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Framing Race: An Analysis of Media Coverage of the Racially Motivated Murders of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin

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Framing Race: An Analysis of Media Coverage of the Racially Motivated Murders of
Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

In August 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black boy from Chicago, was brutally murdered by two white men for “wolf whistling” at a white woman. Fifty-seven years later, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a neighborhood watchman on February 26, 2012. The unwarranted killings of these two Black boys caused uproars across the entire country. This study examines how the media framed and represented Till and Martin in the cases of their racially motivated murders. Prior research shows that Black male youth are framed in the media as deviant and lawless, continuously being represented as criminals. However, there are a few studies that analyze how Black victims are represented in the news, specifically when their deaths are racially motivated. This research investigates the language used to describe Till and Martin in media accounts. A content analysis of media texts was conducted with media representation and racial framing serving as the theoretical frameworks. Articles from the *Clarion-Ledger*, *Orlando Sentinel*, and *New York Times* were analyzed for this study. The results were indicative of implicit bias against Till and Martin. They were represented as troublemakers and framed through the common stereotypes used to describe Black, male youth.

Keywords: race, racial framing, media representation, journalism, emmett till, trayvon martin

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Jeff and Linda, who have supported and encouraged me throughout this entire process.

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I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Cheryl Jenkins, for helping me complete this study.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MS	Mississippi
N/A	Not Applicable
US	United States

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Black people have been abused by a system that vindicates authority figures and everyday citizens who mistreat them based on their race. Although some progress has been made, the detrimental implications of institutional racism still exist today. According to Jones (1974), institutional racism “establishes and sanctions unequal treatment for a given race of people” (p. 221). Black people in America face discrimination through several social and political institutions. They live in an oppressive society where their lives are constantly at risk. As a result, their deaths, particularly those of young Black men at the hands of white supremacists, is a common tragedy within the community. Although these killings occur more than can be counted, only a select few receive national attention. Because of the media, viewers receive an explanation of the crimes that is often curated by a perspective that is not their own.

Every news outlet has its own audience and reporting style and frames its storytelling in particular ways. Framing, which is the practice of making certain elements of a story more salient than others, is commonly used in the news (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Research has indicated that many journalists use racial framing when they report on the race-related aspects of a story, making race one of the main issues to which the audience pays attention. Any implicit bias that journalists may have about different races can influence how they deliver controversial stories, more specifically stories about race or racial issues. According to Entman (1992), unfavorable representation of Black people in the news causes the audience to categorize them into negative stereotypes, and since negative representation is the viewers’ expectation when watching the news, the journalists will continue to deliver that (pp. 209-210). The salience of this issue has

historical implications in media representation and is the guiding theoretical framework of this research, which explores how mainstream news media report on racially motivated murders. This study will analyze news coverage of the murders of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin and observe the type of language used to describe these racially motivated murders. The coverage of these two murders was selected because they were high profile, well-covered cases of young, Black victims. The time frame between the murders is also significant as it helps to establish historical patterns of racial framing in mainstream media.

In August of 1955, Emmett Louis Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago, visited his relatives in Money, Mississippi (MS) for summer vacation. Eight days after his arrival, Till was brutally beaten, shot in the head, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River for allegedly wolf whistling at a white woman. His killers were two white men, Roy Bryant, the woman's husband, and his half-brother J.W. Milam. They were indicted for kidnapping and murdering but were later acquitted (Metress, 2002).

On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida by a neighborhood watchman. The killer, George Zimmerman, was a 28-year-old Hispanic man who thought Martin did not belong in the neighborhood and decided to confront him. The altercation between the two ended with Zimmerman killing Martin, who was only carrying a bag of Skittles and a can of Arizona tea that he had purchased just minutes before from a 7-Eleven in the neighborhood (Graeff et al., 2014).

The cases of Till and Martin were selected for study because of three similarities: (1) the victims were Black boys under the age of 18; (2) they were killed by Non-Black people; (3) their deaths received national attention. These three points are important

because, historically, mainstream media has not given stories with those characteristics thorough, unprejudiced coverage. For example, mainstream newspapers in Mississippi identified Till's case strictly as a crime story with a perpetrator and victim. This insinuates the idea that Till's death was justifiable because he received a punishment for his crime, which was whistling at a white woman (Spratt et al., 2007, p. 179). During the time of Till's death, America was racially divided, with desegregation laws causing turmoil in the South. However, Martin's death happened 57 years later, when overt racism was no longer socially acceptable. Yet, despite the time difference, it is possible that mainstream newspapers represented both Till and Martin negatively. This study seeks to provide insight on how the mainstream news media reported on the Till and Martin cases and is exploratory in nature. Using a content analysis to analyze specific media texts, this study will answer the following research questions:

1. How did the media report on the stories about the racially motivated murders of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin?
2. What kind of language was used to describe the victims of these murders?
3. How did mainstream/White media talk about these stories?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin

Emmett Till was murdered at a time when racial tensions were high. A year before his murder, in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The South's idea of separate but equal began to deteriorate as more people fought for integration and equal rights (Warren, 1954). Unhappy citizens of the South attacked those who were fighting for equality, and violence against Black people ran rampant during that time. The brutal murder of Till brought a great deal of attention to the state of Mississippi. A northern youth had been killed by the hands of two adult white men. Newspapers followed the case of Till closely as Milam and Bryant were put on trial. John Herbers, the United Press bureau chief in Jackson, MS at the time, was responsible for the most popular wire service in Mississippi. Because he had an audience outside of the South, it was his responsibility to remain as objective as possible (Tisdale, 2002, p. 43). Most mainstream media did not delve into the fact that Till's death happened because of larger problems surrounding racism, like Black suffering because of deviation from the white social order. The *New York Times*, for example, covered the trial in a "straightforward" manner, avoiding any supporting context as to why something like this happened to Till (Flournoy, 2003, p. 98). The lack of detail and context in these publications may have led racist audiences to believe Till's death was justified.

The killing of Martin happened in what many people believed to be a post-racial society. In a study on how Black male college students saw themselves in the media, Parker and Moore (2014) called the post-racial society frame a "fallacy" (p. 12). After

Barack Obama's first election in 2008 and second election in 2012, the idea that race was no longer an issue for Black people in America spread across the nation. Obama's presidency seemed to signal that Black people should not have any problems advancing in society because there was now a Black president, something millions of Americans thought would never happen. When Martin was killed, his death challenged this new society in which people thought they were living. How could a Black teenager be killed like this when the president of the country is Black? When the news first started reporting on Martin's murder, they represented him as an innocent Black boy who was profiled by a wannabe cop. Then, there was a shift in the representation. Martin became a "thuggish" Black teenager who was walking through a neighborhood where he did not belong. In killing him, Zimmerman was only protecting his community (Allen & Metcalf, 2019). These events call into question the post-racial society that many Americans claim to live in. Despite the difference in the time periods of Till and Martin's deaths, representation of these two victims was still based on the age-old stereotypes of Black youth in America.

Media Representation

According to Stuart Hall (1997), representation is "the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language" (p. 3). People who have similar understandings of reality create a shared culture by translating those concepts through language. Media representation is one of the practices of producing meaning. Journalists give meanings to the events they cover and communicate those meanings to their audiences. News organizations and journalists broadcast stories using language that aligns with their own conceptual maps which may have led to implicit bias. For instance,

if a journalist sees Black men as dangerous, he/she will use certain words, visuals, or sounds to apply the meaning of “dangerous” onto Black men.

Negative representation of Black people is very prevalent in the news. Entman (1992) uses the ingroup/outgroup concept known as the Ultimate Attribution Theory to explain how the negative representation of Black people is developed. He explains that white people (ingroup) see Black people (outgroup) as one whole unit instead of as individual human beings. They, then, associate all Black people with the negative stereotypes that have evolved from racist social and political systems in America. As a result, the ingroup’s explicit and implicit bias affects how Black people are represented in the news (Entman, 1992, p. 209). Allen and Metcalf (2019) note that Black men in the media are mainly represented as the athlete, the rapper, and the criminal (p. 22). By portraying Black men in this light, the media uses these archetypes to move a story forward. The audiences use the media’s representation as “mental models” of what a Black man is, whether they have ever met one or not (Kidd, 2016, p. 26). Without proper representation, audiences gain a diluted understanding of who Black men are. Without a diverse workforce in the media, Black men have a lack of positive representation in the news, leading to unfair treatment in society.

Negative media representation of Black men tends to stir up fear in audiences. Black men are portrayed as “violent, angry, prone to criminal behavior, and hyper-sexual” (Allen & Metcalf, 2019, p. 21). The stereotypes of adult Black men are also placed on Black youth, showing them as threats to society. A study on the representation of juvenile offenders by race in Los Angeles and Orange County explained that negative portrayals of Black youth add to the “moral panics” of those who already fear Black men

(Dixon & Azocar, 2006, p. 145). They worry that the deviance they see in Black youth will eventually destroy the safe havens they have created. Dixon and Azocar (2006) went on to say that this kind of thinking leads to ethnic blame discourse, the belief that the detriment to society is because of the harmful activities of minorities (p. 154). Ethnic blame discourse affects the way journalists represent Black youth, leading audiences to believe Black youth deserve the punishments they receive because their behavior needs to be regulated.

Both cases of Till and Martin show how the media negatively represented them based on fear of their deviance. Journalists represented Till as hyper-sexual, by reporting on how a young Black boy wolf-whistled at a white woman; one paper even reported that Till grabbed the woman by the waist and asked her on a date (Popham, 1955, para. 25). According to Spratt et al. (2007), one newspaper reported on Till's father being executed for rape, insinuating that Till would follow his footsteps (p. 181). During George Zimmerman's trial, one of the main components of his case was that he suspected Martin was prone to criminal behavior, linking him to prior burglaries that happened in the community (Stutzman & Weiner, 2013b). Journalists represented Martin as a troublemaker, reporting on marijuana possession, truancy, and a number of other things. This representation of Martin gave many readers the idea that he had it coming (Stutzman & Weiner, 2013a). This negative representation of Till and Martin was communicated through several racial frames used by journalists.

Racial Framing in the Media

While representation is the meaning of the concepts in our minds, framing is the manifestation of those concepts. Robert Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection

of “some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). Everyone uses framing to help them understand their conceptual maps. Moreover, journalists use framing every time they tell their audiences the news. In order to place meaning on events and people, journalists must use frames to define what is happening in the world around us. For instance, if a journalist is reporting on a robbery committed by a Black man, he or she can emphasize several characteristics of that individual to represent him negatively. Factors like unemployment or a low education level might be brought up in the report. If there is a video of the robbery, it may be included as well. Framing the Black man as poor, uneducated, and dangerous represents him as a threat to society. The frames simplify the robbery, so the audience can quickly comprehend what happened and who the perpetrator is. When the media uses racial framing, it has the power to shift the societal and cultural views of America (Bowen, 2015, p. 114).

Traditionally, Black people, especially Black men, have been negatively framed in the news. Regarding crime news, Black people are continuously associated with “crime and danger” (Entman & Gross, 2008, p. 97). For example, Dixon and Linz (2000) found that Black people are more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than victims in comparison to white people. Regarding Black male youth, the media tends to connect them to violence and danger (Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998). When Black people are constantly portrayed in the media in such an unfavorable way, it reinforces white fear of Black men and youth, causing the creation and maintenance of racial framing in the news (Lane et al., 2020, p. 793). When racial framing is used to tell a news story, certain details and descriptions (not just race) influence the way the audience processes the

information. Entman (1992) pointed out that because blatant racism in the media is no longer acceptable, journalists with racist ideologies use subtle messages to get a point across. He used the phrases “threatening young, black male” and “demanding black activist” as examples (Entman, 1992, p. 210). The mention of race is not what causes the audience to perceive Black people negatively but the descriptions, instead. “Threatening” and “demanding” have negative connotations, representing the subjects of the story in a harmful way. Furthermore, audiences are then led to associate all Black people (in the media and in real life) with those unfavorable characteristics. Looking past the mention of race and into the descriptions of the subjects is important for this study. Till and Martin were both victims, but the language used by each news source creates the frames in which the audience received the stories.

According to prior studies, the white racial frame permeates journalism, causing three general frames to be salient in the news—anti-Black, pro-white, and stereotype (Feagin, 2013). A study on the framing of Trayvon Martin and the Black Lives Matter movement found the anti-Black frame presented Black people as “divergent,” breaking from white supremacy’s expectation of Black people to stay in their place (Lane et al., 2020, p. 797). This frame of anti-Blackness and divergence promotes the idea that any Black person who steps out of line in the eyes of white people deserves punishment, especially since Black people are mainly featured in crime news. Reports on Black victimization or perpetration enforce a crime and punishment frame. White audiences accustomed to seeing Black people as lawless or dangerous are likely to either automatically assume a Black defendant is guilty or assume a Black victim’s actions provoked his/her demise. Media stereotypes are described by Entman (2006) as

“recurring messages that associate persons of color with traits, behaviors, and values generally considered undesirable, inferior, or dangerous” (p. 13). Stereotypes of Black people are already prevalent outside of the media, but the news spreads and reinforces these stereotypes. Black male youth tend to automatically be labeled as deviant in our society. In Trayvon Martin’s case, the stereotype of “Criminal ‘Gangsta’ Thug” was placed on him (Lane et al., 2020, p. 801). News stories linked Martin to marijuana, fighting, and vandalism. Other reports of Zimmerman associating Martin to criminal activity in the neighborhood further imposed this gangsta stereotype onto Martin (Lane et al., 2020, p. 802).

Two categories of framing found by Iyengar (1994) are episodic and thematic. Episodic frames represent stories as isolated events, while thematic frames relate stories to larger political issues. Journalists in Mississippi framed Emmett Till’s story as an isolated event. They avoided relating his case to the many other lynchings and killings in MS, ignoring the racial violence happening throughout the state. MS journalists expressed their disdain for civil rights organizations speaking out against injustices in MS and across the South (Spratt et al., 2007, p. 182). On the other hand, Martin’s case opened up discussion in the media about gun laws, self-defense, and racial profiling. However, that was mainly on broadcast television. In print news, Lane et al. (2020) found that episodic frames were prevalent in stories on Trayvon Martin (p. 804). Because episodic frames portray crimes as isolated, audiences of print news could not relate Martin’s death to the bigger issue of racial profiling. Instead, they read about Martin’s relation to marijuana, the fact that he was not from the neighborhood, and testimonies of the fight between him and Zimmerman. This causes victim blaming within the print media and

amongst their audiences (Lane et al., 2020, p. 795). Till and Martin's cases were framed in various ways by the media, despite happening in different time periods. Also, because of the nature of each case, news organizations were careful how they told the stories.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

In order to analyze news coverage and language used to describe victims of racially motivated murders, this thesis uses a content analysis of three newspapers that covered the cases of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. According to Berelson (1952), content analysis is “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18). By conducting a content analysis, the researcher can look for and analyze patterns of negative depictions of Black boys in the media.

The news articles used in this study covering the Till murder and the subsequent trial were published in September 1955. The news articles covering Martin’s murder and subsequent trial were published from February 2013 to July 2013. These time periods were chosen because they encompass the period of the most comprehensive and salient coverage. During these times, an abundance of information surfaced in several newspapers, as journalists tried to convey what was happening in a way that best fit with their news organizations’ standards.

Coding Instrument

The coding instrument was created in order to measure how journalists report on young, Black boys in mainstream media. A pretest of the coding instrument was completed by two coders to test intercoder reliability. They addressed all 48 questions included on the instrument. The intercoder reliability of that pretest was .70. For the actual analysis, three coders were thoroughly trained on how to read the coding sheet and what each unit of analysis meant. They carefully analyzed the newspaper articles to

categorize the information they found in the texts (see Appendix A). The following list is an explanation of the variables that the coders looked for:

1. *Perpetrator vs. Victim*: the language portrays Till/Martin as the perpetrator or victim

Perpetrator: the person who commits or is responsible for the crime

Victim: the person who is harmed because of the crime

This section was included because Black boys in the media are frequently portrayed as the perpetrators rather than victims. Till and Martin were both victims, so this section will help see if newspapers remained objective or biased.

2. *Negative Representation*: Till/Martin are described as dangerous, thugs, outsiders, or rule breakers

This section was included because these are some of the words used to describe young, Black boys in the media.

3. *Victim Blaming*: language, such as “didn’t comply” or “forceful,” suggest Till/Martin’s actions deserved punishment

This section was included because journalists often portray Black boys’ actions in a way that insinuates they did something to deserve harm.

4. *Other*: language outside of the listed categories that the coders find

This section was included because, unlike words that explicitly represent Black boys in a negative light (thug, dangerous), certain language can covertly give a negative portrayal or victim blame (confrontational, did not comply).

Unit of Analysis

Newspaper articles from the *Clarion-Ledger*, the *Orlando Sentinel*, and the *New York Times* were analyzed for this study. The choice of the newspapers was based on location, circulation size, and accessibility. The *Clarion-Ledger* is located in Jackson, MS, which is 110 miles away from Money, MS, the town where Till was murdered. The researcher could not find the exact circulation size of the *Clarion-Ledger* during 1955, but according to a *New York Times* article written in 1979, it was 65,000 (Holsendolph, 1979). Back in the 1950s, the *Clarion-Ledger* considered themselves a statewide paper that supported racist ideologies in Mississippi (Wells, 2011). The researcher accessed the articles for analysis through Newspapers.com.

The *Orlando Sentinel* is located in Orlando, Florida, which is 28 miles from Sanford, Florida, the city where Martin was killed. The researcher could not find the exact circulation size of the *Sentinel* during 2013, but according to an article written in 2016, the newspaper had daily circulation of 151,000 and Sunday circulation of 258,000 (“Orlando Sentinel Names,” 2016). Articles for the analysis were accessed via Newspapers.com.

The *New York Times* is considered a reputable, mainstream publication. Located in New York City, its far proximity from the murders of Till and Martin balances out the closeness of the *Clarion-Ledger* and *Orlando Sentinel*. Although the circulation size from 1959 could not be found, the size in 2013 was over 1.9 million (Watson, 2020). The size and reach of the *New York Times* allows the coders to analyze the perspective of journalists who were not local to the crimes. The researcher accessed the articles for analysis through the *New York Times*'s online TimesMachine.

Findings

In all, 30 articles that were selected for print by the editors of the newspapers under investigation were analyzed in order to arrive at the findings presented in this chapter. Of this number, 10 articles were selected from each of the following publications: the *Clarion-Ledger*, the *Orlando Sentinel*, and the *New York Times*. From each newspaper, five articles were analyzed for Emmett Till, and five articles were analyzed for Trayvon Martin. Table 1 and Table 2 show the percentage of occurrences according to the unit of analysis, *Perpetrator vs. Victim*. Coders indicated if they saw Till or Martin being represented as a perpetrator or victim by indicating “perpetrator,” “victim,” “both,” or “N/A.”

Table 1. Occurrences According to Perpetrator vs. Victim for Emmett Till

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Perpetrator	Victim	Both	N/A
<i>Clarion-Ledger</i>	5	13.3%	33.3%	46.7%	6.7%
<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	13.3%	40%	26.7%	20%
<i>New York Times</i>	5	0%	40%	13.3%	46.7%

In Table 1, the variable with the least amount of occurrences across all three newspapers is “perpetrator.” This is likely because Till was obviously the murder victim, with him being a 14-year-old boy slain by two adult men. However, the *Clarion-Ledger* portrayed Till as both the perpetrator and victim more than solely showing him as the victim. The *Orlando Sentinel* mainly labeled Till as the victim. The *New York Times* highest percentage is in the “not applicable” section, with “victim” being the second highest. The *New York Times* likely tried to remain objective by not labeling Till at all but still leaned towards portraying him as a victim.

In Table 2, all three newspapers' highest percentage is in the “both” section, meaning the articles mainly portrayed Trayvon Martin as both the perpetrator and victim. This is likely because only George Zimmerman really knows what happened the night of Martin’s death. Based on the evidence and witness testimonies, the public still does not know what actually happened.

Table 2. Occurences According to Perpetrator vs. Victim for Trayvon Martin

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Perpetrator	Victim	Both	N/A
<i>Clarion-Ledger</i>	5	33.3%	6.7%	60%	0%
<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	6.7%	20%	46.7%	26.%
<i>New York Times</i>	5	13.3%	6.7%	46.7%	33.3%

Table 3 and Table 4 show the percentage of occurrences according to the unit of analysis, *Negative Representation*. Coders indicated if they saw negative representation by indicating “yes,” “no,” “N/A.” In Table 3, the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *New York Times* did not represent Till negatively, for the most part. However, the *Clarion-Ledger*’s highest percentage is in the “yes” section. The newspaper’s proximity to the murder of Till could be the reason why it mainly represented him negatively. His actions towards the white woman were highly disapproved by white Mississippians, especially with him being from Chicago. Therefore, the results for the *Clarion-Ledger* are not surprising.

Table 3. Occurences According to Negative Representation of Emmett Till

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Yes	No	N/A
<i>Clarion-Ledger</i>	5	66.7%	13.3%	20%
<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	26.6%	66.7%	6.6%
<i>New York Times</i>	5	13.3%	86.7%	0%

Table 4 shows mixed results across all three newspapers. Again, this is likely due to the known and unknown facts of Martin’s case. A little over half of the *Clarion-Ledger’s* articles did not represent Martin negatively. An almost equal number of articles in the *Orlando Sentinel* either did or did not represent Martin negatively. The *New York Times* did not have a variable that took the majority percentage.

Table 4. Occurrences According to Negative Representation of Trayvon Martin

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Yes	No	N/A
<i>Clarion-Ledger</i>	5	20%	53.3%	26.7%
<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	40%	46.7%	13.3%
<i>New York Times</i>	5	33.3%	40%	26.7%

Table 5 and Table 6 show the percentage of occurrences according to the unit of analysis, *Victim Blaming*. Coders indicated if they saw victim blaming by indicating “yes,” “no,” “N/A.” Table 5 shows that the majority of the *Orlando Sentinel* and *New York Times* articles did not blame Emmett Till for what happened to him. However, the *Clarion-Ledger’s* results show that 46.7% of the articles victim blamed and 46.7% did not victim blame. This could be because even though white Mississippians thought Till’s actions deserved a punishment, they still may have believed the brutal murder by Bryant and Milam was extreme.

Table 5. Occurrences According to Victim Blaming of Emmett Till

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Yes	No	N/A
<i>Clarion-Ledger</i>	5	46.7%	46.7%	6.6%
<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	33.3%	66.7%	0%
<i>New York Times</i>	5	13.3%	86.7%	0%

Table 6 shows similar results with the *Clarion-Ledger*, with almost equal percentages between the “yes” and “no” variables. The *New York Times* does not have a variable that takes the majority. However, the *Orlando Sentinel* mainly blames Martin for what happened to him. This is likely because of the newspaper’s proximity to the case.

Table 6. Occurrences According to Victim Blaming of Trayvon Martin

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Yes	No	N/A
<i>Clarion-Ledger</i>	5	40%	46.7%	13.3%
<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	66.7%	26.7%	6.6%
<i>New York Times</i>	5	26.7%	40%	33.3%

The final unit of analysis is *Other*. Coders wrote any language they saw that portrayed Till and Martin in a negative light in a covert manner. One coder found the words “fight” and “confrontation” to fit in this category for Martin. In the context of the articles in which these words were found, they relate to not only negative representation but victim blaming, as well.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

This study set out to examine the representation and framing of the victims of racially motivated murders. Multiple scholars have researched the media representation of Black juveniles, Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. By using racial framing as the theoretical framework and conducting a content analysis, the research questions guiding this study can be answered. The research questions are:

RQ 1: How did the media report on stories about the racially motivated murders of Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till?

Two Black male teenagers were murdered at the hands of white supremacists and a zealous vigilante. The media had the responsibility of reporting these stories in a way that distinctly let audiences know who the victims and perpetrators of these crimes were. The three newspapers used for this study told straightforward news that lacked context and exposing details of the victims' lives that shifted the blame of the crimes. Remaining objective in stories that report on race is difficult for journalists who already perceive Black people a certain way. According to Schudson (2001), objectivity means reporting only the facts, removing any emotional tones, and representing both sides fairly. In this study, a mix of objectivity and bias was found in the articles used for the analysis.

Although Till's death happened in a time of blatant racism and bigotry, he was rarely represented as the perpetrator in the media. The *New York Times* did not represent Till as the perpetrator at all, while the *Clarion-Ledger* and *Orlando Sentinel* represented him as such 13.3% of the time. The way Bryant and Milam brutalized Till was inhumane.

His death became nationwide news, and prevalent civil rights activists proclaimed their disgust with the racial atmosphere of Mississippi. Regardless of how people felt about the events that led up to Till's murder (allegedly wolf-whistling at Mrs. Bryant), it was obvious that he was the victim of a heinous crime. The *Clarion-Ledger* represented Till as both the perpetrator and victim in each article more often than solely showing him as the victim, while the *New York Times* and *Orlando Sentinel* did not. Even though Till was the victim of a crime, it seemed that white Mississippians could not let go of the fact that he allegedly made a pass at a white woman. Journalists seemed to allow their conceptual ideas of Black youth to fuel their reporting. The *Clarion-Ledger* used several media stereotypes to frame Till, which “[reinforced] negative emotions” about Black male youth (Entman, 2006, p. 13). Unfortunately, Till fell into the stereotype that many white Mississippians held at that time--Black men and youth are a threat to society, especially to white women. Every *Clarion-Ledger* publication used for this analysis mentioned that Till had “wolf-whistled” at Mrs. Bryant, feeding into the stereotype that Black males are hypersexual. These stereotypes further represent Black male youth as threats to society (Allen & Metcalf, 2019).

Some of the *Clarion-Ledger* articles stated that Till was from Chicago. Attitudes towards Black Northerners were tense because of the Great Migration. Author Isabel Wilkerson's book *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) gives a historical account of the suffering Black people endured during the Great Migration. She interviewed over 1,200 people for the book and spent almost 10 years condensing them into three main characters. According to Wilkerson, many Black families migrated to the North for job opportunities and a better life. Southern planters and employers were unhappy because

they were losing cheap labor. White laborers saw the remaining Black laborers as their competition and used violence to pressure them into moving away. The Great Migration strained the relationship between Black and white Southerners even more, creating mixed feelings surrounding the North. Black Northerners were generally disliked for disrupting the Southern way of life (Wilkerson, 2010). Entman (1992) says that white people's explicit and implicit bias affects how they frame Black people in the news (p. 209). The *Clarion-Ledger's* mention of Till's origin likely came from the implicit bias journalists had about Black Northerners. Furthermore, one article from the *Clarion-Ledger* described Mrs. Bryant as a "pretty brunette wife" (Everett, 1955, para. 3). These descriptions represent her as a fragile, feminine woman (Allen & Metcalf, 2019; Spratt et al., 2007) who needed to be protected by her husband.

The stereotypes of the Black male youth and Black Northerners combined with the sentiment of the fragile white woman caused many white people to believe Till's death was justified. People saw Till as a danger to the community, and his alleged actions towards Mrs. Bryant warranted punishment. Dixon & Azocar (2006) assert that this type of thinking leads to ethnic blame discourse, the belief that minorities are the cause of society's downfall (p. 154). Journalists who use ethnic blame discourse usually frame Black youth as the ones at fault, regardless of what actually happened. While the *Orlando Sentinel* and *New York Times* mostly refrained from victim blaming, the *Clarion-Ledger* did not. Journalists' writing was affected by any implicit biases they had, despite attempts to remain objective (Entman, 1992). Because Till's death happened in the 1950s, stating that a young Black boy "wolf whistled" at a white woman was enough for people to blame him for his own death. Allen & Metcalf (2019) said early theories on Black

masculinity and sexuality represented Black men as hyper-sexual beings with “animalistic desires,” whose “ultimate sexual conquest” were white women (p. 21). White men were expected to protect white women however they could. In each *Clarion-Ledger* article used in the analysis, the claim that Till made a pass at Mrs. Bryant was offered at least twice. The journalists described his words as “ugly remarks” and “some obscene remark” (“Body of Negro,” 1955, paras. 1 & 22). The statement was strategically placed so that readers read it at the beginning and end of the articles (sometimes in the middle if the article mentioned Till’s actions three times). Journalists saw Till as a troublemaker who was facing the consequences of his actions, and they represented him as such. This created a “mental model” of who Till was in the readers’ minds (Kidd, 2015, p. 26). Furthermore, they made sure the audience would not forget Till’s negative image by reminding readers of the stereotype of the predatory Black man.

In the case of Martin, the question of who was the perpetrator and victim in this crime is still brought into question years after his death. As the one who lost his life, it would seem that Martin clearly is the victim. However, the racial controversy that surrounded the case posed a challenge to how journalists reported this story. According to Feagin (2013), the white racial frame permeates journalism; it includes racist stereotypes, attitudes, and imagery. Martin was a 17-year-old teenager, and the stereotypes of Black male youth had not changed much since Till’s time. They are still seen as threatening and violent, but with the progression of language, Black youth are now called “thugs” and “gangstas,” as well (Lane et al., 2020). When the case became about race, the need to prove Martin’s fault as a Black teenager is what shifted his media representation from victim to perpetrator. The results of the analysis show that all three newspapers' highest

percentages were in the “both” category, meaning Martin was represented as both the victim and perpetrator instead of either one or the other. All fifteen newspaper articles used in the analysis of Martin’s case either stated that Zimmerman claimed self defense or that Martin allegedly attacked him. In addition, nine out of the fifteen articles expressed that Martin was unarmed. These questionable details of the killing probably made it difficult for journalists to represent Martin solely as a victim or perpetrator.

Over half of the articles from the *Orlando Sentinel* showed some form of victim blaming, whereas the *Clarion-Ledger* and *New York Times* showed less. Journalists used victim blaming by disclosing the activities Martin partook in as a teenager. For example, one article from the *Orlando Sentinel* was solely about Martin participating in fights. Defense attorney Mark O’Mara brought a video recorded by Martin into court, claiming that Martin was recording his friends beating up a homeless man. The attorney had to backtrack on his claim because the video was actually of two homeless men fighting each other. However because Martin was still involved in the fight by recording it, *Orlando Sentinel* journalists were able to take the fighting angle and expand on it. They reported that Martin was a participant in organized fights and revealed that O’Mara had a video of Martin refereeing a fight. An *Orlando Sentinel* reporter wrote a story describing the video, and the web producer prematurely published the video and story onto the newspaper’s website (Stutzman, 2013b). For these journalists, it was pertinent to represent Martin as a fighter. By representing him this way, Martin is victim-blamed because that representation is what journalists use to justify Zimmerman’s self-defense claims.

The *Orlando Sentinel* shaped the idea that Martin was someone who willingly chose violence, and Zimmerman was protecting himself and his neighborhood. The newspaper published the story about Martin's fights on June 3, 2013, before jury selection took place on June 10th. As a local newspaper only 28 miles from where the crime happened, it is quite possible that its audience consisted of potential jurors. For example, on June 14, 2013, the *Sentinel* published an article about the jury selection. One potential juror stated that she believed Zimmerman was innocent and Martin was "learning to become a street fighter" and "looking for someone to fight" the night he was killed (Stutzman & Weiner, 2013, para. 4). The *Sentinel's* negative representation of Martin, specifically during the pretrial, influenced readers to create a "mental model" of Martin as the perpetrator (Kidd, 2015, p. 26). Regardless of what facts were brought up during the trial, readers already had an image of Martin before it even started. It is even possible that the *Orlando Sentinel* had an influence on the outcome of the trial. By representing Martin as a fighter before the trial, Zimmerman's claim of self-defense would seem more believable to jurors, especially if they were naïve about racial profiling. Racial profiling is a means of surveillance used by people who hold stereotypes about a certain race, such as Black, male youth being prone to criminal behavior (Allen & Metcalf, 2019). By creating this narrative of Martin as a violent teenager and failing to describe racial profiling, the *Orlando Sentinel* potentially assisted the defense in perpetuating Zimmerman's innocence.

RQ 2: What kind of language is used to describe the victims of these murders?

Every newspaper analyzed in this study mentioned the victims' race. In the articles, Till was described as "Negro" and Martin as "African American" or "Black" (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013, para. 2; "Body of Negro," 1955, para. 1; "Defense attorney walks," 2013, para. 1) This is relevant because one of the main reasons these cases got nationwide attention is because the murders were racially motivated. Racial stereotypes plague Black male youth. For hundreds of years, mainstream society has seen them as dangerous and deviant. For example, in the 1950s, Black men and youth were being murdered in large numbers for allegedly making passes a white women, deeming them hypersexual and violent (Allen & Metcalf, 2019). One *Clarion-Ledger* article described Till as a "bubble-gum chewing Negro youth who allegedly [wolf-whistled] at a white woman" ("White Orders Full," 1955, para. 1). This description caused readers' stereotypical views about Black youth to be more strongly held. In the 2010s, fear of Black male youth had increased tremendously because they were now being associated with more stereotypes, like drugs, guns, and gangs (Parker & Moore, 2014). Another *Clarion-Ledger* article used the phrase "felt threatened by the African-American teenager" to explain Zimmerman's motive ("Defense attorney walks," 2013, para. 1). The stereotype of the threatening Black teenager gave readers a false image of Martin. Furthermore, if they held any implicit biases against Black youth, it is possible that readers empathized with Zimmerman allegedly feeling threatened.

Another reason race was relevant to these cases is because the deaths of Till and Martin were related to larger issues that threatened the Black community. Before, during, and after the 1950s, Black people were terrorized with violence by those who felt like

they did not fit into the white social order. Violence against Black people ranged from lynchings to executions to police brutality. Racists fought against justice and equality, upholding systems of oppression that ultimately cause the deaths of many innocent Black people, like Till and Martin (Tolliver et al., 2016). However, the lack of racial and historical language frames Till and Martin's deaths as episodic. As noted above, episodic frames represent stories as isolated events (Iyengar, 1991). Although all the newspapers stated the races of the victims, the *Orlando Sentinel* and *Clarion-Ledger* failed to go into detail about the racist ideologies that provoked the killers to attack these young boys. Regarding Martin's murder, two of the *New York Times*' articles expounded on Florida's self defense laws and how racial profiling affects the Black community. This probably explains why the *New York Times* demonstrated less victim blaming than the *Orlando Sentinel* and *Clarion-Ledger*. This is relevant because simply stating "racial profiling" without giving a definition or detail on how it has historically affected Black people does not help uninformed readers understand why Zimmerman followed and shot Martin. On the other hand, readers can easily grasp the language used the frame the altercation between Martin and Zimmerman on the night of the murder.

The *Orlando Sentinel* and *Clarion-Ledger* gave the most elaborate account of Martin's actions on the night of his death. While the *New York Times* mostly stated that Martin allegedly attacked Zimmerman, the other two newspapers used graphic imagery so that readers could visualize what happened according to Zimmerman's testimony. In four of the *Orlando Sentinel* articles, journalists said Martin knocked Zimmerman to the ground and was "hammering" or "slamming" his head into the sidewalk (Stutzman, 2013a, para. 10, 2013b, para. 10; Stutzamn & Weiner, 2013b, para. 7, 2013d, para. 26).

Three of the articles said Martin punched Zimmerman and broke his nose (Stutzman, 2013a, 2013b; Stutzman & Weiner, 2013b). One of the *Clarion-Ledger* articles said Martin “sucker-punched” Zimmerman (Schneider & Hightower, 2013, para. 9). Another stated that he was “smashing” Zimmerman’s head into the concrete (“Attorneys start,” 2013, para. 1). All of these illustrative words and phrases framed a violent image of Martin that was painted by Zimmerman’s testimony and those who believed it. The *New York Times* did mention that Martin allegedly punched Zimmerman, knocked him to the ground, and slammed his head against the sidewalk (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). However, it was only mentioned once in one article. All of the others simply stated that Martin allegedly attacked Zimmerman. On the other hand, the *Orlando Sentinel* and *Clarion-Ledger* found it necessary to continuously feed readers this graphic account of Zimmerman’s testimony, an account that framed Martin as the aggressor. However, the *New York Times* showed less victim blaming than the *Clarion-Ledger* and *Orlando Sentinel*, regarding Martin’s case.

RQ 3: How do mainstream/White media talk about these stories?

After analyzing the newspaper articles and data, the researcher found that mainstream media talked about Till and Martin’s stories through one main frame: the Black male deviant. Frames representing deviance or divergence are commonly used in the media whenever a Black person does not fall in line with the laws of white supremacy (Lane et. al, 2020). Till allegedly wolf-whistling at Mrs. Bryant is mentioned several times in all three newspapers. Articles from the *Clarion-Ledger* and *Orlando Sentinel* said he was “acting fresh toward a white woman” (“Negro Boy’s Death,” 1955, para. 1;

“Slain Boy’s Mother,” 1955, para. 1). An article from the *New York Times* stated that Till allegedly told Mrs. Bryant he had “been with women before” (Popham, 1955, para. 25). It was known in the South that there were deadly consequences if a Black man made advances at a white woman. Till did not abide by the rules of the South, and as a result, he was framed as deviant, especially by the *Clarion-Ledger*. Being the only Mississippi newspaper used in the analysis, it is no surprise that the *Clarion-Ledger* showed higher amounts of negative representation and victim blaming for Emmett Till, compared to the *Orlando Sentinel* and *New York Times*. The data has shown that proximity plays a role in how the victims are framed by each newspaper. Till allegedly broke Mississippi’s social order, so the implicit bias of the *Clarion Ledger’s* journalists led to him continuously being framed as deviant.

Martin’s representation of “deviance” was not defined by the night that he died but instead by the activities he partook in his everyday life as a teenager. Only four out of the fifteen articles on Martin spoke about what Martin was involved in, two from the *Orlando Sentinel* and two from the *New York Times*. Due to this small number of articles highlighting his activity, there are not any alarming results for the occurrences of negative representation in the newspapers. However, the language that journalists used framed Martin as a deviant teenager, and this impacted how people perceived Martin. The *Orlando Sentinel* published an article entirely focused on Martin being involved in fights, saying he “took part in organized fights” and that there was a video of him “refereeing a fight” (Stutzman, 2013b, paras. 12-13). The other article gave an account of what a potential juror said she learned about Martin through the news--his cellphone contained photos of a gun and marijuana plants and text messages about fighting

(Stutzman & Weiner, 2013b, para. 3). The articles from the *New York Times* were more detailed than those from the *Orlando Sentinel*. One article associated Martin with marijuana, school suspension, fighting, and guns. Journalists further wrote comments from Zimmerman's defense, stating "Martin's drug use could have made him aggressive and paranoid" (Alvarez, 2013b, para. 4). Another article mentioned the same activities as the one before, but this one also associated him with "gangsta culture" and stated that Martin's mother had "kicked him out of the house" (Alvarez, 2013a, para. 1-2). Quite often these kinds of activities are linked to troubled teenagers. By framing the stories around Martin's negative behavior, audiences may have been led to believe that Martin was defiant and looking for trouble. Allen and Metcalf (2019) found in their study "Up to No Good": The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Fear of Black Men in US Society," that framing Martin in this manner affirmed any implicit biases the audience held, that he was "prone to criminal behavior and thus deserving of harsh discipline" (p. 23). Hence why a potential juror said she believed Zimmerman was innocent and Martin was a "troubled young man looking for a fight" (Stutzman & Weiner, 2013b, para. 1).

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Black Americans have historically faced racial discrimination and violence in this country. This violence has led to the deaths of many innocent Black people by the hands of racist vigilantes. Over the years, the media has covered several of these racially motivated murders. This study analyzed the language journalists used to cover the murder victims of two prominent cases: Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. Racial framing and media representation were the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. The findings show that journalists' implicit biases affected how Till and Martin were framed and represented in the news.

Both Till and Martin were young Black boys, a demographic that does not receive fair representation in the news (Dixon, 2006; Entman, 2006; Lane, 2020; Parker & Moore, 2014; Spratt, 2007; Willis, 2016). Dixon (2006) revealed that Black juveniles are portrayed as perpetrators of crimes more often than they are actually arrested (p. 153). In the cases of Till and Martin, they were not the perpetrators but instead, the victims. This fact forced journalists to approach representation and framing differently, while attempting to hold on to the traditional way of representing Black youth. The findings of this study show that journalists framed the stories around negative aspects of the victims' lives. In the case of Till, journalists made it clear that he was an outsider breaking the rules of the South. In Martin's case, his past school suspensions, alleged drug use, and involvement in fighting were published in the news. In both cases, several mainstream newspapers published stories that covertly defended the killers' actions, framing Till and Martin as deviants who were receiving their punishments. The majority of the findings

showed that Till and Martin were negatively represented in the news, and this affected how the public perceived them.

This study adds to the research on media representation and framing because of its focus on Black victims, specifically Till and Martin. Numerous studies have been conducted on the representation of Black people as the perpetrators of crimes, but few have observed the specific language used for victims of racial crimes. By analyzing a crime from the 1950s and one from the 2010s in one study, similarities and differences in journalists' reporting practices can be understood. Eventhough both Till and Martin were not objectively framed and represented, journalists used different language because of the difference in time frames.

The findings of this study are troubling because journalists with implicit biases are still covering racially motivated murders against Black people today. In 2020, America was in an uproar because of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. If the journalists fail to properly frame and represent the victims of these murders, Black people's fight for justice, safety, and equality will continue to be misunderstood.

Limitations of Study

Although this study offers a descriptive analysis of media texts, it is limited in scope because of the lack of comparison. The original study idea was to examine both mainstream and Black newspapers in order to incorporate cultural value in the analysis, but time and other unfortunate constraints made using the additional data impractical. Also, the study's methodology contains a limited number of variables. Due to the uncertainty of the fall semester's outcome in the light of the world-wide pandemic, the

researcher only used three variables for analysis. This ensured that the coding could be explained, tested, and executed in a reasonable amount of time.

Future Studies

A comparative analysis of how mainstream and Black newspapers represent and frame victims of racially motivated murders can be conducted in the future. This current study laid the groundwork for how the newspapers can be analyzed for language. Adding Black newspapers to the equation can possibly show a drastic contrast between how mainstream and Black newspapers talk about Black victims of racial crimes.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE CODING SHEET

Coder_____ Code Date_____

Newspaper_____

Codes:

Article: 1-10 per newspaper

Perpetrator vs. Victim: 1=perpetrator, 2=victim, 3=both, 4=N/A

Negative Representation: 1=yes, 2=no, 3=N/A

Victim Blaming: 1=yes, 2=no, 3=N/A

Other: negative words/phrases outside of listed categories

Article	Perpetrator vs. Victim				Negative Representation			Victim Blaming			Other
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	1	2	3	

Total											

APPENDIX B: ARTICLES FROM *CLARION-LEDGER* USED IN CONTENT

ANALYSIS

	Article	Date
1	Body of Negro Found In River	09/01/1955
2	White Orders Full Probe Of Delta's Kidnap-Murder	09/02/1955
3	Slain Boy's Mother Will Get Invitation To Trial Of Deltans	09/08/1955
4	Deltans' Trial Date To Be Set Friday	09/09/1955
5	Till Nearly Missed His Fatal Journey To Land Of Cotton	09/19/1955
6	Defense attorney walks fine line	06/10/2013
7	Attorneys start Zimmerman trial	06/25/2013
8	Mothers testify about cries for help	07/06/2013
9	Witnesses: Zimmerman screaming on 911 call	07/09/2013
10	Jury given more options	07/12/2013

APPENDIX C: ARTICLES FROM *ORLANDO SENTINEL* USED IN CONTENT

ANALYSIS

	Article	Date
1	Negro Boy's Death Called 'Lynching'	09/01/1955
2	Trial Set in Race Slaying, Victim's Mother To Attend	09/10/1955
3	Jurors Summoned for Trial of Accused Slayers of Negro	09/16/1955
4	'Wolf Whistle' Murder Trial Commences Today	09/19/1955
5	10 Accepted As 'Whistle' Case Jurors	09/20/1955
6	Defense lawyers seeking Trayvon's voice recordings from female friend	02/13/2013
7	Attorneys apologize for misrepresenting Trayvon fight video	06/3/2013
8	Potential juror's candor marks Day 4 of selection process	06/14/2013
9	Jury sees Trayvon photos, evidence	06/26/2013
10	State's key witness holds firm: Zimmerman was aggressor	06/28/2013

APPENDIX D: ARTICLES FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* USED IN CONTENT

ANALYSIS

	Article	Date
1	Slain Youth's Body Seen By Thousands	09/04/1955
2	Report on Slaying Due	09/06/1955
3	2 Held For Trial In Slaying Of Boy	09/07/1955
4	Trial Tomorrow In Boy's Murder	09/18/1955
5	State Rests Case In Youth's Killing	09/23/1955
6	Defense in Trayvon Martin Case Raises Questions About the Victim's Character	05/23/2013
7	Judge in Trayvon Martin Case Puts Limits on Defense	05/28/2013
8	Zimmerman Judge Bars Testimony on 911 Call	06/22/2013
9	Zimmerman Case Has Race as a Backdrop, but You Won't Hear It in Court	07/07/2013
10	Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing	07/13/2013

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