

It's Not All Black and White: Portrayals of Mass Shooters Before and After the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement

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Abstract

Mental health and mass shootings are two topics that are increasingly prevalent in the media. This study analyzes the framing of online news coverage of Black and White mass shooters and whether the portrayal of these perpetrators changed after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Qualitative content analysis of 36 articles and 12 perpetrators showed that perpetrators are grouped and framed based on personality and background. The data suggests that articles about Black perpetrators were less likely to include mental health discussions and more likely to include behavioral details about the shooter that were irrelevant to the crime. Results showed that the 2020 movement sparked an increase in mental health conversations among articles about Black perpetrators only in cases that could be deemed more newsworthy. This data suggests that there are implicit biases disseminated in these reports, as articles are framed differently depending on the perpetrators background, personality, or race.

I. Introduction

In 2020, there were more mass shootings in the United States than there were days in the year. According to the Gun Violence Archive, 2020 was a record high for America with the number of mass shootings reaching 611 (2020). This has led to frequent discourse about the connection between mass shootings and mental illness. However, studies show that “notions of mental illness that emerge in relation to mass shootings frequently reflect larger cultural stereotypes and anxieties about matters such as race, ethnicity, social class, and politics” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, pp. 241-245). With the rise in racial tensions, mental health afflictions, and gun violence, our nation is becoming increasingly unstable. These “anxieties” that many Americans hold escalate as these issues continue to occur. Often, this feeling of fear turns into anger and many look for someone or something to blame.

When incomprehensible events like mass shootings occur, many turn to the media for answers. After all, media serves as gatekeepers who strategically select, filter, and distribute content to consumers. When news reports of mass shootings and crime are framed differently from perpetrator to perpetrator, media consumers’ perceptions may be tainted. Mass shootings, defined as an event where four or more are injured or killed, have become sensationalized in the media and the perpetrators of these violent acts have often taken the spotlight in many articles (Gun Violence Archive, 2021). While media narratives of White mass

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shooters historically have been attributed to mental illness, those describing perpetrators of an ethnic minority enforce the stereotype that these minorities are naturally more aggressive and dangerous (Frisby, 2017). This perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes, furthering the political and social polarization America has been facing.

The year 2020 was the start of a major global crisis that changed the way society navigates and discusses mental health. It was also the year of one of the largest movements in United States history with around 25 million participants (Carr Center, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 has been said to have changed the way the nation talks about race. This study seeks to understand whether this new way of navigating conversations about race and mental health can be seen through the implicit subjectivity of online news articles about Black and White perpetrators of mass violence. This research will examine the portrayal of mass shooters in online news media to determine if there are any differences in portrayal based on whether the perpetrator is Black or White. Additionally, this research will also analyze any changes in portrayal based on the influential 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. This will be accomplished by examining 36 total articles about 12 different mass shooters: three White mass shooters and three Black mass shooters who committed these violent acts before the 2020 movement, as well as three White and three Black mass shooters from after this pivotal movement.

II. Literature Review

Previous research has explored the link between mass shootings and mental illnesses, the role of media coverage in mass shootings, and Racial Formation Theory. When emotional and unfathomable events such as mass shootings occur, it leaves people looking for answers. This has led to research investigating the inaccurate conversations about the role mental health has in mass shootings as well as the inaccurate reporting of the shootings themselves. Scholars have also examined that, through Racial Formation Theory, race is an ever-changing construct that signifies current social beliefs and conflicts.

The Connection Between Mass Shootings and Mental Health

Two topics that have become increasingly prevalent in the media are mental health and mass shootings. Both are highly sensitive topics that, unfortunately, many United States citizens are far too familiar with. The United States accounts for under 5% of the global population, however, it is home to 31% of global mass shooters (Lankford, 2016). Additionally, according to the 2021 report from Mental Health America, mental health in the United States has been worsening for years (2021).

The link between mass shootings and mental health is a contested one in scholarship. In one recent study, it was found that in 28 of 35 mass shootings, the perpetrator had an untreated psychiatric illness (Cerfolio et. al, 2021). However, findings from the National Council for Behavioral Health found that only 4% of violent acts committed in the United States were committed by those with serious mental illness (2019). The inconsistent reports surrounding these topics make it challenging to develop an informed stance. However, health professionals are emphasizing that these cases should be looked at as isolated incidents due to this inconsistency.

It is also important to note that, “scholars who study violence prevention thus contend that mass shootings occur far too infrequently to allow for statistical modeling and predictability” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, p. 241). Although the frequency of mass shootings in the United States is a concerning matter, members of society must understand that mass shootings represent “statistical aberrations that reveal more about particularly horrible instances than they do about population-level events” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, p. 242).

Previous research has shown that those who are White have a higher chance of having their crimes attributed to mental illness than those who are Black. It also showed that White perpetrators are more likely to have discussions about them that frame them as sympathetic characters as opposed to Black perpetrators who were treated as “perpetually violent threats to the public” (Duxbury et al., 2018, p. 767). This is also consistent with findings that “the representations of mental illness and a ‘loner’ persona create an insanity defense to White perpetrators, sensationalizing hate-fueled narratives towards the individual and detaching their crimes from a collective racial community” (Grounds, 2020, p. 84).

It is crucial to understand that there are two factors that can impact the validity of a public health intervention study: “a small effect size [and] a rare outcome event” (Swanson, 2015, p. 1369). Mass shootings occur too infrequently to have predictable validity and instead represent “rare acts of violence” that have minimal indication of the correlation between mental health and acts of mass violence (Swanson, 2015). Because of this, assuming a connection between mass shootings and mental illness is not only inaccurate and irrelevant in the objective reporting of a crime. It can also perpetuate racial stereotypes about ethnic minorities and sets society a step back in its quest at destigmatizing mental health.

Media Coverage and Mass Shootings

Although mass shootings are heinous crimes that should be viewed and treated as such, each journalist has an ethical responsibility to “ground their work in a set of abstract moral principles, such as telling the truth [...] and trying to be accurate” (Ward, 2014, p. 464). However, due to the fast-paced nature of these incidents and the rush for journalists to provide timely coverage, they are faced with a dilemma, “do they get to the story first, or do they get there correctly” (Elsass & Schildkraut, 2016, p. 2). This rush to report paired with the sensationalized nature of mass shootings has led to skewed media coverage that emphasizes the more deadly attacks. This has also created a reporting pattern that places an emphasis on the perpetrator rather than the act itself (Schildkraut, 2019).

There has been an extensive history of the media inaccurately reporting mass shootings. In both the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, the perpetrators were misidentified and circulated through media channels (Elsass & Schildkraut, 2016). In a 2007 Omaha, Nebraska mall shooting, the media “incorrectly reported the race of the shooter, leading the public to believe that a Black male was still on the loose when the shooter, [...] a White male, was dead in the department store” (Elsass & Schildkraut, 2016, p. 4).

Most mass shootings have been committed by White male perpetrators, including 90% of all mass shootings in the last decade (Mingus & Zopf, 2010; Frisby, 2017). Despite this statistical evidence, racial minorities are still over-represented in the media when it comes to violent crimes, which may extend racial stereotypes and make viewers more inclined to believe that minority groups are inherently more aggressive and dangerous (Frisby, 2017).

Media often places an alarming emphasis on the perpetrator as a character in the narrative (Mingus & Zopf, 2010). This has led to distinct differences between the reporting of shooters based on race – “without the benefits of White privilege, shooters who are not White are forever doomed to be the Blackguards of their race, a permanent shadow to those who bear a cultural or phenotypical similarity” (Mingus & Zopf, 2010, p. 73). As a result, it can be easier for those who are White to detach themselves from violent crimes committed by others who are White. Conversely, those with non-White identities can sometimes feel the need to apologize for the crimes of others with similar identities.

Media and Racial Formation Theory

Previous studies have shown the impact that race has in the media. Research about representations of mass shooters in the news confirms that “racial identities are disproportionately emphasized in reports of ethnic minority perpetrators by newspapers” (Grounds, 2020, p. 84). This emphasizes the role of race in media reporting and that depictions of minority perpetrators have been constructed by shared social prejudices that are held in majority White and English-speaking countries (Grounds, 2020). As a result, it is important to understand how views of race are created and how this can play a role in the depiction of various racial identities in the media.

Researchers Michael Omi and Howard Winant defined racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (2014, p. 55). Racial Formation Theory and the process of racial formation are centered around two aspects: “situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized,” as well as “the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled” (Omi and Winant, 2014, pp. 55-56).

Under this theory, it is crucial to understand that “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant, 2014, p. 55). Race should be thought of as an “element of social structure” and a “dimension of human representation rather than an illusion” (Omi and Winant, 2014, p. 55). This places an emphasis on race being a fluid concept

that is ever-changing based on societal standards and representations.

Previous research has shown that a large portion of media consumers associate crime with the Black community (Oliver, 2006). In a study conducted to assess racial cues in the media, it was found that implicit racial biases were found in all of the studied newscasts. These racial cues were centered on themes of Black helplessness and criminality (Dolan et al., 2015). These are just two examples that indicate the presence of social structures leading to racial biases as well as the impact of these racial categories on differences in media framing depending on race.

This theory goes hand-in-hand with racial frames in the media because Racial Formation Theory views race as a social construct that also “encompasses the means by which racial meanings are systemically incorporated, circulated and appropriated by institutions” (McLwain, 2015, p. 1075). By this definition, to assess the ever-changing concept of “race,” it is important to evaluate how different racial groups are framed in influential institutions such as the media. The media is a powerful source that can influence thoughts and beliefs on a topic. How the media presents information can impact the audience’s perception in a way that is still accurate in its actualities. Media framing can often occur in a way that upholds racial stereotypes and discriminatory depictions of minority races.

Previous research explores how race has played a role in dialogue surrounding the descriptions of mass shooters in the media. Research has also shown that it is not uncommon for media outlets to have implicit biases and subliminal messages of racism, have inaccurate reports of mass shooters, and inaccurately imply causation when discussing mental illness and mass shootings. However, previous research has not taken a deep dive into analyzing the impact of social and racial justice initiatives on media reports of mass shooters. As humankind and the media often are shaped by significant societal events, it is important to determine whether media reporting practices and the depiction of mass shooters change based on these impactful movements. This research intends to fill the research gap by identifying thematic components of the description of mass shooters in online news media and seeing how these portrayals compare or differ depending on whether the perpetrator is White or Black. As well as determining the impact the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement had on the portrayal of Black and White perpetrators.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following questions, for online news articles referencing the randomly selected mass shooters:

RQ1: How are mass shooters portrayed in online news media?

RQ2: How are Black mass shooters portrayed in online news media compared to the portrayal of White mass shooters?

RQ3: What are the differences between the portrayals of Black and White mass shooters before and after May of 2020 in online news media?

The coronavirus pandemic brought to light two major issues in our society: mental health and racial injustice. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement is often referred to as a “tipping point” in our society (Murray, 2020, para. 1) and a movement that “changed the way the nation talks about race” (Adams, 2020, para. 1). Seeing how mass perpetrators are depicted before and after this period through the lens of mental health, background, and personality will allow for a comparison between the description of Black versus White mass shooters and whether there are any trends.

III. Methods

This research uses a qualitative content analysis to identify thematic components of messages as they appear in the media, more specifically, news sites. This was done by analyzing the descriptions the media uses to describe each mass shooting perpetrator. In this case, the goal was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and attitudes associated with each perpetrator and how that is depicted in the media.

The researcher began by randomizing a list of White mass perpetrators who committed mass shootings between 2017 and May of 2020. In this study, a mass shooting consists of four or more people injured or killed, not including the shooter (Gun Violence Archive, 2021). Each White mass perpetrator during this period was given a number. The same process of listing and numbering was then done for Black mass shooters during the same time frame. This process was then repeated for Black and White mass shooters who committed acts after May of 2020. Three perpetrators of each race and time frame were randomly selected using a randomizer and selector tool. This resulted in a list of twelve randomly selected mass shooters: three White perpetrators before May 2020, three Black perpetrators before May 2020, three White perpetrators after May 2020, and three Black perpetrators after May 2020.

The list of perpetrators only included those who had at least two articles of news coverage on CNN.com, ABCNews.go.com, and a local online news source near the shooting. This was to ensure that both local and national perspectives were assessed. Additionally, the articles selected were the first news articles from both the local and CNN sites that featured the perpetrator's name to ensure that the stories selected included a description of the perpetrator. The researcher selected CNN because it was named the most popular online news outlet in 2021 (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021). With a total of 399.4 million monthly visits, CNN has become, generally, the most favored and wide-reaching online news platform in the United States (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021). The researcher selected ABCNews.go.com as a second national online media source because it was rated the most reliable and least biased of the online mainstream media outlets (Pryor, 2020). With this methodology, thematic components in articles about each perpetrator are comprehensively analyzed on the local level, the most wide-reaching national level, and on a national level from sources with high reliability and minimal bias.

There were three main categories that the researcher assessed when conducting a qualitative content analysis. These categories included descriptions about (1) mental health or illness, (2) background, and (3) personality. Descriptions of mental health may include phrases such as "he was going through a hard time," "he was on medications," or "he was recently diagnosed with ...". Descriptions of the perpetrator's background may include language such as, "he came from a troubled home," "he was bullied," or "he grew up going to church." Descriptions of the perpetrator's personality may include phrases such as "he was always angry," "people around him have always been afraid of him," "he kept to himself," among others.

After assessing these three main categories, the researcher then determined overarching themes or frames. These themes and frames were used to analyze the differences in portrayal by race while also assessing differences in descriptions of perpetrators before and after May of 2020. Themes are crucial in qualitative content analyses because they "make explicit the implicit meaning of dialogue, behavior, and events" and should not leave readers burdened with the task of interpreting the meaning of these themes (DeSantis & Ugarriza, p. 367). This study's methodology draws from a previous research study, which employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how news media portrays the causes of mass shootings for shooters of different races (Duxbury et al., 2018).

IV. Findings

The Portrayal of Mass Shooters in the Media

Research Question 1 seeks to answer how mass shooters are generally presented in the media. Many of the articles written about the studied perpetrators were minimal in their details regarding mental health, background, and personality. Although there were times when these categories were brought up, it was typically in incidents where the information would be relevant to the case. Essentially, these mass shooters were portrayed in myriad ways that typically depended on the details of the case. These portrayals could be grouped into four profile categories: the unhinged perpetrator, the chronically angry perpetrator, the nice perpetrator that just snapped, and the perpetrator who was going through a lot at the time.

The "unhinged and delusional" frame

The category of perpetrators who were framed as "crazy" and "unhinged" was the largest category out of the four frames. One article detailed the perpetrators' long battle with sexual addiction and that he had lived in a transition house for people leaving rehab (McLaughlin et al., 2020). Another perpetrator was

described as having visions from God and that “God told him to go help the victims of Hurricane Ida, so he began purchasing supplies for the trip, but one day, his behavior took a stranger turn” (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 11). Another article explained how one perpetrator “believed pop star Taylor Swift was stalking him, and he had made comments about killing himself” (News Channel 5 Nashville, 2018, para. 6). It continued by stating a plethora of other incidents that led people to describe him as “delusional” such as when he “breached a White House security barrier [with] a very specific request: [...] to meet with Donald Trump” and when he was convinced that people were “tapping into his computer and phone” (News Channel 5 Nashville, 2018, para. 2, 5, 10).

The “always angry” frame

The next common portrayal was those who were framed as “always angry.” This portrayal often focused on previous incidents of erratic behavior or those who knew the perpetrator and feared him. The articles emphasized that this was not a one-time incident where the perpetrator was overcome with rage. For instance, one article read, “the anger being expressed by this young man seems much more ambiguous; more of a general expression of rage” (Jermont, 2021, para. 15). Another perpetrator was described as “a big guy” who was “very aggressive” (Fox 5 DC, 2018, para. 9). The article went on to discuss his previous 42 arrests and that he “was fired for punching another employee in the face, and [...] returned to the business to yell and curse at the man who fired him” (Fox 5 DC, 2018, para. 8). An article about another mass shooter who fell into this category explained that “neighbors gave him the nickname ‘El Loco,’ the crazy one, and told the press he would shoot his guns at all hours of the night” (Hennes, 2019, slide 11). The article then detailed how he was on a “long spiral going down” and “he was living in a dirt-floor shack [...] that lacked electricity, plumbing, a floor, and furniture” (Hennes, 2019, slide 10).

The “seemingly nice guy who snapped” frame

The next portrayal that became evident was “the seemingly nice guy who snapped.” Although some articles did discuss previous incidents where the perpetrator may have been violent, the emphasis was placed on perceptions from the people that knew the shooter. For example, one neighbor described one perpetrator as “friendly” saying, “He said hi to a lot of people who came and went. [...] I am sad and shocked” (Almasy et al., 2019, para. 26). Another perpetrator was described as a “quiet, polite, nice guy, and a good listener” (Green et al., 2019, para. 12). He was said to be in “good standing at work and had no ongoing disciplinary issues” (Green et al., 2019, para. 15).

The perpetrator who was “going through a lot” frame

The last category involved perpetrators who were “going through a lot.” Articles describing perpetrators under this category often went into more detail about their personal background as well as some of the plights of their life. One news source discussed the offender’s history with bullying and the troubles he had growing up due to the fact that his father was murdered (Krause & Olivares, 2021). The source detailed his issues with bullying and how these issues made him “not even want to get out of bed” and inevitably led to his depression (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 15). Another article about this perpetrator explained how he had been bullied and robbed on two different occasions (ABC6, 2021).

The Portrayal of Black Mass Shooters Versus White Mass Shooters in the Media

Consistent with the findings related to Research Question 1, Black mass shooters were portrayed in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances of the event. However, there were two findings that remained consistent when assessing the difference in portrayals of White versus Black mass shooters – the absence of the discussion of mental health in articles about Black perpetrators, and the inclusion of information irrelevant to the case in articles about Black perpetrators.

The absence of the discussion of mental illness

One theme within the online reports of Black mass shooters between 2017 and 2020 was the absence of the discussion of mental illness in regard to the event. While all White mass shooters had an article written about them that referenced poor mental health as a possible trigger that may have led to the deadly event, these findings were the opposite for Black mass shooters. Six out of the six White mass shooters had mental health appear in the studied articles about the incident, however, only two of the six Black perpetrators had articles that referenced mental health or illness.

One article referencing a White perpetrator stated, “The victims of this shooting did not have to be

sacrificed to our lack of appropriate mental health care” (Grinberg, 2018, para. 43). Another article about a White perpetrator even included a separate section about the importance of detecting mental health struggles early to prevent mass shootings from occurring. This article quoted a writing by the mother of a separate mass shooter which reads, “If anyone close to [my son] had been able to grasp that he was experiencing a health crisis that impaired his judgment, compelled him to fixate on violence, mislead him to dehumanize others, and enable him to kill his schoolmates and a teacher before killing himself, we could have intervened and gotten him the help he needed to move beyond the period of crisis,” (Garbe, 2019, para. 12).

This emphasis on mental health does not translate to articles written about Black mass perpetrators. One article about a Black mass shooter read, “People should not be quick to blame mental illness alone [...] crimes like this are rarely linked solely to mental problems (Jermont, 2021, para. 16).

Inclusion of irrelevant information

Another theme present in the majority of news articles about Black perpetrators was the inclusion of information that is seemingly irrelevant to the criminal incident. For instance, an article about one Black perpetrator included that, “he had not been to the doctor in two years” (Green et al., 2019, para. 9). Another article about a different Black shooter mentioned that when police found the suspect he was “smoking a cigar” (Boyette et al., 2017, para. 6). The same perpetrator was labeled as someone who “often paid his rent late” immediately after a segment that included neighbors describing him as a friendly and quiet presence in the community (Fox 5 DC, 2018, para. 13). Another perpetrator was said to be “quiet and kept to himself but loved taking his Charger out to practice drifting, a popular maneuver in which drivers make cars spin sideways by intentionally oversteering” (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 26). Another example occurred when a neighbor who lived below him explained, “You heard him walking around; he would drop stuff at like 2 a.m., and me and my roommate would try to figure out what he was doing” (Devine et al., 2019, para. 32). It is arguable that none of these pieces of information about the perpetrator provide any value to the understanding of each case.

An article about a different Black mass shooter referenced a previous run-in with the law that occurred in 1995, around 24 years prior to the current shooting incident (Almasy et al., 2019). Although criminal background is often referenced in articles about criminal suspects to demonstrate their troubled past, a stark contrast can be seen with these references when it comes to Black perpetrators as opposed to White ones. A news article about a White mass shooter emphasized that investigators were “reluctant to interpret information from a decade ago as an indication of what happened on [the day of this current incident]” (Johnston et al., 2019, para. 30). In the case of the White perpetrator, criminal background was dismissed because it was from a decade ago, but the same rationale did not apply for the article written about the Black perpetrator even though his criminal records dated back almost two and a half decades ago.

Portrayals Before and After the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 sparked an increase in awareness of racial injustices as well as mental health issues. Regarding the portrayal of Black and White perpetrators before and after the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, there were two themes with relative consistency. The first theme was that articles discussing perpetrators after the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 were more likely to include only information about the mass shooter that was relevant to the case. The second finding was a slight increase in conversation about mental health in articles about Black perpetrators after the 2020 movement.

The inclusion of only pertinent information about the perpetrator

A common theme found throughout the articles about the studied mass shooters was that articles about incidents that occurred after May of 2020 had fewer details about the shooter himself. For instance, when referencing a perpetrator’s past background, many articles only included pieces of their past that were relevant in understanding his potentially hateful tendencies. This consisted of brief information of relevant previous arrests that displayed his past with gun violations and aggravated assault charges along with previous social media posts where the perpetrator says, “I’m going to blow up the whole community” (Tareen, 2021, para. 7). A CNN article about another mass shooter had a section titled “What do we know about the suspect,” which only included the perpetrator’s name and age along with details about the event itself (Caldwell et al., 2021, header 3). This consisted of information such as the charges and where the weapon was recovered while omitting information about the perpetrator’s background and personality.

Increase in conversations about mental health

Additionally, although every studied White perpetrator had mental health discussed in at least one article, the number of cases where mental health was addressed for Black perpetrators increased after Black Lives Matter. In the random selection of Black mass perpetrators who committed acts of violence after May 2020, two out of the three had articles written about the incident that discussed mental health. However, in the cases from 2017-2020, zero of the three studied shooters had mentions of mental health in the articles written about them. One perpetrator who committed his act of violence after May of 2020 was described as “depressed and some days did not even want to get out of bed” (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 16). An article about another perpetrator detailed his struggles with mental health explaining that “his mental health degraded fast and terribly bad” (Tully, 2021, para. 12).

V. Discussion

This study aimed to understand the way online news media sources portray mass shooters depending on their race and if the frame of the portrayals changed based on the recent 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. Overall, it was found that mass shooters are likely to be grouped into framing categories based on personality and behavior which remained consistent even after the movement in 2020. Additionally, White mass shooters were more likely to have their crimes discussed through the lens of mental health while articles about Black mass shooters were less likely to discuss mental health and more likely to include irrelevant behavioral details about the perpetrator. After the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, Black perpetrators had increased conversations about mental health in articles about them. However, these conversations only occurred in “newsworthy” shootings carried out by Black perpetrators such as a National Football League player and a young, bullied teen.

The grouping of perpetrators

In this study, the substantial emphasis the media places on the perpetrators themselves is consistent with previous research that shows that articles about mass shootings emphasize the shooter rather than the event itself (Frisby, 2017). Additionally, previous research also shows that grouping perpetrators by background and personality attributes “gives way to the idea that the ‘broken’ attributes in the shooters themselves are the same as the ‘broken’ attributes in society as a whole” (Hume, 2020, p. 25).

The groupings of perpetrators make it easier for the media to refer to the perpetrators as somewhat of a character in a narrative, which also aligns with previous research (Mingus & Zopf, 2010). Additionally, it is important to remember that mass shootings are “statistical aberrations that reveal more about particularly horrible instances than they do about population-level events” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, p. 242). By grouping these perpetrators by personality or background, media consumers may assume a correlation between the characteristics of the perpetrator that are portrayed in the media narrative to similar characteristics among the people around them. Previous research emphasizes that “it is important for media practitioners to consider not generalizing the flawed character traits of a perpetrator or perpetrators to all similar criminals in the country” (Hume, 2020, p. 25).

This commonality is substantial because it emphasizes a trend in the media where perpetrators of violence are generalized into categories based on previous behavioral patterns. This can have pernicious impacts on how society treats those with seemingly similar characteristics and behavioral patterns as these mass shooters. As previous research has stressed, assuming that these characteristics serve as warning signs to the greater public is fear inducing. Just because perpetrators are grouped by things such as anger or how much they are going through in life, does not mean that others falling under the categories of being “angry” or “going through a lot” are likely to execute this level of mass violence.

Differences in the portrayal of Black perpetrators

Regarding the media framing of Black perpetrators, there were two stark differences when compared to that of their White counterparts. First, Black mass shooters were less likely to have their crimes attributed to mental illness. Second, articles referencing the crimes of Black perpetrators were more likely to include information that was not relevant to the case. This study found that White perpetrators were more likely to

have their crimes attributed to mental health than perpetrators who are Black which directly aligns with the findings of previous research (Duxbury et al., 2018).

Only two of the six Black perpetrators had articles that referenced mental health or illness, while all the studied White perpetrators had discussions of mental health in articles about them. Not only was there a lack of mental health discussion when reporting on Black mass shooters, one of the articles about a Black perpetrator specifically told the readers to “not be quick to blame mental illness alone [...] crimes like this are rarely linked solely to mental problems (Jermont, 2021, para. 16). Narrowing in on the perpetrator’s mental health allows the blame to be placed on the individual perpetrator’s disorder rather than the behaviors of the shooter himself. Furthermore, the exclusion of Black perpetrators in this theme can lead the public to attributing the actions of the particular event to the racial group that the perpetrator belongs to. This coincides with previous research that emphasizes how it is easy it is for White people to detach themselves from violent crimes committed by other White people due to the benefits of White privilege while leading non-White identities to feel the need to apologize for the crimes of others with similar identities (Mingus & Zopf, 2010).

Additionally, articles discussing Black mass shooters often included information that had minimal relevance to the crime itself. This theme had two prominent subcategories; the first category consisted of information regarding criminal background. Although criminal background could arguably be relevant to the history of a mass shooter, the framing of these previous run-ins with the law are not consistent between White perpetrators to Black perpetrators. An article about a Black mass shooter discussed a previous offense that occurred 24 years prior to the shooting, while an article about a White perpetrator emphasized that information about his criminal past should not be interpreted as an indication of the current incident, since the previous incidents occurred a decade prior.

The second subcategory involved behavioral information about the perpetrator that had no relevance to the committed act of violence. Narratives about the studied Black perpetrators included information about a perpetrator smoking a cigar, not going to the doctor in two years, paying rent late, and disrupting a downstairs neighbor by walking around too loudly. This information is incorporated in a way that creates a connection between Black perpetrators and increased history of criminal and behavioral patterns. This can suggest that these Black mass shooters are congenitally more belligerent, while the exclusion of these details in articles about White perpetrators may create the assumption that their acts were unforeseen. Since race and the public’s perception of race is socially constructed, how people view minority identities is constantly impacted by what occurs in society (Center for Health, 2017). This means that differences in portrayals based on race in the media contributes to the marginalization of racial minorities and contributes to the already held stereotype that racial minority groups are inherently more aggressive and dangerous (Frisby, 2017).

The impact of “newsworthiness”

A theme that stood out was the difference in portrayal depending on the “newsworthiness” of the incident. Mass shooting incidents that were perceived as “unique” were often written in a more narrative-like manner and included more information about the background and personality of the shooter. This is consistent with previous research that discussed how the nature of sensationalized mass shootings leads to an increased emphasis on the perpetrator rather than the act itself (Frisby, 2017).

For instance, one article about a perpetrator was written in a more descriptive and “story-like” way. The writer included a variety of details such as “the skinny 18-year-old [that] could not escape the daily scourge of high school bullying, harassment, and attacks” who had been “humiliated and stripped of his dignity” (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 3, 16). The article also detailed how the perpetrator’s own father was brutally murdered previously and the impact that had on the perpetrator. This story was seemingly more “newsworthy” because it involved a teenager committing a school shooting. Another example of a “newsworthy” shooting appeared when a former NFL player committed a mass shooting. Articles about this former athlete went into great detail about aspects of his life that can be seen as unnecessary in terms of its relevance to his crime. This consisted of discussions about his football career, his sport-related injuries, the fact that he did not drink or do drugs, and even discussed the smoothie shop that the perpetrator once opened (Almasy et al., 2021; Kinnard & Liu, 2021; Tully, 2021).

The coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 stimulated an overwhelming increase in discussions about racial injustice and mental health in the media. Overall, there was not an abundance of difference in how perpetrators were framed based on race before and after May

2020. However, one change that became evident was the increase in conversation of mental health in articles about Black perpetrators who committed acts after May 2020. While zero of the three Black mass shooters studied who perpetrated before 2020 had mental health brought up in articles about them, two of three Black mass shooters after 2020 had mental health discussed in online news media.

However, one critical factor that impacted the increase in mental health references was the “newsworthiness” of these cases. Past research has identified how the media has historically inflated “newsworthy” shootings because these articles catch the attention of the public at a higher rate than other crimes (Schildkraut, 2019). These mental health references occurred in two shootings by Black perpetrators in cases that were particularly “newsworthy.” One shooter was a professional athlete who likely had a large following and many fans, meaning articles about him would accumulate more attention from the public. Similarly, a heinous act of violence committed by a teenager may attract more attention as society is accustomed to viewing children as pure and innocent beings (O’Toole, 1999). Therefore, this finding suggests that media may be more inclined to address mental health in articles about Black perpetrators when those cases are most likely to attract a larger audience. This selective use of mental health as a discussion point can ultimately be a severe detriment, prioritizing profit over normalizing mental health conversations.

VI. Conclusion

This study sought to analyze the framing and themes in online news coverage of Black and White mass shooters and whether the portrayal of these perpetrators changed after the influential 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. A qualitative content analysis of 12 perpetrators and 36 online news articles showed that although the portrayal of mass shooters is mostly dependent on the circumstances of the crime, online news media sources often group perpetrators based on personality or behavior and frame the articles accordingly. Articles referencing Black mass shooters were less likely to include coverage about mental health and more likely to include personality or behavioral background about the perpetrator that was irrelevant to the case itself. However, all of the coverage of White perpetrators had articles relating their crimes to possible mental health challenges. This finding suggests the use of mental illness as a method of blame diversion among White perpetrators, while Black perpetrators are demonized by the narratives created in the media surrounding their background and behaviors.

Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 did lead to increased reporting about mental health among Black perpetrators, but only in more “newsworthy” events. The analysis shows that the way online news reports frame coverage of mass shootings depends heavily on perpetrator attributes making them the focus of the report, rather than the crime. The findings of this study indicate that the media often includes and disseminates content riddled with implicit and racial biases that can be pernicious to society. This is evident in the grouping and framing of perpetrators depending on behavior and personality, as well as disparities in depictions of Black versus White perpetrators in terms of selective inclusion of mental health discussions and the framing of perpetrator background information.

It is important to note that this research comes with limitations. This study analyzed only 12 of the many mass shooters in American history. Additionally with the study of only 36 articles, the sample size of this research is relatively limited. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable. This research does lay a foundation for future studies to be conducted surrounding the portrayal of mass shooters depending on race and the impact influential social justice initiatives have on changing these portrayals. Future research could examine a greater number of cases to increase the sample size. Additionally, future research can also investigate the perceptions that media consumers hold when viewing reports of mass shootings. Future studies can also investigate the impact the pandemic had on mental health frames in articles about other acts of violence committed by racial majorities versus racial minorities.

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