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Columbine and the Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator

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ABSTRACT

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Mass media has great influence over its audience. When a sensational story hits the news waves, the general public's attention is instantly riveted to the television screen. News stories that involve the deaths of innocent people often create a culture of fear, fuel false narratives, and scatter misinformation. In fact, this culture of fear, coupled with misleading information, created the myth of the juvenile superpredator, a phrase coined by DiIulio in the early 1990s. The stereotyped superpredator was a homicidal, uncontrollable youth hiding within areas where crime and violence are rare. In particular, this myth was propagated following the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. Across time, misinformation and false narratives served to spotlight the perpetrators' notoriety—their ultimate motivation for perpetrating this heinous attack.

News media, law enforcement, and school administrators are in the unique position to stop the spread of misinformation and prevent school shooters from gaining the fame they desperately seek, a common motivation among school shooters and copycat perpetrators. This study seeks to explore how the media portrayed the Columbine High School shooters and how it fed into the myth of the juvenile superpredator. This study analyzed youth violence risk factors in the wake of the Columbine High School Shooting to determine if news media was accurate in their reporting. We wanted to determine if news coverage was a major influence on the public's perception of youth violence. These risk factors were scrutinized from television news coverage from national news organizations. Results indicate that in the wake of school shootings, strong considerations regarding ethical news reporting and clearer lines of communication between school administrators and law enforcement officials may prevent misinformation from spreading in the first place and may prevent school shooters from gaining notoriety in such aftermaths. Additionally, curtailing the spread of misinformation may help communities prevent reactionary policies that ultimately harm school students through overly punitive measures.

Keywords: school shootings, media coverage, Columbine school shooting, juvenile superpredator, notoriety

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CHAPTER 1

Background and Introduction

"Virtually all the early news stories were infested with erroneous assumptions and comically wrong conclusions. But the data is there." —Dave Cullen (Cullen, 2010, p. 159)

On April 20th, 1999, two students from Columbine High School entered the building and began shooting. It came on without warning and it would end just as horrific. The attack would last less than an hour before the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, took their own lives. The media frenzy which followed was like none other up to that point. They tried to make sense of what happened. They interviewed students as they ran out of the school. Crying and terrified, these students were just as confused, trying to piece together their own shock and dismay.

However, a story started to develop from numerous unverified sources. No one knew what was true, but it was reported and latched onto by the public instantaneously. *How many were killed? Who were the shooters? How did this happen? Could it have been stopped?* These were the questions that everyone across the nation was asking.

Rumors and false attributes were applied to the shooters. According to the media they were victims getting revenge on those bullies who made their lives miserable. They were outcasts who snapped suddenly. They were martyrs for their own cause. Unfortunately, only these pieces were remembered and would be remembered by futures shooters.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold planned their attack years in advance. These perpetrators were not outcasts. Everyone was their target that day, not jocks or bullies, as popularly claimed. They wanted everyone to know who they were. Their motivations were to become infamous. They wanted to be remembered and the media gave that to them by building false pedestals of

mythological status (Cullen, 2010). The public is also to blame by taking in news at face value. We now know better.

Mass media has great influence over its audience. When a sensational story hits the news waves, the general public's attention is instantly riveted to the television screen (Cramer, 1994). News stories that involve the deaths of innocent people often create a culture of fear, fuel false narratives, and scatter misinformation (Burns & Crawford, 1999). In fact, this culture of fear, coupled with misleading information, created the myth of the juvenile superpredator. The superpredator, a phrase coined by DiIulio in the early 1990s, was —a homicidal, uncontrollable youth hiding within areas where crime and violence are rare (DiIulio, 1995b). In particular, this myth was propagated following the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. Across time, misinformation and false narratives served to spotlight the perpetrators' notoriety—their ultimate motivation for perpetrating this heinous attack.

Identifying risk factors of youth violence in news media, following the Columbine High School Massacre may help law enforcement, schools, and mass media in denying perpetrators the notoriety they seek and help quell copycat shooters (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Verlinden et al., 2000). News media, law enforcement, and school administrators are in the unique position to stop the spread of misinformation and prevent school shooters from gaining the fame they desperately seek, a common motivation among school shooters and copycat perpetrators (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Young et al., 2019). This study seeks to explore how the media portrayed the Columbine High School shooters and how it fed into the myth of the juvenile superpredator.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Entertainment in the United States is big business. Simply put, the more viewers a news station attracts, the more money they bring in as the audience responds to network advertising. As Cramer (1994) succinctly stated, “The real reason is profit” (p. 38). These profits soar when audiences become glued to their television screens, especially when crimes do not fit neatly into patterns most commonly seen within inner-cities and densely populated urban areas such as “rival gangs, narcotics…or other previously recognized risk factors found in high-density urban settings” (Verlinden et al., 2000, p. 3). Mass shootings are one such example of a crime that does not fit neatly into these patterns. Making up less than 1% of all violent crimes in the US, mass murders, including school shootings, are incredibly rare (Hurst, 2005). However, when they do occur, they are highly publicized, focusing society’s attention to such events, and feeding the perception that such acts commonly occur (Verlinden et al., 2000).

Another reason that such events are broadcast is because lesser crimes are not always “newsworthy” (Cramer, 1994, p. 35). The media focuses less on events that do not capture the public’s attention and where police have little evidence to go on in their investigations. These smaller stories are often pushed to the side when larger stories catch the public’s attention. Even though pure public interest warrants the covering of mass shootings, sensational stories and profit drive media’s focus (Cramer, 1994). This is especially troublesome, as incidents involving mass shootings have steadily become deadlier in recent years (Duwe, 2017).

For example, Americans were glued to their television screens in the immediate aftermath of the Columbine High School massacre. It would be nearly two weeks for other national news stories to push their way to the top of the news hour after Columbine (Cullen,

2010). In the week following the incident, CNN had their "highest [television] ratings in their history," with the four major broadcast networks (CNN, NBC, ABC, and CBS) dedicating over forty televised news stories about the massacre (Cullen, 2010). On April 20, 1999 (the day of the shooting) ABC's evening news program, *Nightly News*, dedicated "40% of its time with Columbine, and the next night CBS's *Evening News* devoted…70% of its available time" to the massacre in Littleton, Colorado (Consalvo, 2003, p. 32).

The Media's Portrayal of Youth Violence

The media drives how youth violence is portrayed to the masses through the "disproportionate influence in the creation of plausible organizational narrative after crisis" (Mills & O'Connell, 2003, p. 323). Thus, it is important to comprehend how the media covers school violence and how the media influences the nation's conscience (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009).

Though not intentionally, during the 1990's, the media created a distorted representation of how we view youth violence in America. This distorted view led to stricter juvenile crime laws and resulted in a school-to-prison paradigm of juvenile justice (Heitzeg, 2009). However, measures to increase the punishment for youth, such as increasing school expulsion rates, actually decrease school achievement and increase dropout rates for those who are over-disciplined for minor offenses (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). It is especially important for school administrators to understand the ultimate consequences when shifting from rehabilitative justice to punitive and exclusionary punishment (Mallett, 2016). Over-reactive policies tend to emerge from the myth of unsafe schools, even though public schools are safer today than they have been in the past decade (Mallett, 2016).

In fact, schools become safer as they provide positive supports for their students and consider offenses within the proper context (Robers et al., 2012). Mallett (2016) further

explained that the myth of violent youth in the 1990's led to the overreaction in public policy, such as zero tolerance policies which reinforced the school-to-prison model. In particular, the school-to-prison pipeline continues to plague urban schools and targets minorities, as well as those in lower socioeconomic classes (Kang-Brown et al., 2013).

Throughout the late 1980's and early 1990's, the media helped create the caricature that any adolescent from any background can "become a victimizer" instead of a victim (Glassner, 1999, p. 68). This was accomplished through carefully crafted news segments of sparse and localized incidents of youth violence. By reporting these incidents time and again, the media offered these stories of youth violence as evidence of juvenile crime waves over a period of weeks and months following such events (Glassner, 1999). The constant reminder of these incidents makes it difficult for the audience to forget, as these stories are repeated at the top of every news hour. Furthermore, the media reminds the public of juveniles and their crimes when they report on the anniversaries of violent incidents (Glassner, 1999).

News stories regarding youth violence "customarily contain two elements that together guarantee the audience will sit up and shudder: vivid depictions of the young criminals and their crimes, and numbers showing dramatic increases on some dimension or another" (Glassner, 1999, p. 70). Many adults have very little contact with youth violence or youth crime and must rely on the experiences and words of experts in the field (Krisberg et al., 2009). Audiences are put into a never-ending cycle of fear, anticipating their own children as future victims. The media actively constructs meaning in their stories by integrating fragmented pieces of information with detached events. Upon hearing these stories, the audience relies on the assumed experts who make claims regarding youth violence and school shootings—often disregarding the story's accuracy (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009).

Inaccurate information evolves into false narratives or myths. Narratives serve the distinct purpose of explaining and providing solutions to challenges that society has difficulty facing, in which "myths about crime and justice are no different" (Muschert, 2007, p. 352). In the case of the Columbine High School massacre, for example, the common explanation of being bullied as the perpetrators' primary motivation is unfounded. There is no evidence that bullying or any form of persecution were in fact the cause of the perpetrators' rampage (Cullen, 2010).

Additionally, in aftermath of the Columbine Massacre, the perpetrators — Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold — were "identified as a new brand of perpetrator: the suburban rampage school shooter" (Muschert, 2007, p. 363). This falls into the pattern of mass media's fascination with the rise of a violent youth crime wave (Miller et al., 2006). The juvenile crime wave became the new frame, or perspective, of focus for the media. The media often reports stories through a frame of problems that society faces and must ultimately fix (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). This problem frame promotes a culture of anxiety and fear. The tragedy at Columbine High School brought a growing problem of perceived youth violence into the national consciousness and became the defining moment for the media and how they would contribute to the national conversation about it.

Public's Response to Violent News Media

Such problem events promote a culture of fear when experts falsely describe them as epidemics (Verlinden et al., 2000). The promotion of the media solidifies this false narrative when it reports such tragedies for the sake of salience. The constant fear of school shootings "has extended beyond the poor, inner-city neighborhoods, reaching affluent suburbs, towns, and rural areas" and induced moral panic into middle and upper-class neighborhoods (Burns & Crawford, 1999, p. 147). Moral panic is a term used to describe a "widespread public fear that evildoers

[are] trying to harm…society" and occurs when there is a perceived threat to the order of society by those seeking to commit evil acts (Burns & Crawford, 1999, p. 148). When television audiences view a violent event in schools on their television screens, they fall into the false belief that violence is on the rise in their own neighborhoods and schools (Hurst, 2005). Additionally, Gerbner (2010) described this phenomenon of fear and anxiety induced by violent media exposure as *mean world syndrome,* and he further postulated that those exposed to violent media had this bias to believe that the world was more treacherous than it actually was.

Additionally, the masses' opinions are often shaped by what they see in national news programs, regardless of political affiliations, and are often "misinformed, but in many cases exponentially misinformed, by the hyperbole that too often follows school shootings" (Brooks et al., 2000, p. 30). For example, a day after the shooting at Columbine High School, on April 21st, ABC broadcast a news segment entitled "*Phenomenon of the Goth Movement*." This segment falsely attributed the Goth movement and the influences of Goth culture (such as the music of Marilyn Manson) to be one of the major driving forces corrupting youth, and, by extension, the Columbine shooters.

Social media has similar effects on how people respond to violent news media. Regardless of accuracy, social media has enabled news media to spread rapidly over a wide net, making it difficult to track which news is fake and which news is real (Al-Rawi, 2019).

Additionally, social media magnifies the problem of fake news and fast-moving misinformation. In fact, *Fake News*, defined as news that is reported as inaccurate, unreliable, or ripe with misinformation, or all of the above, often caused consumers to feel fear and disgust when presented with a story on a single event (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Vosoughi et al. (2018) also reported that when presented with the same story on the event, factual and accurate

reporting induced audiences with feelings of "joy and trust" (p. 1146). Social media is not held to the same ethical standards of traditional news reporting, where anyone can be contributor and consumer, which makes is even more difficult to track the spread of misinformation (DeVos et al., 2018). DeVos et al. (2018) further explained that it is increasingly difficult to balance accurate information with ongoing events, where parents are seeking information about their children, and the "real danger [of] saturated coverage of mass killings may instigate future violence" (p. 59).

The Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator

This epidemic of fear drew attention to the rise of the juvenile *superpredator*: a "radically impulsive, brutally remorseless individual driven to commit acts of ruthless violence with full awareness of and indifference to the wrongfulness and consequences of such behavior" (Bazelon, 2000, p. 165). The threat of the superpredator was promoted by news media in 1990's with experts commenting on the above-mentioned growth of a juvenile crime wave (DiIulio, 1995a, 1995b; Miller et al., 2006). Scarce and localized incidents of youth violence were "used to craft the plotlines of popular talk shows, prime-time news programs, and television dramas" (Bazelon, 2000, p. 166). These images seep back into the national consciousness to "influence public opinion in 'a feedback loop of reciprocal mythmaking,' which continued to enhance the perceived threat of youth violence" (Bazelon, 2000, p. 165–166).

The media's constant reporting on youth crime without proper context of accurate data solidified the public's growing perceptions of the frequency of youth violence and came to understand that the youth were at risk (Krisberg et al., 2009). Statistics outside of context help the public to reach conclusions not based in fact. Fragmented pieces of information with out-of-context events created a false narrative of superpredators on the rise (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009).

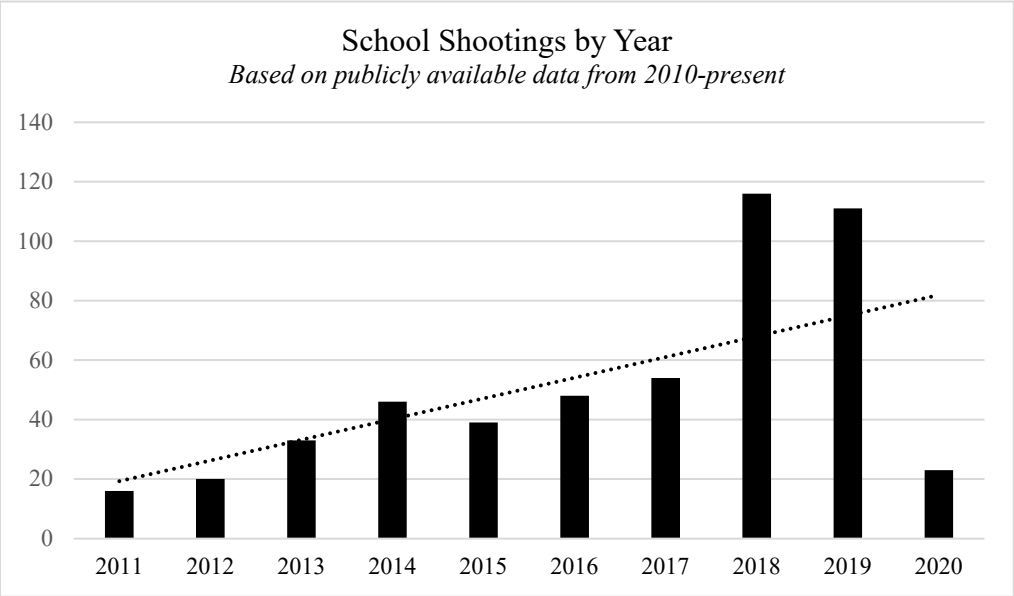
When the news is selective about what to include in their reporting, it creates many false pictures that can be interpreted in countless ways, which convinces the public of a "higher frequency and severity of crime than is actually the case" (Krisberg et al., 2009, p. 27).

In reality, the impending doom of a youth crime wave was nothing but fiction, as several academics assumed that the short and steady rise of youth violence in the early 1990's would continue to grow by linking crime rates and demographics haphazardly (Krisberg et al., 2009; Snyder & Sickmund, 2000). The media grabbed onto their conclusions and focused on how small upticks in youth crime statistics constituted "crime emergencies" that had to be dealt with, and they were in the habit of highlighting "the more sensationalist aspects of stories rather than context" (Krisberg et al., 2009, p. 7).

Even though youth violence (in and out of schools) is on the decline, parents' fears continued to grow, and parents are especially worried for the safety of their children in their schools (Brooks et al., 2000). Violence in schools diminished by half from 1992 to 2002, a downward trend that continued over the next decade (Fox & Fridel, 2018; Hurst, 2005). However, one study indicated that even though violence occurring in schools has been declining since 1992, there has been a rise in mass school shootings in the United States that are becoming deadlier than previous decades (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). It should be noted however, students are more likely to experience theft while at school than they are to experience violent crimes (Hurst, 2005). However, since 2010, there has been an increase in school shootings in the United States (see Figure 1), with especially high numbers of victims during 2018 and 2019.

Figure 1

Incidents by Year, Based on Publicly Available Data From 2010–Present



Note. This figure is based on information provided by Riedman & O'Neill (2020), posted on the following Internet site: [https://www.chds.us/ssdb/charts-graphs/].

Nevertheless, violent crimes are not often reported to local police, and most data regarding school violence is several years old, thus making it difficult to make conclusions on current trends (Hurst, 2005). Any discussion must then be approached with great caution. In the years following the tragedy at Columbine High School, 86% of school resource officers reported that crimes go underreported, often because of the influence of local politics trying to create a positive image of their schools (Hurst, 2005). Hurst (2005) reported that three out of four resource officers said they have confiscated a weapon from a student within the past year. Generally, school violence is declining, but school administrators must recognize that serious problems may be hiding in plain sight.

Shooter Motivation

The media's reporting on mass shooters, particularly school shooters, has the unfortunate side effect of rewarding the perpetrator's offenses by giving them the fame and attention they seek, which further incentivizes future school shooters looking for notoriety (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Lankford and Madfis (2018) also reported and confirmed that a majority of these individuals come to the realization that the more people they murder the more attention and fame they will receive from the media. Additionally, Lankford and Madfis name three consequences when the media reports on school shootings: it gives the shooters the attention they want, it increases competition between other mass shooters to maximize victims, and it leads to copycat effects. This was partially seen when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold daydreamed that their actions would draw the attention of Hollywood's top directors and "believed that movies would be made about their lives, which turned out to be true" (Lankford & Madfis, 2018, p. 262).

Risk Factors of Youth Violence

It is equally important to understand the underlying risk factors of youth violence in order to prevent the spread of fear and misinformation that paints alternative pictures of youth criminals, which, when coupled with media induced fear, gave rise to the superpredator myth (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Verlinden et al., 2000). In fact, numerous studies have indicated that youth violence is a product of several factors, including "bad parenting, violent popular culture, mental illness, unhealthy school climates, and availability of firearms have all been targets of blame" (National Consortium on Violence Research, 1998). Verlinden et al. (2000) considered these risk factors first identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; Band & Harpold, 1999); the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; Dwyer et al., 1998); the National School Safety Center (NSSC; Stephens, 1998); and APA (1999).

These risk factors are listed in Table 1 (adapted from Verlinden et al., 2000). It should be noted that these risk factors have remained stable over time, especially in the past three decades, as more research has studied youth violence trends (Bushman et al., 2018). One assessment, the *Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth* (SAVRY), is one such popular tool that assesses these youth violence risk factors (listed in Table 1) in adolescents between the ages of 12–18. The SAVRY exhibited strong predictive validity (ranging from .74 to .89) for violence recidivism in a sample of 121 youth in a one-year follow-up (Meyers & Schmidt, 2008).

Purpose of Study

The relationship with violent criminals and the media is not new. This relationship has been recorded in popular culture and has been studied by countless scientists seeking to understand these criminals' motivations. The 19th century saw Jack the Ripper communicate with law enforcement as he taunted them during his short crime spree. Other serial killers, such as the Zodiac Killer and the BTK (*bind, torture, kill*) Strangler, communicated with police and boasted of their accomplishments while detailing their crimes (Morford & Ferguson, 2018; Wenzl et al., 2009). Law enforcement have relied on these killers' communiqués to build psychological profiles on these perpetrators and to understand their motivations. It is equally important to understand how the media reports on youth offenders for similar reasons (Cramer, 1994). Doing so may help the media recognize ways that they can change their reporting to prevent this notoriety from being gained in the first place, and to prevent the spread of fear. It may also help school administrators determine the best way to get information to law enforcement officials and the public without the unfortunate side effect of misinformation in the aftermath of a school schooling, which feeds into the mythmaking of perpetrators as superpredators.

Table 1

Risk Factors of Youth Violence in Schools

Individual	Family	School/Peers	Societal/Environmental
Brought a Weapon to School	Poor Monitoring	Antisocial or Violent Peer Group	Poverty or Low Socioeconomic Status
Has Made a Detailed Plan to Attack or Hurt Others	Exposure to Family Violence	Low School Commitment or Achievement	Exposure to Violent Media
Suicidal Ideation/Attempts or Completions	Antisocial or Violent Parents	Academic Failure	Exposure to Violent Cultural Norms
Animal Cruelty	Child Neglect and/or Abuse	Gang Involvement	Easy Access to Weapons
Violent Drawings or Writings	Parental Substance Abuse	Social Isolation	
Impulsivity and/or Hyperactivity	Marital Conflict	Peer Rejection	
Psychiatric/Medical Conditions	Divorce	Feels Bullied or Persecuted	
History of Aggression	Family Conflict		
Substance Abuse			
Attitudes/Beliefs			
Narcissism			
Criminal Record			
Motive to Hurt Others			

Note. The information in Table 1 is adapted from NASP, Dwyer et al. (1998); NSSC, Stephens (1998); FBI, Band & Harpold (1999), Verlinden et al. (2000), and Meyers & Schmidt (2008).

Reactionary policies in response to media induced hysteria (following school shootings and youth crime) gave rise to the school-to-prison paradigm (Heitzeg, 2009; Rocque & Snelling, 2018). This paradigm does more harm than good to the school environment and understanding how to prevent this spread of fear through media misinformation may actually make schools

safer as these institutions move towards rehabilitative care as opposed to punitive policies (Mallett, 2016).

Research Questions

This case study explores how the media reported the Columbine High School shooting and how it built upon the myth of the juvenile superpredator. In this study, we investigated the major news outlets' portrayal of the Columbine School Shooting, particularly the news portrayal of the perpetrators and the information offered about the specific youth risk factors associated with violence. Our purpose was to gather information that would assist us in answering the following research questions:

1. How did the major media outlets portray the Columbine High School shooters?
    a. Specifically, in regard to the Columbine High School massacre, what type of youth risk factors were or were not reported by the media?
    b. When portraying the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre, which major risk factors received the majority of media focus?

CHAPTER 3

Method

Media frame analysis (MFA) is the primary method of research in this study and will be supported by other methods of content analysis which we combined and have called Media Content-Frame Analysis (MCFA; Giles & Shaw, 2009). A media frame is the perspective in which a story is told or how the media makes sense of a certain event (Giles & Shaw, 2009). MFA is "a formal procedure for conducting analyses of (primarily news) media texts" and is further defined through its reliance on incorporating scientific methods from the social sciences (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 375). Specifically, we adopted and adapted other methods primarily put forth by Macnamara (2005) and Neuendorf (2016), with additional methods described by Riffe et al. (2019).

MFA adopts features that are relevant to psychology, such as "narrative and characterization," along with the story itself (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 375; Pavelka, 2014). While there is no standard in media frame analysis, Giles and Shaw (2009) provided a model of framing that adopts "techniques from other fields…using qualitative [and quantitative] methods" (p. 383). They also argue that media has a psychological impact on human behavior, and there is a great need to adopt a more systematic approach to MFA, due to the lack of research specific to news media (Giles & Shaw, 2009). Furthermore, Giles and Shaw (2009) argue that:

> [It is] essential to incorporate a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods in a framing analysis. We conceive MFA as comprising two broad analyses: a (largely quantitative) macroanalysis of a broad data set, sampled carefully and purposefully from a specified range of media sources; and a qualitative microanalysis of selected materials,

perhaps to illustrate one of the broader framing processes identified in the macroanalysis. (p. 383)

Data Collection and Analysis

The key, and beginning, step of analyzing news media is the construction of a Code Book or Coding Form, which contains the variables under study and provides the primary framework for the coding of transcripts, as well as supporting data analysis (Macnamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2016). In short, a Code Book is the instrument that allows researchers to code and analyze data. Coding is the process of "transcribing, recording, categorizing, or interpreting of…data…so that they can be compared and analyzed (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 220).

In building this Code Book, we began by searching for "media coverage [of the Columbine School Shooting]... guided by code words" through a database that compiles news coverage (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 383). In this case, news media coverage was guided by "Columbine" as the code word through the database *LexisNexis*, which compiles business, legal, and news media transcripts.

The next step in organizing the Code Book and the data for MFA is relating each transcript within our analysis "to a specific event that can be regarded as the source or origin of the story...[which] may be a specific incident, like a murder....[or] a statement by a senior figure" (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 384). The end point was identified as 48 hours after the school shooting occurred: April 22, 1999.

Furthermore, Giles and Shaw (2009) put forth that the macroanalysis process requires the selection of relevant material, like that of a literature review. It is not necessary, nor recommended, to "incorporate all material extracted through the search into a meaningful analysis" (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 384). Using "Columbine" as the code word resulted in well

over 10,000 news media transcripts. We decided to narrow down search results along a timeframe. Specially, we looked at the first 48 hours following the massacre at Columbine High School. This timeframe was chosen as television news coverage of the tragedy peaked on April 22, 1999 (Muschert, 2007). It also coincides with our origin point. MFA then calls for the identification of the audience (the reader or viewer).

Subsequent screening of media transcripts was accomplished by narrowing down search results by the major television networks at the time of the event (ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC). We wanted to look at national news sources due to salience of coverage and the wide net it casts over large populations. Thus, our audience is the US nation, and, by extension, those individuals who, in the future, will be influenced to commit their own acts of school violence, specifically school shootings.

Breaking down the data into categories is a *key step* in the analytical procedure, often seen in MFA (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 385). Identifying categories from our results tied directly to the next step postulated by Giles and Shaw (2009) for media frame analysis: identifying character(s).

Character analysis in news media is “an important feature of MFA” because of the interest that researchers often have in psychological studies (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 385). As part of the macroanalytic process, the choosing of characters is done so by “identifying key individuals who recur frequently in the articles” (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 385). In our study, we identified Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as our main characters because they were the perpetrators of the shooting. In order to define their characteristics, we categorized and organized by thematic risk factors of youth offenders, originally compiled by Verlinden et al. (2000).

In this study, we categorized media transcripts based on the identified youth violence risk factors. We searched for the risk factors within news transcripts and considered the media's portrayal of the two Columbine perpetrators. By investigating the categorized risk factors, we are able to address our research questions. Categories were independently analyzed by four individuals trained in coding techniques and then finalized as the group discussed common themes that were portrayed within the categories. Additionally, secondary characters were also identified, namely the victims of the massacre, along with the community and nation as a whole.

The finished Code Book was created in an Excel spreadsheet and it coded whether or not the transcribed news article mentions a certain youth violence risk factor, along with the other categories we decided to include, which was based on our discussion on common themes (e.g., reactions from the community, whether or not the article talks about the victims). An analogue version of this Code Book is included in Appendix A.

We chose to code data without the use of computer software designed specifically for coding textual data because "computers cannot consider the *context* of content, they only view the text which can result in narrow incomplete interpretations" (Macnamara, 2005, p. 8). Macnamara (2005) argues that the actual methodology is more important (e.g., training coders to analyze data according to pre-established criteria). Excel allowed us to capitalize on the ease-of-use interface of the program itself and allows us to "leave [our] files open on a screen beside the medium displaying [our] content…and code more quickly" (Neuendorf, 2016, p. 227). The Excel program also allowed us to make "intercoder reliability checks and subsequent data analysis easier since the data are already in the appropriate format" (Neuendorf, 2016, p. 227).

Coding Reliability

Reliability within media frame and content analysis relies on the "function of coders' skill, insight, and experience, [as well as the] clarity of the categories…[and] limited to improving coders, categories, or both" (Holsti, 1969, p. 135). In effort to increase reliability we recruited more than two coders and coded independently of one another as suggested by Macnamara (2005). As stated above, the team of coders consisted of four individuals: one university professor and three school psychology graduate students, who were all trained in coding methodologies. Macnamara (2005) lays out strategies to boost agreement and co-variation to establish intercoder reliability:

1. Pre-Coding Training to help coders become familiar with the variables/categories, and to clarify/operationally define variables (e.g., youth violence risk factors)
2. Pilot Coding with Overlapping Articles (test coding at least 10% of identical articles independently)
3. Revision of Code Book to ensure coding categories are clear and operationally defined
4. Retrain coders if required

Before training began, all 265 transcribed news articles were randomly assigned to each team member. Training consisted of one-hour sessions held weekly over the course of three months as we "work[ed] together, find[ing] out whether [we] can agree on coding variables…and revis[ing] the codebook/coding form as needed" (Macnamara, 2005, p. 20). To establish intercoder reliability we randomly selected 33 identical articles (12.5% of total articles) to code independently of one another and met back together for reliability checks.

One of the main issues of content analysis is the difficulty in defining an "acceptable level of reliability…for which there is no single solution (Holsti, 1969, p. 142). However, Both Krippendorff (2004) and Macnamara (2005) report that there are a few measures of reliability that researchers can utilize and rely on when calculating reliability figures. Macnamara (2005) states that there are several "statistical formulae [that] have been developed for measuring intercoder reliability," including a basic percent agreement (p. 10).

In our case, we chose this basic assessment, as it was the easiest to compute within the Excel spreadsheet in the absence of available specialized statistical software. Our intercoder reliability for the pilot coding phase of our sample articles resulted in 98.1% (0.98) agreement among the 33 identical articles. Macnamara (2005) notes that "reliability coefficients of 0.80 or greater are acceptable to all and 0.75 is acceptable in most situations" (p. 12).

Validity of Data

Validity within content analysis "is usually established through the informal judgement of the investigator" as they decide whether or not their methodological process (Appendix B) is comprehensive enough to form generalizations, which are more subjective within media content analysis than other social sciences (Holsti, 1969, p. 143; Macnamara, 2005). In other words, content analysis relies on face validity, or the "common truth" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 313). In fact, content analysis is rooted in face validity because it is "concerned with [the] reading of texts, with what symbols mean, and with how images are seen…in the shared culture in which interpretations are made, which is difficult to measure but often highly reliable at a particular time" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 314). Face validity is also important within the realm of content analysis because it is the "gatekeeper of all other kinds of validity…[though] it is difficult to explain how [it] works…it is [still] omnipresent" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 314).

The stability of identified youth violence risk factors over several decades is also well established (Armstead et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 1998; Meyers & Schmidt, 2008). For our research, this consistency helps establish the face validity of these youth violence risk factors (Bushman et al., 2018).

MFA also demands the linking of media transcript together to form generalizations, both explicit and implicit, that may be related to ongoing phenomena, such as school shootings (Giles & Shaw, 2000). Validity in content analysis is subsequently accomplished through an understanding of our research objectives (or research questions) and a prior knowledge of the content under study (Macnamara, 2005). Generalizations within media content analysis and MFA become "media templates," which are "long-running stories that have been given an almost mythical status by both media sources and their audiences" (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 389). This analysis of MFA and media templates allowed researchers to describe how the media portrays a traumatic and highly publicized incident, in this case the Columbine High School shooting.

CHAPTER 4

Results

In total, 265 transcribed news articles were reviewed. Each of the percentages in the specific subcategories of coding are based on the 265 articles that were reviewed. Table 2 shows the percentage and number of articles that mentioned a specific subcategory. In regard to youth violence risk factors, most of the media attention was focused on individual risk factors. The majority of articles (81.1%; *n*=215) explicitly mentioned the perpetrators had *Brought a Weapon to School*. This subcategory dominated the largest portion of articles (*n*=215) that made mention of youth violence risk factors. This was followed by *Made a Detailed Plan to Attack* (42.3%, *n*=112) and *Gang Involvement* (37.4%, *n*=99).

Besides the above mention subcategories, the other risk factors of youth violence that were mentioned most by news media within the Individual Risk category was perpetrator *Attitudes/Beliefs* and *Motive for Attack* with 26.4% (*n* =70) and 28.7% (*n* =76), respectively. *Suicidal Ideation* and *Violent Drawings* were also mentioned at an increased rate at 30.2% (*n* =80) and 15.8% (*n* =42) respectively. *Motive for Attack* was mentioned 28.7% (*n* =76) by the various media outlets in this study.

There was very little mentioned in regard to the Family Risk category, with the subcategory *Insufficient Monitoring/Supervision* dominating that category overall at 4.2% (*N*=11). *Family Conflict and Child Neglect/Abuse* were mentioned 1.1% (*n* =3) each. The remaining subcategories were not mentioned in any article. *Gang Involvement* was followed by *Social Isolation/Peer Rejection* at (24.9%; *n*=66) and *Feels Persecuted or Bullied* (14.7%; *n* =39) within the School/Peer Category. About a fifth of total articles within this study made mention of the perpetrators *Easy Access to Weapons* within 24.9% (*n* =66). Twenty-one-point five percent

(*n* =57) of total articles mentioned that perpetrators had been *Exposed to Violent Media.* Only 6.4% (*n* =17) of articles mentioned the perpetrators' *Low Socio-Economic Status*.

Table 2

Youth Violence Risk Factors[a] *Reported in Major Network Television News During the First 48 Hours Following the Columbine High School Shooting* (N =265)

	n	Percentage*
Individual Violence Risk Factors	231[b]	87.2
Brought a weapon to school	215	81.1
Made a detailed plan to attack/hurt others	112	42.3
Suicidal ideation/attempts/completion	80	30.2
Animal cruelty	1	.4
Violent drawings/writing (including online drawings/writings)	42	15.8
Medical or physical condition	1	.4
Impulsivity/hyperactivity	1	.4
Psychological/psychiatric conditions	7	2.6
History of aggression/difficult temperament/history of threatening others	29	10.9
Substance abuse	4	1.5
Attitudes/beliefs	70	26.4
Criminal record/discipline problems	24	9.1
Motive for attack	76	28.7
Gender	154	58.1
Age	39	14.7
Race	4	1.5
Family Risk Factors	15[b]	5.7
Insufficient monitoring/supervision	11	4.2
Exposure to family violence/antisocial or violent parents	1	.4
Child abuse/neglect	4	1.5
Parental substance abuse	0	0.0
Marital conflict and/or divorce	0	0.0
Family conflict	3	1.1
Peers/School Risk Factors	117[b]	44.2
Antisocial/violent peer group	10	3.8
Low school commitment or achievement/academic failure	4	1.5
Gang involvement	99	37.4
Social isolation/peer rejection	66	24.9
Feels bullied or persecuted	39	14.7
Socio Environmental Risk Factors	105[b]	39.6
Socioeconomic status	17	6.4
Exposure to violent media /violent culture	57	21.5
Easy access to weapons	66	24.9

Note. Percentages are based on 265 transcribed television news articles.

[a] Youth violence risk factors align with information provided by Band & Harpold (1999); Dwyer et al. (1998); Meyers & Schmidt (2008); Stephens (1998); and Verlinden et al. (2000).

[b] Because articles may have mentioned numerous subcategories, the sum of the numbers in the subcategories do not add up to the number in the major category.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The primary reason for choosing the Columbine High School massacre as the focus of this research, instead of choosing a more recent shooting like the Sandy Hook or Marjory Stoneman Douglas shootings, is because Columbine has become a cultural watershed as it was, at the time, the most viewed and most covered news coverage in the 1990's after the O. J. Simpson chase. The spotlight on and continuing interest regarding this particular school shooting is because, at the time, this was the deadliest school shooting (Larkin, 2009). Larkin (2009) also reports that the Columbine High School massacre took an important place in history because subsequent school shooters directly referred to Columbine and expressed the desire to *outshine* the Columbine shooting. Additionally, the Columbine perpetrators were "media-savvy," posting their darkest thoughts, expressing their motives, and even journaling the plan for their attack online (Larkin, 2009, p. 1311). Additionally, the Columbine High School massacre has a unique place in the national conscience because it forced the issue of school shootings to the top of every news hour and made headline news on the front page of every newspaper (DeFoster, 2010).

A false narrative soon developed in the immediate wake of the Columbine High School massacre, one that was promoted by the media. The results of this study's media frame content analysis clearly demonstrate the emerging narrative. The media's focus on the perpetrators' violent risks factors (*Brought a Weapon to School, Made a Detailed Plan to Attack, Motives, Social Isolation, Gang Involvement*) bolstered the mythmaking status of Columbine, as inaccurate information spread quickly by news organizations before the perpetrators' bodies were even found (Cullen, 2010). To the general public, the perpetrators were rampage killers

with a motive to kill, hiding in plain sight, carefully planning and preparing their attack (Cullen, 2010). In fact, many of the assumptions reported by the media about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (specifically their motives, gang affiliations, and social isolation) were wrong. In Cullen's (2010) *Columbine,* the most extensive history of the massacre, notes that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had no affiliation with the Trench Coat Mafia, which proved to be a non-violent school social group with no gang ties. Additionally, Cullen (2010), who was a journalist at the time of the massacre, reported that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were not socially isolated or bullied. They had many friends, worked together at the same job, and even had girlfriends whom they went to school dances (Cullen, 2010). The revenge motivation (aimed at bullies and jocks) promoted by the media fell flat. By most accounts, school teachers considered both perpetrators as good students who did well in school (Cullen, 2010). Besides a minor criminal offense a few years before the massacre, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were well-behaved according to Cullen (2010).

Regardless of motivations, the spread of misinformation by the media created fear in the general public and gave rise to myth that distorted the perpetrators in juvenile and violent superpredators (Krisberg et al., 2009). Public policy reacted to this unfounded fear through punitive measures in the form of school-to-prison pipelines, which unjustly treated students for minor offenses, which harms the school environment as school commitment decreases (Heitzeg, 2009).

Schools are in the unique position to stop the spread of misinformation by working closely with law enforcement in the immediate wake of tragedies (Young et al., 2019). Young et al. (2019) encouraged schools and law enforcement to work closely together in deciding what information should be shared and how it should be given to the general public and media outlets.

Properly sharing information should "ensure responsive engagement and effective online responses, in real time, and continually monitor, evaluate, and engage in ongoing listening to ensure appropriate and effective response" (Young et al., 2019, p. 39).

Schools are also in the position to support those students who may pose a safety risk to themselves and others. Although youth violence risk factors have remained stable across time, it should be further noted, that there is currently no "single instrument [that] has been validated for use in risk assessment for serious juvenile violence…[and] there is no single psychological profile or assessment method that has received wide support" (Bushman et al., 2018; Verlinden, et al., 2000, p. 47). However, a comprehensive approach that includes "a combination of clinical and empirical data…[as well as] interviews with parents, teachers, others acquainted with the child, and with the child is likely to provide the most complete information about pertinent risk factors" (Verlinden et al., 2000, p. 47). School psychologists are in the position to help schools assess these students and create proper supports for them (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

Media Responsibility

In 2016, an American Psychological Association's panel revealed "the prevalence of mass shootings has risen in relation to the mass media coverage of them and the proliferation of social media sites that tend to glorify the shooters and downplay the victims" (Johnston & Joy, 2016). One of the primary media guidelines set forth by DeVos et al. (2018) is for media's reporting to stop focusing on commentary surrounding an event because it is hard to verify accurate details and easy to misinterpret and misrepresent. Instead, media should report only on verifiable facts while reducing commentary on related events, such as "names, faces, and personal stories of those who perpetrated the acts of violence" (DeVos et al., 2018, p. 63). Our analysis showed that media focused on more sensational aspects of the perpetrators, such as gang

involvement and their access to weapons. Commenting on the perpetrator's involvement in gangs and other forms of violence only serves to raise the perpetrators' myth-making status.

In recent years, media has adopted the guidelines set forth by the "No Notoriety Campaign" which encourages news outlets from "not using shooters' names or photos, but instead focusing on facts and victims" (DeVos et al., 2018, p. 13). About a third (29.06%, *n*=77) of the transcripts in our analysis mentioned the perpetrators by name. Law enforcement should also consider adopting guidelines from the "No Notoriety Campaign" when reporting to the media on the facts from school shootings.

School Discipline

The coverage of the Columbine High School massacre brought school safety to the forefront of the public arena, where policies were influenced by mass media coverage of the horrific event, which would eventually lead to over-disciplinary policies to prevent school violence (Mayer & Jimerson, 2019). Mayer and Jimerson (2019) found that "the failure of schools to appropriately discipline disruptive students has consequences for overall student achievement" (p. 70). In fact, research has shown that "arresting a student leads [can lead] to lower standardized test scores, a higher probability that the student will not graduate from high school, and a higher likelihood of future involvement in the justice system" (Nance, 2016, p. 321).

The negative effects of incarcerating juveniles are well documented in the research (Nance, 2016). Furthermore, the school-to-prison pipeline often leads juveniles to face maladjustments in attitudes, behaviors, employment, housing opportunities, mental health concerns, low school engagement, and future involvement with the criminal justice system,

which has many overlaps with our current understanding of risk factors involving youth (Nance, 2016).

When students do not meet standards of school decorum they are over-disciplined "by suspending, expelling, or referring them to law enforcement for offenses that could be handled in alternative ways aimed at keeping them in school," which often increases their involvement with the school-to-prison pipeline. For this reason, it is important to implement changes to the school environment that promote student well-being, as positive school settings are "associated with reduced [involvement in] violence" (Lindstrom-Johnson et al., 2017, p. 180).

Spreading the Right Information

In 2018, The Federal Commission on School Safety outlined guidelines when sharing information in the wake of tragedies, which included information for schools and law enforcement agencies (DeVos et al., 2018):

a. Critical personnel (e.g., law enforcement, school administrators, and communities) who respond to school shootings must determine their response plan in the wake of crises. These guidelines may help these teams report information to the community:
    - Who will talk to the press,
    - What information will be shared, while taking regard for community safety,
    - How this information will be shared, and
    - When this information will be released (usually after families of the victims have been notified.
b. Schools should work closely with law enforcement and community leaders in developing their media response plans.

c. Additionally, schools should work closely with law enforcement and local government leaders in developing their media response plans, and vice versa.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this analysis was the extensive time required to code the transcripts from the media outlets in the immediate aftermath of the Columbine High School massacre. For this reason, we decided to focus on only the largest media outlets at the time and the first 48 hours following the event. Additionally, we had no comparison group for this study. In other words, the accuracy of the news reporting and the content of the news reporting may or may not be typical of the reporting that covers such events.

Another drawback is the nature of this retrospective study and the possibility of inherent bias when investigating past events. Likewise gathering past data about news following a school shooting is challenging, due to the uneven news coverage of school shootings (Schildkraut et al., 2018).

Conclusion

As far as we can discern, this is the first time that media-frame analysis and content analysis have been utilized to identify youth violence risk factors in media related to a school shooting. This new approach has yet to studied further in other news media contexts and with other topics related to school-based mental health issues. The manner in which media present school shootings and youth violence has yet to be thoroughly studied in its relationship to subsequent school safety measures, school discipline policies, and the long term negative repercussions of policies promulgated from school shootings (APA, 2008; DeVos et al., 2018; Heitzeg, 2009; Muschert, 2019; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013).

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APPENDIX A

Coding Book

Coder_____ Title_____ Initial or Recode? (circle one)

TV Station_____ Air Date_____ Word Count_____

Individual/Perpetrator	**Mentioned in Article?**	
1. Brought a Weapon to School	No	Yes
2. Has Made a Detailed Plan to Attack/Hurt Others	No	Yes
3. Suicidal Ideation/Attempts/Completion	No	Yes
4. Animal Cruelty	No	Yes
5. Violent Drawings/Writing – Including Online	No	Yes
6. Medical/Physical Condition	No	Yes
7. Impulsivity/Hyperactivity	No	Yes
8. Psychological/Psychiatric Conditions	No	Yes
9. History of Aggression/ Difficult Temperament/History of Threatening Others	No	Yes
10. Substance Abuse	No	Yes
11. Attitudes/Beliefs	No	Yes
12. Criminal Record/Discipline Problems	No	Yes
13. Motive for Attack	No	Yes
14. Gender	No	Yes
15. Age	No	Yes
16. Race	No	Yes
Additional Comments:		
Family	**Mentioned in Article?**	
17. Poor Supervision/Monitoring	No	Yes
18. Exposure to Family Violence/ Antisocial or Violent Parents	No	Yes
19. Child Abuse/Neglect	No	Yes
20. Parental Substance Abuse	No	Yes

21. Marital Conflict/Divorce	No	Yes
22. Family Conflict	No	Yes
Additional Comments:		

School/Peers	**Mentioned in Article?**	
23. Antisocial/Violent Peer Group	No	Yes
24. Low School Commitment or Achievement/Academic Failure	No	Yes
25. Gang Involvement	No	Yes
26. Social Isolation/Peer Rejection	No	Yes
27. Feels Bullied or Persecuted	No	Yes
Comments:		

Societal/Environmental	**Mentioned in Article?**	
28. Social-Economic Status	No	Yes
29. Exposure to Violent Media/Violent Culture	No	Yes
30. Easy Access to Weapons	No	Yes
Additional Comments:		

APPENDIX B

Media Content-Frame Analysis Flowchart

NOTE: This flowchart is adapted from Macnamara (2005), Giles and Shaw (2009), and Neuendorf (2016).