forms of social media.

**Common Themes across Accidents**

Overall, these themes depicted a strong thread of blame. Many of these comments were a negative judgement about the parents’ skills (e.g., Parenting Abilities & Actions). Commenters inferred that parents in both incidents were incompetent, generally bad people, and did not care about their children. This theme (Parenting Abilities and Actions) has appeared in other parent blame literature (Toews et al., 2016), such that perceptions of a mother’s skills is indicative of the amount of fault attributed to her. The subtheme Supervision is consistent with previous literature demonstrating that parents are expected to provide constant supervision to prevent bad things from happening, and that not providing this constant supervision is seen as an immoral and criminalized act (e.g., Gregory, 2015; Schmidt, 2014). Comments that it is a parent’s “full-time job” to watch their child, and that the parent should know what their four-year-old is doing “at all times” suggest an idealistic perception of parents’ ability to have constant watch over their children, consistent with previous work by Thomas et al. (2016) and Toews et al. (2016). Further, the subtheme of Expecting (i.e., where commenters believe that the parents should have foreseen the incident, and provided the appropriate supervision, or been appropriately educated on the dangers of the area) has also been seen in previous studies on blame (Toews et al., 2016). One possible explanation for this finding is through the hindsight bias (Fischhoff, 1975; Roese & Vohs, 2012). Hindsight bias is the tendency for people to look back on an event with a known outcome, and to overestimate how predictable or foreseeable that event was before it took place (Fischhoff, 1975; Roese & Vohs, 2012). Possibilities for working to alleviate this hindsight bias are discussed below.

Consistent with defensive attribution theory, in which people highlight the differences between themselves and the victim of an incident to reduce their perceived likelihood of experiencing the same incident (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2019; Shaver, 1970), the theme It Wouldn’t Happen to Me depicts commenters comparing themselves to the parents in the incidents and making strong efforts to distance themselves from them, by noting that the incident would
never have happened to them because they would have done things/parented differently. As Shaver (1970) notes, blaming the victim (in this case the parents) acts to distance an observer from feeling at risk (i.e., to reduce anxiety or stress) for experiencing the same negative event as the victim, particularly in situations where similarity between an observer (i.e., commenter) and the victim are high. It is therefore possible that the individuals who were commenting wanted to attribute blame towards the parents because it is painful to imagine that a similar negative event might befall them. Further, this idea has been noted as being understandable through a just world theory lens. Some individuals appear to hold implicit just world beliefs (i.e., they believe that the world operates in a fair and just matter, good acts are rewarded, and bad acts are punished; Lerner, 1980), as they needed to believe that the parent had made some sort of mistake, or that they have a characterological flaw, in order for something so negative to have happened to an innocent child (Toews et al., 2016). That is, among people who hold just world beliefs, the concept of an “innocent victim” is difficult for accept, and thus they tend towards believing that the victim has done something wrong, in order to reconcile negative situations with their beliefs.

Differences in Qualified Blame/Sympathy and Punishment

Commenters differed in how they responded to both incidents in terms of Qualified Blame/Sympathy as well as Punishment. With the DW incident, some commenters denied blaming parents but qualified this comment by stating that they held parents responsible. Such response complexity has been previously found in a study examining attributions of mother fault for child sexual abuse (Zagrodney & Cummings, 2017), where some participants provided attributions that both assigned and absolved the mother of fault within the same statement. Zagrodney and Cummings (2017) offered four possible explanations for these complexities: changing gender attitudes toward mothers, social desirability or participant discomfort blaming mothers, and topic sensitivity that makes blame difficult to discuss. Similar to that study, we are unable to conclude from where such complexities stem. Future research in this area should focus on this complexity in discourse to assess it further.

Punishment for the CZ Incident

Punishment was one theme that was expressed differently between incidents. Whereas commenters discussing the DW incident noted that the parents had been “punished enough” by losing their child, commenters discussing the CZ incident described the parents as deserving of punishment. It is important to note that zero commenters discussing the CZ incident had comments that fell in the Qualified Blame/Sympathy theme. That is, while the DW incident parents received qualified blame and sympathy, and were seen as not deserving punishment, the CZ incident parents received (unqualified) blame and were seen as deserving quite severe punishment. There are three major differences between these two incidents might explain these contrasts: parent race, gender, and severity of the incident.

Race

Whereas the CZ incident involved an African-American family, the DW incident involved a Caucasian family. Given the dramatic racial tension evident in the US, it is imperative that we consider race. Although both sets of parents received insults, Punishment was astoundingly more prevalent with the African-American family. This might in part be due to stereotypes and prejudice. Harry et al. (2005) found that stereotypes of African-American parents as being neglectful and incompetent are commonplace, specifically with school
personnel in the US. Thus, it might be stereotypes and racist attitudes towards African-Americans which are driving these malicious retributory attitudes towards the mother. Likewise, Caucasian families were seen as having “been punished enough” (i.e., Qualified Blame/Sympathy) by the loss of their child. To our knowledge, no direct comparison of parent race and fault attributions exists within the literature. Our results highlight the importance of assessing the impact of race and racism on parent blame, as well as online commentary as a vehicle for expressing and maintaining racist views toward African-American parents.

**Gender**

Additionally, the gender of the parent directly involved in the incident differed between stories. With the DW incident, it was the father, and with the CZ incident, it was the mother, who were with the child at the time of the incidents. With the DW incident, it is possible that there was more Qualified Blame and Sympathy, and less desires for Punishment because it was the father who was directly involved. This speculation is supported in mother-blame literature, as mothers are often attributed most of the blame for their child’s misfortunes, as compared to fathers (Caplan & Hall-McCorquodale, 1985). Further, research shows that even in extreme cases of parenting failure (i.e., the death of a child after being accidently left in a hot car), mothers are blamed more and judged as less competent than fathers (Walzer & Czopp, 2011).

Expectancy-violation theory (Burgoon, 2015; Burgoon & Jones, 1976) posits that individuals will be evaluated more harshly when their behaviours violate stereotyped expectations of their group (e.g., a mother making a parenting mistake) versus when these behaviours do not violate expectations (e.g., a father making a parenting mistake). Thus, it is possible that commenters were less harsh with the DW incident and saw the need to qualify their blame and incorporate sympathy in their responses towards him, because it was the father who directly involved, as opposed to the mother.

**Severity of the Incident**

It is important to note the difference in severity between the two incidents. With the CZ incident, the child survived with minor injuries. With the DW incident, the child lost his life. This difference might have influenced thematic differences, namely in lesser desires for retribution for the DW parents, and greater qualified blame/sympathy for them. This finding is inconsistent with previous research, such that with accidents with more severe outcomes, individuals have been found to ascribe greater controllability, responsibility, and blame to the parent than in mild outcomes (Hanson et al., 2015). Further, research shows that more severe accident outcomes are associated with more severe beliefs in the necessity of legal punishment (Hanson et al., 2015). Yet, our results insinuate that individuals might attribute less responsibility and blame to the parent when their child’s accident has more severe or fatal outcomes, which goes against several previously mentioned research findings. It is important to note this deviation from what might by hypothesized by previous literature might indicate race or parent gender are better explanations for this difference in Punishment.

**Who Supports Parents?**

One encouraging finding from this study is the subset of commenters who provided support and encouragement for the parents. Notably, this was the only positive theme to arise from our analyses. These individuals expressed sympathy, as well as questioned why people felt the need to blame someone. Most previous qualitative research on fault assigned to parents has focused on those who “assign” fault only, rather than also examining those who provide...
support. Although the format of this study did not allow for us to investigate individual differences, our results indicate that future research should investigate the individual differences driving these comments or support, such as defensive attribution theory (DAT). For example, DAT would argue that those who are most dissimilar from the parents in the news stories would be more likely to leave supportive comments (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2019; Shaver, 1970).

**Implications**

Our research adds to current dialogue around parent blame for child harm. From this research, we provide a clearer picture of fault attributions to parents after child harm. As our online and offline worlds cannot be disentangled (Burgess & Green, 2018), our study provides a reflection of modern beliefs regarding parent attributions of fault for child accidents, showing that parents are held at fault for the public events that happen to their children, and that modern parenting exists within a context of intense online observation and commentary, for better or worse. This appears to have a reciprocal relationship on parents and their use of online media, advice and support-seeking, and help-seeking during times of child injury or problem. It is imperative that future research examine these links.

Our results might also provide guidance for what information to/not to include in media articles, to reduce vitriol towards parents when such incidents happen. Further, by understanding the rationale behind blame attributions, we can provide information to combat some of these beliefs (e.g., information that accidents still happen, even when children are under supervision). This research might also provide people with insight into the maliciousness of their comments. People who cyber-bully might be more malicious than they would be in real life, as computers provide a feeling of depersonalization and distance from the victim. Perhaps if individuals can explicitly read and understand the effect that online comments and overarching dialogue have on parents, they will be better able empathize and limit blame. Last, these findings have implications for the judicial realm. Because parents of children accident victims are often investigated and/or prosecuted for child neglect or endangerment, investigating themes and theories behind attributions of fault (e.g., hindsight bias) might be particularly helpful. Specifically, because there have been techniques proposed to “de-bias the hindsight bias” (Sanna & Schwarz, 2003, p. 287), this research has implications for attempts to de-bias individuals involved in legal proceedings, in order to work towards providing more fair trials.

**Strengths and Limitations**

Our data is limited by two factors. First, given that comments naturally arose in response to news articles, we are unable to delve further into commenters’ responses by asking follow-up questions, in the way that we might have been able to with recruited research participants. Second, selection bias was a possible influence on our data in two ways – the selection bias involved between those who opt to provide online comments with their name attached (versus anonymous online comments) and those who choose not to provide such comments, as well as the selection bias involved in choosing news websites for data selection. For example, it is possible that our low frequency of supportive comments is due to a lower likelihood of supportive individuals posting online comments, that anonymous online comments might have different content or intensity than non-anonymous comments, or that soliciting comments from other types of websites (e.g., social media) might lead to different results. However, our thematic analysis has several strengths including the unsolicited nature of these naturally occurring comments we analyzed. Moreover, these comments were posted
in response to actual events, whereas much previous research has relied upon hypothetical vignettes.

**Directions for Future Research**

There are numerous avenues for future exploration stemming from this research. First, it would be beneficial to investigate theoretical models for blame attributions, given the noted applicability of defensive attribution theory, expectancy-violation theory, just world beliefs, hindsight bias, and the availability heuristic. Investigating if demographics play a role in influencing blame attributions would also be an important area for inquiry. Further, it would be helpful to investigate parents’ experiences of such malicious online comments. Future researchers could also investigate how blame attributions compare between online and in-person. Last, investigating the attitudes, both online, and in person, of individuals who have influence in judicial proceedings (e.g., judges, social workers, psychologists), would provide important insight into whether they hold similar views to general society. We recommend researchers employ various methods (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method) that will allow them to balance breadth versus depth of analysis. For example, our use of deep reflexive thematic analysis necessitated analysis of a subset of comments. In comparison, a quantitative approach might sample more breadth.

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