

Lund University

Department of Sociology



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Opposing Stereotypes

Understanding Identities in Online Communities for Minor-Attracted Persons

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January 2025

Master's Thesis CCRM20, Cultural Criminology, 30 Credits

Word Count: 21.986

Abstract

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This thesis examines the collective identity negotiation among online community members identifying as Minor-Attracted Persons (MAPs). Through a comprehensive analysis that includes twenty unstructured qualitative interviews and a qualitative survey with ninety-four responses, the research aims to illuminate how MAPs construct, redefine, and sustain identities that counteract the pervasive stigma associated with their attraction to children. Utilising theoretical frameworks by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Erving Goffman, Michael L. Schwalbe, and Douglas Mason-Schrock, the study contextualises MAPs' identity work within a broader social environment that largely condemns both their attraction and their quest for agency. By employing an understanding-based methodology, this investigation delves into MAPs' collective identity formation, outlining how online community members navigate societal perceptions that deem the attraction to children monstrous and the internal community dynamics. The findings reveal three distinct oppositional identities that MAPs adopt to counter the oppressive stereotypes of monstrosity: Being Human, a Sexual Minority, and Protectors of Children. Additionally, the study uncovers three further identities that MAPs develop to differentiate themselves from other members within the online community: Sacrificial Guardianship, Defending Human Liberty, and Promoting Emancipation. In doing so, this research contributes significantly to a more nuanced understanding of identity negotiation, stigma management, and the myriad challenges faced by MAPs, thereby enriching contemporary understandings of individuals living with a stigmatised sexual identity.

Keywords: Identity Work, Stigma, MAPs, Online Community, Sexual Identity

Popular Science Summary

Online communities where adults with a sexual attraction to children operate have faced scrutiny and debate. On one hand, online communities on the dark web have facilitated the sexual exploitation of children. On the other hand, online communities on the open web have emerged as spaces for identity negotiation and activist pursuits among Minor-Attracted Persons (MAPs). Although popular culture has significantly influenced public perception of MAPs by reinforcing stereotypes and social anxieties, recent scientific findings reveal that the online MAP community is more diverse than previously thought.

This thesis examines how members of online communities for individuals attracted to children on the open web collectively negotiate identities. The research involved an online qualitative survey of 94 responses and 20 unstructured interviews with members of various online communities. Participants' accounts were analysed using three theoretical perspectives: the sacred-profane dichotomy, identity work as a group process, and stigma. These frameworks provided insights into participants' identity work and their efforts to ascribe meaning to their identities.

This study investigates how identity is collectively negotiated among members of the online community for MAPs in contemporary modernity, where this subject is compounded by stigma and surrounded by moral and legal concerns. In doing so, this thesis addresses the paradox of Western societies that simultaneously condemn the attraction to children through the promotion of child protection while at times tolerating or even sexualising children through media and popular culture. By examining the cultural, emotional, and social dimensions of MAPs' sexual identity, this thesis hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the identity work of adults sexually attracted to children.

This thesis issues a trigger warning. Due to this topic's sensitivity, the findings may be difficult or upsetting for readers, including MAPs, to engage with.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the generosity and openness of my participants. I sincerely thank you for trusting me with your experiences and insights. Your willingness to share your stories has shaped this study and profoundly influenced my understanding of the online MAP community. A special thanks to the forum administrators and directors who have presented my study to community members.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Erik Hannerz, whose guidance, feedback, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this project. Your thoughtful critiques and support have challenged me to refine my ideas and stay true to the objectives of this research. I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to Henrik Vigh, my mentor, for his support during my preliminary research at Copenhagen University. I would also like to show my sincere appreciation to Tove Gustavsson for her invaluable insights and guidance on encryption and data protection.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my classmates for being a vital source of inspiration and support throughout this journey. Through our discussions and shared challenges, we have captured the collaborative spirit of academia. Your advice and insightful reflections have motivated me during difficult times.

Finally, I wish to express my deep appreciation to my friends and family for their patience, understanding, and support. Your faith in me has been a steadfast source of strength, and I am immensely grateful for your encouragement.

Thank you all for being an integral part of this journey.

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1. Introduction

The digital world is known for its dark sides and lawless space where perverts and predators operate around the clock (Steel et al., 2023). Among these predators, the notorious ‘cyber-paeds’ have intensified societal fears by appearing as an overarching threat to the innocence and well-being of children both online and offline (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012). The pervasive societal anxiety regarding child safety is, in part, attributable to the ominous example of sexual predators who exploit children. Through a facade of affection and care, these individuals seek to manipulate and gain the trust of their young victims, ultimately for the purpose of perpetrating abuse (Chopin et al., 2022). These predators are depicted as deceptive and calculating, utilising emotional manipulation to obscure and conceal their true harmful intentions of wanting to violate children’s bodies (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Although labelled as incurable, Western societies remain steadfast in the belief that treatment is essential to prevent repeated acts of sexual contact with children (Chenier, 2012). Thus, individuals attracted to children are viewed in academic and popular discourse as representing a psychological disorder, a criminal offence, and a commodified portrayal of a true crime monster (Harrison et al., 2010).

This preconception of individuals attracted to children has, by others, been referred to as ‘the public paedophile character’, a lens through which people in Western societies tend to understand individuals attracted to children (Nielsen et al., 2022). In opposition to this monstrous image, individuals with a sexual attraction to children have created alternative resilient identities online (Cranney, 2017). In these online spaces, the term Minor-Attracted Person (MAP) has surfaced as a collective project through which individuals attracted to children collectively have sought to humanise their existence (Walker, 2021). Yet, the negotiation of identity in online communities for MAPs remains underexplored and insufficiently addressed in social science. This thesis addresses a challenging and often controversial topic: the collective identity projects of MAPs. While previous studies have focused on the medical, psychological, and legal aspects (Bulfin, 2021), this thesis takes an alternative approach by examining the cultural, social, and identity-related dimensions of those who experience an attraction to children.

The stigma often linked to MAPs (Minor-Attracted Persons) has been recognised as misaligned with these individuals' self-perceptions and collective representations (Goode, 2011; Walker,

2021). Thus, the construction of oppositional identities in these online communities is perceived as singular and unified rather than nuanced (Holt et al., 2010). This thesis has sought to understand how self-identified MAPs make sense of their sexual identity and how oppositional identities are negotiated despite and because of the stigma that compounds their sexual attraction in contemporary modernity. Hence, this thesis will, amongst other things, delve into how MAPs ascribe their identities with meaning and how actions become a symbolic extension and manifestation of MAPs' oppositional identities. This thesis examines the processes through which MAPs construct and negotiate online identities within societal structures that overwhelmingly reject them.

1.2 Research Questions

To examine this issue, the current study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do the participating MAPs construct and negotiate their sexual identity in relation to prevailing cultural ideas about adult sexual attraction to children?
- 2) How and on what grounds do the participating MAPs establish and enforce in-group boundaries, and what impact do these boundaries have on their identity negotiation?

By addressing these questions, this thesis seeks to enhance contemporary understandings of MAPs and to expand current research on stigmatised sexual identities, online identity work, and stigma.

1.3 Key Terms

The term MAPs—Minor-Attracted Persons—will be used in this thesis to refer to individuals who are attracted to minors; by implication, it does not inherently apply to those who engage in acts of sexual abuse against children (Jara & Jeglic, 2021; Seto et al., 2023). According to Levin (2019), the widespread confusion surrounding the distinction between an attraction to children and acts of child sexual abuse (CSA) has resulted in a conflation of MAPs and child sex offenders (CSOs). Previous research rarely addresses the distinction and overlap between MAPs and CSOs; therefore, the notion that acts of CSA are not a necessary condition for being a MAP is often overlooked, according to Levin (2019).

This thesis distinguishes among Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), Minor-Attracted Persons (MAPs), and Child Sex Offenders (CSOs). Child sexual abuse (CSA) refers to sexual activity involving underage children, regardless of whether it entails sexual exploitation, contact offences, or non-contact offences, all of which are punishable by law (Salter, 2018). Individuals found guilty of such offences are termed child sex offenders (CSOs) (McDonald, 2022). While MAPs (Minor-Attracted Persons) are often identified as sex offenders due to their sexual preferences, contemporary research suggests otherwise (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). As people often pursue their desires, the link between MAPs and CSA is not unfounded (Cohen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is possible to be a MAP without engaging in acts of CSA and for CSOs not to be attracted to children.

Farmer et al. (2024) note that scholars often prefer the term MAPs as it appears more neutral compared to 'paedophile.' This non-stigmatizing term, it is argued, requires scrutiny regarding whether employing MAPs in research normalises paedophilia or lessens the perceived harm associated with attraction to children, given the lack of consensus on its use. This critique thus reflects a misunderstanding of scholarly research, which aims to study rather than endorse stereotypes, including the identity negotiation of MAPs. Thus, this study examines human behaviour.

The term MAPs will be employed following the epistemological and ontological foundations of this study. It is understood that this term is a social construct, signifying a meaningful identity that participants utilise in everyday interactions to differentiate between attraction to children and acts of CSA (Jahnke et al., 2022). Additionally, MAP serves as an umbrella term that encapsulates a broad range of age-based attractions that extends clinical definitions of paedophilia (4-11) to include hebephilia (12-16) and nepiophilia (0-3) (Jahnke et al., 2022; Seto, 2017). This study uses the terms "child," "minor," and "kid" interchangeably when referring to those to whom MAPs are attracted. It refrains from strictly defining this age range, acknowledging the diverse ages to which participants may be attracted, thus adopting interpretative flexibility to accommodate various perspectives on what qualifies as a child. Therefore, using the term 'paedophile' would, as Walker (2021) notes, overgeneralise these distinctions, which are significant for participants' identity negotiation and experiences in living with an attraction to children.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the digital dimensions of sexual identities, stigma, and online communities. It examines prior scholarly efforts to understand adult sexual attraction to children. Subsequently, it addresses the notion of childhood as a cultural idea and the implications of sexual morality. Finally, it provides a sociological perspective on current research surrounding MAPs and its relevance to this thesis.

2.1 Sexual Identities and the Internet

The concept of human sexuality has transformed with the internet, influencing how sexual identities, practices, and 'deviations' are understood. In psychology, Lievesley and Lapworth (2022) characterise adults' attraction to children as a sexual identity, while others regard it as a mental disorder and sexual orientation (Mundy, 2022; Seto, 2018). In other branches of the social sciences, McDonald (2012) notes that this attraction is often perceived as a criminal offence, even in the absence of criminal behaviour. Additionally, Goode (2011) suggests that the attraction to children is part of a 'continuum' of human sexuality. Proposals to classify attraction to children as a sexual orientation have sparked controversy, provoking public and academic outrage due to concerns about the potential undermining of harm to children (Farmer et al., 2024). However, having been confined to local cultures, sexuality has, as Cover (2022) noted, through technological advancements, aside from being global, also become digital.

In the contemporary digital landscape, many gender and sexual minority groups utilise social media to explore their identities, access information, seek support, and find a sense of belonging. Their online interactions help shape self-perceptions and influence collective identity. These spaces, referred to as 'backstages' by Goffman (1963), allow individuals to openly express all aspects of their identity, including those considered deviant by others (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023). Lievesley and Lapworth (2022) assert that MAPs face stigmatisation similar to that experienced by the LGBTQ+ community; however, they highlight that MAPs differ from recognised sexual minorities. Unlike consensual LGBTQ+ relationships, MAPs are attracted to children who cannot provide legal or moral consent, a distinction that underscores the fundamental difference between the two groups. Therefore, Lievesley and Lapworth (2022), alongside Walker (2021), argue that no moral or legal equivalence exists between MAPs and LGBTQ+ identities—only a shared experience of navigating the challenges

of a stigmatised sexual identity. Nevertheless, the similarities lie in the psychological burden of concealing one's sexual identity due to concerns about stigma and the potential interpersonal repercussions that may follow (Lievesley & Lapworth, 2022).

The use of the internet for various purposes, including sexual activities, is not unproblematic. Salter and Sokolov (2024) assert that the internet has facilitated the widespread proliferation of digital sex crimes, ultimately affecting the black market and underground economy, as the digital black market thrives on the demand for illegal sexual content. The internet has created further opportunities for individuals who wish to engage in sex crimes against children while evading detection (Kloess & Van Der Bruggen, 2023). According to Steel et al. (2023) and Kierkegaard (2008), the Internet has evolved into a lucrative market for those seeking illicit information, materials, and activities. In the absence of geographical boundaries and the widespread nature of social networks, the enhanced encryption offered by the dark web likely ensures the anonymity of individuals involved in illegal activities. Goode (2009, 2011) expands on this online behaviour, asserting that using the internet to interact with children for sexual purposes is both common and foreseeable. Rather than being shocking or surprising, this should be anticipated.

The online presence of individuals with a sexual preference for children is often regarded as a significant threat to children's well-being. As early as 2002, Tremblay observed that online communities for MAPs may lead to two potential outcomes. One possibility is that these communities encourage MAPs to engage in sexual intimacy with children by promoting certain attitudes and justifications (Holt et al., 2010; Krähnke et al., 2023). Alternatively, they could serve as a preventive measure by offering support and a sense of belonging, which may deter sexual offences. Contemporary studies indicate that participation in MAP online communities enhances resilience (Walker, 2017), aids in identity formation (Blagden et al., 2018), fosters supportive connections (Nielsen et al., 2022; Cranney, 2017), reduces suicidal ideation (Bekkers et al., 2024), and influences beliefs about adult-child intimacy (Cantor et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2022). Involvement in online communities for MAPs has enabled collective identity negotiation, inspiring actions both online and offline.

2.3 Monsters, Manipulators and Plagued Souls

Media reporting, true-crime documentaries, and early clinical definitions have significantly contributed to the stereotype of MAPs as monstrous figures, as well as to the commodification of CSA. Jewkes and Wykes (2012) contend that the socio-political anchoring of ‘the paedophile’ is particularly evident within the media-legal discourse surrounding ‘Stranger Danger’, which predominantly portrays MAPs as a male threat to the safety of children (see also Hartley & Bartels, 2022). Walker (2020) and Tozdan et al. (2022) further highlight that this characterisation has led to insufficient research on female MAPs and LGBTQ+ representation within MAP communities by reinforcing existing stereotypes and marginalising alternative voices. Bulfin (2021) notes that 19th-century sexologists used gothic language to describe concepts that ordinary terms failed to convey. In his seminal work, Von Krafft-Ebing (1939) cultivated an overarching perception that individuals who engage in sexual offences against children – inherently attracted or opportunistic – are profoundly deranged and morally weak, often equating them to sadistic criminals or psychopathic murderers. Through these societal processes, CSOs and MAPs have been positioned outside the bounds of normalcy and associated with the gothic archetype of the monster.

Drawing on the gothic and monstrous imagery of the past, contemporary portrayals of MAPs and CSOs have evolved to reflect anxieties surrounding digital spaces. Jewkes and Wykes (2012) refer to this phenomenon as a ‘culturo-criminal discursive shift’, which reallocates existing anxieties about stranger danger into the digital realm, thereby giving rise to the perceived threat of ‘cyber-peds’. The archetype of the hyper-intelligent manipulator sharply contrasts with the traditional monstrous pervert by emphasising a calculated and technologically adept figure who deceives children while evading detection (Chopin et al., 2022). Thus, technological advancements have reshaped public anxieties about MAPs and CSOs, extending the threat beyond physical spaces into the virtual domain wherein concerns of offenders exploiting digital platforms to groom and manipulate children manifest.

Offender typologies and grooming strategies have dominated the literature on MAPs and CSOs since the late 20th century. The virtual environment, as Gooren (2011) states, has become an expanded ‘hunting ground’ for sexual predators who skilfully seduce children. Grooming strategies involve trust-building, desensitisation to inappropriate behaviour, and emotional manipulation, blurring the line between coercion and consent (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021;

Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013). Grooming is often strategic and premeditated; it can occur offline and online by someone known or unknown to the child and may be intentional or unintentional (Jeglic et al., 2023; Kim, 2024). Cross et al. (2022) alongside Jones et al. (2024) assert that this power imbalance, whether explicit or implicit, makes these interactions inherently exploitative, regardless of the adults' intentions. CSA has come to symbolise the ultimate power and control over child victims or serve as a manifestation and extension of hegemonic masculinity (Cossins & Plummer, 2018). Unlike forcible sexual assault, grooming often relies on relational dynamics to manipulate victims, which further obscures the boundaries between acceptable and exploitative behaviour (Jeglic et al., 2023).

While popular culture often portrays MAPs as solely responsible for the sexual abuse of children, research indicates that the most common CSOs are individuals within a child's domestic environment (Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010; Seto, 2017). Prominent scholars in psychology have emphasised that not all MAPs engage in CSA, and conversely, not everyone who commits such offences identifies as MAPs. Thus, most individuals who engage in CSA lack an attraction to children (Cohen et al., 2018; Grady & Levenson, 2021). Seto (2018) further notes that approximately 35–50% of convicted CSOs are MAPs, while the remaining 50–65% are domestic offenders without an attraction to children; however, despite MAPs constituting only 1% of the general population, MAPs account for up to half of all sexual offence convictions against children. Therefore, understanding the reasons behind the substantial number of MAPs who refrain from perpetrating sexual offences against children is crucial, as noted by Walker (2021) and Cantor and McPhail (2016).

The misconception that MAPs are predisposed to commit sexual offences has significantly stigmatised both offenders and those who experience attraction to minors without acting on it. Although contemporary research lacks consensus on the origins of minor attraction, there is a shared acknowledgement that an individual's sexuality arises from a complex interplay of biological and social factors (Fazio et al., 2017; Grady & Levenson, 2021). Literature reveals high rates of suicidal ideation, substance use, sexual preoccupation, depression, internalised stigma, and uncertainty about romantic fulfilment among MAPs (Ingram et al., 2023; Lawrence & Willis, 2021; Lievesley et al., 2020). Dymond and Duff (2020) portrayed MAPs as individuals tormented by their sexual desires, often marked by an internal conflict over their attraction, noting that stigma hinders MAPs from accessing vital support and therapy that could help them avoid self-harm or harm to others. Stevens and Wood (2019) argue that while MAPs

are not inherently predisposed to become offenders, facing attraction to children amidst serious mental health issues and stigma is profoundly challenging for individuals to navigate in solitude (Jackson et al., 2022). This underlines the need to understand how MAPs navigate stigma and manage their stigmatised sexual identity, particularly concerning how they negotiate oppositional identities while rejecting oppressive stereotypes.

2.4 Symbolic Childhoods

In Western societies, children symbolise innocence and are profoundly interwoven with their relationships with adults (Gooren, 2011; Loseke, 2013). Levin (2019) posits that the societal condemnation of sexual relations between adults and children emerges from a foundational moral duty to prevent harm and protect children, a principle that is profoundly rooted in Western ethical paradigms. Borneman (2012, 2020) contends that adult-child sexual interactions are taboo, as it violates self-determination and consensual sexual conduct. Furthermore, Angelides (2005) highlights that evolving perceptions of childhood and feminist critiques of masculinity have increased awareness of CSA. Therefore, understanding the stigma surrounding attraction to children and societal responses to MAPs necessitates engagement with contemporary discourses about children and childhood.

In deconstructing childhood, Smith (2023) analyses the historical, political, and social constructs surrounding this pivotal life stage. He argues that contemporary anxiety about CSA reflects a romanticised portrayal of children's innocence. Gooren (2011) likewise presents children as untouched and intrinsically innocent, in contrast to the moral degradation of adulthood. Srivastava (2014) states in his paper, 'Are Children Individuals?', that "[children] can at best be observed and appreciated, but not taken seriously regarding what they think, say, or do." Fischel (2016: 207, 210) expands on this concept with the "cultural power of childhood innocence," noting that childhood is seen as vulnerable to loss, requiring "endless expansions of state power for its preservation". Thus, protecting childhood innocence is driven by what is perceived as being best for the child.

Preserving childhood innocence is often deemed essential for shielding children from premature exposure to adult experiences. Farrington (2007) argues that premature exposure to adult responsibilities, challenges, or environments disrupts a child's natural developmental trajectory and results in the loss of childhood. Sircar (2022) emphasises that this corruption involves

children's engagement in sexual matters, which they do not fully understand. Gooren (2011) critiques protective interventions, labelling them as driven by fear and an unrealistic ideal of children's sexual development. He argues that adolescent sexual activity is not always harmful, illustrating his point with examples of teenagers who engage in consensual exploration with their peers. Petruccelli et al. (2019) critique this, arguing that it overlooks the risks associated with age-discrepant encounters and ignites debates on sexual morality, where ideals of innocence heighten concerns about sexually active children enduring lifelong trauma.

The simultaneous sexualisation of children and protective measures reflecting childhood innocence illustrate what Taylor (2010: 48) describes as “the nexus of young children and sexuality.” Page Jeffery (2018) challenges the notion that only MAPs are attracted to children, asserting that a broader culture surrounds this sexualisation. Savage (2015: 37) exemplifies this with the existence of erotic anime such as the “Japanese subculture of Lolicon and Lolita”. Schofield (2016: 126) along with Kohm and Greenhill (2011, 2017) observes that popular cultural representations of adult-child sexual relationships, which “explore paedophilic desires,” have been commodified in films, literature, and journalism, including child sexual abuse material. Societal concern over attraction to children has intensified these narratives, providing audiences with both ‘erotic excitement’ and insights into CSA (Schofield, 2016). In this context, Goode (2011: 163) states that “the child moves from being an authentic individual to a symbol,” emphasising how children are reshaped into cultural objects that reflect moral panic and fascination.

2.5 Understandings of MAPs Attraction to Children

The preceding sections have demonstrated that there are further reasons why MAPs are among the most despised beyond their attraction to children. Prior research has largely attributed the explanations for this attraction to rationalisations and pathology, particularly concerning institutionalised populations (Kämpf, 2020; Paquette & Cortoni, 2022). Conversely, contemporary studies highlight the emotional and social aspects inherent in the lived experiences of MAPs. Dymond and Duff (2020) indicate that attraction to children involves connecting with them on an emotional and social level and recognising them as individuals rather than mere commodities. Furthermore, Houtepen et al. (2016), along with Martijn et al. (2020), propose that this attraction has led MAPs to articulate their feelings in terms of being in love with a child or fantasising about a romantic relationship with a child. Houtepen et al.

(2016) and Lanning (2010) thus note that among individuals who admit to offences, such actions are often driven by affectionate intentions rather than uncontrollable urges.

Cantor and McPhail (2016) note a similar expressiveness of emotional affection toward children among ‘non-offending paedophiles.’ Swidler (2001) further underscores that love constitutes an emotional and cultural dimension. Although love is inherently personal, it also possesses social and cultural significance. However, Kavanaugh and Maratea (2016) argue that the understanding of love as a social and cultural phenomenon is limited in its application to stigmatised sexual identities. Rubin (1984) expands on this, asserting that the attraction towards minors exists outside the boundaries of acceptable sexual orientations, where privileged sexualities are normalised while marginalised identities are systematically excluded. She posits that love is reserved exclusively for those deemed morally acceptable. Swidler (2001) further emphasises the role of language in shaping experiences, allowing individuals to employ ‘shared cultural vocabularies’ to differentiate between mythical and pragmatic interpretations of love. While MAPs have been identified to articulate love in both mythical and pragmatic ways, their attraction inherently defies accepted Western conceptions of sexual morality (Cantor et al., 2022; Martijn et al., 2020, 2022).

Rather than being a private matter, love is deeply interwoven into the cultural landscape in which it exists. Jónasdóttir (2014) posits that love has a political dimension, where the politics of sexuality and love have, in many respects, become inextricably linked. She argues that love requires free, consenting adults. Expanding on this, Eva Illouz (2007, 2012) asserts that while love increasingly operates as a commodity and is rationalised within modern society, it still retains crucial significance as a symbolic foundation for human connection and identity. Jahnke et al. (2018) elaborate on Western moral arguments concerning harm, thus deeming adult-child sexual relations unethical and rendering mutual love between an adult and a child inconceivable. Psychological research further suggests that MAPs' emotional connection to children represents a psychologically meaningful aspect central to the characterisation of this sexual identity (Konrad et al., 2018; McPhail, 2024; Stephens et al., 2024). This emotional connection to children is framed as a characteristic of MAPs' sexual interest rather than merely being indicative of offending. Schaefer et al. (2023) found that instead of attempting to groom children for sexual contact, MAPs formed friendships with children online simply because of enjoying their company. Given the cultural significance of love, discourses on sexual morality

and the importance of language in shaping experiences, how MAPs utilise their lived experiences in negotiating identities to counter stigma becomes of interest.

3. Theory

This chapter details the theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts that have guided my interpretation of the data and how I have analysed participants' accounts of their identity negotiation. For this thesis, I have employed a theoretical framework that utilises the works of Alexander (2010; 2006a; 2006b), Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996), and Goffman (1963) to understand how MAPs invent, construct, negotiate, and maintain identities in a digital context.

3.1 The Sacred and Profane

In *The Meanings of Social Life*, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2006b) draws on and expands Émile Durkheim's (1995) distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane* beyond religious settings to explain how contemporary secular societies construct and sustain moral boundaries. Alexander (2006b) posits that the sacred and profane dichotomy remains a central organising principle in modern social life, wherein societies delineate what is sanctified and condemned through symbolic codes, collective rituals, and cultural performances. This, he writes, structures collective morality and *social solidarity* where the '*sacred evil*' constitutes a critical counterpart to the sacred, representing the deeply stigmatised, polluting and morally repugnant forces that threaten the integrity of socially held sacred values. Alexander (2006b) asserts that sacred evil is not merely the lack of social solidarity but a deliberate category created to uphold the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Societies reinforce moral codes and collective identities by classifying certain practices and groups as representing sacred evil through exclusion, punishment, or purification. Loseke (2013) exemplifies how children's innocence and freedom constitute centrally organising codes in 'the production of meaning in public life'. While codes may vary in national prevalence, strength, significance, and personal interpretations, they act as interpretive frameworks that guide individual experiences and perceptions. According to Loseke (2013), these codes form a cultural framework that enables social actors to understand and make sense of their lived experiences, the world around them, and their social interactions. Alexander et al. (2010) refer to this as *moral universals* through which societies articulate shared values and accepted standards for good and evil that transcend individual or group differences. While Alexander's (2006b) neo-Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and profane provides a framework for

understanding how society establishes moral boundaries around childhood, sexual identity, and love, it also probes how MAPs engage in a similar process. More importantly, it helps explain how MAPs use these boundaries to counter their stigmatised identity as symbols of sacred evil.

Social movements have historically sought to claim their dignity by integrating their struggle with universal civil themes. In *The Civil Sphere*, Alexander (2006a) argues that the civil sphere actualises the capacity for social criticism and fosters democratic integration, as the sphere is based on solidarity, which entails a commitment to a shared secular faith. To Alexander (2006a), what drives counterproposals for reform within the civil sphere is an attempted reconstruction of *social solidarity* based on the recognition of an anticipated injustice and an assurance of an awaited general good. In the name of love, Richards (2016) explains how social movements for rights and equality use love as a symbolic recourse for resistance against oppressive systems. In his writing, love acts as a unifying and motivating force, empowering individuals and groups to resist structural injustices and articulate visions of a more equitable society. Symbols, Alexander et al. (2010) account, structure social meaning by representing shared values, beliefs and anxieties. Through the establishment of social boundaries, societies are enabled to maintain solidarity and guide collective behaviour. While Alexander (2006a) argues that the autonomous force of culture is a web of meanings, he is reluctant to reduce culture to ideology. Instead, he writes that culture provides the frameworks through which individuals and groups interpret their experiences, construct identities, and navigate moral boundaries. Alexander's (2006b) distinction between the sacred and profane will be used to understand how members of the online MAP community construct an identity that distances themselves from the label of monsters and repositions their group in a less polluted and more sacred way.

According to Alexander et al. (2010), sacrality has a dual nature; it encompasses what societies consider undesirable, which can still possess a sacred status in certain contexts or within specific groups. Thus, sacrality operates not as an absolute moral category but as a dynamic social force that reflects societies' cultural values and hierarchies. Mary Douglas (2005) explains that order and disorder are mutually defining concepts. Order gains meaning only in contrast to disorder, just as disorder is recognised only in opposition to order. This relationship mirrors the duality of sacrality described by Alexander (2006b), as the sacred and profane are similarly interdependent. Douglas's (2005) framework suggests that societal structures, rituals, and norms rely on this interplay to maintain coherence and delineate boundaries of inclusion

and exclusion. Constructed socially, these dualities act as guiding principles that legitimise social order and moral evaluations. Sexualities, as well as any sexual culture, kinks or sexual preference, contains cultural elements that distinguish sacrality from profanity through, for example, love/harm, consent/coercion, purity/danger, and normalcy/deviance (Douglas, 2005; Rubin, 1984). Hence, what is deemed sacred – symbols of moral virtue – may become sacred in its opposition, as to symbolise rebellion; sacrality can function both to uphold societal values and to disrupt or oppose them.

3.2 Identity-Work as Group Process

To understand identity work among groups of individuals living with a stigmatised sexual identity, one must first understand how the identity is made sense of and, hence, how it becomes meaningful. Identity is fundamental to individuals' notion of self. Yet, identity does not exist in a vacuum; rather, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) explain that identity extends the individual level to include collective identities. In social interactions with others, identity is made, remade and maintained. Engaging in what Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) call 'identity-work' online with similarly oriented others provides a zone free from stigmatisation whereby solidarity, validation and emotional support can be obtained (Kavanaugh & Maratea, 2016).

Drawing on symbolic interactionism and the dramaturgical perspectives of Burke (1984) and Goffman (1959), Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) assert that identities are 'worked' in the sense that they require active engagement and situational accomplishment. In contrast to being an individual activity, identity-making, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) argue, is an ongoing work where individual self-presentations draw upon the collective and are based on the joint creation of symbolic recourses. Simultaneously, identities, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) argue, are 'semiotic tools' for situationally construed makings of the self that evoke meaning by reflecting qualities of the identity bearer in the eyes of others. From this perspective, all attempts to signify one's identity, conscious or unconscious, obvious or subtle, definite or indefinite, are how identity is worked to signify one's subjectivity. From this point of view, identity work involves 1) defining into existence, 2) coding identity claims, 3) affirming, and 4) policing boundaries. Or, as Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996; 119) put it, "identity work includes not just signification of one's social location but one's powers, worth,

inclinations, and feelings”. Hence, efforts to signify the self and the group situationally in interactions make identity into a ‘work’.

By introducing the concepts of *oppressive* and *oppositional* identity work, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) elevate identity-making as an active and dynamic process embedded in larger cultural and social struggles. The first refers to identities imposed on others, either those considered ‘outside’ one’s own group or those ‘within’ the group itself, often based on the assumption that the ‘other’ lacks certain qualities and is, therefore, inferior to one’s own group. The latter refers to attempts by a subordinate group to resist the stigma imposed upon them by the dominant group (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). This oppositional identity work involves transforming the redefined identity by associating it with noble rather than flawed attributes, commonly through strategies of subversion of a dominant group’s identity codes. Elias and Scotson (1994) refer to the dynamics between subordinate and dominant groups through the concepts of ‘established and outsiders’. Dominant groups establish social boundaries to protect their privilege and strengthen cohesion. In addressing ‘the problem of identification,’ Elias and Scotson (1994) recognise the conflicts that arise from how individuals view themselves versus how others see them. This negotiation of identity connects kinship transmissions of prejudice based on an outsider group’s social location and the social structures that reinforce group differences through manifestations of ‘we’ and ‘they,’ In examining how MAPs negotiate their sexual identity, this study utilises Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) theory of Identity Work as a Group Process, which offers insights into the collective aspects of identity construction and negotiation within a stigmatised social environment.

Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) theory provides a framework for understanding how members of the online MAP community police boundaries, both against internal others (other MAPs) and external others (the dominant group), by ascribing meaning to their shared identities. The sacred represents the core values and ethos central to participants' collective unity and self-presentation, signified and manifested through interaction, storytelling practices, symbols, and actions. By examining these policing practices, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's (1996) theory highlights how community members actively negotiate and reaffirm boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, constantly redefining what it means to be a member of the online MAP community. This process underscores how shared objectives, definitions, codes, affirmations, and policing of boundaries are accomplished by drawing on the collective (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This lens also captures how participants presented themselves in

interaction with me during the data collection process. Hence, these identities are not formed in isolation but are shaped through social interaction with broader societal symbolic systems, emerging as a response to their oppressive identity as monsters.

3.3 Stigma and the Management of Spoilt Identities

To understand how participants developed oppositional identities, it is necessary to consider the stigma attached to MAPs' sexual identity and the cultural contexts in which these identities are embedded. Stigmatisation may be understood as a cultural process through which negative attributes are associated with and attached to specific identities (Lamont, 2018). Stigma influences and creates the space for alternative identities to emerge, whether in opposition to, alignment with, or negotiation of societal norms and expectations.

In his seminal work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman theorised that stigma is a social process whereby individuals perceived to deviate from societal norms are assigned a devalued – spoilt – social identity. Stigma, he writes, emerges in interaction with others, where an individual's assumed negative traits – physical deformity, individual characteristics or group membership – renders them socially discredited. Because of the negative characteristics associated with the stigmatised identity, Goffman (1963) argues that stigma may stain the individual character. Therefore, discrimination and marginalisation often follow, where the imposed stereotypes influence how individuals are treated by others and how the affected individual or group manages their sense of self in social interactions. Hence, stigma may be both visible and invisible. Sexual identity is one such invisible attribute; unless known to others, the stigma is left undetected by others (Rubin, 1984).

In her work *Thinking About Sex*, Gayle Rubin (1984) refers to the 'hierarchy of sexualities' when accounting for how socially privileged forms of sexuality are transitive and stigmatised sexual identities are othered and placed farthest from the margins of societal acceptance. For this thesis, stigma will be used to analyse how MAPs, due to their stigmatised sexual identity, are positioned outside the culturally constructed boundaries of humanity and, consequently, excluded from the accepted frameworks of experiencing pure or moral love. To Goffman (1963), norms create the boundaries of 'normalcy' and serve to organise inclusion and exclusion in social interaction by dictating the appropriateness and acceptability of displayed behaviours, attributes, or identities within an interactional setting. Individuals engage in stigma-

management strategies to control or mitigate the effects of stigma. *Passing* is one such strategy, where an effort is made to appear within the bounds of normalcy by means of concealing or hiding a stigmatised attribute (Goffman, 1963). *Information control* is another technique whereby crucial information is concealed, obliterated or re-framed to give a more desirable impression of themselves. Goffman (1963) introduces *the biography problem* as part of controlling information, underscoring how biography anchors a singular record of individual actions and experiences. Yet, he writes that self-presentation is multiple in its character, allowing individuals to present themselves in different roles to different audiences. In that sense, biography may be subject to reinterpretation and retrospective construction. This thesis will extend these theoretical insights to explore how MAPs navigate their stigmatised identities to negotiate their place within socially constructed boundaries of normalcy and sexual morality.

4. Methodology

This chapter explores the thesis design and execution, investigating the identity work among online MAP community members. It highlights the social, cultural, and emotional contexts that influenced and shaped participants' experiences, the research process, and my role as a researcher. I gathered 94 survey responses and conducted 20 unstructured interviews with community members. The data collection, coding, and analysis procedures are detailed, alongside my reflections on positionality and ethical considerations. Data storage and protection procedures are integrated into this chapter.

4.1 Research Design

This inquiry began in the autumn of 2023, during which I undertook a preliminary study as part of my thesis project and internship at the University of Copenhagen. While conducting this preliminary study, I noted that the complex emotional inner lives and collective identity formations among MAPs had been largely overlooked in existing research, as pointed out by Holt et al. (2020) and Jones et al. (2021). The subsequent literature on this subject sparked my desire to gain further insights into the nature of attraction to children, as well as the perceptions and experiences of those who feel such attraction. Unfortunately, current literature lacks socio-cultural context, treating MAPs' experiences of stigma and sexual identity as separate from the digital landscape. As section 2 noted, most recent studies involving MAPs have been conducted within psychology, where psychometric methods and a reliance on online discussion threads and multiple-choice questions have been utilised. This, Braun et al. (2021) note, risks losing significant nuances of subjective experiences.

This scholarly situation offered me a unique opportunity. Ellard-Gray et al. (2015) indicated that participant vulnerability constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon. It is emphasised that certain social groups are frequently difficult for researchers to access due to their social or physical locations, levels of vulnerability, or otherwise concealed nature. Jaworski (2022) has further observed that unstructured interviews, to a greater extent, allow participants to control the interview and its direction. Asserting its importance in enabling participants to question the conventional narratives around them. Given the limitations of prior research and the recognised value of open-ended questions (Brinkmann, 2022), I designed a qualitative online survey and adopted an unstructured interview methodology.

As researchers, we are not exempt from the social realities that influence our participants' lived experiences (Thorpe et al., 2018). This awareness encourages me to consider my part in collaboratively shaping knowledge and interactions during the research process, prompting a reflective exploration of my position within the social, political, and interpersonal contexts of the study (Shaw et al., 2020). Growing up, I learned to associate danger with candy from strangers, wearing name-displaying items, and interacting with people unknown to me. As the internet grew during my adolescence, I was warned against sharing personal information and posting images that could be misused. This belief deepened as people I knew shared their experiences of sexual victimisation, at times by family but not exclusively. The media also reinforced these ideas. Every interaction seemed to confirm this stereotype. I held a bias, believing that being attracted to children meant sexually abusing them. As biases threaten to influence how we interact with and experience our surrounding world, this bias also threatened my participants (Berger, 2015). Throughout my study, I remained dedicated to gaining insight and found it intriguing to confront the stereotype I had always accepted as truth.

Considering this, the risk of inadvertently stigmatising participants during interviews was considerable and needed to be addressed. This thesis employs a Durkheimian sympathetic approach to explore identity construction among individuals seen as symbols of *sacred evil*. It aims to bridge the knowledge gap using an understanding-based methodology. Since its inception, understanding the social impact on daily life has been fundamental to sociology (Flaherty, 2023). Assuming a complete understanding of the world risks undermining sociology's ongoing significance as a scientific discipline. Although Durkheim (1995) did not explicitly address sexual identity, he posited that to understand collective consciousness and analyse social phenomena, sociologists must immerse themselves in social actors' social realities and subjective experiences (Durkheim, 1995; Tutenges, 2023). Failing to do so can lead to superficial interpretations. Given the stigma surrounding their attraction to children, the approach is valuable for comprehending MAPs' identity negotiations. Drawing on the Durkheimian sympathetic approach, this thesis aims to explain how MAPs negotiate their identities, acknowledging their marginal status in society without assuming the truth of participants' accounts.

Another concern was that this publication might inadvertently reinforce the stigma against MAPs. I aimed not to promote stigma, as it is neither ethically scientific nor beneficial for

MAPs or children. Therefore, I utilised the Durkheimian sympathetic approach to address this concern (Durkheim, 1995). By focusing on understanding cultural contexts and personal experiences without reinforcing stereotypes, I felt a strong need to grasp the thoughts, feelings, and larger cultural narratives influencing participants' experiences (Trajtenberg, 2018). Aiming to view MAPs as subjects for study instead of merely research objects, the experiences and identity negotiation of MAPs became the central focus of my thesis.

4.2 Navigating the Digital Terrain

During my preliminary investigation, I gathered contact information for forums and public figures within the online community for MAPs accessible on the open web. Participants were identified based on one podcast, blogs, and forums. Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft Bing were used to locate and contact ten blogs, four international and one German-speaking forum. The search terms included “paedophile,” “pedophile,” “girl lover,” “boy lover,” “minor-attracted persons”, and “MAPs” combined with “blog” or “forum.” While I used only search engines and websites accessible on the open web, I acknowledge the possibility that my survey may have been disseminated to individuals operating within the dark web due to the prevailing digital landscape (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024). This concern is particularly pertinent as I made my survey accessible via TOR networks to safeguard participants' identities. As dark web forums can differ significantly from open web communities, it is essential to note that this thesis has been exploring online communities on the open web. This distinction has not always been emphasised in earlier studies.

Prior research identified the online MAP community as hard-to-reach because it is neither a clinical nor institutionalised population (Ellis, 2023; Walker, 2017). As of this, I initiated contact through my preliminary study, where forums and prominent figures served as gatekeepers (Gřundělová et al., 2024). In accessing the field, I initially came into contact with moderators and administrators of various forums. Due to their prominent status in the online community—achieved through dedication and hard work—much of my data came from notable figures. Many participants advocated for various causes by establishing organisational structures and engaging in activism within these communities. Administrators wanted to ‘check me out’ before allowing my study to be presented in their forums, ensuring protection for their members against potentially harmful research. This is significant, as participants may have their own agendas for taking part.

Through this process, I connected with various online personas, bloggers and international and German-speaking forums in the community, which aided recruitment (Berger, 2015). I established trust and rapport during the thesis project by conducting follow-up interviews with previous participants (Schmid et al., 2024). Throughout this project, some communities previously unknown to me reached out, drawn by their interest in my study and its approach. After reviewing previous research on MAPs, I identified an appropriate survey domain that would likely facilitate entry into the community. This strategy aimed to address the challenging accessibility issues and the vulnerable status of this population (Harvey et al., 2024). During the process of gaining access, I faced challenges due to a lack of ethical approval, as MSc students conducting thesis-related projects are exempt from obtaining approval from the ethics board. This exemption, however, impacted the trust I could establish within the community and the forums where I sought collaboration. To address these concerns, I provided my supervisor's contact information at the participants' request to confirm my exemption from an ethical review and validate the legitimacy of my study. By earning the trust of various forums and individuals during my preliminary study, I sought to facilitate access to the community and lay the groundwork for building rapport in preparation for my forthcoming thesis (Crough et al., 2024).

4.3 Data Collection

The preliminary study, along with the data from this thesis, includes 94 online survey responses, 16 interviews, and four follow-up interviews. It is essential to note that participating in my study has not been without risk for participants. Because of this, participants and I took great precautions to ensure anonymity. Data have been stored on an encrypted hard drive throughout the research process, following GDPR guidelines (Elliot et al., 2024; Gable et al., 2009). Anonymisation was accomplished through the creation of a code key consisting of letters and numbers designed to disconnect transcripts or notes from participants.

4.3.1 Online Survey

A qualitative survey was designed to elicit rich and nuanced data while considering this project's limitations. Braun et al. (2021) point out that the rarely used qualitative survey is an unexploited valuable resource that promotes qualitative research values and has the potential to obtain rich and nuanced data. To accomplish this, qualitative surveys are comprised predominantly of

open-ended questions. The server <https://www.soscisurvey.de> was used to protect participants' privacy, as it allows completion of the survey through the TOR Browser. It is known for its strong privacy measures, including no storage of IP addresses, SSL and SSH encryption, and robust protection against unauthorised access. To my knowledge, the survey was distributed in two German and four international forums, advertised on one blog, and acted as a gateway for initiating contact with five active blog hosts.

Based on the experiences and insights gained during the preliminary study, I developed an improved survey version. Through the initial study, I concluded that eliciting as much information as possible from those interested would be more valuable than expecting too many participants. The final version of the survey included a total of 47 questions and the following six themes: 1) background, 2) stigma, 3) living with an attraction to children, 4) the emotional aspects of the attraction, 5) non-abusive interactions, and 6) future outlook. Several participants noted that the survey was extensive. A few participants informed me that it took approximately three hours to complete the survey, although I had estimated it to take 40 minutes. Thus, online surveys have risks; I cannot know whether the age, gender identification, or opinions are genuine (Thomas et al., 2024).

Early in the data collection process, the study gained recognition within the German-speaking online MAP community. I was asked whether the survey could be translated into German, which was possible with the assistance of competent sources. These sources only assisted me in translating the survey, ensuring that only I had access to the answers. Most surveys were completed in English, with a few in German.

4.3.2 Interviews

In the initial study, alongside the qualitative survey (see Section 4.3.1), I developed a semi-structured interview guide that was later reassessed and refined. Drawing from these insights, I revised my methodology by adopting an unstructured conversational interview style that employed open-ended questions and follow-up questions to a greater extent (Brinkmann, 2022). Initially, I feared the conversational style might lead to chaotic interviews, but those concerns proved unfounded (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Participants appreciated the informal approach, which fostered familiarity and trust. Delaying 'confrontational' questions allowed for rapport building, enabling open engagement with challenging topics (Brinkmann, 2022). Enquiring

about intimate and potentially sensitive topics early on could have evoked scepticism about my intentions, thereby jeopardising the recruitment process and inadvertently stigmatising participants.

Interviews were conducted through digital means, including chat, audio, and video formats, based on the preferences of the participants. The wide range of communication tools created an adaptable space where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences (Harvey et al., 2024). Audio and video interviews were undertaken using Skype, Zoom, or Jitsi. Each session was recorded on a separate device, with access to the raw data restricted solely to the researcher to uphold ethical standards (De Villiers et al., 2022). Each interview typically lasted between 1.5 to 3 hours. Chat interviews utilised encrypted applications to ensure privacy and security for participants (Carter et al., 2021). Conducted over several days, this format provided flexibility for responding. Encrypted platforms ensured confidentiality and built trust, which was crucial due to the sensitive nature of the research. Schroeder et al. (2024) assert that individuals from stigmatised groups are at increased risk of harm and exploitation in research, yet argue that omitting these groups from research is not an effective solution.

During interviews, regardless of format, stigma emerged as a prominent issue impacting both the participants' responses and the interview environments. Concerns about the protection of privacy arose regarding the timing and locations of the interview. Some chose chat interviews, as these allowed greater control over their words and extended response times. For those who chose audio interviews, participants expressed difficulties in finding a suitable time for scheduling the interview, as participants wanted to ensure being alone at home or accompanied by trusted friends or partners. In a few instances, participants chose to conduct the interview in their cars or when roommates were occupied, yet several expressed insecurities about potential interruptions, such as someone unexpectedly arriving home. Fear of discovery increased participants' nervousness, as seen in one younger participant who lived at home, frequently whispering during the interview to avoid being overheard by parents. Vogel and Hazelton-Boyle (2024) note that qualitative interviews in such contexts demand significant emotional labour from researchers, especially when participants disclose sensitive information. This aspect of academic research underscores the intricate interplay between emotional engagement and the ethical responsibilities of researchers in qualitative settings.

While stigma did not necessarily shape the nature of all interactions in interviews, as Cook (2012: 333) suggests, it “can shape the nature of data collected.” Interviews are permeated by representations of the social dynamics inherent to the interview itself and reflections of the social context in which these interactions transpire. Participants' embodied signs of stigma influenced communication, resulting in shaky voices and tendencies to over-explain their statements, wherein participants attempted to prevent misunderstandings. This nervousness was also evident in the cautious, hesitant tone of many audio interviewees, who often chose their words carefully, wary of judgment or distrust. As Cook (2012) noted, the roles and power dynamics between the interviewer and the participant and their respective agendas are critical factors in this process. Furthermore, power relations and established social hierarchies persist even in collaboratively constructed conversations (Demar, 2024; Prior & Lachover, 2023). Hence, while interviews can empower participants, research interviews often prioritise the preference of the more powerful researcher.

In interviews, participants faced other risks, such as becoming discredited or being disregarded as a moral agent in the interview interaction (Goffman, 1963). Thus, stigma was not merely something participants sought to oppose collectively; it arose within the inescapable power dynamics present in the research interview (Cook, 2012). Nervousness and insecurity often diminished as rapport was built (McNamara, 2024) and through what Cook (2012) referred to as ‘micro-ethics’, which describes how the interview is practically managed beyond formal consent forms and information sheets. As Gerson (2021) indicates, the ‘art’ of interviewing is a craft learned through practical know-how. For instance, I kept my camera on during audio interviews while emphasising that participants could choose to leave theirs off, and I made an effort to answer participants’ questions about my own perspectives on the topics discussed. Participants' use of pseudonyms, secure platforms, and camera disabling indicated their preference for anonymity, underscoring the ethical sensitivity imperative to this research. In video interviews, participants tended to be publicly open about their sexual identity. Having participated in numerous interviews before ours made these participants more outspoken and comfortable during the interaction. In these interviews, participants were usually more actively involved in online activism, either previously or currently. Through this reflexive interviewing style of making notes of behavioural patterns and developing flexible micro-ethics, I sought to reduce the risks of participating in this thesis (Pessoa et al., 2019).

Although perhaps prepared for the formalised and forced social interaction that an interview constitutes, fear of stigmatisation when discussing this sensitive topic with someone foreign to them can be expected to increase nervousness in participants (Cook, 2012). In interviews, I grappled with the challenge of being an active and sympathetic listener while ensuring my questions didn't amplify participants' vulnerability or mistrust. However, aligning with Cook (2012), the conversational interview style used here did not aim to create an 'illusion of everyday conversation' since a 'forced social interaction' cannot fulfil the conditions of being free and mutual. This approach aimed to be exploratory and inquisitive, allowing participants to 'steer' the dialogue and question the conventional narratives surrounding them, as suggested by Jaworski (2022).

Interviews ended prematurely on several occasions for various reasons. In one instance, a participant chose to stop the interview due to mental health issues. In another case, a potential participant wanted to partake in an interview but was ultimately unable to do so due to experiencing both psychological and physical pain. On several occasions, potential participants initially reached out to schedule an interview, only to stop communicating. In another situation, the lack of willing translators forced an interview to be conducted via text, although the original intention was to conduct an audio/video interview. Several of these irregularities likely arose from the considerable stigma surrounding participants' sexual identity and mentally ill health, which is known to impact a significant number of online community members and can create major barriers to participation (Ingram et al., 2023).

4.4 Coding & Analysis

Throughout this study, I have continuously considered the analysis and presentation of my findings. This concern arose from the recognition of the inherent risks associated with exoticising and dehumanising participants. Therefore, my analysis aims to present my findings from a nuanced perspective, ensuring that participants' dignity and respect are preserved (Durkheim, 1995; Luker, 2008).

After anonymisation, I used NVivo software to facilitate coding, focusing on elucidating the structures of meaning within the identity work of MAPs. The analysis focused on the dual boundary work MAPs engaged in to create oppositional identities, unfolding how MAPs shaped

their identities in relation to external entities—namely other dominant groups—and internal ones, particularly other MAPs considered inferior within the online community.

The conceptualisations of the *external other* fluctuated in definition based on the oppositional identity that participants sought to negotiate (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Nevertheless, the external other predominantly encompassed groups deemed responsible for perpetuating the oppressive identity of monstrosity associated with MAPs' sexual identity; these were the same groups with whom MAPs sought to forge a sense of shared social solidarity (Alexander, 2006a). Conversely, the *internal other* was identified as other MAPs within the online community and those implicated in the sexual abuse of children. The delineation of the internal other varied according to the specific oppositional identity participants negotiated. Through this boundary work, I highlighted articulated distinctions between what MAPs regarded as sacred or central to their identity and what they perceived as profane or antithetical to it (Alexander, 2006b; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). A central component of this coding procedure was the delineation of inclusion and exclusion. By mapping these processes, I endeavoured to elucidate how participants claimed shared solidarity with moral universals to affirm their legitimacy while differentiating themselves from stigmatised representations (Alexander, 2006a; Alexander et al., 2010).

In analysing the data, I examined how various patterns of meaning were symbolically extended as participants integrated certain actions and interpretations while disregarding others (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). For instance, activism and boundaries in interactions with children emerged as crucial sites of boundary work. Participants navigated these domains to differentiate themselves from oppressive stereotypes and affirm their alignment with broader civil themes. This aligns with Alexander's (2004) concept of 'scripts,' which illustrates the relative autonomy actors possess in constructing and enacting identities within a shared subset of background understandings. Rather than focusing solely on the specific claims made by participants, I aimed to emphasise how these identities were asserted by examining the processes through which they were situated within larger structures of meaning (Colbjørnsen Aakvaag & Hviid Jacobsen, 2023).

Inspired by Alexander (2004), these structures of meaning were organised around binary distinctions, such as MAPs versus monsters, and further juxtaposed through pairs like natural/unnatural, emotional/emotionless, harm/love, singular/dynamic, and equal/unequal.

These distinctions created a framework for understanding how MAPs interpreted and attributed meaning to their identities. According to Alexander's (2004) framework, participants' identity work is constrained and enabled by broader cultural scripts, which provide interpretative frameworks for asserting, affirming, or challenging identities. By exploring how MAPs created and sustained their identities, I sought to understand how socio-cultural forces and participants' relative autonomy influence these processes.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethics were a significant concern during the study's planning, conduct, and finalisation. Acknowledging and addressing these issues was vital to reducing the risks to participants and me. Despite the ethical concerns raised by this study, the need for this type of research was considered far greater, following the research criteria outlined by the Swedish Research Council (2017).

During data collection, I failed to clarify to participants that my statement about not wanting to know of any criminal involvement—past, present, or future—applied beyond just children. I came to this realisation only afterwards. Although I intended to inform participants of my ethical code, I did not consider how they might view my assertion, which likely unintentionally stigmatised participants and hindered rapport building (ALLEA, 2023). Nonetheless, by the end of the interviews, several participants shared that it was a pleasant experience or one of their best interviews.

Informed consent was obtained in various ways depending on individuals' choices to contribute to this research. The survey was designed with mandatory questions and provided information about what it would mean to participate in the study. The chat interview gathered consent through messages in which the interviewee was introduced to the consent form and asked to indicate whether they consented or not. For the audio and video interviews, verbal consent was obtained after informing the participant about my study.

To mitigate harm, it was vital to recognise that this study may affect participants' emotional health and well-being as well as my own. Given the considerable number of individuals in this population who face mental health challenges, I provided contact information for mental health support organisations during the interviews and at the end of the survey. Recognising the effects

of sensitive research on researchers, as noted by Hughes et al. (2024), I kept detailed notes and a research diary to manage and reflect critically on my experiences as a researcher. The guidance from my supervisor has furthermore been essential in tackling the challenges of this study (Schänzel & Porter, 2023). These strategies allowed me to assess my positionality critically and maintain balance throughout the research process.

5. Analysis & Findings

The analysis is divided into two sub-chapters that reflect statements from 20 interviewees and 94 survey interviews, illustrating how MAPs negotiate oppositional identities. Firstly, the section titled '*Collective Opposition to Monstrosity*' illustrates how MAPs work their identities against dominant groups' conceptions of them, referred to as the *external other* (see section 4.4). Second, '*Diversifying MAPs*' highlights the identity work within the online community, where other members are positioned as the *internal other*.

5.1 Participant Characteristics

Participants in this study varied in age, gender, ideological perspectives, and involvement in online communities on the open web. Most identified as male, followed by non-binary individuals; others identified as women, transgender, or used other categories to define their gender identity. Participants were commonly aged between 20 and 30, wherein younger participants were more likely to identify as nonbinary, transgender, or queer, while older participants (40+ years) were primarily cisgender men and women. The majority used the labels MAP or paedophile, with a subset of participants preferring not to use specific labels, considering their attraction part of a broader spectrum of sexual or romantic preferences. Despite using the term MAPs, the legal status of children was often seen as having little impact on their attraction to minors. Participants frequently negotiated the meaning of their attraction through language and labels, which they adapted to align with broader societal discourses or personal beliefs. Attraction to girls was most frequently mentioned across all gender identities, while attraction to boys was second most common, with several attracted to all genders. The age of attraction was generally prepubescent children (4-12 years), with some who expressed attraction across wide age spans (e.g., infancy to adulthood). Most had not disclosed their sexuality to more than a few trusted friends or family members who were trusted to keep such a secret. A few participants noted being publicly open about their sexuality. The majority were not in a relationship; however, among those who were, many tended to be non-exclusively attracted to children, meaning that these participants were also attracted to adults. Only a limited number indicated that they had children on their own, and a few mentioned previous or current experience working with children.

5.2 Collective Opposition to Monstrosity

In section 2, previous literature tended to portray MAPs as monsters based on their sexual identity. This chapter presents how participants collectively sought to oppose the oppressive identity of the monster that the *external other* assigned to them, their strategies, and how these identities served as stigma-management strategies. The identities included *Being Human*, a *Sexual Minority*, and *Protectors of Children*. These oppositional identities were framed against various representations of the external other—described as *uninformed*, *discriminatory*, or *risk-conscious*—in an effort to collectively reject the label of monstrosity.

5.2.1 Being Human

Being human formed the basis of MAPs' sexual identity, opposing the idea of being a monster. MAPs conveyed that the concept of the monster did not reflect their true identity; rather than being different, MAPs were just like anyone else—human (Walker, 2021). However, until joining an online community for MAPs, many believed the stereotypes prevalent in public discourse to be accurate reflections of who they were or might become (Lievesley & Lapworth, 2022). Within these interactional spaces, MAPs started to understand their experiences through the interpretive framework provided by online communities through collective storytelling practices (Nielsen, 2022). I want to point out that although the ideological representations of what it means to be a MAP and the sacredness within this identity differ among participants, what binds these expressions of MAPs' sexual identity together is a strong emphasis on shared solidarity with the external other. The external other was commonly defined as the uninformed, where the oppressive identity of monstrosity constitutes both an external and an inner threat to the self and the collective.

Societies need a scapegoat to distract from more obvious and bigger problems [...] It makes me sad that this stereotype is so strong, but I understand the mechanisms in society and don't blame the "normal people" out there. Mixing criminal behaviour with sexual and emotional attraction is criminal in itself. At least media people should know better, but tabloids and interested parties use the mix to demonise individuals who are attracted to minors. – Maurice

Recognising stigma as a product of biased media capitalising on social anxieties positioned the *uninformed other* as subject to larger institutional and cultural ideas that conflated the attraction

to children with acts of CSA. Maurice's quote demonstrates how MAPs are framed as 'scapegoats' and rendered a status of sacred evil by the external other, which he deems to be uninformed about the distinction between the attraction to children and acts of CSA (Alexander, 2006b). The uninformed other was the most prominent depiction of the external other in the collected data and was described as the mainstream society responsible for the stigmatisation and dehumanisation of MAPs. Previous research on MAPs has similarly identified that positioning the monster as external to the self lays the foundation for an oppositional identity as humans (Walker, 2017, 2021).

In contrast, one could argue that by positioning the monster as external to themselves, MAPs neutralise the harm associated with being attracted to children, deflect responsibility or deny harm (Cantor et al., 2022). Alternatively, MAPs' objectification of the monster frames those responsible for CSA as an external – stranger danger – threat to children (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012). Nevertheless, this interpretation overlooks a crucial aspect. For MAPs, the sacred of their sexual identity lies in distinguishing between their emotional and physical attraction to children and the actions related to CSA. This distinction enables MAPs to frame their identity in a way that emphasises their humanity rather than portraying themselves as monsters (Bulfin, 2021; Goode, 2011). In this context, being human becomes a means of reassuring participants of their sacred character by integrating their identity into broader civil themes – someone who does not harm children – emphasising their shared solidarity with the uninformed other (Alexander, 2006a). The objectification of the monster involved a re-conceptualisation of monstrosity that need not include themselves: monstrosity was contextualised.

Paedophiles are, in the same way, "child abusers" like "normal" men are "woman rapists". Merely their sexual preferences do not reveal anything about a person's moral character or how they act. – Steve

Monstrosity was associated with immoral acts that were not determined by sexual preferences but instead associated with morale and behaviour. The external status of the monster was simultaneously a possibility but not an inevitability. Connecting monstrosity to a general idea of harm was not limited to harm induced by MAPs but extended to harm done by anyone at any time at the expense of the other person's dignity and compliance. Regardless of sexual preference, profane acts of sexual violation discarded what MAPs sought to protect: their shared social solidarity with the external other (Alexander, 2006a). Separating the self from the

stigmatised attribute was achieved by drawing on the collective, allowing members to uphold a moral stance against stereotypes. The opposition to the oppressive identity of monstrosity was for MAPs less about the attraction to children itself and more about the structures of meaning that the attraction signified. MAPs communicated sameness rather than difference to the external other, strengthened through the condemnation of sexual violence, which participants related to the preservation of societal order, as noted by Levin (2019). The consequence of this was that participants were enabled to position themselves as aligned with conventional values in their rejection of harm and sexual violence. To further this sense of shared humanity, several participants explained that before acknowledging their attraction to children, some held the same stereotypical beliefs about MAPs as the uninformed other:

I felt that the stereotypes didn't apply to me, mainly because I am a woman, so I did the next logical thing in my eyes back then: I thought I couldn't be a paedophile. However, I had some misconceptions about male paedophiles myself, believing they inherently have more issues due to these strange "urges" described by the media. – Renae

As a woman, Renae noted that her experiences did not align with the mediated representation of paedophiles, which emphasised a lack of self-control and a predisposition to sexually abuse children. As Houtepen et al. (2016) pointed out, media and public discourse have been attributed a central role in shaping the societal framework within which MAPs locate and negotiate their identities. Unable to relate her experiences to these depictions, Renae and others embraced self-control as a frame of reference in objectifying the monster. By relying on assumptions about the obliviousness of the uninformed other—evident in the inaccuracies of media representations—to delegitimise the monstrous identity, MAPs aimed to affirm their humanity by creating distance between themselves and the stereotype (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996). What is significant here is MAPs communicated and interpreted shared solidarity to the external other and the separation of the collective from the profanity of CSA (Alexander, 2006a). This conceptualisation allowed participants to reclaim their humanity. Thus, aside from being external, monstrosity was also constructed as a threat from within:

Every time I see a villainous MAP in entertainment media, I can't help but think, "Oh god, is this how people see me?" It's terrible. It makes me question myself and wonder if I truly am like that, though that feeling tends to pass. But it has

left a lingering impression. My attraction feels more like a punchline than my lived experience, and I have developed an anxiety around the possibility of unknowingly being an abusive person, which leads me to constantly question my interactions with others, especially with children. – Jean

The internalisation of potentially being a monster—someone who would intentionally harm a child—threatened to contaminate what participants held sacred: their humanity. Jean illustrates this by describing how her attraction felt more like a ‘punchline’ than a reflection of her lived experiences. According to Goffman (1963), stigma can lead to the internalisation of negative attributes and profound psychological distress, even when these attributes do not align with the lived experiences of those affected. This stigma, as experienced by Jean, was not an objective belief in her ability to harm children but rather a reflection of the societal association of her sexual identity with danger (Rubin, 1984). The collective rejection of this stereotype was, aside from an internal battle (Dymond & Duff, 2020), also an online collective identity project (Nielsen et al., 2022) that integrated participants' intrinsic differences from the monster into their biographies as an identity code (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Demonstrating the distinction between participants' lived experiences and monstrosity involved not only delegitimising the stigma but also how shared solidarity with the external other was evoked and, hence, how this identity became meaningful (Alexander, 2006a). The internalisation of stigma, for some, resulted in psychological distress so profound that it was directed toward the here and now, the future, and participants entire existence:

Continuously climbing out of a hole through great effort, only to fall into the next one. Anxiety derives from a constant fear of being outed and fear of the potential for negative consequences. I’m always on my guard about what I say, feeling that all social situations pose an existential threat [...]. Depression arises from a lack of positive perspectives on the future, particularly in my youth, and the belief that I would die alone without ever knowing love. – Riley

Riley’s experiences of stigma illustrate the symbolic boundary that labels MAPs as symbols of symbolic evil (Alexander, 2006b). The fear of being ‘outed’ highlights the conflict between reconciling their sexual identity with cultural narratives that portray MAPs as deviant, creating ongoing tension between self-protection and societal rejection. By stating, ‘always being on my guard,’ Riley emphasises how the external others’ perception of MAPs as predatory and

dangerous influences his self-view and interactions with others (Lievesley et al., 2020). Ingram et al. (2023) argue that MAPs report significant levels of suicidality, depression, and anxiety. The notion of a future without love expresses the devastation and yearning of various participants. Eva Illouz (2012) contends that cultural and emotional contexts shape the experience of love. Riley's fear that he might 'die alone without ever having known love' illustrates how love is governed by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, reserved for those deemed morally acceptable (Rubin, 1984). These yearnings were not framed as worthy of prioritising above children's dignity and well-being. Instead, as will be demonstrated in section 5.3, these desires of love were managed through various re-conceptualisations of the meaning of love.

By acknowledging the 'existential threat' posed by social situations, Riley illustrates how stigma forces him to conceal information about himself to manage others' perceptions of him. Passing became an essential strategy employed offline and within online platforms outside MAP communities (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, these communities offered participants a refuge from societal rejection and stigma—regardless of their ideological beliefs—serving as spaces for recognition and self-discovery (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller., 2023). Nevertheless, participants opted for acronyms, pseudonyms, and online protections even in these online MAP spaces to mask their true identities. Hence, MAPs' offline identities remained hidden, even within online spaces that fostered a sense of belonging.

5.2.2 A Sexual Minority

Previous literature has clearly outlined the questionability of equating MAPs with other established sexual orientations, often motivated by children's inability to consent to sexual interactions and the long-standing history of conflict with LGBTQ+ communities (Angelides, 2005; Elias & Scotson, 1994; Walker, 2020). Despite this, participants frequently identified possessing a sexual orientation as one of the defining traits of being a MAP. The oppositional identity of being a sexual minority was contrasted with the external other, characterised as discriminatory due to their ignorance and failure to recognise MAPs attraction to children as a legitimate sexual orientation.

It's just sad that people judge without talking to us or researching our sexual orientation [...]. It makes me cry sometimes as I wonder how people can hate

me so deeply without even knowing me. It truly hurts to be accused of things I have never done and will never do. It makes me feel like I have no place in society. – Ray

The *discriminatory other* was identified as the mainstream society, who, if not actively participating in the discrimination of MAPs, indirectly supported and enforced the stigma through the absence of intervention. Participants distinguished the uninformed from the discriminatory other, noting the more distasteful stance of those who consciously ignore the difference between desire and action by stigmatising MAPs for their feelings rather than behaviour. Ray describes how societal perceptions of his sexual identity as an embodiment of monstrosity function to marginalise and delegitimise his sexual orientation, leaving him and others like him to experience societal exclusion. Involuntarily being positioned as an outsider by the established external other (Elias & Scotson, 1994). By sharing his experience of being ‘accused,’ Ray emphasised how the discriminatory other denies MAPs the freedom to define and express their sexual identity without facing prejudice (Rubin, 1984). Herein, Ray illustrates, by referring to ‘we,’ how framing their attraction as a sexual orientation came to represent something sacred for MAPs by contrasting it against monstrosity. This distinction is in Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) meaning, how participants resisted imposed stigma by reframing their identities within a broader context of sexual minority and human sexual diversity, as Goode (2011) argued. Thus, the negotiation of the oppositional identity as a sexual minority took place not in a vacuum but within the sanctuary of online communities for MAPs:

Overall, it has been a relatively positive space for discussing the social issues facing the community, exploring how they could be addressed if people wanted to help us, and supporting research to break the common misconceptions. – Taylor

It is not simply a matter of asserting that the lack of self-identification as monsters causes participants to automatically categorise themselves as members of a sexual minority. Instead, as put forward by Kavanaugh and Maratea (2016) in their study on resistance within online communities for zoosexuals, this was a collective engagement within online spaces. Having a sexual orientation was made equivalent to being a sexual minority. These virtual spaces enabled MAPs to redefine their identity in opposition to the oppressive identity imposed upon them by the discriminatory other. Hence, through online interaction, MAPs were able to define their

existence and validate their identity as a sexual minority through shared understandings of their identities. In their study, Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2023) similarly noted how online communities served as a refuge for gender and sexual minority youth in their search for acceptance and belonging. Participants moved beyond individual interpretations, forming collective interpretative schemes rooted in shared injustices online. Within this online sphere, group solidarity and the integration of their struggle with larger civil themes fostered a shared sense of purpose and identity (Alexander, 2006a). Participants used these online communities not only to validate their identity claims, as Nielsen et al. (2022) argued but also to draw upon and contribute to scientific research. Resistance constituted both a rejection of societal stigma and an affirmation of MAPs' sexual identity through contributions to the scientific discourse. Categorising the sexual attraction to children as a sexual orientation manifested MAPs attraction to children as something natural rather than unnatural:

I enjoy spending time with them; I am hurt when they are upset, and I can fall deeply head-over-heels for them. [...] I have found adults attractive, but I have never been enraptured by an adult's beauty in the same way I have been by a child's. Something about them—their faces, voices, and personalities—captures me in a way that adults do not. Adults can make me blush, but children can leave me stunned and breathless. I don't know if I'd really like to get into the physical aspects of children that attract me. It feels somewhat crass, to be honest, like a straight man talking about women like sex objects. – Felice

The organisation of experience through what Swidler (2001) has termed 'the mythical vocabulary of love' enables Felice to linguistically situate her attraction to children within a framework of 'breathless', 'head-over-heels', and 'enraptured'. Felice conceptualised love as a human need intertwined with Western ideals of romance by distancing love from sexual connotations, as critiqued by Jónasdóttir (2014). Establishing a sexual identity as a MAP, as noted by Seto (2018), involves accepting the premise that their sexual interest in children constitutes a sexual orientation based on age rather than being solely defined by gender or non-binary identities. While most participants identified as male and acknowledged their emotional affection for children, Felice avoids addressing the physical attributes of children that she finds appealing in contrast to her male-identifying counterparts. Hence, male-identifying MAPs are not exempt from hegemonic masculinity and are, therefore, also more prone to objectifying children's bodies (Cossins & Plummer, 2018). In subverting the predatory conceptualisation of

MAPs' love for children imposed by the discriminatory other, participants sought to distance themselves from the monstrous stigma (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Humanisation was achieved by invalidating claims of their sexuality as unnatural. In contrast, participants actively sought to validate claims of their sexual identity as natural, portraying it as yet another form of human sexuality (Goode, 2011). Herein, participants tended to emphasise how their attraction remained the same although participants grew older.

When I first discovered my attractions at around 13, I was primarily concerned about getting into trouble. I repressed my feelings, believing that if I didn't acknowledge them, no one else would either. – Ellis

To establish an identity as a sexual minority possessing a legitimate sexual orientation, participants integrated their discovery of their sexuality into their biographies as part of a collective project to humanise their existence (Goffman, 1963). Participants asserted that MAPs inherently possess a sexual attraction to children, indicating that such attraction is not a conscious choice but an intrinsic aspect of their humanity. Walker (2021), along with Seto (2017), has similarly observed that MAPs, in addition to the emotional attraction to children, commonly realise their sexuality in adolescence and that the attraction to children is stable over time. Arguments of their sexual minority status were often followed by the identification of early childhood memories that highlighted recollections of an attraction to child-like characteristics and physical attributes. The experience of having one's sexual orientation delegitimised by the discriminatory other further strengthened participants' arguments for belonging to a sexual minority, which, from a historical perspective, has often faced similar discrimination (Angelides, 2005).

When referring to the process of joining online communities for MAPs and revealing one's sexual identity, MAPs used the phrase 'coming in' because this disclosure occurred in the backstage of their lives, a space free from stigma (Goffman 1963; Kloess & Van Der Bruggen 2023). The expression 'coming out' instead referred to the process whereby participants disclosed their sexual identity to someone in the offline world. These signifying articulations served as linguistic tools whereby participants drew on larger narratives of sexual minority struggles to align themselves with other marginalised groups (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996). Striving to further embed their struggle within broader movements against sexual minority discrimination, MAPs sought to validate their sexual orientation as legitimate and

worthy of protection, recognition and dignity rather than stigma (Alexanders, 2006a). This alignment enabled MAPs to confront the oppressive identity of monsters by focusing on addressing unjust discrimination.

LGBT+ beings have a lot of rights today, including that there are laws against discrimination in employment, housing and services for being LGBT+. If you are open homosexual or transgender, you are still allowed to adopt and care for a child. MAPs should too. If you are open homosexual or transgender, you are still allowed to work with children. MAPs should too. But we will be discriminated against today, because of “the safety for children”. – Mae

Herein, Mae attempts to shift the symbolic boundary between the sacred and the profane, linking the long and continuous struggles for dignity, rights, and protection for LGBT+ communities with those of MAPs (Alexander, 2006a). Mae’s comparison of MAPs with LGBT+ individuals is not a suggestion that children can consent but an argument that reinforces the external others’ status as discriminatory based on conflating attraction to children with acts of CSA. In their study, Walker (2020) notes that the use of LGBTQ+ identity labels among MAPs was embraced, yet it caused an identity conflict arising from the use of such labels. Mae’s claim that ‘MAPs should too’ seeks to reframe her identity and MAPs as a collective into individuals with caring and protective qualities associated with sacrality. Rather than simply overseeing the risks involved with MAPs’ interactions with children, Mae, on numerous occasions during our interviews, attended to how some MAPs, for various reasons beyond their attraction to children, should not be interacting with children, acknowledging that MAPs too risk transgressing children’s boundaries. By highlighting laws that permit discrimination against MAPs under the pretence of ‘safety for children,’ Mae maintains that such measures reinforce stigma and infringe upon her right to not be discriminated against. Hence, Mae’s quote reflects the conflict between MAPs’ identity work and societal structures that purify children: a sacred-profane dichotomy that positions MAPs as symbols of sacred evil (Alexander, 2006b; Douglas, 2005).

5.2.3 Protectors of Children

Thus far, I have shown how participants constructed their sexual identity in opposition to monstrosity, which was extended to the uninformed other whom participants asserted to be

inherently alike, and the discriminatory other that participants sought to oppose. I have also pointed out how the scripts of being human and a sexual minority can be combined to further distinguish themselves from monstrosity in defending their sacred humanity. Conversely, a third definition of the external other was the risk-conscious other, which furthered the previously outlined pursuits of participants to maintain an identity as humans.

A lot of MAPs really really do care about kids, and I personally just adore kids.

The last thing I want to do is cause harm to one, in any way. [...] I do get it, that urge to protect kids, I have that urge myself. I have that urge. Because, like, it's part of who I am. – Yannick

A shared commitment to safeguarding children, like that of the *risk-conscious other*, led Yannick to describe this protective instinct as an ‘urge to protect kids’ from what Fischel (2016) called a ‘loss of childhood’. The risk-conscious other was often identified as adults, parents, society, lawmakers, and the criminal justice system. In our interview, Yannick exemplified his protective urge by referring to a situation where he got into a fight with someone who was physically mistreating their child. Although it didn’t come to blows, he stepped in to ensure that no harm was done to the child. Yannick shares this story with a smile to reflect his satisfaction with intervening, framing his actions as an extension of his identity: someone who values the protection of children. In the excerpt, Yannick attributes his emotional attraction to children as invaluable in transforming the abnormality implied by the oppressive identity into a heroic trait (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). By framing his sexuality as inherently tied to protection rather than harm, Yannick challenges the assumption that equates attraction to children with CSA by underlining MAPs’ human qualities and protective instincts. Through actions that condemned harm done to children, the oppressive identity was overturned, and participants claimed an identity centred around the objective good of protecting children (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). However, as Yannick and Mae both emphasised, this protective identity includes the acknowledgement that some MAPs, for various reasons other than their sexual attraction, should not have contact with children. By highlighting their shared solidarity with the risk-conscious other, participants pointed to their shared understanding and insight into harm done to children by various individuals and institutions (Alexander, 2006a). Aside from having emotions compared to being emotionless, MAPs repeatedly accounted for having greater empathy for children than the external other.

These beings, with their power to bring hope and joy to my heart, must be protected at ALL costs. This protection is not limited to mental or physical harm but extends to the inherent dignity of children. – Keith

Having emotions, viewing children as people, and not wanting to take ownership over children was central to how MAPs maintained an identity as protectors of children. Participants legitimised this claim by citing the prevalence of empathetic capacity among online community members, supported by scientific findings, like those by Konrad et al. (2018) which recognise empathy as a psychologically meaningful component of MAPs' attraction to children. However, a few participants noted that their emotional fondness first came to light after joining an online community for MAPs. Some participants accounted that because the sexual attraction to children is physically more noticeable, they did not dare to investigate their attraction to children more thoroughly before encouragement from the online community. Others expressed that having internalised the stigma towards MAPs, participants came to believe themselves to be incapable of experiencing an emotional attraction. This was especially prominent among those exclusively attracted to children, as noted by McPhail (2024). By relying on scientific findings and a shared interpretative framework, combined with their lived experiences, this empathetic ability was crucial not only for acknowledging their sexual identity but also for anchoring their collective sense of selves (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996).

In locating this empathetic ability within their biographies, several participants mentioned always having possessed a 'moral compass' to emphasise that their deep care for children originated from their human qualities in addition to their sexual identity (Goffman, 1963). MAPs' claim of loving children is juxtaposed against the risk-conscious others' predatory interpretation of MAPs' love for children, wherein MAPs asserted loving children for their minds, souls, and personalities, in addition to being attracted to their bodies. Through this contextualisation of love, participants accounted for the difference between MAPs and the risk-conscious other, wherein participants ascribed children personhood rather than seeing children as adults' properties, akin to findings by Dymond and Duff (2020). In extension to humanise themselves, participants collectively framed children as actual people. This love for children was demonstrated both linguistically and through actions. Assertions like, "This has nothing to do with romance or sex; they're just really interesting people" (Andy, survey interview) captured why some MAPs pursued friendships with children based on the idea that children are less constrained by adult social expectations (Schaefer et al., 2023). Assuming the role of a

protector of children also necessitated adopting a position on the importance, or potential absence, of establishing boundaries for interactions with children.

With my own children, I give them hugs and kisses, or I don't if they express that they don't want to be hugged or kissed [...]. I might wrestle, tickle or snuggle them. I will pick them up. All of this is in a platonic, fatherly way. I would never want my children to feel sexualised by any adult. I don't engage in most of these behaviours with other people's children. – Florian

The aspiration to safeguard children was exemplified through various actions, and, for some, such as Florian, this aspiration manifested itself in the establishment of boundaries in interactions with children. Despite insisting on never harming a child, stigma led multiple participants to doubt their intentions in interactions with children. To manage stigma, participants used boundaries to create a moral threshold and protect their sanity in a hostile social climate (Goffman, 1963; Rubin, 1984). Hence, boundaries were not created in interactions with children to avoid sexually offending a child. Instead, boundaries were established in interactions with children as a means of impression management. Although these dual intentions can naturally coexist (Chopin et al, 2022), what is important here is how the pervasive stigma faced by MAPs caused participants to manage how others perceived them. This raises the question: would someone not attracted to children feel the need to explain acts such as hugging their own children in the same way as Florian?

For some, establishing boundaries constituted an effort to position themselves within the sacred ideals of child protection that distance them from the profane dangerousness assigned to the oppressive identity (Alexander, 2006b). Other participants scrutinised such boundaries, considering the establishment of boundaries absurd, as it implied the necessity for self-restraint in any manner, shape, or form. As such, boundaries in interactions with children threatened these participants' sense of normalcy and jeopardised their claimed humanity (Alexander, 2006b). Thus, setting boundaries was seen as conforming to the stigma participants aimed to challenge, as it implicitly acknowledged the profane assumption of possibly being a monster. Boundaries also reflected participants' desire to protect themselves from hypothetical accusations later in their lives, as the mere suspicion of being a MAP might lead to criminal accusations, even in the absence of criminal actions.

I expect to be publicly known as a paedophile in [number of years]. At that time, people might reflect on my behaviour with children and accuse me of inappropriate conduct. [...] It was so healing to connect with people like me [online] who were the types of individuals I could be friends with. It made me feel a lot better about myself and about living as a paedophile, so much so that I have committed my life to advocating for our well-being. – Quin

The risk-conscious other was characterised as protective of children yet unable to see the bigger picture of how to protect all children at all costs by including MAPs in this mission. Quin intended to be publicly known as a ‘paedophile’ as part of their pursuit to protect children and MAPs alike, where subjecting themselves to probable public prosecution was a risk worth taking. The future-oriented perspective through which Quin ascribed meaning to their life and future was rooted in finding ‘people like me’ online. In an interview, Quin further emphasised the centrality of the collective by explaining how they were inspired by the activism of prominent figures in the online MAP community, wanting to further their work. Hence, identity work is not only collectively meaningful and oriented towards the here and now and the future, but it also manifests itself through a higher purpose—that of protecting children and MAPs from harm, as Cranney (2017) identified. Being confined to the digital realm, activism emerged as a symbolic resource that manifests MAPs humanity through action by incorporating their struggles into the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006a).

Participants engaged in identity work for various personal reasons, but collectively, constructing an identity as protectors of children gained meaning through how participants strived to be recognised by the external other (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). In this way, the symbolic code of children, as argued by Loseke (2013), represents innocence and moral order that distinguishes the pure from the dangerous (c. f Douglas, 2005, 121-123). By adopting an identity as protectors of children, participants sought to legitimise their experiences and align with the values inherent in this symbolic code, thereby distancing themselves from societal perceptions of MAPs as symbols of sacred evil (Alexander, 2006b). Herein, participants reclaimed their humanity and positioned themselves as moral agents within a societal framework that demands the protection of symbolic innocence (Fischel, 2016). The formation of their identity as protectors relied on this symbolic framework, in which representations of the collective, along with their actions and emotions, were articulated as aligning with the preservation of childhood innocence (Smith, 2023). Constructing their oppositional identity in

this way allowed participants to signify their intentions, capacities, and prospects for the external other to recognise.

5.3 Diversifying MAPs

The literature review demonstrated that contemporary research into MAPs has given insufficient attention to in-group differences within the online MAP community. The second part of this analysis is divided into three subsections detailing participants' identity work and their efforts to redefine the sacred-profane dichotomy: *Sacrificial Guardianship*, *Defending Human Liberty*, and *Promoting Emancipation*. These identities were worked to distinguish themselves from the internal other while expressing shared solidarity with the external other. *Sacrificial Guardianship* and *Promoting Emancipation* intersect with *Defending Human Liberty*, but the latter maintains independence from labels and ideologies. Thus, this analysis highlights how MAPs position the 'other' within the MAP scene, distinguishing between the *disgraceful*, *misguided* and *negligent* internal other, enabling various expressions of being MAP.

5.3.1 Sacrificial Guardianship

Establishing the oppositional identity of sacrificial guardianship involved redefining the love that MAPs have for children. Although participants found children sexually attractive, the emotional dimension of their attraction to children came to the foreground. It was believed that children should not engage sexually with adults. This led MAPs to identify within a framework that recognised the harm of adult-child sex. Participants drew on Western ideals of romantic love, moral obligations, and child protection initiatives to support the belief that love should prioritise the well-being of others. These beliefs manifested through the creation of online communities that prohibited the promotion of adult-child sex, allowing participants to reinforce this view of love collectively.

[W]hatever you do for the best of the other person is love. A romantic relationship requires individuals to be equal. An adult would naturally seek affection and commitment; however, this will create in the child the feeling that to deserve affection and acceptance, they must give it first. The consequences

of that are obvious. As desirable as that may seem from a selfish perspective, I cannot think of a situation where it would be. – Noah

Being human was not merely about professing love for children, ensuring their well-being, or even possessing a sexual identity. For most of my participants, it encompassed their worldview, way of life, and understanding of love. By employing a singular definition of children as fundamentally sexually unattainable and defining MAPs as protectors of children's innocence, participants articulated distinctions concerning love/harm and equal/unequal to differentiate themselves from monstrosity. Earlier research suggests that self-ethical framing is often a public facade designed to deceive children and gullible adults (Chopin et al., 2022). However, what matters here is less the reliability of participants' accounts but rather the implications this presentation of themselves had for the collective identity work that MAPs undertook.

For Noah, being attracted to children necessitated rethinking the essence of love—not as a partnership, but as a commitment to prioritising the child's well-being above his own desires. Swidler (2001) observes that love, as in Noah's case, sometimes represents an ultimate choice grounded in the unwavering virtues of the beloved. Drawing on broader discussions about children's innocence and romantic love enabled participants to forge an identity defined by sacrificial guardianship (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). This represents an effort to reconstruct the sacred and profane boundaries, further strengthening their shared solidarity with the external other. Thus, participants challenged stereotypical views of MAPs as monsters, portraying themselves as dedicated to the child's objective good. In comparison, the internal other was considered disgraceful based on a perceived overestimation of children's agency.

The safety of the child is paramount. If a minor can sense that you're attracted to them, then you're causing trauma that can shape how they view the world for the rest of their lives. Minors should never feel sexualised. [...] If they [MAPs] make advances towards or have sexual contact with a child, then they're engaging in sexual abuse. If they view content that involves actual children, they're partly responsible for the exploitation of that child or those children. If a MAP doesn't trust themselves to be safe around children, they shouldn't be around them. – Ivy

The oppositional identity of sacrificial guardianship was set apart from other MAPs who were regarded as disgraceful. This separation of the group from other MAPs allowed participants to uphold a belief in the sanctity of their love for children, viewing it as unconditional and committed to ensuring their welfare (Alexander, 2006b). Here, Ivy addresses the fundamental belief that distinguishes groups of MAPs from one another: the belief in children's (in)ability to consent. Thus, the policing of boundaries against the *disgraceful other* gains meaning based on this very belief. Grounding their identity in sacrificial guardianship reinforced participants' opposition to monstrosity. It aligned with virtuous morality (Nielsen et al., 2022) by positioning love for children as a central organising principle, situating their identity within a framework of existential sacredness. In this respect, the distinction between groups of MAPs becomes meaningful, as this policing of boundaries signifies a fundamental belief that organises and positions MAPs within rivalry agendas (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). The identity of being human—the foundation for MAP's identity work—along with MAP's claimed shared solidarity with the external other, was so dominant in my data that the identity as human, as a consequence, extended to defending the humanity of the disgraceful other. Although disgraceful, the internal other is granted the capacity to change their views and actions. However, rather than merely being rooted in an idealised notion of love and transcended sexual desires, tension arose from the coexistence of these elements.

The differences in power and the implicit trust kids tend to have for adults make it impossible for them to give genuine consent to anything. [...] My fantasies are about wanting to be a stable adult the kid can rely on for anything and sleeping with them in a way that does not horrifically traumatise them somehow, lol [Laughing Out Loud]. – Daphne

The contradiction between the virtues Daphne associates with love and her fantasies, which contrast with her beliefs, illustrates what Jordan (Survey respondent) and others described as “a confusion”. The confusion evident in Daphne's articulated ‘lol’ is not merely personal but rooted in larger cultural ideas about love/harm, equality/inequality and agency/determinism. Herein, Daphne's ‘lol’ becomes a byproduct of the symbolic boundaries that distinguish acceptable from unacceptable expressions of love and desires (Rubin, 1984). As a consequence, Daphne seeks alignment with larger discourses in her pursuit to reinforce the moral universals of childhood innocence, a sacred sanctuary to be protected from harm (Fischel, 2016). Communicating shared solidarity to the external other as part of channelling their already-

existing humanity involved transforming the external other's expected rationalisations into deeper affirmations of what it meant to be human. Instead of viewing her love for children as a sacrifice, Daphne maintains her love for children as a commitment – as the only way to live with an attraction to children – without compromise, where harm constitutes a violation of this sanctity.

This articulation challenged stigma and positioned participants within a broader moral framework that emphasised shared values of care, love, and the rejection of harm as foundational to their humanity. Herein, participants navigated their oppositional identities to replace determinism—the belief that an attraction to children inevitably results in harm—with agency. Participants enhanced their agency by reinforcing their morale, which contributed to establishing an oppositional identity that contests the oppressive and deterministic assumptions imposed upon them while simultaneously validating what Walker (2017) termed their 'emotional resilience.' Hence, participants viewed the love for children not as a sacrifice in itself but as a personal choice that recognises the dependency between children and adults, enabling participants to establish what Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) described as 'moral identities.'

I was someone who found self-satisfaction in the thought of abused children. I didn't want to live anymore, but I didn't want to die either. [...] I learned that I could live as long as the thoughts remained in my head. It is my choice whether those thoughts stay in my mind or become a reality. – Manny

Ideologies and actions were made meaningful not solely through shared lived experiences but also within the dichotomies of harm/love, abuse/protection, and consent/moral obligation. The emphasis on children's need for protection was not a diminishing of children's personhood but framed as respecting children's developmental stages and safeguarding children's right not to be sexually violated. Children were viewed as children – innocent, developing, and emotionally dependent on adults – rather than as equals to adults in terms of sexual and emotional agency. For some participants, being non-offending embodied the only choice and commitment to loving children (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Other participants recognised their own victimisation from CSA, which compelled them to utterly condemn any sexual relationships between adults and children, emphasising their firsthand knowledge of the damage inflicted by CSA.

Like feelings, reality was directly related to aspects of MAPs humanity, as suggested by Goode (2009). As another participant accounted, MAPs must “see things, such as children's sexual behaviours, in the right light and not read into things that aren't there” (Alex, Survey interview). Hence, feelings of love can lead to wishful thinking (Houtepen et.al., 2016), imbued with a power so strong that it might distort reality (Swidler, 2001). Sacrificial guardianship encompassed a sense of purpose, responsibility, and moral duty grounded in an understanding that distinguishes duty from desire.

We seek emotional connections with children because we are attracted to them emotionally, to fill an emptiness that we would otherwise experience in our lives, much like anyone would if they never found love. – Sam

Rather than portraying platonic interactions with children as opportunities for manipulation (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021), these interactions stemmed from a longing to connect with children emotionally. Platonic interactions with children were described as deeply emotionally rewarding, providing a source of emotional fulfilment unavailable elsewhere (Schaefer et al., 2023). Hence, sacrificial guardianship was imbued with moral and emotional significance. This was captured by a participant who stated, “I knew I was in love because I felt it in my belly and was thinking about them all day long” (Walter, Survey respondent). By framing their emotions as comparable to universally recognisable experiences, such as feeling love ‘in my belly,’ MAPs engaged with cultural scripts of love and affection in rejecting the imposed otherness. Martijn et al. (2020) have similarly documented that MAPs commonly experience having fallen in love with children. To humanise their existence and bring their assumed status as ‘other’ into question, participants articulated their sentiments through what Swidler (2001) calls a ‘shared cultural vocabulary’ of love. A vocabulary that positions love as encompassing emotional, embodied, and cultural dimensions. However, rather than having fallen in love with children, most participants expressed only having had crushes on children, as time rarely was spent with children. Instead, participants express ‘love at first sight’ to demonstrate their affectionate desires. MAPs asserted the legitimacy of their experienced love for children by reinforcing Western ideals that define love as a linguistic, moral and human force (Richards, 2016). When inquired about their experienced desire to interact with children, most participants reported a tendency to refrain from interactions with minors, even when they did not perceive themselves as posing any threat to children’s safety.

We are not threats to children's well-being, and there is no need to restrain ourselves. Most people do not have difficulty avoiding sexually assaulting those they are attracted to in casual interactions. – Owen

The avoidance of interactions was not driven by a belief that such actions would lead to the sexual victimisation of children. Instead, it constituted a strategic measure aimed at mitigating personal emotional distress and avoiding instigating suspicion (Goffman, 1963). Participants tended to regulate their behaviour excessively to avoid any misunderstanding of their intentions. Managing social interactions was not merely an individual endeavour; it emerged as a collective negotiation in online spaces, where participants engaged in discussions about impression management and exchanged social scripts, as Tremblay (2002) hypothesised. The exchange of social scripts revolved around how to resonate and act in interactional settings that involved children or how to cope with experiences of stigma. Foregrounding their commitment to ensuring that no harm befalls children was made meaningful as it inspired community members to police their boundaries against internal groupings (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). The boundary work involved a rejection of behaviours and beliefs that sexualised children as participants perceived it to threaten the collective moral framework. Sacrificial guardianship became desirable by the meaning participants ascribed to it, and therefore, humanity served as a source for inclusion and exclusion. The disgraceful others' failure to adhere to these shared values positioned the internal other as threatening the moral framework that underlies this identity (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). This ideological stance was a defence against external stigma and a collectively aspired mechanism for maintaining their own humanity and dignity. The ideological alignment with mainstream views on child protection enabled participants to anchor their moral virtues in sacrificial guardianship.

5.3.2 Defending Human Liberty

Defending human liberty redirected the focus of identity work from discussions about children's sexuality to a focus on self-love and self-actualisation. Central to the identity construction of MAPs as defenders of human liberty was an emphasis on their need for sexual outlets that do not involve children. These participants viewed claims of love for children as a misguided discussion, particularly because it overlooked the most crucial issue: acceptable sexual outlets. For various reasons, some MAPs viewed the assertions of internal others regarding their love

for children as insignificant to MAPs' human needs and desires. In constructing their identities, participants sought reassurance that their desire for sexual outlets was not monstrous but an inherent aspect of being human. Thus, herein laid the quest of remaking MAP into what Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) described as a 'moral identity'.

I have never committed an act and will never harm a child. To protect children, this loneliness is the price I pay. However, a doll would help me a lot, but they are forbidden. My emotional attraction is, unfortunately, always marked with sadness. This makes me sad and lonely, yet there is no other way. – Trent

The shared identity of defending human liberty was reaffirmed and revalued by emphasising that the attraction to children goes beyond actual children, extending to MAPs' rights to sexual expressivity and freedom. This claim gained significance as MAPs argued for their right to have freedom under responsibility without accusations of endangering children (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Participants asserted that, like anyone else, the right to determine how sexual outlets are sought in the privacy of one's bedroom is a personal decision as long as no child is harmed. Thus, shared solidarity with the external other was emphasised so long as the sacred bounds of protecting children from harm were not transcended (Alexander, 2006b). To support this claim, MAPs argued that dignity and respect are deserved by individuals as fully functioning members of society, alongside the right to express their sexuality equally. Participants noted that in instances of CSA, MAPs who commit these offences face much harsher penalties than other CSOs who are not sexually attracted to children. Participants suggested that this difference highlights a bias based on the offender's sexual identity, arguing that current sentencing practices for CSA represent a form of sexual discrimination. It was claimed that a MAP should not face unequal treatment in court due to their sexual preference; instead, any offence should be treated equally. In defence of their sexual preference for children, participants argued that MAPs should be allowed fantasies, drawings, fictional materials, or dolls, as their sexual needs are equal to anyone else's.

It would be helpful if people stopped trying to ban fictional materials (writing, drawings...) and sex dolls, as if those are dangerous items. I think for many people, those are safe outlets, and they harm no one. – Robin

While not advocating for the legalisation of adult-child sexual relationships, participants frequently expressed feeling deprived of their bodily autonomy, characterising *the internal other as misguided* for failing to recognise the broader scope of MAPs humanity (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). In their pursuit of bodily autonomy, participants sought self-acceptance and freedom from sexual constraints while asserting their agency and acknowledging personal responsibility. It was deemed inhumane to expect anyone to abstain from sexual experiences their entire life (Goode, 2011). The primary issue was not consent or interactions with children; rather, the discussion focused on dolls depicting children or fictional characters. Participants questioned why laws should limit expressions of sexual fantasy in the absence of harm, asserting that individuals bear responsibility solely for their own actions (Savage, 2015). Although not choosing their sexual identity, participants emphasised that MAPs have the option to manage their attractions, which led to a discussion on advocating for the legalisation of fictional materials or doll-like representations of children. Such legalisation's potential dangers and harms could be easily outlined; however, what became crucial to MAPs' identity work was differentiating between the binaries of love/harm and agency/determinism.

Contact between a MAP and a child is only appropriate if neither the MAP nor the child understands the interaction or relationship to be romantic or sexual. A MAP can be a good friend to a child they are attracted to (or a teacher to, a doctor of, etc.) and spend time with them, so long as the MAP does not perceive the interaction as a "date" or the child as their "partner." – Patrice

Defending human liberty relied on a singular definition of the child and a dynamic perception of MAPs. While sexual contact with a minor was considered harmful, opinions varied regarding the basis of arguments about harm (Jahnke et al. 2018). Participants located these arguments in legal, social, contextual, or morally held values and beliefs. This singular definition of children created a consensus on the harmfulness of sexually active children, leading to the belief that children were unable to consent to any involvement in child sexual abuse material in addition to adult-child sex. Yet, children were seen as insignificant to MAPs' sexual outlets since no real child would be harmed. The dynamic definition of MAPs included alternative sexual and emotional outlets, aiming to uphold moral values by preventing sexual harm without involving real children. Participants aimed to reframe MAPs as embodying qualities of self-love, a rejection of harm, and equality with other sexual orientations. It was crucial for defenders of human liberty to resist the moral indictment of media stereotypes and to redefine MAP as a

symbol of human rights advocacy rather than deviant desires. This delineation between MAPs' desires and their need for sexual outlets distanced them from monstrosity through the integration of their sexual needs as parallel to broader civil themes (Alexander, 2006a). By asserting that their sexual desires were not monstrous, MAPs subtly elevated their moral standing as a shared identity (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Hence, participants aligned their identity with the revered principles of advocating for human liberty.

5.2.3 Promoting Emancipation

Promoting emancipation emerged as a third way of framing what it means to be MAP, to love children, and, by extension, to be human. This identity was sharply contrasted with the oppressive monstrous identity, as it clashed with the common presumption of rationalising and justifying adult-child sex (Cantor et al., 2022). Their belief was that while media commonly frame MAPs as predatory and obsessed with power and control, MAPs are, in reality, considerate of children, their needs, and desires. Arguments to support their belief in children's ability to consent were found within an already existing culture that sexualises children, historical narratives of adult-child relationships, and children's rights. Although the belief in children's ability to consent was hardly available in their local environments, participants shared personal testimonies online to reinforce these beliefs among themselves.

I think children alone should have the final say over their bodies. I do not believe it is anybody but an individual's right to say who they can and cannot be with physically. I hope someday, laws will change to reflect this, and physical relationships between [referring to own ideological standpoint] and children can be safe for both. – Mike

While starkly contrasting with the discourse on children's innocence that portrays them as incapable of informed decision-making, Mike advocates for children's rights and personhood. By emphasising children's autonomy, Mike aligns himself with contemporary discourses of individual rights and equality, situating his identity within broader debates surrounding agency and consent (Goode, 2011; Swidler, 2001). What Srivastava (2014) identifies as an overestimation of children's agency that neglects their developmental needs and inherent power imbalances, Mike frames as an infringement on their right to bodily autonomy. The discourse on childhood innocence, participants argued, sidetracks a more complex truth of children's

transition from childhood to adulthood. In line with Gooren (2011), participants framed this discourse to be an unrealistic ideal of children's sexuality. Using language that underscores children's agency and highlights freedom of choice, participants sought to humanise their existence and, by implication, delegitimise the oppressive identity (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996). Through this renegotiation, participants construct an oppositional identity that promotes emancipation rather than self-gratification. The tension arising from Mike's advocacy that contrasts with the discourse on children's innocence illustrates the 'cultural struggle' that Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) accounted for, wherein participants attempt to reconcile their beliefs regarding children's agency with societal expectations on mutual and consensual love (Jónasdóttir, 2014; Swidler, 2001). Mike's hope for a future that legalises such interactions actualises how participants' identity work extends the present to include an envisioned future.

Unlike most participants, who equate love with care and emotional connection, Mike's mention of 'physical relationships' and 'safe' reflects what Jónasdóttir (2014) describes as the conflation of love and sex. Here, less emphasis is placed on love's emotional significance; instead, its capitalising force is highlighted, as Illouz (2007) critiques in her analysis of commodified intimacy. Rather than being emotional, love becomes a transactional physical act.

I don't think that all sexual activity between minors and adults is necessarily abuse. I believe it depends on whether there was consent involved, how informed the child was, and if there was any attempted manipulation. – Laura

The dynamic definition of the child involved a recognition that children should be protected from sexual harm; thus, participants did not perceive all sexual encounters between children and adults as inherently harmful or exploitative (Jahnke et al., 2018). Rather than relying on a singular definition of the child and the MAP, promoting emancipation prompted that adult-child sex can be consensual based on the premise that children are sexual agents. Cantor et al. (2022) have similarly accounted for an existing belief within the online MAP community that emphasises children's sexual autonomy. Instead of perceiving the sexual intimacy between children and adults as harmful in itself, participants pointed to the elements involved in the sexual situation as potentially harmful. As a consequence, participants rejected the imposed oppressive identity through the rejection of harm, enabling the separation of the collective from the symbolic evil associated with the oppressive identity (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996).

This was achieved by integrating moral virtues that reject harm done to children into broader civil themes, emphasising individual rights and self-determination (Alexander, 2010, 2006a).

Adherence to both voluntarism and personhood led participants to argue that a child who has sexual desires should be respected, too. To prove that children were sexual beings, participants inserted their childhood sexual experiences into their biographies (Goffman, 1963). Arguments about children's sexual agency were often accompanied by accounts from participants detailing how the adult world dismissed their sexual feelings during childhood. Conversely, individuals who engaged in sexual encounters as children, claiming not to have been traumatised by these experiences, further validated this argument. This storytelling practice enabled a collective interpretation of biographical experiences (Goffman, 1963; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). To enforce an identity as promoting emancipation, online community members shared scientific studies that supported the notion of children who had not been traumatised by sexual encounters with adults. Herein, participants pointed out that too few studies have focused on investigating mutual relationships between minors and adults. By portraying love for children as mutual and equal, an effort is made to shift the symbolic boundaries between the sacred and the profane to preserve a sense of moral worth (Alexander, 2006b, Swidler, 2001). Participants defended their identity against internal groupings, asserting that these other MAPs were negligent of children and their needs.

Children could be intimidated by the older partner and not say anything - that's also why a preestablished connection is needed. That's why I believe consent is possible, but it's hard to actually acquire. [...] I think MAPs that are involved in CSA don't truly love children. Love isn't abuse. – Ebony

By stressing that 'love isn't abuse', Ebony sustains that MAPs who violate children's personhood are the negligent ones by not respecting children's wants and needs. The emphasis on children's personhood echoes arguments of minority rights where individuals seek recognition and validation of marginalised identities (Rubin, 1984). Other participants accounted that MAPs who were not themselves promoters of emancipation neglected children's autonomous agency by not fighting for children's rights. To be human was to fight for the rights of those whose liberties were disregarded by the *negligent internal and external others*. Not only were MAPs an oppressed sexual minority, but children were also regarded as an oppressed sexual minority and discriminated against because of their age. Hence, in seeing children as

people, it becomes easier to ‘fall in love’ with someone considered equal to oneself, also believed to share similar sexual needs and desires. In contrast, it could be argued that Ebony’s mentioning of the need for ‘preestablished connections’ is equivalent to grooming strategies or rationalisations, as argued by Aslan et al. (2014) and Cantor et al. (2022). However, what is essential is how participants rely on love/harm, protector/abuser to negotiate an oppositional identity.

Volunteerism emerged as a symbolic code invested with power employed as a frame of reference in negotiating the identity of promoting emancipation. For volunteerism to work, MAPs first had to ascribe children both personhood and agency. Participants recognised children not as passive objects in adults’ possessions but as individuals capable of making informed decisions, including decisions about intimacy. Swidler (2001) accounted that volunteerism, although not universally endorsed, has a cultural power that lies in its prominence as a dominating moral framework. Moreover, Illouz (2007; 2012) has argued that this mode of thinking reflects a striving to maximise good outcomes for individual pursuits while expecting others to do the same in the name of love. By applying this logic to their attraction to children, MAPs positioned themselves as respecting boundaries and prioritising mutual benefit rather than domination. Hence, the alignment with volunteerism enabled participants to assert their commitment to self-actualisation and advocacy for children's rights and, by extension, counter stigma and protect their humanity (Alexander, 2006a).

I admire childhood as a concept; it is a semi-religious feeling that makes me identify with the Ancient Greeks, who worshipped young boys as the ultimate ideal of beauty, or with Michael Jackson, who shared a similar admiration for childhood. – Jack

Promoting emancipation was made morally acceptable by underlining the naturalness of their sexual attraction to children based on a critique of social norms and sexual morality as socially constructed. Herein, participants attempted to legitimise their identities within a moral universal of sexual diversity, agency and consent to challenge dominant narratives framing the attraction to children as deviant (Goode, 2011; Rubin, 1984). Loving children involves listening, understanding children as competent, taking them seriously, and acknowledging their wants and needs. In participant’s accounts, this conceptualisation of love represented the true meaning of loving children. The critique of restrictive sexual morality drew on historical narratives of

periods where intergenerational relationship was more accepted. Affirmation of their identities was found through the sharing of ‘known and successful’ relationships between minors and adults within the online community (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Using the binary of natural/unnatural, participants attempted to position themselves in alignment with the discourse on sexual diversity, which argues that variations in sexuality exist as part of human experiences (Goode, 2011). Participants worked this identity to imply that the current taboos on intergenerational relationships are culturally contextually anchored rather than universal.

It's just sex. It's just pleasure. How can we—as a society—be perfectly okay with atrocities of violence like war, which are so frequent in our world, yet giving a young person pleasure is worse?! We have our morality upside down when killing someone is seen as preferable to giving pleasure. – Cedric

Participants reframed their attraction not as manipulative coercion but as rooted in mutual desires and pleasure-seeking. Conceptualising love in any other way was to Cedric unattainable, as it would infringe upon the sacred of his sexual identity. For participants to equate love with consent and as something both MAPs and children were denied, participants had to position themselves within a framework of belonging to a sexual minority and children as deprived of sexual agency (Alexander, 2006a). Participants sought to locate their identity within the sacred ideals of care and protection by emphasising their moral intent and rejection of harm. As Rubin (1984) accounts, the placement of attraction to children outside morally and socially acceptable boundaries thus counteracts participants’ very claims.

The higher purpose of fighting for children's rights became meaningful through their framing of love as a shared mutual experience grounded in agency and respect, as suggested by Cantor et al. (2022). By aligning themselves with the discourse of rights and equality, participants constructed a moral character that positioned their attraction as ethical and socially significant (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). This reframing can be understood as a boundary-making process, where participants seek to delineate themselves from the oppressive identity ascribed to them by the external other. The identity of promoting emancipation enabled a self-perception as an advocate for children's autonomy, aligning this identity with a broader struggle against societal norms perceived as oppressive or dismissive of children's agency. However, failure to adhere to these scripted definitions of love jeopardised participants' moral framework (Alexander, 2006b; Swidler, 2001). Without conceptualising love as consent-based and

reciprocal, the collective identity work and moral framework of promoting emancipation risked collapsing under the weight of societal condemnation and participants' wordy orientation.

6. Concluding Discussion

Throughout this thesis, it has been pointed out that MAPs collective identity negotiation is insufficiently understood in contemporary science, which requires further investigation. The analysis provides a nuanced examination of being a MAP in online communities by examining the collective utility of oppositional identities. It highlights MAPs asserted shared solidarity and adherence to moral universals in attempts to incorporate these identities into broader civil themes. The analysis differentiates how MAPs negotiate their identities within the community (against internal others) and in response to societal stigma (imposed by external others). I suggested that these processes reflect attempts to collectively negotiate oppositional identities as MAPs. The first part of the analysis addresses the initial research question, while the latter part answers the second.

The first part of the analysis examined how MAPs oppose societal portrayals that deem the attraction to children monstrous due to a conflation of the attraction with acts of CSA. By constructing three oppositional identities—*Being Human*, *a Sexual Minority*, and *Protectors of Children*—, MAPs strived to reclaim their humanity and align with the moral universals of love and a rejection of harm. Akin to the findings of Walker (2017, 2021) MAPs attributed their stigmatisation to biased media and societal misconceptions that conflate the attraction to children with acts of CSA. Participants argued that the external ‘other’ views MAPs through a lens of fear and dehumanisation. Despite this, MAPs claimed to be human, actively resisting the connotation of monstrosity typically associated with them. This was achieved by emphasising that having a sexual preference for children did not determine MAPs' actions.

The collective identity work of online MAP community members revealed a recurring theme: MAPs sought to establish oppositional identities against societal perceptions that deem them monstrous. By emphasising their shared humanity and solidarity towards the external other, MAPs fostered unity. Thus, the stigma attached to MAPs' sexual identity had implications for the identity work participants undertook. In this collaborative defence, participants notably avoided expressing disdain towards others within the community. However, distinctions emerged as ideological stances were articulated among different factions of MAPs, unveiling nuances in their collective identity work that separated groups of MAPs, along with their pursued activism and boundary work from one another.

The internalisation of stigma often led to significant psychological distress; however, as Bekkers et al. (2024) noted, the practice of collective storytelling in these digital environments empowered MAPs to disavow the oppressive monstrous identity and reclaim their humanity. MAPs consciously rejected any desire to exploit children, instead embracing a mission dedicated to protecting them from harm. This mission affirmed their humanity and signalled a moral commitment to counter societal perceptions of inherent monstrosity.

Central to MAPs' identity work was the rejection or redefinition of external labels of sacred evil, as alternative labels and moral attributes were adopted to differentiate their attraction to children from societal conceptions of monstrosity (Holt et al., 2020; Jahnke et al., 2022). MAPs advocated for recognition of their attraction as a legitimate sexual orientation, linking their struggle to those of other marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ communities, as identified by Walker (2020). By positioning themselves as a sexual minority, MAPs resisted imposed stigma and sought validation through shared online storytelling.

Romantic, emotional, and social attractions, coupled with nurturing feelings toward children, set MAPs apart from society's vilified views. Although contemporary research has attended to the emotional aspects of MAPs' attraction to children and its relevance to their identity work (Walker, 2021; Goode, 2011; Houtepen, 2016), this emotional dimension has predominantly tended to highlight MAPs love for children as a scientific fact. While it is important to acknowledge the articulation of love for children among MAPs, these works risk perpetuating stereotypes of MAPs as fundamentally other rather than investigating their expressed love for children as integral to their collaborative identity construction. MAPs aligned themselves with societal values by adopting a protective stance toward children. This framing allowed them to distance themselves from harmful stereotypes and redefine their identity as advocates for children's safety and dignity. These identity codes allowed MAPs to challenge societal norms, assert their right to self-definition, and express their intrinsic moral attributes.

The second section of the analysis examined how MAPs constructed oppositional identities to counter societal stigma and redefine the sacred-profane dichotomy by differentiating themselves from other MAPs, referred to as the internal other. This section delineated three conflicting oppositional identities: *Sacrificial Guardianship*, *Defending Human Liberty*, and *Promoting Emancipation*. These identities illustrate how MAPs navigated and negotiated their collective self-conceptions within the MAP community.

Contemporary literature on MAPs and their sexual attraction to children posits that MAPs are either prone to rationalising sexual engagement with children (Cantor, 2022) or engage in a singular counter-discourse (Nielsen, 2022). Additional studies posit that the online community of MAPs comprise a singular ‘online paedophile subculture’ (Holt et al., 2010). In contrast, this thesis explored identity work beyond singular counter-discourses and rationalisations. To the best of my knowledge, sparse research has considered how MAPs attempt to construct and negotiate identities in opposition to the monstrous stigma by integrating their identities into larger themes of shared civil and moral solidarity. This reductionism neglects the diverse group identities that exist within the community and the collaborative process of collective identity formation. The variations in the internal organisation of MAP diversity arose from the structured sets of meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences of having a stigmatised sexual identity. Individuals interpreted and enacted MAP ideologies variably, contingent upon global, local, and personal contexts. This variability resulted in a broad range of expressions pertaining to the sexual identity associated with attraction to children.

Online communities provide a space for MAPs to collectively reinforce these values and solidify their humanity and moral worth through shared identities that reject harm done to children, as highlighted by Cranney (2017) and Nielsen et al. (2022). The internal community diversity, in various ways, redefined love for children as prioritising their well-being. *Sacrificial guardianship* placed children's welfare above personal desires. The identity was rooted in a moral duty to protect children, drawing boundaries to distinguish themselves from internal others who overestimated children's agency and societal perceptions of MAPs as monsters.

MAPs' rights to bodily autonomy and responsible sexual outlets, such as fantasies or fictional representations that excluded real children, prompted the identity of *defending human liberty*. The attraction to children was reframed as an inherent aspect of MAPs humanity, which has previously been observed by Bekkers et al. (2024) and Houtepen et al. (2016). MAPs emphasised a rejection of harm and moral responsibility, challenging societal narratives of monstrosity while reinforcing an identity as individuals committed to protecting children.

Rationalising or neutralising harm associated with adult-child sex is most commonly identified as a characteristic of individuals attracted to children in contemporary science and popular culture (Holt et al., 2010). The oppositional identity of *promoting emancipation* advocates for

children's autonomy and agency while critiquing societal norms that deny children's sexual personhood, as observed by Cantor et al. (2022). Participants viewed the taboos on intergenerational relationships as restrictive and culturally constructed rather than universally valid, framing love as reciprocal and based on consent. Through an emphasis on equality, mutual respect, and the rejection of harm, this group of MAPs strives to integrate their struggle for recognition into debates on children's sexual agency, raising tensions within the MAP community.

The oppositional identity work directed at external and internal others was shaped by a broader context of sexual identities and the internet, as well as integration with and opposition to the symbolism of childhood. Online communities played a crucial role, enabling MAPs to create collective identities and resist stigma, although the challenge of humanising themselves while facing pervasive stigma remained. These communities provided a space for solidarity and mutual support, helping to establish moral frameworks that emphasise care, protection, and the rejection of harm. Opposing the notion of monstrosity, MAPs strove to reclaim their humanity and integrate their struggle for recognition with broader civil themes that legitimised their claims of shared solidarity. This, in turn, helps to counteract stigma, as highlighted by the findings of Cranney (2017) and Nielsen et al. (2022). In extension, this allowed MAPs to reclaim their humanity.

Prior research on attraction to children has predominantly depicted MAPs as constituting an integral part of the cultural vocabulary of monstrosity, representing cultural symbols of sacred evil, emotionless predators targeting innocent children. This depiction starkly contrasts with what Swidler (2001) identified as the mythical vocabulary of love, which centres on individuals with complex emotional lives characterised by empathy, care, and passion. These opposing vocabularies pose an inherent conflict to MAPs' identity work, as the two cultural vocabularies—monstrosity and love—gave rise to what Rubin (1994) suggests is an inability to reconcile MAPs' identities within a framework of experiencing genuine love and affection. Because of the conflation between attraction to children and acts of CSA, MAPs are culturally anchored in monstrosity, whereby any affection or love expressed by MAPs is dismissed or reframed as predatory. Recognising MAPs as emotionally complex individuals would, in line with Douglas (2005), challenge ingrained cultural boundaries between the pure and dangerous, posing an integral threat to moral and social order.

MAPs' emotional attraction to children not only pertained to participants' feelings towards children, as noted by Dymond and Duff (2020) but also reflected an identity code that is part of their collective biography. MAPs' oppositional identity work considered the stigma linked to their sexual identity, which participants attempted to counter by aligning their identities with moral qualities rather than flawed attributes. Participants ascribed meaning to their identities based on how they strived to be recognised by the external other to validate and solidify their humanity. Hence, participants engaged differently with the identity work against internal and external others depending on ideological beliefs and their positioning within larger webs of meaning. For MAPs, navigating this conflict between love and monstrosity shaped both their collective identity work and stigma management, often leading to fragmented interpretations of love itself in negotiating oppositional identities.

6.1 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on MAPs should examine how online communities impact identity work and shape collective identities, moral frameworks, and stigma management. Research may explore the influence of online interactions on MAPs' self-perception, group solidarity, and engagement with societal norms. Additionally, researchers could explore how ideological differences influence community cohesion. Future studies could benefit from assessing online members' experiences of stigma related to intersecting identities like gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. A comparative approach to how other stigmatised sexual identities manages societal rejection could provide insights into MAPs' identity work, revealing shared challenges, dynamics, and arguments. Addressing these areas, future research could enhance an understanding of MAPs' identity work and contribute to more informed discussion while prioritising the safety and well-being of all.

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