

Infamous Killers, Forgotten Victims: A Content Analysis of Print Media Coverage of Three Major School Shootings

Weatherby GA*, Luzzo E and Zahm S

Gonzaga University, USA

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***Corresponding author:** Georgie Ann Weatherby, Gonzaga University, USA, Email: weatherb@gonzaga.edu

Abstract

Mass school shootings continually plague the United States and are no stranger to media coverage. Columbine High School, Virginia Tech University and Sandy Hook Elementary School are among the many instances of mass shootings in schools across the country. Through a content analysis of national (*The New York Times*) and local (*The Denver Post*, *The Richmond Times*, *The Hartford Courant*) newspaper coverage of these three shootings, this research focuses on coverage discrepancies between the victims and the shooter(s) and research interprets how the media's coverage of mass shootings affects society. Findings suggest that media coverage leads to societal anomie due to national debates over gun control, mental health, and school security. Also, the perpetual use of labels and the level of attention placed on the shooter(s) rather than the victims play a role in the anomic affect of mass school shootings on society.

Introduction

It is no secret that media plays a central role in influencing the way we think and act. Unfortunately, media coverage is not always unbiased or focused on the factual aspects of a current event. With access to the many forms of media coverage, the public is exposed to big headlines and widespread shock all too often. School shootings, sadly, have increasingly dominated such media headlines and have possibly inspired other people to commit similar acts. For example, a study found, "significant evidence that mass killings involving firearms are incited by similar events in the immediate past" due to the media's coverage of mass killings [1]. Columbine High School, Virginia Tech University and Sandy Hook Elementary School were just a few among the many sites of mass shootings highly publicized in the United States. Between these three schools, sixty-four victims and four shooters made national news. Most of the nation was exposed to the school shootings through some form of media—and, most often; this media exposure was

interpreted on a national level for citizens not residing in the same state where the shooting occurred. Media is a primary source for how citizens receive the facts surrounding the shooting, such as the names of the victims, the number injured or killed, the name of the shooter, and the surrounding speculation as to why the shooting occurred. Citizens tend to take what is printed as fact without questioning what is being said. When it comes to the media reporting school shootings, there appears to be a trend wherein newspapers tend to pay more attention and dedicate more time to aspects of the shooter(s), such as their mental health, home life, and what drove them to commit this act of deviance, while giving a broader overview about the victims of the shooting.

Through the analysis of one national newspaper (namely *The New York Times*) and a local newspaper from each of the specific cities where the shootings occurred (namely *The Hartford Courant*, *The Denver Post*, and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*), this research juxtaposed the

amount of media attention allotted to the shooter(s) versus the amount of attention dedicated to the victims in the various newspaper articles. The sociological theories that were applied to the content analysis are Labeling Theory, Anomie Theory, and Conflict Theory. Anomie Theory was applied to answer the question of how the social structure may induce deviance (i.e. the social unrest that ensues due to the shooting). Labeling Theory was applied to answer the question of how labels created by the media are important for understanding deviance (i.e. stereotyping, using mental illness as an explanation, etc.). Finally, Conflict Theory aided the analysis of the power over the powerless (i.e. the media has discretion on what to publish for the public to read). This research additionally incorporated a theory from journalism, specifically the gate keeping theory of media. These theories guided a thorough analysis of the ways in which the media can and does influence the way people think after reading about mass shootings like those documented at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech University and Sandy Hook Elementary School in print media. Additionally, the theories guided an analysis of how the media influences a person to commit a similar crime through the fame allotted to the shooter(s). Thus, this encourages others to enter the same spotlight with similar actions to become infamous. The research questions explored and answered in this research were: how does media coverage of the victims and shooter(s) differ at the national and local level, and what might this imply about society or the media sector? Additionally, how does media coverage create anomie, perpetuate labels, and control what facts the readers take from the events?

Literature Review

The United States is no stranger to mass shootings, especially in schools, over the last three decades. While there are a devastating amount of school shootings to choose from, this research focused on the mass shootings documented at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, and Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. On April 20th, 1999, two high school juniors opened fire on students and staff, resulting in the injury of 24 people and the death of 13 victims, followed by the suicides of the two shooters. Almost exactly eight years later, a senior at Virginia Tech injured 23 students and killed 32, followed by his suicide, on April 16th, 2007. On December 14th, 2012, a gunman, after shooting his mother at home and killing 26 students and staff members at Sandy Hook

Elementary School, committed suicide. Each of these shootings took place in different areas of the country at different educational institution levels (high school, university, and elementary school). The shooting documented at Columbine High School emerged as a "problem-defining event, reshaping the way that the media and its consumers perceived school shootings" [2]. Until the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, no other school shooting, including the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, had accumulated such widespread attention [2]. Viewer interest from the public seamlessly translates into an increase in the volume of coverage, which tends to rise when crimes tap into the deeper social conflicts shared by many in society [3,4]. Given that there are many topics surrounding media coverage and its influence on the public, this research will specifically center on the media attention that focuses on the shooter profile(s) versus the amount of attention focused on the victims, both at the national and local level. Many theories of both sociology and media are applicable to the examination of media coverage surrounding mass school shootings; anomie theory, labeling theory, conflict theory, and gate keeping theory were the most effective in guiding the research.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is widely concerned with what societal members deem to be 'right' and 'wrong' actions [5]. Various groups in the community have decided what acts are deviant and which are non-deviant based on reactions to the facts that the media presents to them. Without fail, the media immediately grasps at the loose straws within hectic situations and tries to explain or find reason as to why the shooter(s) committed such horrific crimes against innocent students and faculty. Titles including vengeful, morbid, bitter, victim of bullying, outcast, unusual, social outcast, troublemaker, disaffected and humiliated are among the many labels that the media chooses to use in their characterization of the various shooters [6-9]. Once labels are placed on a particular person or group, they begin to act in accordance with the label(s) assigned to them, as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. While the aim of this paper was not directed at understanding the shooters, this aspect of labeling theory extends to media in that once it has placed these labels on the shooters; the public begins to make judgments and to apply stigmas to the shooters. The effect this has is one that leads the public to "believe the person with a stigma is not quite human...we exercise varieties of discrimination" [10]. This is dangerous, especially in regard to the stigma of mental illness. When the media

labels the shooter(s) as having a mental illness, such as depression or anxiety, the public begins to have "external attribution for the shooting behavior because people tend to believe that mental illness causes individuals to behave in a dangerous and violent manner" [11]. This is further endangering to those individuals who identify with mental illnesses similar to those assigned to the shooters, because the public begins to see mental illnesses as the reason for an individual to commit the same heinous crime as the shooter(s).

Media messages may also "cultivate" certain perceptions among readers [12]. In the specific case of the Virginia Tech University shooter, race was a widely exploited label throughout print media. Rather than referring to him as a student shooter, countless articles refer to the shooter as a Korean-American student, thus creating a negative stigma about Korean-Americans [6]. Conducted a study in which they measured racial and mental illness stereotypes and discrimination experienced by Korean-Americans after the Virginia Tech shooting. They recognized that "although Cho [the shooter] was similar to the Columbine shooters in many aspects, he was depicted in the media as vengeful, morbid, and bitter whereas Harris and Klebold were portrayed as high school outcasts and victims of bullying who were harassed into retaliation" [6]. Their research suggests "causal attributions of the shooter's behavior have significant impact on people's evaluations of the shooter's racial group" [6]. Thus, the research demonstrated that the public's exposure to "a Korean-American rampage shooter...and perceiving race as a cause for this violence was positively associated with negative beliefs and social distance toward Korean-American men" [6]. Therefore, it is evident that the media's role in labeling the shooters has a lasting impact on the attitudes and attributions of the public.

Anomie Theory

The second social theory that can be used to better understand how mass media's portrayal of mass shootings affects the audience is anomie theory [5]. Anomie is the breakdown of societal norms or values, and, in turn, those norms or values no longer control how members of society function. Therefore, where there is a disruption in the functioning of societal norms, anomie occurs. Media thereby enables the unraveling of society in its exposure of deviance to the public-the public begins to question safety of schools, the current gun laws, etc. Anomie theory can be visualized as general chaos. When media perpetuates the fear and unbelievable nature

of a mass violent crime, the public appears to enter a "frenzied state...society's rules automatically shut down which causes people to bring forth biased and stereotypical notions" [13]. Anomie theory can be closely linked to labeling theory because when the media learns of a school shooting, they automatically put a label on the shooter and the event that occurred (i.e. calling the shooting a 'massacre' or labeling the shooter as a 'monster'), thus causing society to demand all the facts and answers to their questions. Therefore, debates on gun laws, mental health services, school safety, and the behavior of students play into the anomic affect school shootings have on society.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory assumes that conflict materializes between groups wanting to exercise control over certain situations or events [5]. In accordance with the current research, conflict applies when the media has the power over what to publish in their newspapers and the public has to take it for fact. In essence, a powerful group is attempting to control society. The media is the powerful group that has control over the information given to the powerless, namely the public. Media has "the power to control the flow of information as a major lever in the control of society" [14]. Because "media holds great power over the angles of the stories they choose to present," the public is only hearing the news, facts, and speculation that the media wants it to hear [13]. Furthermore, it has been found through extensive research that media does not "allocate equal time and resources" to each crime story [15]. In this respect, the public is ultimately powerless when it comes to gaining knowledge, given that the media has the power to determine what the public sees, hears, reads, and ultimately thinks.

Print Media and Gate keeping Theory

Gate keeping theory illustrates "the powerful process through which events are covered by the mass media, explaining how and why certain information either passes through gates or is closed off from media attention" [14]. A gatekeeper is an essential part of media. The gatekeeper takes all the information of a given event and chooses what to and how something will be published. Maguire et al. eloquently illustrated the effect of media coverage and crime: "if it bleeds, it leads" [15]. The media also presents crime in such a way that Steven M. Chermak describes as "body count media," a graphic but relevant term for understanding how media presents crime for this research [16]. A gatekeeper not only controls the

information and decides what to publish, but also controls the nature in which the information is presented to the public through newspapers or live news. One of the ways gate keeping cognitively affects the public is through the audiences' thoughts. The public's ideas are shaped based on the information they read or hear from their chosen media source. Mass shootings, especially those involving school-aged individuals, "generate high levels of media coverage, as audiences have a desire to learn the facts of the events, and, in a more sustained way, to understand the social implications and deeper meaning of such events" [2]. Media is remarkably successful in telling people what to think about, hence why they take the time and effort to decide what knowledge will be given to the public. However, it is rare when the public actually receives the important answers to questions about events because the public is so inundated with information and shock that they simply take what the media gives them for fact [2].

It is plausible that the audience is unaware of the extent to which the media can decide "the types of crime worth presenting" [16]. Therefore, those events not covered have no effect in shaping the audience's worldview. The media is highly selective with regard to coverage of crimes; the media prefers to report and allocate a significant amount of time (via newscasts) or space (via print media) to cover crimes that are particularly "violent, unusual, and dramatic/sensational" [15]. They do so because "stories are produced according to tried and tested formulae of what sells best" [17]. Ultimately, we are more interested in hearing about the dramatic, sensational, unusual crimes than hearing stories about a cat that was rescued out of a tree. Media capitalizes on fear as entertainment through exercising its power over what to publish or not.

Through the framework of each of these theories, the research was well equipped to examine the coverage focused on the shooters and the victims at both the national and local level. Specifically, the research evaluated the print media in its decisions to document school shootings and whether they chose to devote more attention to the shooter(s) or the victims in their documentation.

Data & Methods

The data for this paper were obtained through the content analysis of one national newspaper (*The New York Times*), as well as three local newspapers from each location where shootings took place (*The Denver Post*, *The*

Hartford Courant, and *Richmond Times*). The data acquired consisted of a microfilm dating from the day the shooting occurred through the following six days, for a grand total of one week's worth of coverage for each shooting. Data were collected via ProQuest's Digital Microfilm for *The New York Times* and ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* with Index. The local newspaper microfilms, *The Denver Post*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and *The Hartford Courant* were obtained through Interlibrary Loan (ILLiad), all of which were provided by and through Gonzaga University Foley Library. The articles evaluated were done so via digital format and then printed for inter-coder reliability. The researchers' use of microfilm both in digital and hardcopy format was to ensure the consistency of the data. Therefore, the data reflect any and all type of articles that appeared in the newspapers during the given time frame, such as front-page stories, letters to the editor, headlines, etc. This research utilized content analysis for analyzing the data. Content analysis is the structured method of looking at qualitative and quantitative descriptions of some type of communication, and through the analysis of the form of communication patterns and meanings may be discovered [18]. In order to account for reliability and validity, the researchers coded separately and read through each article at both the national and local newspaper level, then discussed and compared coded findings once all articles had been interpreted individually.

The data were analyzed and coded to discover the extent to which each article supported the sociological theories and gate keeping theory discussed in this research report. A table for each national and local newspaper was used to organize the application of Anomie and labeling theory within the articles, given that they tied so closely together (see Appendices A through F). Media coverage followed a broken down structure of codes for analysis. Each article was coded using the following markers: data regarding the shooters' mental status, physical appearance, personal and family history, name, status in the community, name, and any comments from the public, as well as data concerning the victims' status in the community, personal and family history, name, physical appearance, and any comments from the public (see Appendices G and H). Labeling theory was recognized as the way in which the media discussed the mental, physical, personal, and familial attributes of the shooter(s). Examples of these words for the shooter(s) are vengeful, morbid, bitter, victim of bullying, unusual, social outcast, troublemaker, disaffected, loner, and humiliated [6-9]. In contrast, some of the words used for

the victims include leader, well liked, kind, adored, vibrant, enthusiastic, easy to get along with, and very bright [19,20]. Another way labeling theory is seen in the newspapers is through the constant labeling of these shootings as being the "Worst U.S. Gun Rampage" or in the case of Sandy Hook Elementary School, "one of the worst mass shootings in the United States in decades" (see Appendix B, article entitled: 32 Shot Dead in Virginia, Worst U.S. Gun Rampage; see Appendix F, article entitled: Around the World, Grief, Anger, Compassion). Labeling theory gave insight into the consequences of labeling people in society. Additionally, labeling theory exposed how the media's perpetuating of labels may have led to similar violent shooting, such as with the shooter in Virginia Tech University being inspired by what the shooters at Columbine High School did. Any phrase that showed anomie theory in action was taken note of to aid in the understanding of how the media reported school shootings. Anomie was seen especially in the "Letters to the Editor" sections of each newspaper, through quotes from those affected by the shooting, and often the headline word choice from the newspaper journalists. Discussions of gun laws, school safety, friendship and relationships, and attitudes toward the effect of bullying were also noted as exhibiting the anomic affect school shootings have on the public. Conflict theory was evident through analyzing the articles for specific word choices that journalists used in the various newspapers. The media has power over what information is reported to the public; thus, through evaluating each article, the media's power over the flow of information, it was important to hypothesize the reasoning behind why the newspapers choose to spend time on certain information over other facts (such as not revealing the victims' names until days after the shooting, but giving the name of the shooter(s) early on). This was especially interesting in examining why NBC decided to air and publish the videos and letters sent by the shooter in the Virginia Tech University massacre. Furthermore, the power over the powerless dichotomy was made evident through the media's discussion of the various cliques in school culture and group hierarchies, interactions with classmates, and social ostracism, relevant to each of the shooters at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech University, and Sandy Hook Elementary School.

The gatekeeper theory was not as evident in the data; it was difficult for the researchers to determine gate keeping given that the gate keeping occurred before events are published. Therefore, the researchers assumed that the gate keeping of media had already contributed to the data, largely due to the fact that the data presented

was what the media allowed the public to have access to. Additionally, the effect gatekeeper theory had on society was analyzed through Letters to the Editor and comments made by community members where the shooting occurred in various articles. The public comments gave insight into how the media affects society when discussing mass school shootings. The researchers aimed to find data that followed with the four theories and expected to find that national coverage would have more discussion dedicated to the shooter(s) while local coverage would have an equal amount dedicated to the shooter(s) and victims, in consistency with the hypotheses and research questions. Appendices A through H highlight the various article findings that fit with the defined sociological theories and the codes that the researchers developed.

Summary and Conclusion

There was a clear disparity in the coverage of the shooter(s) and the victims at the national level (see Appendix G). During a weeks' worth of news coverage, most of the discussion focuses on the shooter(s)'s familial history, mental status, and their status in the community. It appeared that the national newspaper coverage would publish much fewer articles that focus solely on the victims and their lives in comparison to local news coverage, seen in the coverage all three shootings (see Appendices G and H). However, as the week following the shooting progressed, the conversations shifted from discussing the shooter(s) and victims to concentrating on a debate over gun control, media influence (specifically violent movies, TV shows, video games, etc.), discussions of mental illnesses, and an overall 'call to action.'

Columbine High School - *The Denver Post* and *the New York Times*

As the researchers expected, the local newspaper source for the Columbine High School shooting, *The Denver Post*, reported a higher volume of victim and shooter information than the national news source, *The New York Times* (see Appendices G and H). The researchers postulated that local news would have somewhat equal coverage of the shooters and the victims of the Columbine High School shooting, given that all who were involved were from the local community and had ties to the community in some capacity, whether that be as a student, teacher, friend, "jock," or a member of the Trench Coat Mafia. However, the researchers found that the shooters were given more attention in *The Denver Post*, likely due to the fact that the public wants

immediate facts of the shooting and to understand the boys behind the guns. In comparison to the 144 victim name mentions, the shooters' names were mentioned 299 times (see Appendix H). It is important to note that in this shooting, there were two shooters, rather than one in the other two major school shootings discussed in this paper. This could explain the very high number of shooter name references throughout the local paper. Much more attention was focused on the physical appearance of the shooters than the victims as well (67 mentions compared to 33 victim physical appearance mentions; see Appendix H). There were more community comments and discussions regarding family and personal history of the victims rather than the shooters in Columbine High School (See Appendix H). This could be explained by the emphasis media decided to give to the shooters' physical appearance and history of being bullied as members of the Trench Coat Mafia, while focusing more on the life the victims had lived before it was taken from them. *The Denver Post* referenced the number of victims 36 times for the Columbine High School shooting. This is the second highest victim number reference between the three major shootings, *The Hartford Courant* victim number reference at 95 for the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* referencing victim numbers 33 times for the Virginia Tech University shooting (see Appendix H).

At the national level, *The New York Times* reported the shooter names 155 times, in comparison to the 24 victim name mentions (see Appendix G). Interestingly, the national news source focused more on the shooters' personal and family history than the victims, as well as their status in the community, both as students and members of the Trench Coat Mafia group on their campus (see Appendix G). Again, it is important to remember that there were two shooters in this instance; therefore, 155 name mentions accounts for each mention of each shooter's name. However, even if this number was cut in half (if there had been just one shooter), it would still be more than three times the name mentions for victims. At both the national and local news coverage levels, the concentration of articles shifted from an anomic "why?" and "who are they?" to a directed debate over gun laws, the influence that video games and internet access had on the shooters, and whether bullying was the cause of the mental breakdown of the shooters, leading them to commit their massacre and suicide at the high school. Even in the Letters to the Editor, the public called for more attention on mental health services and discussing gun control laws.

Virginia Tech University - *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *the New York Times*

The local news source for the Virginia Tech University shooting, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, was incredibly difficult to read. The microfilm was very blurry, in some cases to the point of illegibility. Consequently, the researchers must state that the data collection for this local paper is incomplete. As discussed in the limitations section of this research report, further research must be done to check the validity of this data collection, as well as to obtain a more accurate representation of the local news coverage from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. From what the researchers were able to read, they found that the Virginia Tech University shooter's name was mentioned 183 times, while the victims' names were only mentioned 54 times (see Appendix H). Hardly any personal and family history was discussed for the shooter in comparison to the victims (13 shooter mentions, 42 victim mentions; see Appendix H). In fact, much of the discussion about status in the community, comments from the community, and personal history is higher for the victims than the shooter (see Appendix H). *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported the number of victims 33 times—this is the lowest victim number reference of the three major shootings, with *The Denver Post* referencing victim numbers 36 times for the Columbine High School shooting, and *The Hartford Courant* victim number reference at 95 for the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting (see Appendix H). The researchers came across a very interesting finding in the national and local coverage of the Virginia Tech University shooting regarding the shooter's race. In the instances of the other two major school shootings examined in this research, the shooters were all white males. In the shooting at Virginia Tech University, however, the shooter was Korean-American—a fact that was continually brought up in the coverage of the shooter. Much of the physical appearance mentions in the news coverage selectively chose to highlight his Asian facial features, rather than simply describing the shooter as a male student. In comparison with all three school shooters, the Virginia Tech University shooter's physical appearance is mentioned 46 times, which is more than double the amount of times the Columbine High School shooters' physical appearance is mentioned and almost triple the amount of mentions for the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter's physical appearance (see Appendix G). The researchers believe that the emphasis on the shooter's race could have led to strong backlash against the Asian-American community across the country. This is consistent with the literature that showed

that the emphasis on the shooter's racial affiliation had negative effects on other individuals who identified with the Korean-American population, and even further negatively impacted Asian-American individuals [6].

National coverage of the shooter placed a stronger emphasis on the shooter's mental status than the local news coverage, seen in the 33 references to mental status in *The New York Times* compared to the 12 references to mental status in *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (see Appendices G and H). The researchers believe that this could have contributed to the national article shift in conversation of the shooting to overall mental health in the United States. By focusing on the shooter's perceived mental instability, the public begins to ruminate on the effects of untreated mental health and leaves the victims in the dust, a mere distant memory of the shooting itself. The discussion of mental status was brought up for all three shooters in the *New York Times*, but the strongest concentration centering on mental health was identified in the articles covering the Virginia Tech University shooting, at 33 mentions, compared to Columbine High School at 25 mentions and Sandy Hook Elementary School at 14 mentions. To reiterate an imperative aspect of this discussion: the data collected for the local news coverage of the Virginia Tech University shooting are incomplete, and the conclusions made in this research are based on the limited ability to code and interpret the microfilm accessible to the researchers. The findings could have been significantly different if the microfilm had been more decipherable.

Sandy Hook Elementary School - *The Hartford Courant* and *the New York Times*

It was previously mentioned that at the national level in *The New York Times* microfilm, media focus shifted from a discussion of the victims and shooters to a heated debate over gun control, the influence of particularly violent movies, TV shows and video games, and discussions surrounding the need for recognition and treatment of mental illnesses. It is interesting to note that while this finding was consistent in the local newspapers, the *Denver Post* and *Richmond-Times Dispatch*, it was not consistent with the articles examined in the *Hartford Courant*. The researchers hypothesize that this could be due to the unique situation that the majority of the victims at Sandy Hook Elementary school were children—a mere six or seven years old. The researchers believe that the local community in New Haven, Connecticut made a concerted effort to focus more on cherishing and celebrating the short lives of the victims in their

community, rather than turning the tragedy into a debate over guns or mental illness. The researchers also found that the local newspaper for the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting mentions for victims were significantly higher in comparison to shooter mention codes, both in comparison to the *New York Times* national coverage and in comparison to the *Denver Post* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* coverage of victims and shooters (refer to Appendices G and H). For example, there were 495 victim name mentions in *The Hartford Courant*, while there were only 144 victim name mentions in *The Denver Post* and 54 victim name mentions in *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (see Appendix H). The discussion of victim names also held true at the national level, wherein *The New York Times* discussed victim names 116 times in a one-week timeframe for Sandy Hook Elementary School, while the same paper only discussed victim names 24 times for Columbine High School and 39 times for Virginia Tech University (see Appendix G). Following in the same pattern, the victim number mentions were also at its highest between the three local newspapers for the three school shootings: *The Hartford Courant* cited the victim number 95 times, while *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported the number of victims 33 times and *The Denver Post* referenced the victim numbers 36 (see Appendix H).

When looking at the impact of the shooting on the nation, one element was particularly attention-grabbing to the researchers. The victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting were mentioned the most, both in name mention and number reference, across the national and local news coverage, but these victims were not the highest in overall number; the most victims of the three shootings were at Virginia Tech University, with 32 total victims. Again, the researchers hypothesize that a more national outrage may have occurred with this particular shooting due to the fact that the majority of the victims were in Kindergarten and First Grade (with the exception of the six instructors, the shooter, and the shooter's mother). There appeared to be a stronger emphasis overall on the tragedy of losing children in comparison to the loss of life for victims of the other two shootings in this research. This in no way asserts that the nation cared less about the victims of the other shootings; the researchers hypothesize that the nation had more of an outcry because of the nature of the massacre happening in an elementary school with small, young children who could do little to protect themselves.

Applying the Theories

Labeling Theory and Anomie Theory

Labeling theory assumes that within society there is a consensus on the definition of social norms and whether behavior is or is not deviant [21]. Society's labels may be a cause of deviance in two ways. First, a specific label may catch the attention of a labeling audience, which may cause the audience to perpetuate the label. The second way is that an individual may internalize a label that is given to them or that they believe represents them, and in turn causes them to act in accordance with the label [5]. It seemed that the media's 24-hour coverage of school shootings led to the idea of symbolic interactionism, meaning that people tend to see themselves as others see them as a deviant, and then behave accordingly [21]. Media outlets tend to perpetuate labels by continuing the use of words such as 'outcast,' 'different,' or 'loner' simply based on physical appearance and comments from people, which leads others whom associate themselves with that particular appearance or type of personality to potentially act accordingly with the specific label the media has given to them. Additionally, the media labels, which lead to symbolic interactionism, may be the reason for copycat incidences that tend to occur after a shooting. With the coverage of the shooting at Columbine High School, the labeling of the "Trench Coat Mafia" led to significant negative affects against the members of that group, as well as bans on the black trench coats that they wear. The media heavily associated the two shooters of Columbine with the group, thus causing a negative affect toward those who associate with the group. The media further labeled members of the group as 'Goth,' which causes people whose appearance falls under a gothic description to be negatively affected by the media's labels. This labeling therefore strongly perpetuated the damaging of reputations for and community opinions of the other members of this "Trench Coat Mafia" group. This is the exact effect that labeling has on a group of individuals. Once a negative label was assigned to the Trench Coat Mafia members, prejudices arose from the public.

In fact, several schools banned the wearing of black trench coats altogether, and a student in Englewood, Colorado was ticketed for wearing similar clothing to the "Trench Coat Mafia" (see Appendix D, article entitled: '3 arrested at rampage say 'people in black' persecuted' and article entitled: 'Goth-fashion crackdown seen by some as fascism'). Moreover, Korean Americans feared backlash after the shooting at Virginia Tech because the shooter

was of the same ethnicity. The media's focus on the shooter's ethnicity played into the anomic effect on society of fear. Anomie "refers to the breakdown of social norms and a condition in which those no longer control the activity of societal members" [5]. During instances of social disruption, such as mass school shootings, there is greater anomie. In the analysis of the newspapers, it was evident that mass shootings led to many instances of anomie in society. For example, after the Columbine High School shooting, the following topics were discussed due to how people reacted to the disruption in societal norms: reduce violence in the media, control guns, put armed guards in schools, put metal detectors at school entrances, prevent children from exchanging ghoulish thoughts on the Internet, reduce cliques among students, parental need to be more accountable, public schools needing to uphold the principles of good citizenship, and so on (see Appendices A-F for examples from other schools as well). In the specific case of the Virginia Tech University shooting, racial affiliation also caused a sense of anomie for the Asian-American population in the United States. This is seen from articles that quote individuals who feared retaliation on the Korean-American population (see Appendix B, article entitled: 'Korean-Americans Brace for Problems in Wake of Killings'):

- "When the news media said it was an Asian, we prayed, we prayed, 'Not Korean, not Korean.'"
- "...stay home as much as possible and to not tell anyone that I was Korean."
- "Across the nation, Koreans have braced for harassment."

Additionally, many Letters to the Editor and other cited articles exude anomie (see Appendices B, C and D):

- "after the shooting at Virginia Tech on Monday, nerves were on edge at universities nationwide." ('Unsettled Day on Campuses Around U.S.')
- "Schools should be places of sanctuary and safety and learning. When that sanctuary is violated, the impact is felt in every American classroom and every American community." ('32 Shot Dead in Virginia; Worst U.S. Gun Rampage')
- "events like the Sandy Hook killings trigger fundamental fears" ('Nation's Pain is Renewed, and Difficult Questions Are Asked Once More(A18)')
- "a place where children supposed to be safe" ('Act of Heroism(A1cont.A27)')

- "Could our school be next?" ('Other towns Wonder')

From the information gathered, it is clear that the media's use of labels leads to anomic effects in society. For example, the ban on wearing black trench coats in high schools was possibly caused by the media's focus on the attire of the shooters, and the focus on race caused Korean-Americans to worry in fear of retaliation and backlash from the country. Labeling the shooting as the "deadliest" makes it come across as a record to be broken. Furthermore, the media's shift from discussion of the shooting to a discussion of gun control debates and mental health crises creates anomie in society. The anomie surrounding guns prompted some stores such as Dick's Sporting Goods and Wal-Mart, who sell guns, to remove them from the shelves and off the market or to take gun information down from their websites. Moreover, "stock prices of gun makers have fallen since the shooting" [22].

Conflict Theory and Gate keeping Theory

Conflict theory is the powerful group's control over the powerless [5]. For this research, the powerful is defined as the media, which has the power over the flow of information to the general public. With conflict theory, the media defines how society should see the crime, the shooter(s), and the victims based on what they choose to cover and what they choose not to cover, as well as the facts they do and do not disclose when publishing articles. People make assumptions about the school shootings based on what they learn through reading the paper or what they see on broadcasted news. The conflict was especially highlighted in the coverage of the Columbine High School shooters. The media perpetuated a school-related conflict dynamic through their discussion of the inner workings of cliques in the school atmosphere. One article stated, "Columbine is separated into cliques and classes and ins and outs, as complicated a place as society beyond" [23]. When discussing the issues that may have caused the shootings to occur, the media continually made the distinction between the cliques in Columbine High School, which blatantly extended the labeling of the shooters as outcasts or part of the "outs" and labeling those affected as the popular crowd, the jocks, or the "ins." The division of power in social groups was not as focused on in the coverage of the Virginia Tech University and Sandy Hook Elementary School shooters. This research used conflict theory to explain the power that the media has over the powerless public, but it is important to note the way in which the media used their

power to highlight further conflict theory dynamics. In focusing so heavily on the powerful, popular groups over the powerless, bullied shooters, the media exercised their power to expose the cliques and inner social groups at the high school. Gate keeping theory involves the decision-making process when it comes to what will and will not be published in the newspaper [24]. A gatekeeper is the one who makes the choice of what information will be transferred to the audience. In the research completed thus far, it is hard to assume why the newspapers would decide to publish certain facts or articles. For example, excerpts from 9-1-1 calls from teachers at Columbine High School were published in the *New York Times*. In the Sandy Hook shooting, there was backlash from the community due to the media presence. For example, "No media' signs hung from the doors of several stores, and many people scowled at the hordes of interviews or pointedly walked away from them" (See Appendix I) [25]. A community member stated, "You almost feel like they're taking over your town" [25]. Moreover, another member of the Sandy Hook community stated, "if not for the media coverage, none of that would have happened," [26]. Further, Nancy Lanza, the mother of the shooter, was often not part of the victim count. She was instead discussed in connection with the shooter, and occasionally grouped with the victims. Nancy Lanza was a victim of this crime, but the media chose to separate her from the count of "20 children and six adults killed". It is uncertain as to why the media would do this, but the researchers speculate that it detracts from Nancy Lanza being an actual victim of such an awful crime. It is hard to say why the media portrayed her in the way that they did, and not include Nancy in the category or label of a victim.

Another interesting aspect of this theory is questioning why certain letters to the editor were selected for publishing over others. Specifically, one letter explicitly stated the negative impacts that the media's labels have on society. The author states that the use of the term "potential troublemakers" leads to vilification, which may increase the isolation, felt by those who are labeled as such [9]. That particular letter goes against how the media is labeling the shooter, which shows *The New York Times'* ability to be transparent, which gives the paper more credibility. On a similar note, there are Letters to the Editor which talk about how the media covers the shooters and the victims. One article quoted a woman saying, "we want you to remember the victims...Not the shooter" [27]. A reader expressed in a Letter to the Editor: "But what actually matters are the children. What are their names?" [28]. Lastly, another Letter to the Editor pointed out, "we're sure to hear all about the shooter's

problems and societal vulnerabilities” [29]. These comments show that the public wants to hear about the victims and remember the victims. The researchers believe that print media is beginning to understand that society wants the victims to be famous, not the shooter(s) (See Appendix H – *The Hartford Courant*). Many articles regarding the Virginia Tech University shooter discussed the decision NBC made to broadcast the videos and publish the pictures sent to them by the shooter. The media is charged with the difficult task of deciding what is okay to be published and what is not. Many people in the public disagreed with the publishing of this material, which is an excellent example of gate keeping. The producers at NBC used their power as gatekeepers to release the package’s contents to the public. An impact this has on the audience is quoted in “What Drives Suicidal Mass Killers”: “rampage shooters have often been captivated by the idea that they will become posthumously famous. ‘Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?’ the Columbine shooter, Eric Harris remarked” [30]. The media gives the shooters of school massacres what they want by plastering their name, picture, and facts about their life all over newspapers and televisions. Research for this paper demonstrated that conflict theory and gatekeeper theory overlap. The researchers speculate that the contradictory and wrong information from the public displays that media outlets, especially newspapers, have not always printed accurate, truthful information. For example, with the Sandy Hook shooting, *The New York Times* printed information that later proved to be inaccurate, such as the name of the shooter being Ryan Lanza, the real shooter’s brother, the fact that Nancy Lanza, the shooter’s mother, worked at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the shooter had Asperger’s syndrome, the principal of the school buzzed the shooter in because she recognized him, and lastly, that the shooter had an altercation with staff members at the school the day before the shooting. Miscommunication facts can and may lead to the public looking at the crime differently and understanding the facts incorrectly due to the print media’s presentation. Further, as stated above, after the shooting, there is an immense amount of debate on gun laws and regulations. However, one article points out, “the term ‘assault weapon’ as used by the media, is a media invention” [30]. The media’s representation of the weapon being used is inaccurate, but people will continue to call the weapons ‘assault weapons’ due to the media’s pervasive use of the term; consequently, those people will be incorrect when involved in a gun debate.

Discussion

A consistent finding throughout the national newspaper coverage of all three school shootings was a spurred debate over gun control in the United States. Within a few days of the shooting, newspaper media took a shift from a focus on the shooter(s) and victims to focusing largely on a national debate over gun control, public policy, etc. Pro-gun control advocates cite the shootings as evidence that guns should not be so easy to obtain, and that guns lead to horrific violence such as school shootings. Anti-gun control advocates cite the Second Amendment as guaranteeing the people the right to own guns for protection. The debate bled into the policymakers’ agendas, evidenced by several articles surrounding the school shootings that discuss how senators, U.S. Presidents, and other state representatives plan to go forward with the gun control debate. It is the researchers’ opinions based on the evolution of news coverage of school shootings that society tended to ruminate less on the shooter(s) and victims after a few days, and instead became deeply involved with and interested in gun control debates. This appeared to be a common trend with national crises surrounding gun violence, as shown through three different school shootings spanning a 13-year time period. The disparity between victim and shooter coverage was seen at both the national and local level. In the cases of Columbine High School and Virginia Tech University, the victims became a number while the shooters were made infamous. The coverage of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was unique, in that it did not follow the pattern of giving celebrity status to the shooter(s) and forgetting the victims. Coverage of this shooting focused much more on the victims than the shooter, both at the national and local level. Labeling and anomie theory closely related to the findings within the research. The labels both created and perpetuated by the media bled into the prejudices and perceptions of the public. Oftentimes, such labels were harmful to other members in the similarly labeled groups (i.e. Korean-Americans, mentally ill, and Trench Coat Mafia). The anomic effect of newspaper articles is equally present, given the shift that occurs in attitudes and beliefs regarding safety, gun control laws, fear, and mental health.

Future Research

Among the victims’ families, there has been a movement called “No Notoriety.” The main goal of the movement is for the media to give less attention to the perpetrators of mass shootings. The members of this

movement challenge the media to limit the use of the shooters' name(s) after the initial identification, to recognize when infamy is the goal, refuse to broadcast/publish self-serving statements such as the manifesto in the Virginia Tech shooting, and instead elevate the names and likenesses of the victims, and lastly, promote mental health, public safety, and other relevant items for research (notoriety.com). The goal of this paper is to show the effects of the media's abundant coverage of the shooter on society and, hopefully, this research and the "No Notoriety" movement can change the way mass shootings are covered, and thus curb the allure among would-be shooters in the future.

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