

The Momo Challenge and the Intersection of Contemporary Legend and Moral Panic

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In February 2019, media outlets across the world warned parents about an ominous new online challenge threatening their children. According to these warnings, this menace reached all corners of the internet, from WhatsApp, to Facebook, and even the seemingly harmless cartoons uploaded to YouTube. The face of this challenge was a pale, gaunt, and wide-eyed woman named Momo, who had a disproportionately elongated bird-like mouth and long, stringy black hair. As unnerving as this image was, it paled in comparison to the disturbing goal of the challenge: to convince children to grievously harm themselves and others. Reporters explained that authorities had already linked the Momo Challenge to suicides in Argentina, Columbia, and India, while government and school officials across the United States and Europe told parents that their children might already be playing the game. Almost overnight, dozens of YouTube videos alleging encounters with Momo appeared alongside others offering “proof” that the Momo Challenge was embedded within content targeting children. And yet there was no credible proof that the Momo Challenge existed or that it had actually caused children to harm themselves or others. In fact, reports revealing the Momo Challenge to be a hoax emerged simultaneously with those warning parents of its existence, though they did little to quell anxiety. Instead, efforts to debunk the challenge perversely helped to fuel anxiety surrounding it.

The Momo Challenge went from a hoax to a full-fledged media panic in a matter of weeks, in part because parents are inundated with stories about children being targeted by predators who lurk in all corners of the internet. Journalists, school officials, and other experts constantly remind parents that they understand modern technology less than their children. Considering the proliferation of devices children can use to access the internet, it is almost impossible for parents to monitor everything kids do online. Rumors surrounding similar deadly internet games, like the Blue Whale Challenge, only augment these concerns. As a result, many

parents feel helpless to protect their children from these threats. These anxieties are amorphous, and the Momo Challenge helped them become concrete. It offered evidence of society's fears about the internet's capacity to corrupt and harm children. The image of Momo, herself, made these threats even more tangible. She became the avatar for fears of what children can encounter on the internet. She is a product of the digital age, a threat that uses technology like smart phones, tablets, and the internet to corrupt children. However, while she is a decidedly modern boogeyman, she is a boogeyman, nevertheless.

The Momo Challenge resonated so effectively because it channeled these fears using long-standing forms and structures found in contemporary legend, while media, government officials, and parents relied on previous moral panics to provide cues for how they should react. Like other panics, the Momo Challenge expressed social anxiety in a way that attempted to reassert proper forms of behavior. The work of Elizabeth Tucker reminds us that this response is hardly unique to this situation. Her study of memorials for missing women on the internet shows that media narratives of tragedy often reinforce traditional archetypes and assume the form of legend in order to offer a compelling story with a definitive moral (Tucker 2009:69–70). Moreover, as Jan Brunvand has illustrated, people will knowingly spread legends known to be untrue as long as they offer “important” warnings (1981:50). Evidence of these conclusions are found throughout reports about the Momo Challenge. Many concluded that even if the game was a hoax, it was important to remind parents of the potential dangers that *could* exist.

Reports could also point to art, videos, and stories that depicted the Momo Challenge as evidence of its existence, even though it was obvious that these works were created by people inspired by rumors of the hoax. In this way, the Momo Challenge, and the figure of Momo herself, manifested as another form of contemporary legend. This form drew from the long tradition of legends about supernatural boogeymen alongside the contemporary monsters that emerge from creepypasta. The Momo Challenge's simultaneous existence as two forms of contemporary legend, rumors surrounding a “real world” internet challenge and stories of a malevolent supernatural being, along with the ensuring moral panic created symbiotic relationship that helped to sustain media coverage throughout March 2019. In the end, the panic surrounding the Momo Challenge emerged from the combustible mix of social anxiety, media frenzy, and folk culture.

Initial Rumors—2018

The origins of the Momo Challenge can be traced to a very real tragedy. In July 2018, twelve-year-old Ingeniero Maschwitz committed suicide

in her home outside of Buenos Aires, Argentina. While investigating Maschwitz's death, police began looking into her online activities. Not only did they discover that she had been talking with an eighteen-year-old boy on the messaging platform WhatsApp, but that she had also recorded videos on her cellphone immediately before taking her own life. At the time of her suicide, there were unconfirmed reports that Maschwitz sent these videos to her friends. Though they never explained why, police quickly blamed the Momo Challenge, which according to the *Buenos Aires Times* was a "WhatsApp-based terror game that originates in Japan" (*Buenos Aires Times* 2018).

This connection to Japan is likely because the grotesque woman used to embody Momo is actually a sculpture called "Mother Bird." Created by the Japanese artist Keisuke Aiso in 2016, it is an uncanny woman/bird hybrid inspired by the Japanese folk creature, the *ubume*. According to legend, the *ubume* are the spirits of women who died in childbirth. They return to earth tormented by their loss, often in the form of birds (Davisson 2010). While the sculpture received little attention when it was first unveiled, a picture of it became a sensation on the Reddit forum *r/creepy* — a space where people post and comment on eerie images. On July 1, 2018, one of the forum's members posted a picture of "Mother Bird's" head. Though this image became inseparable from Momo, there were no connections made between the picture and the challenge in the original post. The post received over five thousand "upvotes," meaning that over five thousand separate Reddit users liked the image. It also received over one thousand responses. The most popular response, which captures the consensus of most commenters, said:

This was the first time something has legitimately fucked me up on this subreddit. When I scrolled onto that pic I was immediately scared and tried to stare it down til (sic) it looked fake enough, but it never happened and had to bitch out to the comments so I wouldn't have to look at it anymore...I decided to look at it again after posting and I'm legitimately shaking and don't feel safe. Good job at whoever made this abomination. (the_kidd12 2018)

It is unclear how this image became the face of the Momo Challenge or how the game earned its name. At the time of Maschwitz's suicide, however, rumors about it were developed enough for media outlets to describe the deadly game and use pictures of "Mother Bird" as its face. The best example of this comes from a July 11, 2018 bulletin sent out on Twitter by police in Tabasco, Mexico. Using three pictures of "Mother Bird," it warned that a viral challenge was targeting children on WhatsApp and Facebook (@UIDIFGETabasco 2018). This warning

would provide a template for other law enforcement officials when they issued their own statements on the Momo Challenge, many copying the Tabasco bulletin verbatim. These early warnings articulated the basic structure of the Momo Challenge legend that remained unchanged at the height of the panic in early 2019. According to descriptions, the challenge began when a child contacted one of the phone numbers associated with Momo on WhatsApp. He or she would then receive a challenge. Initially, these dares would be mundane, for example, asking the player to stay up late or watch a scary movie. He or she would then have to send a video or picture confirming to Momo that the challenge was complete. From there, the tasks would escalate to dangerous acts, eventually requiring the participant to harm others or his- or herself. The identity of the person or people behind the challenge was always unknown.

From the beginning, news reports portrayed the Momo Challenge as a global scourge. When Ingeniero Maschwitz committed suicide, the *Buenos Aires Times* claimed the game had already spread throughout Europe before coming to Argentina (*Buenos Aires Times* 2018). One month after her death, authorities in both Columbia and India attributed other suicides to the Momo Challenge. The Indian newspaper *Mirror Now News*, for example, immediately blamed the suicide of a sixteen-year-old girl on the game. Even though she left a suicide note that attributed her tragic actions to low grades, authorities and her family believed she had been encouraged to take her own life by the Momo Challenge. Weeks earlier, the newspaper had covered the suicide of Ingeniero Maschwitz, alleging that she had sent several videos and photos as part of the Momo Challenge, even though authorities only confirmed she had recorded a video prior to her death. The same report mentioned that the Momo Challenge had plagued children in Europe and the United States (*Mirror Now News* 2018b).

In August and September of 2018, local media in the United States also began covering the Momo Challenge. These early reports were brief and typically referred to Maschwitz's suicide alongside vague references to similar events in other countries and their supposed connection to the challenge. While these reports may have lacked specificity, they contained the same ominous warnings found in coverage from South America and India. San Francisco's ABC affiliate, for example, began their report by saying: "Police around the world are warning parents of a disturbing, violent internet challenge that could be encouraging children to take their own lives" (Torres 2018). The only example of such warnings: the tweet from the Tabasco police. Even though the station explicitly linked the Momo Challenge to the death of Ingeniero Maschwitz, it could only verify that police were investigating possible

connections to the internet game. The report offered no conclusive proof. If police could confirm that the challenge was responsible, it remarked that Maschwitz would be the first “confirmed” victim of the challenge (Torres 2018). This brief segment would prove to be typical of media discussions of the Momo Challenge. Outlets would offer vivid, disturbing discussions of the challenge, but could not confirm its existence or anyone victimized by it (Schmidt 2018; Jones and Kinchlow 2018). From the start, coverage relied on a fixed legend structure rather than proven events.

In an effort to compensate for this lack of evidence, the tabloid news program *Inside Edition* relied on supposed first-hand knowledge provided by the YouTube personality Shane Andrews, whose channel Repzilla alleges to expose the “internet’s greatest mysteries.” Andrews claimed he played the Momo Challenge and, in the process, saw “some very violent images and text messages that I cannot show... The messages were scary. They said that they knew personal things about me which they couldn’t possibly know” (*Inside Edition* 2018). He offered no verification of his statements and *Inside Edition* did not confirm them. It also did not consider that Andrews may have been using the interview as an opportunity to cultivate his online persona and get exposure for his YouTube channel. Nevertheless, his claims are notable because they are one of the first to allege that the game attempts to use details about players’ lives to blackmail them into fulfilling the challenges, adding a new element to the legend structure.

The proliferation of these reports, which corresponded with rumors of the Momo Challenge spreading by word of mouth, prompted official reactions in a handful of cities. The Sheriff’s Office in Pasco, Florida tweeted an alert in early August saying: “We haven’t received any reports on this in Pasco but we merely want to share this warning that law enforcement agencies from several countries are putting out. We want to remind parents to always be aware of what their kids are doing on social media.” The tweet also shared a report from UK newspaper, *The Sun*, which discussed the challenge (@PascoSheriff 2018). A month later, several schools in Colorado issued similar warnings to parents. Robyn Hunt, the Dean of Students at the American Academy in Parker, Colorado told her local NBC affiliate that the school made the decision to warn parents of the Momo Challenge because “it takes all of us to come together to keep all of us on top of the newest thing that is coming out. There is something new every day that we have to watch for and make sure everybody understands the repercussions behind most of these challenges and how disturbing they can be towards these students” (*ABC 7 Denver*:2018). Once again, it is significant to note that these warnings lacked evidence of the game’s existence and could only offer the suicide

of Ingeniero Maschwitz as proof of its deadly effects. More tellingly, in both cases, authorities used the opportunity to remind parents to monitor the online behavior of children. Even if the rumors were not true, the Momo Challenge still personified the dangers of the internet, dangers that were important to reiterate.

While the structure of the Momo legend had a relatively fixed structure in media reports and official statements, a different form was developing as it spread by word of mouth among children and adolescents. This Momo was not an avatar used by anonymous predators that encouraged challengers to do unspeakable things: it was an explicitly supernatural boogeyman that preyed on them. In December 2018, a rash of bullying incidents that occurred in elementary schools in Brick, New Jersey illustrate this difference. According to reports, an older student told a first grader “that if he did not commit suicide Momo would come to his house at 3 a.m. and stab him in the face.” Another boy was told by a different student that the same thing would happen to him if he did not shove one of his friends (Oglesby 2018). Neither student claimed to have played the challenge and there were no connections to online platforms, like WhatsApp. Most importantly, the retribution for failing the challenge was direct punishment from Momo herself.

School officials reacting to these events did not appreciate this difference. When reaching out to parents, the township’s superintendent offered a brief summary of the challenge as presented in the media, included links to counseling services, and cautioned parents to be vigilant of their children’s online activity. The statement did not address the bullying that occurred or the fact that neither of these cases involved internet use at all (Brick Township Board of Education 2019). Rather than react to stories that children were using to bully one another, the school system instead chose to warn about the potential threats posed by the internet.

The events in Brick received widespread media attention, with many reporters interviewing parents and school officials. In each story, discussion of the bullying was similarly absent. Instead, they offered extensive coverage of the game, its supposed connection to Facebook and WhatsApp, and the challenge’s links to the suicides in Argentina, Columbia, and India (Scarano 2018; *Fox 6 Now* 2018; Furlong 2018). Many of these reports also included interviews with child psychology experts offering tips to protect children, something that will become a common part of the media’s coverage of the panic in February and March 2019. While the media, government officials, and parents focused on the Momo Challenge’s supposed origins on internet messaging services, it was clear that children and adolescents had only a vague awareness of this fact. Instead, they heard about Momo the same way they have been

learning about legends for generations—from classmates. And even though Momo’s face stayed the same and she still demanded them to perform ghoulish tasks, she was simply a monster. As one child told his parents when they asked what he knew about the Momo Challenge: “Momo stabs you with a knife when you’re sleeping at night” (Furlong 2018). Momo had become two very different types of boogeymen.

The Momo Media Frenzy—February–March 2019

The fracturing of Momo into intertwined, but distinct legend forms remained consistent as media coverage intensified. Renewed concern about the game began at the end of February 2019, when dozens of police departments, school boards, and local governments throughout the United Kingdom and the United States began issuing public warnings to parents. The substance of these statements was mostly consistent, maintaining the developed legend structure of earlier reports. They generally included confirmation that authorities were aware of the Momo Challenge, offered a brief description of the game, cautioned parents to monitor the online actions of their children, and gave resources offering assistance. Often, these statements made clear that there was no verified proof the challenge was real, with some even calling it a hoax. This lack of substantiation did little to slow the release of these notices. For example, in a letter sent to parents, the superintendent of School Administrative Unit 16 in New Hampshire even went so far as to comment: “While some claim it to be a hoax, the growing body of evidence proves otherwise” (Bricker 2019). A cascade of similar statements followed, making clear that many officials believed the Momo Challenge to be a real and dangerous threat.

Days later, the Public Protection branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland released their own statement where the department’s spokesperson remarked:

I am disgusted that a so-called game is targeting our young children and I would encourage parents to know what your children are looking at and who they are talking to. Whilst the threat of a curse may sound silly to an adult, it could be a very frightening prospect for a young child and they may feel under pressure to carry out acts to protect themselves or family from further harm. (Police Service of Northern Ireland 2019)

The police chief in Wethersfield, Connecticut also expressed outrage in an interview with reporters. Reassuring viewers that his department was monitoring the situation, he said: “The child may take that [the challenge] for real and hurt themselves. Who would want that? What kind of a person would actually want to see a child get hurt? It’s beyond

my comprehension” (WFSB 3 2019). None of these officials identified a child harmed by the challenge, let alone a child from his or her jurisdiction. Proof of threat came from the flurry of statements about it. As with other contemporary legends about crime and delinquent behavior, warnings about the Momo Challenge provided the “evidence” other authorities needed to issue their own (Best and Hutchinson 1996:392–395). Often, officials were clearly reacting to calls they were receiving from worried parents, but nevertheless, the cascade of press releases and statements created a self-affirming feedback loop for belief in the challenge.

While public safety officials denounced the challenge and offered safety advice, some school districts took more dramatic action, limiting student access to the internet in schools. By this point, it was commonly accepted that the Momo Challenge was not only accessible on messaging platforms but was also found in videos posted on YouTube. According to rumors, clips of Momo demanding that viewers perform insidious acts were imbedded into content targeting children, especially the cartoon *Peppa Pig*. As a result of these developments, access to YouTube was the most frequent concern for school officials. On February 28, the Lincoln Unified School district in California blocked YouTube for the day after rumors surfaced that students were exposed to the Momo Challenge through videos on the site. In a letter to parents, the district’s superintendent wrote: “While there is currently no evidence that this particular challenge has resulted in direct harm to children, we do think it is important to understand and to be aware of current social media challenges, as well as how to best approach these types of challenges with your children” (Filipas 2019). The next day, school officials in West Palm Beach, Florida blocked YouTube after schools reported finding Momo embedded within educational videos they were using in the classroom. While officials could not specify which videos were affected, they told parents they blocked access to YouTube “out of an abundance of caution” (Wolf 2019; Pedersen 2019). These decisions received widespread attention on social media and appeared to offer official confirmation for journalists covering the issue.

These developments caused a subtle but noticeable shift in both the legend structure and media coverage of the Momo Challenge. Concern that children might accidentally be exposed to the game while watching seemingly innocent videos on YouTube became an essential element of the ubiquitous media coverage from February 27 through the first weeks of March. Like the public statements from police and school officials, these reports followed a standardized formula. They typically included ominous warnings about the Momo Challenge, its presence on WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, and interviews with local officials

or child psychologists. These reports often had interviews with local parents describing what they had heard about the challenge. Adding these discussions alongside expert advice gave reports a veneer of authenticity, compensating for the lack of actual verification.

The four-minute segment that aired on the *Today Show* on February 28, 2019, was emblematic of this media coverage. It began with *Today Show* correspondent Morgan Radford telling viewers that the “disturbing” Momo Challenge was “back in the spotlight” and that authorities were searching for those responsible for creating it. The report then immediately showed a mother sitting on a sofa with her young daughters looking at an iPad. The mother described the sense of powerlessness she felt because of her inability to monitor everything her children did online. She then asked one of her daughters if Momo was “scary” and the little girl replied “yes.” Before the interview, the mother had asked her daughter who Momo was and the girl described the image of “Mother Bird.” There was no evidence the child had played the challenge, only that she was aware of the picture. In spite of this, the report then went on to summarize how the challenge works. Even though it told viewers that there were no confirmed cases of violence related to the challenge and that it has been identified as a hoax, it immediately pivoted to saying: “real or not parents are concerned.” It concluded by discussing rumors of the game’s spread on Facebook and YouTube (*Today* 2019).

The language used by the *Today Show* was almost identical to that of the ABC affiliate in Dallas, Texas when it aired its own segment on the Momo Challenge a day earlier. Under the headline “Real or not, ‘Momo Challenge’ has parents on edge,” it too offered an interview with a mother who said her daughter became terrified of Momo after running across “Mother Bird” while playing on the game app Roblox. The child only mentioned Momo after her mother asked her about it, and once again, she only saw the picture, she had not participated in the challenge. In spite of this fact, the reporter began his discussion by saying the Momo Challenge encourages children to hurt each other or themselves (Panicker 2019). Interviews with parents or children scared by Momo became the most common “proof” of the challenge offered by the media. And in most cases, as with the two examples above, parents were the ones who initiated the conversation with their child.

The NBC affiliate in Boston interviewed a mother on February 27, after a warning she posted on Facebook went viral. The mother said when she asked her 10-year-old son about Momo, he immediately screamed: “Don’t show me. Don’t show me.” The mother then explained: “He knew exactly who it was. He had seen it before” (Niezgoba and Sudborough 2019). She was convinced her son had found

the image online, but she could not say where he had done so. Similarly, the ABC station in Tampa Bay, Florida included the story of a daughter bursting in to tears when asked about the challenge (*Boston 25 News* 2019; Lofholm 2019). A station in Cedar Rapids, Iowa interviewed a father who said his six-year-old daughter “was like [sic] losing sleep. She wouldn’t go to bed. She wouldn’t go to the bathroom without there being a light on.” When he showed the picture of Momo to her and her four-year-old brother, the father said: “they both freaked out. I’ve never heard them scream that loud in my life” (James 2019).

Such stories became the evidence used to bolster reports of the threat posed by the Momo Challenge. In reality, however, they only confirm how much stories about the Momo Challenge had spread. Children and adolescents had been scaring each other with stories about Momo for almost a year, and most of them continued to learn about the challenge by word of mouth. One Utah boy, for example, began having nightmares about Momo after being told about her at a friend’s house. In spite of this fact, his story was included alongside discussions about the dangers of children watching YouTube without supervision (Roe 2019). If we consider this fact while comparing the reactions of children with those of reporters, parents and officials we can see how different the Momo Challenge’s legend was in the minds of each. Coverage of the Momo Challenge and parent concern always saw Momo as a reflection of the dangers of the internet, while young people viewed her as a supernatural boogeyman.

Though different, these two legend forms helped spread awareness of each other. When describing Momo to friends, it is safe to assume kids showed each other pictures of her. By this point, such images were easy to find. Not only was the original photo of “Mother Bird” prevalent online, as evidenced by a simple Google Image search of “Momo,” but people had also begun creating their own images of Momo, recording YouTube “encounter” videos, and writing fictional stories about the challenge. Ironically, the flurry of statements and reports surrounding the Momo Challenge also made it easier for children to come across these images. Viral warnings about the challenge always included these images to grab attention, and the more these warnings spread, the easier it was for children to find them. The more children became aware of these images, the more parents were concerned they were exposed to the challenge.

While news outlets provided no evidence that the Momo Challenge was real, the constant coverage of it appears to have inspired a handful of horrifying situations where children almost hurt themselves or others. These cases only escalated the panic surrounding the game. On February 26, a child in Ionia, Michigan told her mother that Momo “challenged”

her to hurt her baby sister. After talking with a school counselor, the child never mentioned the game again and there was no evidence she had interacted online with anyone claiming to be Momo (Charles 2019). The next day, the CBS station in Sacramento, California interviewed a mother who said her autistic daughter had been asking strange questions about suicide and knives before turning on their gas stove without lighting it. According to the mother, her daughter had been instructed to do this by a clip of Momo she found on YouTube. The mother was unable to provide the specific video and YouTube was unable to verify its existence (*CBS Sacramento* 2019). A boy in Scotland also claimed he found Momo on YouTube. According to his mother, he showed her “an image of the face on my phone and said that she had told him to go into the kitchen drawer and take out a knife and put it into his neck.” Days later, a mother from Witchita, Kansas told reporters that her son threatened to set his room on fire and began hitting himself after coming across Momo online (*KAKE News ABC* 2019). Similarly, a Wisconsin boy told a classmate that Momo told him to hurt himself (Hanley 2019). In each of these disturbing situations, reporters were unable to verify the existence of the Momo Challenge or find the videos the children saw. Furthermore YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms continued to tell reporters that they could not verify the claims of the children.

The Momo Challenge as a Moral Panic

Denials from tech companies were met with skepticism by reporters and parents alike. When the parenting website *Kidspot* reported the story of a ten-year-old girl in the UK cutting off her hair because of the Momo Challenge, it included a discussion with a tech expert asserting that it was impossible to prevent the challenge’s spread. Tim Falinski, an executive with the antivirus software company Trend Micro, told the site: “Due to the sheer large quantities of content that is uploaded daily, it’s near impossible to ensure that all inappropriate content doesn’t make its way online” (Cox 2019). Most reports generally assumed that technology companies were incapable of ensuring dangerous content did not reach children. As a result, parents and journalists were often continued to believe this material was readily accessible by children.

Offering further corroboration were the innumerable viral challenges that have dominated popular culture over the past few years. Most, like the ice-bucket challenge to raise awareness for ALS, are harmless. Others can be dangerous. Often, these nefarious challenges exist largely in rumor. While the nature of these challenges is different, they all share common characteristics that resemble the legend structure of the Momo Challenge: they are disseminated online, encourage participants to prove

they completed the challenge by posting videos or pictures, depend on peer pressure to ensure compliance, and they almost always have deadly effects. The best example of this is the Tide Pod Challenge, which was widely covered in 2018, where participants would post videos or pictures of themselves eating Tide Pods on social media (Bever 2018).

Some, like the Blue What Challenge, are rumored to be spread by bad actors, eager to create carnage. This challenge, which mirrored an earlier game “How to Become a Fairy,” created a panic in Russia and Central Asia in mid-2016 before capturing global attention in 2017 in a way that prefigured the panic surrounding the Momo Challenge. In May 2016, Russian media outlets began reporting that secret online clubs were encouraging members to harm themselves and to ultimately commit suicide. Most of these members were teenagers, and once they agreed to play the game, they were given a series of tasks over 50 days. These tasks, which began as harmless dares, increased in severity until finally the participants are instructed to kill themselves. These early reports linked the Blue Whale Challenge to hundreds of suicides and prompted authorities in Russia to arrest individuals connected to the internet forums allegedly connected to the challenge (Arkhipova et al. 2018).

While many of the suicides linked to the Blue Whale Challenge were tragically real, there was almost no evidence the suicide clubs actually existed. This lack of corroboration did little to slow the frenzy of headlines emerging in Russia, and eventually around the world. As word of the Blue Whale Challenge spread beyond the Russian speaking-world, the fact that Russian authorities had arrested individuals seemed confirmation enough of the challenge’s veracity (Stewart 2018). By the time rumors of the Momo Challenge began to surface, even though the Blue Whale Challenge had been successfully debunked as a hoax, many media outlets still took as fact that hundreds of teens had died because of it.

The Blue Whale Challenge appeared to offer tangential proof that the Momo Challenge must be real. It is worth reiterating that the performance of both challenges is identical. Both require participants to initiate the challenge online, both involve a series of escalating dares requiring video or photographic proof, and both end in death by suicide. The major difference between the two is that the Momo Challenge had a face associated with it, and as will be discussed later, the unsettling image of “Mother Bird” was the perfect companion for something as horrific as a suicide game that targets children.

Nevertheless, belief in the Momo Challenge would never have become as widespread without the Blue Whale Challenge. Rather than see the similarities between the two as potential signs of another hoax,

many reports interpreted them as further proof that yet another predatory game was targeting children. For example, when describing the Momo Challenge, the Christian news service *Faithwire* wrote, “the game has struck fear in the hearts of many parents, particularly after the devastating consequences of last year’s ‘Blue Whale Challenge,’ game” (Maule 2018). While other reports may have been less dramatic, it was typical for discussions of the Momo Challenge to say the game bore “a resemblance to the 2017 ‘Blue Whale’ challenge,” or was “following in the footsteps of the deadly Blue Whale Challenge” (Phillips 2019; *Mirror Now News* 2018a). The South African lifestyle site *All4Women*, which has a section devoted to parent advice, offers the best illustration of how the media linked these two challenges. It included both in a post titled “13 Online challenges your child already knows about” which discussed challenges children and teens were supposedly playing. The use of the phrase “your child already knows about” is telling because it plays on the fear that the parent reading the article did not. It reflects the belief that parents face the daunting, nearly impossible, task of monitoring the online activity of their kids while also keeping track of an endless stream of emerging online threats (Elgersma 2019).

Ultimately, the panic surrounding the Momo Challenge can only be understood in the context of this belief. Parents are constantly warned by the media, government officials, and school administrators that they are ill-equipped to protect their children from the perils of contemporary society. The best-selling parenting guide, *Toxic Childhood* encapsulates these fears. The book argues that modern culture is corroding the social framework that allows children to develop into functional adults. It mourns the decline of family cohesion produced by parents who work too much and children who are too engaged with technology to build strong relationships with their family and friends. It offers an in-depth diagnosis of the challenges facing the modern child and ends each chapter with strategies to “detox” destructive habits. When discussing modern technology, the book asserts that it has transformed child development, bombarding children with ads that warp their sense of self and violent video games that fosters deviant behavior. More importantly, it replaces face-to-face interaction with virtual connections, encouraging children to form “friendships” with total strangers who might not be who they say they are. More ominously, technology has isolated family members from one another as they spend time on their own devices. Parents are often unaware of the threats facing their children (Palmer 120–124; 145–147; 230–237).

The way parents talked about the Momo Challenge reveals the extent of this anxiety. When discussing the challenge, parents constantly expressed the fear that they were helpless to protect their children from

the dangers of the internet. In an interview with local media, one mother from Mingo County, West Virginia told reporters, “It’s really scary... because you can’t stand over the shoulder [of your children] because you have other things to take care of” (Klein 2019). When the ABC affiliate for Buffalo, New York posted their coverage of the Momo Challenge on Facebook, one parent responded that her children would not be allowed on Facebook, while another simply sighed: “What’s wrong with people these days?” Talking with reporters, a local school official seemed to summarize the anxiety of parents by saying, “There’s something new every day that we have to watch for and make sure everybody understands the repercussions behind most of these challenges” (Groh 2018). The use of the plural “challenges” illustrates once again the important role earlier panics surrounding the Blue Whale Challenge and other online hoaxes played in legitimizing the Momo Challenge.

It also explains one of the most fascinating parts of the Momo Challenge panic—it was immediately identified as a hoax even as hundreds of media outlets were warning people about it. As early as August 2018 *Business Standard* wrote a short article debunking the connection between Ingeniero Maschwitz’s suicide and the Momo Challenge (*Business Standard* 2018). On February 27, 2019, just as the panic was reaching its height, *Forbes* magazine posted a column online encouraging people to think of it as they would chain letters and urban legends (Robertson 2019). Soon, some journalists were using the panic to lament the gullibility of parents, officials, and media outlets (Dwyer 2019). These reports did little to temper parent concern or media attention.

In fact, even though some journalists began reports by describing the Momo Challenge as a hoax, the way they discussed the game seemed to confirm concerns about its potential danger. For example, *Newsweek*’s coverage from February 27, 2019, told readers at the top of the article that there was no verifiable proof the Momo Challenge was real, but the remainder of the piece offered a detailed overview of the challenge, how it works, and who police believed were responsible for perpetrating it. It concluded with the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s advice to “supervise the games your kids play and be extremely mindful of the videos they are watching on YouTube,” while ensuring “that the devices they have access to are restricted to age suitable content” (McDonald 2019). Such warnings were common and help to explain why many outlets reported on the challenge, even though it was known to be a hoax. Even if it was not real, internet dangers were, and it provided an ideal opportunity to remind parents how to keep their kids safe.

As the comments section for these articles prove, many parents, concerned for the wellbeing of their children, missed this nuance.

Reflecting on coverage from the ABC affiliate in Scranton, Pennsylvania, one mother opined: “So Facebook has kept this ‘momo’ [sic] on for an extended period of time (I’ve known about this for awhile [sic]) and is knowingly aware of the dangers of kids killing themselves, yet is pulling conservative sites, gunsmith and repair instruction sites because of ‘public safety’. Facebook needs to be shut down!” While another suggested that “Sometimes they leave pages up as a snare. Dangerous people tend to be compulsive and have impulse control problems, obviously so, therefore social media can be a most excellent trap. But parents shouldn’t allow minors or anyone living under their roofs absolute secrets especially when it comes to social media. Transparency equals peace and security” (*Fox 6 Now*). Both of these comments reflect the fear that the internet is a space occupied by predators, and tech companies and the government are too driven by their own agendas to effectively protect children from these dangers.

Even more telling were the comments left by readers of an article on the technology blog *Engadget*, which provided a nuanced look at how the Momo Challenge was able to become such a successful hoax. While many accepted the article’s conclusions, others used the opportunity to reiterate integral parts of the challenge’s legend structure as presented in the media. In particular, commenters expressed the belief that tech companies were obscuring how easy it was for children to access videos featuring Momo. For example, one comment remarked:

Andrew... so sorry to read your last minute article. It seems as it was a last minute delivery since you didn’t have a minute or so to actually dig into youtube [sic] and youtube [sic] kids to see that there are videos circulating around those platforms. You can find a couple of momo [sic] videos "disguised" as peppa [sic] pig [sic] or paw [sic] patrol [sic] or others. Somewhere [sic] in the middle the video cuts to an image of momo [sic] with a background [sic] noise giving instructions for self harm, and then the cartoon resumes. Hopefully your next article will have the expected thoroughness that engadget [sic] should be pursuing. Wish you best, and hope you will issue a new article re-addressing this. P.S. The original MOMO challenge stated that MOMO contacted you through whatsapp [sic] messaging system and gave you instructions, this seems evindetly [sic] much more of a long shot, than what I’m stating. (Tarantola 2019)

Another comment revealed the extent to which stories about Momo had spread among children. It stated: “This article is completely false, and horrible journalism! Both of my kids (7&8) and my best friends [sic]

daughter were taken in by this. Many tears were shed when they were asked if they had seen this, they vehemently denied it but it was obvious they had. I have never been more angry at a journalist than reading this piece of crap article demeaning a very real effect. Yes it may not have fooled teen's [sic], but it definitely is ensnaring vulnerable 6–10 year olds!" (Tarantola 2019). These remarks possess an almost palpable anxiety. Careful research and argumentation could not overcome the fear that children faced mortal danger from the internet.

Augmenting these concerns is the fact that real predators do exist, and parents are not always able to protect children from them. As Amy Adele Hasinoff reminds us, the benefits of new media always come alongside "new and novel ways for people to harm one another" (2015 2). Jim Greer has similarly argued that moral panics always reflect anxieties that accompany social, cultural, or technological change. In the social imagination, children are thought of as innocents that have the potential for corruption, and because they lack maturity, they are more vulnerable to the "dark side" of technology. As a result, any development that limits the ability of adults to supervise children is bound to cause moral panics (Greer 2015:137–138). In part, this response is because society assumes that children and teens are more likely to be swept up in crazes or fads, lacking the judgement to identify the potential dangers of their actions (Hasinoff 2015:63–64). Building on the notion, Joel Best and Kathleen Bogle explain that parents also assume that adolescent culture has become more permissive compared to their own experiences. These new norms, often driven by shifts in modern media and technology, encourage young people to engage in riskier and more dangerous behaviors. Compounding this anxiety in the minds of parents is the fact that they believe young people have their own "language" obscuring the nature of their actions. "Text-speak," code words, and new slang make it so that even vigilant parents are unable to adequately understand what is actually happening (Best and Bogle 2014:9-14).

Given how powerful these social anxieties are, Ethel Quayle notes that any time stories emerge that connect child predators, bullying, and other dangers to new media and technology, they will not only receive wide media coverage but that this coverage is also more likely to overstate the role of technology and put it at the center of the story (2015:104-105). The moral panic surrounding the Momo Challenge not only drew from legends about similar internet challenges, but it also reflected decades of social anxiety. One can easily see the supposed corrupting influence of horror comics or rumors that rock albums or *Dungeons & Dragons* promoted satanism echoed in discussions surrounding the Momo Challenge (Martin and Fine 2017:107–126; Springhall 1998:121–146).

All of these factors demonstrate that Stanley Cohen's structural analysis of moral panics offers the best way to understand the hysteria surrounding the Momo Challenge. In his seminal work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen explains that moral panics develop when:

A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen 1973:9)

Reaction to stories about the Momo Challenge align perfectly with this model. Concern about the internet's capacity to facilitate harm to children emerged with the technology itself. But these threats were amorphous. Rumors of internet challenges made them more concrete, especially when associated with a specific image and personality, like Momo. Now that the threat had a face, social activists could mobilize to combat the threat prompting officials to action. The number of child psychologists, tech experts, and cyber security professionals that offered their expertise to media reports of the Momo Challenge is notable. Journalists obviously relied on these professionals to add gravitas to their reports, and these experts used the opportunity to explain how to protect children from all online threats, not just the Momo Challenge. At the same time, the Momo Challenge reveals the complexity of modern moral panics tied to the internet. They undeniably reflect social anxiety about technological change and its social impact, but they also depend on that very technology to develop. The ability to retweet, share, and like stories about the Momo Challenge were essential to its successful spread.

Momo as a Supernatural Boogeyman

Momo, herself, was the ideal specter for this moral panic. The image of "Mother Bird" created an avatar that could personify the challenge in a way that the symbol of a Blue Whale or faceless child predators never could. Horrifying, yet perversely photogenic, she perfectly embodied something as gruesome as the Momo Challenge. It was an image tailor-made for viral posts and local news coverage. This figure also allowed the challenge to draw from legends outside of the moral panic tradition. While the Momo Challenge was undoubtedly a product of the long history of hoax-related contemporary legends, Momo the character drew inspiration from the boogeymen of popular culture and traditional

folklore. In appearance and behavior, she clearly echoes the malevolent spirit Sadako (Samara in the American version) from the horror film *The Ring* (Nakata 1998; Verbinski 2002). Both have pale, gaunt faces and long, stringy, black hair. Both are summoned using modern technology; and contacting them brings deadly results. As a monster of folklore, Momo serves as a modern incarnation of Bloody Mary. As we will see, most encounter videos show someone attempting to reach Momo in the dark, with their face barely lit by their computer screens or phones. Successful contact is usually signified by ominous noises, like a door slamming. In these performances you see an obvious connective thread to the generations of people who scared themselves and their friends by ominously chanting “Bloody Mary” in their bathroom mirrors (Dundes 1998). The connection between Momo and Bloody Mary is even clearer considering the way the Momo legend spread among children and adolescents.

We know from media reports that most young people learned about Momo from their friends in school, not by playing an online challenge. It is not hard to imagine them sitting in the cafeteria or at a slumber party describing Momo in hushed voices. While the incorporation of cell phones and the internet give the Momo boogeyman legend a modern twist, its method of dissemination is the same as foundational contemporary legends like “The Hook,” “The Killer in the Backseat,” and “The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs” (Brunvand 1981:47–57). Moreover, the substance of these two legend forms is notably different. If we consider the examples from the media reports already discussed, it is clear that the Momo that lived in the minds of children and adolescents is a supernatural creature, rather than the online threat feared by their parents. When kids discussed their fear of Momo, they worried about a monster under the bed that would attack them when the lights were out, not a flesh and blood child predator encouraging them to do terrible things. In fact, the only thing that differentiates Momo from Bloody Mary and other traditional boogeymen is that people can use their phones to show pictures of Momo to their friends. Technology has made modern ghost stories more tangible.

Yet Momo is not just a child of traditional folklore and contemporary legend, she is equally the product of creepypasta lore. Creepypasta, a word used to describe the creation and spreading of online horror stories, pictures, and videos, has become increasingly popular since the mid-2000s, and creepypasta communities have been responsible for some of the most influential modern horror legends. By design, creepypasta is largely authorless, with stories and characters that are adapted by multiple creators and changed over time. Posted on subreddits, wikis, and other user-driven content sites, the goal of creepypasta is to create

works of fiction that mimic the form of traditional legend (Blank and McNeill 2018:4–6). In a sense, it is manufactured folklore.

The most famous example of creepypasta is Slender Man. Starting in 2009, people began posting doctored photos depicting seemingly normal scenarios, like children playing, with an ominous, humanoid figure in the background. The figure quickly earned the nickname “Slender Man” and soon dozens of new images, stories, drawings, and videos were posted that further developed his legend. Slender Man is usually depicted as a tall, lanky, faceless man in a black suit and tie. At times he also has tentacles or insect-like appendages coming from his back. Like Momo, he is designed to be uncanny—blending human and inhuman qualities in an unsettling way. As Trevor Blank and Lynne McNeill note, Slender Man is “the best example of an intentionally created legend that has hit all the right notes required to be believable” (2018:3). Like Momo, Slender Man was immediately associated with harming children. The first images of him contained frightening captions explaining that the images were supposedly linked to the death or disappearance of the children pictured. One of the most frequent themes of Slender Man fiction is his tendency to prey upon or protect children who are bullied, ostracized, or different.

Beyond Slender Man, Momo shares similarities with other creatures of creepypasta lore, most notably Jeff the Killer. Stories about Jeff the Killer emerged a year prior to those of Slender Man, influenced by a doctored photo posted on 4chan. The image was of a noseless, smiling face totally devoid of color. The eyes were altered into perfect circles with small pinpoint, black pupils while the mouth was exaggerated into a gapping smile with bright red lips and large white teeth. The face was framed by long, stringy black hair. Pre-figuring Momo, initial commentary alleged that the photo was a selfie, edited by a troubled girl before she committed suicide. This explanation was dramatically altered in subsequent descriptions. Soon, stories written to accompany the picture explained that the photo was of a boy who had been bullied and ultimately disfigured in an accident. Driven insane by his experiences, he began killing his bullies and he was known for hiding in the closets of his victims warning them to “go to sleep” (Sesseur 2012). Momo’s appearance and behavior mirror those of Jeff the Killer. In fact, when hearing of children crying to their parents that Momo would attack them in their sleep, one could easily substitute Jeff the Killer for the same effect.

Beyond these comparisons, Momo is linked to the creatures of creepypasta by the hundreds of stories, pictures, and videos her legend has inspired. She is nevertheless unique because these creations developed *after* stories about the Momo Challenge already began. By

definition, creepypasta is a work of fiction meant to resemble a traditional legend. Because they did not originate entirely from a story or image posted online, this form of the Momo Challenge and Momo are not technically creepypasta. In a curious twist, their development mimics the fiction created to mimic folklore. They could not have developed as they did without the creepypasta community. As previously discussed, the subreddit *r/creepy* was responsible for spreading awareness of the “Mother Bird” sculpture and creepypasta forums were the first to cultivate stories about the Momo Challenge. Ultimately, Momo is the blended byproduct of traditional forms of spreading rumor with online legend fabrication. This technicality has done little to affect the popularity of the Momo legend among the creepypasta community, however. She has captured the community’s imagination and spurred its creativity in ways similar to Slender Man, Jeff the Killer, and other creepypasta monsters. Searching the term “Momo” or “Momo Challenge” on Google or exploring user-driven content sites like Tumblr, YouTube, and Reddit reveals hundreds of pieces of fanart that stand alongside dozens of stories and videos.

One of the most prevalent cultural products that emerged from the Momo Challenge were the dozens of YouTube videos that alleged to offer “proof” the game was real. In some of these videos, people recorded supposed chats with Momo on WhatsApp while others embedded Momo into cartoons. Also common were videos where YouTube personalities appeared to offer well-researched examinations of the challenge. In addition to contributing to the *Inside Edition* report discussed earlier, Shane Andrews posted a 10-minute video that explored the game’s origins, its connection to previous internet challenges, and even offered his own psychological theories that explained how it could encourage people to actually commit suicide (Repzilla 2019). Similarly, Jessii Vee, who hosts a channel devoted to the discussion of “urban legends and cryptids” and boasts 1.43 million subscribers, posted her own analysis. This video offered little in the way of evidence but included ominous references to pictures Momo had sent out to participants that Vee “didn’t even want to talk about on this channel.” Unlike Andrew, Vee accurately concluded that the Momo Challenge began as a hoax but warned that copycats and internet trolls were making it real (Vee 2018). The YouTube channel “offSoon” created a comparable analysis during an in-depth debate between its hosts attempting to decide if Momo was an “urban legend” or real (offSoon 2018). While these videos were popular, garnering hundreds of thousands of views, clips that alleged actual encounters with Momo were even more so.

The channels hosted by LaurenzSide, with over three million subscribers, and AldosWorld TV, with over two million subscribers,

created some of the most watched videos of this type, each with over one million views. LaurenzSide's "I Played the MOMO Game at 3AM... And Then This Appeared On My Computer" is a video of the host playing a Momo-inspired video game where the player explores a haunted house and has to evade Momo's attacks after chatting with her on WhatsApp. Once the game is done, the host finds a desktop icon of Momo. After clicking the icon, the host appears to be chatting with Momo and, after exiting the window, her computer screen is changed to a screaming Momo face (LaurenzSide 2018). In the video posted to AldosWorldTV, the host records himself watching a Peppa Pig cartoon on YouTube "at 3 am." Because Momo has infected the video, she begins "haunting" his home once he watches. In a scene reminiscent of the conclusion of *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999), the host leans into his camera saying that he is supposed to be alone in his house and he does not know who, or what, is making the noises. He ends with a warning not to look for evidence of Momo (AldosWorld TV 2019).

Both of these videos are obviously tongue-in-cheek, creating the atmosphere of a live-action ghost story. This fact is signaled by the decision to fuse the Momo Challenge with the popular internet sub-genre of 3 am challenges. YouTube, along with the horror communities on Reddit and 4chan, are filled with alleged accounts of spooky events that occur when people perform certain rituals at 3 am. These stories generally include instructions for completing these rituals along with ominous warnings about what could go wrong. This sub-genre is so popular that it is a regular part of LaurenzSide's and AldosWorld's content. The way the Momo Challenge fused with existing internet horror culture, not to mention the popularity of the videos mentioned, reflects the performative and participatory nature of online culture identified in the work of both Anthony Bak Buccitelli (2012) and Henry Jenkins (2009:4). The potential offered by platforms like YouTube invites content that reflects contemporary folk culture and for viewers to engage with that culture. Moreover, it creates an environment that encourages new legends to explicitly draw from, mimic, or copy earlier ones.

In many ways, for viewers these videos are a digital form of the "legend trips" that folklorists have been studying since the 1970s (Kinsella 2011). Traditionally, such trips involve people, usually teenagers or young adults, visiting places rumored to be haunted or to be connected to local legends. As Elizabeth Tucker reminds us, such activities help participants confront issues like death in a setting that allows them to "feel both thrilled and afraid under relatively safe circumstances" (2007:182). I would argue that YouTube videos alleging

to capture interactions with Momo operate in a similar manner. Obviously, someone cannot experience or encounter Momo the way they could a graveyard or house that is supposedly haunted, but these videos allow viewers to participate in the Momo Challenge and observe its supposed consequences from the safe distance provided by their screens. They confront the illusion of danger without the reality of harmful consequences.

While the consumption of these videos acts as a passive form of virtual legend tripping, their creation represents a form of ostension, or the act of making legend forms tangible (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983). These videos put Momo's menacing presence on display, translating lore into a pantomimed form of reality. Other forms of online media continue this ostensive practice. Beyond encounter videos, Momo has also been popular on YouTube story-telling channels and subreddits, like *r/nosleep*, where members scare one another with campfire-style stories. These tales, which are understood to be fiction in the guise of truth, dramatize supposed encounters with the Momo Challenge (Chloe the Dork 2018; the-dead-canary 2019). Most of these stories maintain the basic core of the Momo legend, especially the idea that she is contacted through texting. At the same time, they maintain the explicit supernatural elements found in Momo videos on YouTube. Rather than depict her as a persona adopted by bad actors eager to prey on children, Momo becomes an otherworldly menace only brought into the world when contacted.

As a result, the performative Momo Challenge, as captured in these cultural products, sanitizes the game from the most disturbing aspects of the legends surrounding it. Gone are the demands that participants harm themselves or others. Also missing is the explicitly predatory nature of the challenge—those playing the challenge are popular YouTube personalities in their mid-20s, not vulnerable children. Moreover, as seen on YouTube, Momo is a spectral figure and the danger of the Momo Challenge is its potential to summon a supernatural creature, not the possibility of real-world violence. In this form, playing the Momo Challenge is more akin to asking questions to a Ouija board than interacting with anonymous internet predators trying to hurt kids.

The Momo Challenge has also encouraged internet trolls, eager to capitalize on Momo's supposed presence in YouTube, to make videos that make this rumor reality. The cartoon shown in AldosWorld's 3 am video is a perfect example of such creations. It starts out as a typical episode of *Peppa Pig*. Things quickly take a disturbing turn as the characters begin killing one another before ending with Roger the Alien, from the cartoon *American Dad*, crawling out of one of the dead bodies (AldosWorld TV, 2019). In another example, a user added a picture of

Momo to an existing *Peppa Pig* cartoon. When Momo appears, an eerie voice tells viewers: “I am Momo. Look into my eyes.” Momo then warns that if viewers do not “like” the video and soil themselves, she will “eat all of [their] cheese” (lil skwiddy, 2019). The off-kilter, if morbid, way these videos end signals that they are meant to be comedic parodies of the type of videos rumored to be haunting YouTube.

Nevertheless, their existence offered verification enough for those looking for evidence of the Momo Challenge. As Bill Ellis has shown, ostensive performance of legends has often been misinterpreted as “proof” of the legends’ veracity, helping to exacerbate moral panics (1991:279–296). The creative opportunities offered by the internet have made such misinterpretations even more likely. People can now create legend-driven content from their own home, and people are more likely to unintentionally come across this content. Because YouTube is designed to select additional content for viewers by analyzing content they have previously watched, it is likely that many children accidentally saw copycat Momo videos while watching cartoons like *Peppa Pig*. YouTube’s algorithms are not sophisticated enough to eliminate doctored videos unless those videos contain descriptions that mark them as such or if they have been flagged (Newport 2019).

This reality helps to explain why so many people used the art inspired by the Momo Challenge as proof of its existence. For the most part, creators make this material for people in on the joke. They assume that people reading a story on a creepypasta forum or watching a 3 am challenge video realize they are consuming a work of fiction. The entire point of this internet subculture is to recreate the feeling people get when they tell each other ghost stories. Of course, the main difference between stories spread online, as opposed to face-to-face, is that the internet is open to everyone. People who are unaware of what they are seeing could easily interpret these products as proof of the Momo Challenge’s existence. As a result, it is easy to see how the performative aspects of contemporary legend can lead to panic, especially since there is evidence that, while fictional, these stories have inspired tragedy.

This sad reality obviously calls to mind the horrific stabbing of a twelve-year old Wisconsin girl by two of her friends in 2014. This tragedy provides one of the most important connections between the Momo Challenge and creepypasta creations like Slender Man. These friends, who had been avid consumers of Slender Man stories and images, told authorities that the stabbing was necessary to win the approval of Slender Man (Brodsky 2016). Prefiguring the panic over the Momo Challenge, media coverage of the stabbing became increasingly sensationalized. While the stabbing itself was shocking enough, its connection to Slender Man meant that journalists used the tragedy as a

mirror to reflect a more generalized fear that the internet was poisoning the minds of children. As previously mentioned, Slender Man, like the creepypasta form of Momo, was an explicitly supernatural creature. As Jeffrey Tolbert has shown, reports quickly linked the Wisconsin stabbing to other violent crimes with tenuous connections to Slender Man. Visiting a creepypasta website or dressing up as Slender Man at a costume party became signs of danger and deviance, evidence of the fact that societal norms were being corrupted by the internet (Tolbert 2018:94–102). As will happen with Momo, Slender Man transitioned from a supernatural boogeyman into a symbol of cultural decay as he transitioned from creepypasta legend to moral panic.

Considering the ties binding the development of the Momo legend with the manufactured lore created in the creepypasta community, media reports and government officials immediately linked rumors of the Momo Challenge with the Wisconsin Slender Man stabbing. On November 26, 2018, Corpus Christi Montessori School in Corpus Christi, Texas issued a statement on their Facebook page warning parents about the dangers of the Momo Challenge. The post included a link to a report from Fox News, and explicitly linked Momo with “internet creations like Slenderman, Jeff the Killer, and Smiledog called creepypastas.” It further explained that “Creepypastas are horror-related legends or images that have been copied and pasted around the Internet. These Internet entries are often brief, user-generated, paranormal stories intended to scare readers. They include gruesome tales of murder, suicide, and otherworldly occurrences” (Corpus Christi Montessori School 2018). While reporting this warning, journalists further developed the connections between the Momo Challenge and Slender Man, reminding viewers and readers that Slender Man “inspired two 12-year-old girls to attack another girl, stabbing her 19 times in 2014” (*Fox 6 Now* 2019).

Local stations in Wisconsin made this connection in a way that resonated with those still shaken by the 2012 stabbing. On January 20, 2019 Milwaukee’s ABC affiliate ran a segment warning parents of the Momo Challenge. Their report included an interview with a specialist in digital marketing and social media from the Milwaukee Area Technical College explicitly linking the two events. She cautioned that “in these types of challenges, kids aren’t thinking through the ramifications and the consequences and they’re getting hurt... In Wisconsin, the Slender Man was kind of a challenge, and I think one of the reasons why people are taking this so seriously is because that hits close to home” (Cruz 2019). In other words, the Slender Man stabbing made Wisconsin parents and government officials realize the need to take these warnings seriously.

Conclusion

The immediate connection the media made between the tragedy in Wisconsin and the Momo Challenge encapsulates the game's simultaneous existence as two distinct but intertwined forms of contemporary legend. While the Momo Challenge is a hoax, and there is no secret network of people inspiring children to harm themselves or others, this legend form succinctly embodied social anxiety surrounding danger children face online. It provided a way for the media, government officials, experts, and parents to tie these fears to a specific face. Momo's ubiquitous presence on social media platforms and traditional media outlets, along with the challenge's obvious connection to other legends about viral games, validated these fears and made them concrete. The threat to children was no longer diffuse, but rather could be found in WhatsApp and Facebook accounts, YouTube videos, and message boards.

The second legend form appeared to offer verification for these suspicions. As children spread stories of a supernatural boogeyman, these stories were interpreted as concrete proof children were playing the game. Ironically, fear about the Momo Challenge undoubtedly helped to spread awareness of it in the minds of the very individuals people were trying to protect. Influenced by traditional folklore, other contemporary legends, and creepypasta, communities on the internet created more "proof" of the challenge, often unknowingly. They sought to entertain like-minded readers and viewers by creating content that reflected this supernatural form of Momo. These creations were easily misinterpreted by the uninitiated, contributing to the panic. Considering the intensity of this panic, it is notable how quickly concern about the Momo Challenge evaporated. News reports, Facebook posts, and official statements stopped by mid-March and by May 2019 media outlets had moved on to warning parents about the dangerous "shell on challenge," where kids dared each other to record themselves eating the packaging surrounding prepared foods (Sommer 2019). Momo had become yesterday's threat.

The lack of tangible evidence of the challenge's existence likely contributed to the rapid dissipation of the panic surrounding it. Without actual proven cases, there was little for authorities and the media to do besides issue warnings. At the same time, no one disavowed or retracted their statements. Momo simply faded away. The anxiety that produced the panic surrounding the Momo Challenge remains strong, however. Just as the Momo Challenge drew from earlier legends about deadly internet games, it is probable it will be used to validate future panics surrounding new legends.

Without constant media coverage, Momo has retreated back to the realm of internet lore. While the number of videos, stories, and pictures

being made may have slowed down; Momo is now a part of mainstream cultural consciousness. *Saturday Night Live* considered her popular enough to air a faux commercial for a fast-food chain promising patrons that their Momo-esque mascot was not “tempting kids with chicken so she can steal their souls” (*Saturday Night Live*, 2019). Meanwhile, Momo cemented her status as a modern monster icon when Orion Pictures announced in July 2019 that they were developing a horror movie inspired by the challenge (Boucher 2019). These developments make clear that the line between different legend forms and structures will continue to blur.

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34 *Moore*

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