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# Finding the Women in the Words: Examining the Framing of Female Victims in Homicide Reporting

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*Finding the Women in the Words:  
Examining the Framing of Female Victims  
in Homicide Reporting*

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## Finding the Women in the Words: Examining the Framing of Female Victims in Homicide Reporting

**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the print media coverage of two similar 2019 murders, one of a White woman and one of a Black woman, to research the framing of female victims in homicide reporting. Previous research identified how components from the overall structure of details down to the specifics of word choice impact how readers depict and remember victims. Through a discourse analysis, the Alexandria Kostial-Aniah Blanchard case study found how the coverage downplayed each victim, mainly through the placement of details, word choice and the effects of various journalistic standards, including the inverted pyramid structure and delayed identification. By understanding how victims are depicted in the discourse, scholars can work towards more balanced reporting of homicide victims.

In regard to topics or “beats” covered in print media, many journalists consider crime as one of the hot-ticket items. The novelty and severity of the stories tend to gain public attention with breaking news headlines and their ability to elicit strong emotions. Readers demand to know what is happening in their local areas, especially crimes as distressing as murder, and it is the duty of journalists and print news publications to provide those stories; however, there are consequences when crime is not reported responsibly.

With the rise of advocacy for victims’ rights, there is more awareness regarding the issues of how victims are depicted in the media, especially victims who are female and/or of color. Recently, there are evident patterns where instead of the narrative being directed at the crime, the reporting diverges into the backgrounds of those involved, mentions unrelated details to the case and is structured and organized in such a way where the crime itself and the people affected are unclear. The unclarity leads to confusion, which leads to doubt, potentially leading readers to doubt the case as a whole, including the victims. Victim-blaming cannot only diminish the severity of the crime, but tarnish the memory of the individual. How stories are framed to a

reader influences how they leave the article feeling about a victim; therefore, it is important to understand how the framing of a narrative makes an impact far beyond the pages of print.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Framing Theory.*

Scholars consider sociologist Erving Goffman as the founder of framing theory, and his ideas are now applied to other fields of study, including the media. According to scholar Stephen Reese, the basic premise of Goffman's framing theory is looking at how people tend to make sense of and understand issues based on prior ideas and expectations (Reese 7). Goffman's general idea can then be applied to other areas such as the news. Drawing on definitions from the various scholars Reese included in his research, framing can be summarized as providing the context of a narrative, consequently influencing a receiver's interpretation of the message (Reese 10). The information included in a narrative influences the reaction the receiver has to a story. Due to individual perceptions, beliefs and expectations, reporters may include or exclude certain perspectives and details, whether explicitly or implicitly, which can alter the meaning of a story (Reese 11). As Reese noted in his research, this gives the media a degree of power where what they report influences how different people in society view something or someone.

In his background research, Reese noted different components which contribute to how a story is framed, including how the story is organized and its shareability. Organizing refers to how a story is presented, which Reese argued can influence the response and reaction of the receiver (Reese 12). Depending on what perspectives are presented in the narrative, the organization of the piece can influence what message a receiver takes away. For example, the first perspective presented in a story may stick with the receiver as the dominant one, limiting the

effect and influence of others presented later. Scholars S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne concur with the assertion that organizations have the ability to change the receiver's attitude depending on what details are included and emphasized, which they discussed in their research in *Social Meaning of News*. They believed news media consumers are more interested in a story narrative as opposed to a hard-facts article because the story narrative has more of a human-interest component. The scholars noted how this leads to a paradox: The news wants to remain objective while incorporating an interesting storyline, yet this tends to result in unobjective reporting because creating an interesting story means drawing on established and understood narratives and ideas (Bird and Dardenne 343). The select scholars agreed that the organization of story structure can have a great effect on what the overall message turns into from the sender to the receiver.

Another component of framing frequently discussed amongst these scholars is the sharing of stories and ideas. Reese defined shared as the frames which are passed on because they are culturally understood and accepted (Reese 15). Reese, Bird and Dardenne agreed how the “share-worthiness” of a frame is a significant influencer. In Bird and Dardenne’s literature review, they argued that the “shared” component in framing the news helps receivers gain reassurance and helps to find solutions to complex problems based on familiar expectations and experiences (Bird and Dardenne 336). Where people are constantly seeking answers to complicated issues, they typically will want material which not only helps them reach a solution, but one which is easily understood based on prior knowledge and expectations. Bird and Dardenne also said that sharing is important to a frame continuing because if a receiver does not understand a message it is unlikely the receiver will continue to follow the story; thus, it is in the interest of news organizations and reporters to follow shared and understood frames (Bird and

Dardenne 342). The individual components, such as organizing and sharing, come together to create frames and narratives which persist in culture and the media, and influence how society interprets different messages.

Framing has several implications regarding reporting, which scholars Bird and Dardenne discussed in their research. First, complete objectivity in journalism is near impossible because of personal biases held by reporters and organizations (Bird and Dardenne 334). The norms and constructs journalists and organizations hold are inevitably incorporated in some degree into the reporting by how they create their stories. Secondly, Bird and Dardenne argued news story structures are not constantly recreated or unique, but rather they are established structures based on cultural norms and expectations (Bird and Dardenne 337 and 339). The example they used was the story structure of Cinderella; even though there are different versions, the story maintains similar structure and components, which allow receivers to recognize the storyline. The culturally recognized structures contribute to the influence of “share-worthiness” Bird and Dardenne discussed in their research because understood narratives are easier for receivers to retell to others. In the case of reporters, they will prefer to use recognizable structures to spread stories further and reach more people. Lastly, the scholars argued how news values are not objective and concrete guidelines, but in fact are created and influenced by stakeholder expectations (Bird and Dardenne 338). For example, many news media consumers are interested in hearing a story rather than listed factual details; therefore, the news values adapt to audience demand. Traditional news values like proximity or novelty sustain because of the cultural influence and expectation of what news should be: a compelling story. Thus, framing theory is the foundation for constructing meaning in reporting.

*News Values and Selection.*

To gain a better understanding of how frames are used in reporting, it is important to know how news values and selection impact how a story is told. Discourse scholar Teun A. van Dijk argued that the structure and common practices of a newsroom can influence how stories are framed, including reproducing racially biased ideas. Many journalists and editors are White, and the small percentage of journalists of color are rarely assigned high-profile stories, such as ones in politics (van Dijk 244). The result of the lack of representation in the newsroom is that many stories are told from a White perspective. According to van Dijk's argument, stories being told from a White perspective includes using the same sources who tend to give familiar narratives, thus excluding quotes from minority sources, avoiding stories that criticize White institutions, such as police, and generally writing a story as a White person, thus potentially using racial stereotypes whether intentional or not (van Dijk 245-254). All of these factors have the potential to misconstrue a narrative.

Although van Dijk made these observations in the early 1990s, scholars Seong-Jae Min and John Feaster agreed with van Dijk's arguments 20 years later. In their research, Min and Feaster found the White perspective is dominant with the same sources and types of stories because profits drive news organizations; if stories follow similar patterns, there is a greater chance the stories will sell (Min and Feaster 209). The importance of profit to a news organization will motivate most to go with a seemingly safer option in fear of losing established sources, advertisers and more. This more recent research is supported by established political and economic understandings of news coverage. Scholar Edward Herman established five political-economic factors which play a role in influencing the media; of the five, the first three involve the media's profit orientation, advertisers as a major source of income and the dependence on

sources (Herman 77-93). Because the print media has more high-stakes audiences to please than solely the reader, these organizations will tend to cater to what they perceive as the most dominant and accepted perspective.

In addition, Min and Feaster believe physical attractiveness may play a role in selection bias. Their research focused on missing children and national television news coverage. Although the results found that females are underrepresented, the findings raised the question about how attractiveness impacts who receives coverage (Min and Feaster 213-214). While their research varies from my own, given they are focused on television where mine is print media, keeping the idea of attractiveness in mind could be useful to see if the reporting mentions attractiveness as a detail, if it elicits a stereotype about the victim or otherwise. Gaining a better sense of what factors may impact news values and selection bias creates a better understanding of how gender and racial stereotypes seep their way into the reporting itself.

### *Gender and racial stereotypes.*

With newsroom dynamics understood, stereotypes in reporting become clearer. A significant amount of literature on the topic of crime reporting is dedicated to exploring if and what stereotypes are used, and a lot of the scholars found stereotypes present throughout their research. Marian Meyers noted several dominant stereotypes in her research on television coverage of the violence at Freaknik, a predominantly Black spring break event in Atlanta. According to Meyers, the Freaknik coverage included the stereotypes of the sexualized Jezebel, welfare users and matriarchs (Meyers 114). The use of these stereotypes created a sense of victim blaming in the stories. A couple years later, Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young used Meyers as a source in their own research regarding the murders of women on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Jiwani and Young found similar results. Although the authors noted how



there was a decreased shift in the victim-blaming narratives throughout the several years of coverage due to increased activism for victims and marginalized groups, the “good” versus “bad” distinction for each victim still appeared (Jiwani and Young 911-912). While Meyers’s study focused on both gender and racial stereotypes by analyzing Black women, the study from Jiwani and Young focused more on gender yet reinforced several issues and effects of stereotyping discussed by Meyers. A separate study by Kristin Dukes and Sarah Gaither reinforced Meyers’s argument on racial stereotyping and victim blaming. Although Dukes and Gaither focused on Black men and used fictional biographies to see if stereotypical language had an effect on participants, the results were similar to Meyers in that the use of stereotypes made receivers blame the victims of the crime rather than the perpetrator (Dukes and Gaither 801). In sum, stereotypes used while reporting on a victim can drastically change how a receiver perceives the victim.

### *Rhetorical Analysis.*

The gender and racial stereotypes and tropes used in crime reporting can be better understood with having knowledge of rhetorical devices and semantics used in the writing. Word choice, word order, punctuation and placement can have an effect on how a reader interprets a narrative in print news. Meyers’s study focused on this in depth by looking at how rhetorical devices, including vagueness or over completeness, along with semantic strategies, including victim blaming, can add bias to a story and ultimately change its meaning (Meyers 101). Vagueness leads to excluding details relevant to a case while over completeness may include details that are irrelevant to the case, such as the physical attractiveness of the victim. Whether intentional or not, these rhetorical devices can change what a reader is thinking without the reader being aware of it.

The semantic strategies work in similar ways as rhetorical devices. Details such as what words are chosen and facts that are included can change the meaning of a story. While researching the Freaknik coverage, Meyers found victim blaming to be a common trend. For example, the Atlanta television station WXIA used phrases like “young girls” and “lewd conduct” in various reports, which implied victim blaming (Meyers 105 and 110). “Young girls” suggested age and naivety played a role in the violence while “lewd conduct” hinted at the notion that the women drew unwanted attention towards themselves. Implicit comments like these can diminish the severity of the crimes and the empathy people feel towards victims. Jiwani and Young built on the issues of victim-blaming narratives Meyers discussed through their own research. In their literature review, much of the work Jiwani and Young found concluded that there was a trend of using stereotypes of promiscuous women acting in a way that was perceived as “inappropriate,” implying that behaving outside the standard female image led to the violence against the women (Jiwani and Young 901). According to Jiwani and Young’s research, women who stray from the ideals of “proper” or “traditional,” such as women who make a living through sex work, are portrayed in the media as outcasts of society because it is not perceived as an acceptable way of life to many people. The issue with semantic strategies such as victim blaming is they typically take away from the case itself or the perpetrator by focusing on what the victim could have done differently to protect herself from violence. Between all the different components of framing theory, news values and selection bias, gender and racial stereotypes and rhetorical analysis, a homicide story involving a female victim has potential to take on an entirely different meaning.

After reviewing the literature of other scholars regarding the topic of framing female victims in homicide reporting, there are still unanswered questions and gaps in the research.

First, several of the studies regarding the effects of stereotypes in crime reporting focused on television instead of print news. I conducted research on print media to see if the trends travel across different media platforms. Secondly, a significant amount of the secondary literature consisted of quantitative content analysis, which does not cover the meaning of their findings. For example, content analysis cannot explain the connotation the Jezebel trope may have, and how it may affect a reader's interpretation of the narrative. Min and Feaster suggested in their research that additional work needed to be done focusing on *how* cases are covered. Having said this, I conducted a discourse analysis on homicide reporting in print news in order to begin to understand the implications of selection bias and tropes regarding female victims by asking the following question: *How is Alexandria Kostial's murder covered in print media compared to Aniah Blanchard's?*

## RESEARCH METHOD

To investigate how women are framed in homicide reporting, I used a discourse analysis to look at how paradigmatic relationships, including word choice, and syntagmatic relationships, referring to the placement and order of words, affect framing in news stories. I investigated two specific cases to analyze, compare and contrast: the murders of Alexandria "Ally" Kostial and Aniah Blanchard. I selected these two cases because many aspects of their demographic profiles and cases were similar. The victims themselves were both college-aged, lived in the South, murdered within the same year and by a firearm. The one major variation between the two women was the racial difference: Kostial was a White woman and Blanchard was a Black woman. There were significant similarities between the two women, which allowed for outside factors to be as limited as possible to conduct an accurate and fair analysis.

The primary sources I analyzed included newspaper articles and newswires for each case compiled from the Nexis Uni database. I narrowed the search with various filters, including having to be reported in 2019 when both cases occurred, along with the articles being written in English and published in North America as both cases occurred in the United States. After applying the filters, Blanchard yielded 53 results and Kostial yielded 22 results. Two folders with the complete result list for both Blanchard and Kostial were created in order to have a record of all the available articles. From there, I created a random sample of 18 articles for Blanchard's case and 18 for Kostial's. In order to ensure a random sample, each article received a number and then a random generator selected articles for each case in order to get a fair and varied representation of the coverages. In cases where a selection was not a relevant news article, such as a letter to the editor, opinion column, a duplicate or altogether unrelated, such as published honor roll lists, I eliminated it from the set and selected a new number in order to keep the focus on homicide reporting. Because four of the articles in the 22 from Kostial's results were disqualified because they did not relate to the case, that is how the random sample became 18 articles for each. After selecting the articles correlating with the numbers from the random number generator, I created an additional two folders with the article sample for both Blanchard and Kostial.

Of the articles selected for each case, I read the first 10 in depth for analysis and then read the remaining eight to see how they supported or varied from already established claims and patterns. Throughout the analysis, I looked for a few different components. First, I read to see if the articles used racial and/or gender stereotypical language in reporting the victims. I identified stereotypical language by words and phrases which could be considered offensive and/or inaccurate. I defined "offensive" as words and phrases which elicit personal anger, feelings of

disrespect and appear indecently exaggerated. I defined “inaccurate” as words and phrases which are generalizations, misleading or imprecise to the reader. Building on this, I read to see if the articles used victim-blaming language. I identified victim-blaming language as passages where the victim appeared undermined, including doubtful vocabulary like if the victim “alleged” or “claimed” something about the perpetrator prior to the murder that was ignored. Along with this, I noted *how* the reporters told the stories by looking for stylistic choices such as active versus passive voice, the placement of details about the victims, how the articles described the victims and more. Looking for this correlated with looking for stereotypical and victim-blaming language. As I read the articles, I looked for other emerging patterns as well that I may have been unaware of prior to starting my research. Overall, I looked for how the two women were described paradigmatically, and then how syntagmatically these factors affected the framing of the story with word choice, order and placement.

I organized the data by taking detailed notes throughout each reading. I highlighted important details like stereotypical or victim-blaming language used, and noted placement of details, such as names or descriptors in the lede or headline, in order to elicit themes occurring within the stories. After reading each article individually, I looked broadly at the information I noted to elicit themes in the smaller details.

## ANALYSIS

The coverage of the murders of Ally Kostial and Aniah Blanchard had characteristics unique to their individual cases, along with similar patterns emerging in both. The stories selected were a mix of stand-alone articles from newspaper publications, sections of news roundups, or stories included in university-related publications. A couple of differences stood out between the coverage of Kostial and Blanchard. First, some of the stories used for the analysis in Blanchard’s

coverage focused on the development of “Aniah’s Law” resulting from her murder, yet I included them due to the fact that the articles continued to discuss the case in detail. Second, Blanchard’s sample had more roundup-style articles where sports sections covered her story because of Blanchard’s familial relationship with Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) athlete Walt Harris. Although many of the articles from each case were relatively short, falling anywhere from 100 words to, at most, 2,000 words, patterns quickly emerged throughout the coverage.

*Alexandria Kostial.*

Beginning with the coverage of Ally Kostial, several prominent patterns and trends emerged in the sample. First, when analyzing the articles on Kostial’s murder, the reporting downplayed the victim and her case by overlooking details related to her. Brandon Theesfeld, the suspect charged with the murder of Kostial, was given more attention, detail and space in the articles than the victim herself. How the reporting described Theesfeld compared to Kostial downplayed the significance of his alleged crime and her murder.

Examples of overshadowing Kostial were seen throughout various articles. In an article covering the arrest of Theesfeld within days following Kostial’s murder, the lede mentioned Kostial as “an Ole Miss Student,” and then she received no further attention until paragraph 11 of 14; however, the reporting explained Theesfeld’s background, especially focused on his education, earlier than the details of the crime, such as when and where the police found Kostial’s body, receiving placement by the fifth paragraph (Dmcarthur “Arrest Made”). The omission of details regarding Kostial and the murder were present in other articles within the sample as well. In fact, a couple of articles did not mention Kostial by name in the lede, and she was not directly referenced until the second or even third paragraph (Moore “Texas man; Quon).

A standard practice in journalism is delayed identification in a lede for people without prominence; however, doing so undermines the importance of the victim. Although both the crime itself and the charges against Theesfeld directly related to Kostial, the placement and indirectness of Kostial's information and key details made her appear to be a minor detail to the story.

The reporting portrayed Kostial as a minor role in comparison to how the coverage portrayed Theesfeld. For example, one story introduced Theesfeld as the "Ole Miss student who was charged with the murder" yet failed to mention how Kostial was also an Ole Miss student, but instead described her only as a "21-year-old" (Dmcarthur "Bond hearing"). The same instance occurred in a separate Mississippi-based publication ("Former student"). Although a minor detail, this showed how different publications portrayed Kostial in a similar light and placed more emphasis on Theesfeld than her. Another story described Theesfeld as "the now-suspended Ole Miss business student" and acknowledged Kostial as a "fellow 21-year-old student" after the fact (Dmcarthur "Investigation planned"). Reporters are expected to aim to be as objective as possible to maintain credibility; therefore, they will often include detailed information regarding multiple perspectives on a case. In this instance, reporters aimed to provide details on both the victim, Kostial, and the charged suspect, Theesfeld. Although the coverage aimed to present multiple perspectives, the imbalance of details given about Kostial compared to Theesfeld appeared to make Kostial a secondary focus of the story. Referring to the paradox introduced by scholars Bird and Dardenne in the literature review, reporters may focus so much on creating an interesting storyline while simultaneously striving for objectivity that by doing so the hard facts about the case are made unclear.

A common trend throughout all of the articles was the description of Kostial as an “Ole Miss student,” at times placing emphasis on that title over her name. In all but two of the headlines of the 18 in the sample, Kostial was not mentioned by name, but almost always replaced with the phrase “Ole Miss student” instead. The University of Mississippi, better known as “Ole Miss,” is a reputable institution, and referring to the fact Kostial was a student there showed a sign of respect towards her; however, the generalized title overshadowed who Kostial was as an individual. Meanwhile, articles where Theesfeld was referenced as an “Ole Miss student” above all downplayed the extent of the crime because of the impressive association with the “student” title. Having the title frequently associated with Theesfeld may lead the reader to feel a sense of pity for how a promising student became involved with a murder or may even have readers second guess Theesfeld because of a seemingly promising description. Although all may be for the sake of keeping the reporting unbiased so as to avoid the article becoming skewed against Theesfeld, the attention to detail and emphasis placed on him created a new bias by overshadowing the victim and her murder. As seen from the examples, an issue that arises is if a reader is being introduced to the case with one of these articles, Kostial may be overlooked because the lack of emphasis and lack of specificity on details directly relating to her while the coverage emphasized the details of the suspect.

Having said this, it is important to take journalistic standards and practices into consideration in how they influence how reporters write stories, thus how coverage is framed. The majority of news articles tend to follow an inverted pyramid structure, meaning the prioritized information is introduced at the start of the article and supplementary details come later. Because Theesfeld was typically discussed first in the coverage, Kostial was seen as an afterthought where her information was not included until later in the piece or sometimes placed



at the end where some readers may not even reach. In addition, journalistic ethics like privacy and sensitivity may play a role in the framing of the coverage. However, intentional or not, the consequences ultimately appeared to overlook Kostial to the point where readers are unable to remember her. The journalistic standards set for reporters to follow may not be appropriate when it comes to crime reporting. Using practices like delayed identification and inverted pyramid structure along with the pressures to include multiple perspectives for a story, even in a case focused on the murder of one, may be consequently overshadowing what the case is truly about.

Another pattern contributing to the downplaying of Kostial and her murder was the lack of active voice. Writing in the active voice is stronger and more urgent than other styles including the passive voice, which tends to be lengthier, muddled and confusing for the reader. In Kostial's coverage, the lack of active voice made the crime appear less severe than the reality of the situation. For example, an article about Theesfeld's bond hearing described Theesfeld in the perfect tense with the appositive of "the Ole Miss student who was charged with the murder," which reads with less urgency and severity than if the reporter used active voice with writing such as "*Authorities charged* the Ole Miss student with the murder" (Dmcarthur "Bond hearing"). The lack of active voice in regard to Theesfeld deemphasized the charges against him for the murder of Kostial. In the former example, emphasis on Theesfeld as "the Ole Miss student" is achieved, but at the expense of overlooking the action of being charged with Kostial's murder. Even though active and passive voice may ultimately provide the same information, using one over another holds the power to change the frame the reader views the story in, and whether they focus on Theesfeld or Kostial.

Lastly, Kostial is undermined as the victim by vagueness in details throughout the coverage. Vagueness relating to Kostial was seen in various ways throughout the article sample.

A general pattern throughout was even though most of the articles referred to Kostial as an “Ole Miss student” only four of the 18 selected articles mentioned how she studied marketing in school whereas the coverage mentioned Theesfeld as a business student 11 times. The lack of information about Kostial compared to the increased detail of Theesfeld contributed to the reader being able to envision a clearer image of the perpetrator than of the victim, which may have consequences. As referenced in the literature review, Marian Meyers found in her research how vagueness in details contributes to a victim-blaming narrative because it creates a sense of doubt about the case; in turn, the reader’s uncertainty about the case weakens the severity of the crime. An example of vagueness appeared in an article about Kostial’s murder where the reporting read that Theesfeld “was in some sort of relationship with Kostial,” which may leave the reader with confusion and concerns (Moore “Defense withdraws”). A separate article from the same publication and author used an identical phrase in another story about Kostial’s murder about a month later (Moore “Texas man”). The attention continued to be placed on Theesfeld, and the phrase left readers with several unanswered questions: Was it a romantic relationship gone wrong? If so, did she do something to upset him? Has Theesfeld acted in similar ways in other relationships? Confusion leads to uncertainty for the reader, which can lead to uncertainty about the story as a whole. In fairness, details may have been unavailable to the reporter. One article mentioned how the authorities withheld details about Kostial and Theesfeld’s relationship because at the time of the report the investigation was ongoing (Moore “Defense withdraws”). Having said this, if the reporter was unsure about a detail and was unable to confirm, typically the journalistic rule is to not include it. A common standard in journalism is to confirm details in a story before reporting them. In Kostial’s case, this meant if her and Theesfeld’s relationship

was not confirmed or denied there should have been more consideration to including it because concrete and certain information was unavailable.

*Aniah Blanchard.*

Like Kostial's case, the coverage of Aniah Blanchard revealed patterns of overlooking the victim, some which overlapped with Kostial and some entirely new. A portion of the coverage downplayed Blanchard as a victim by excluding individual characteristics. In some instances, Blanchard's appositive referenced her simply by the relation to her stepfather, UFC fighter Walt Harris. By focusing on this relationship, a reader may be struck by the namedrop of Harris as a public figure that Blanchard's name is overlooked. The story of her murder turns into how Harris felt and was impacted rather than what happened to Blanchard.

The association between Blanchard and Harris was frequently used throughout the coverage. Some articles made Harris the main focus instead of Blanchard from the headline on. One headline read "UFC fighter's missing stepdaughter: Body found during search," which brought the stepfather into consideration before the victim (The Associated Press). Other articles did not make the association as high of a priority, yet still included it. A sports roundup discussing the case referred to Blanchard as "Walt Harris' stepdaughter," and she was not mentioned by name until the last paragraph ("Hamstring will"). In another article, the second paragraph mentioned that "a number of UFC fighters have tweeted out their condolences for Harris and his family" before ever mentioning details of the case, thus framing the story as a tragedy about him and his family rather than a tragedy about Blanchard (Clarke). The mention of Harris came before details about Blanchard, such as her age, gender and the fact that she was a college student. By the coverage placing the emphasis on Harris, the attention was redirected away from Blanchard, who was the main subject of the homicide story.

As a reporter, including the connection to the UFC served as a way to increase readership because the story then becomes the interest of sports fans. Harris is a public figure and holds prominence, so mentioning his name draws attention to Blanchard's case. Even when the articles do not mention Harris by name, the connection to the UFC is enough to spark people's interest who maybe would not read about the case otherwise. Because of Blanchard and Harris's relationship and association, the story can then be applied to other areas, such as sports reporting, which leads to more awareness and readership of Blanchard's case. Although the attention can be positive by leading people to want to take action or seek justice for Blanchard, the result of placing the emphasis on Harris and the UFC leaves the reader remembering that component of the story more than recognizing Blanchard's. Mentioning the connection later in the piece may be valid information to include; however, the result of making the connection a priority consequently delayed Blanchard's details further into the piece, thus leading the reader to perceive the victim as a less-important aspect.

Although there were still instances of Blanchard being overlooked in the coverage, there was greater recognition for her case and accountability for bringing the victim justice. Overall, the coverage avoided incorporating racial stereotypes of Blanchard, unlike what Meyers found in her previous research of homicide reporting with Black women. Several patterns throughout the coverage may help explain how the coverage avoided stereotypes. One way the reporting did this was by writing with a more active voice. Although the use of passive voice in portions was still present, having a greater amount of active passages gave the story more momentum because it read with urgency while also being clear and concise. For example, when discussing Ibraheem Yazeed, the main suspect of Blanchard's murder, the article wrote how "police apprehended... and charged him," which reads assertively and leads the reader to believe the case was actively

being worked on (Clarke). The use of active voice allowed for better clarification on the standing of the case and the main people involved, especially in regard to Yazeed, who received fewer details than Brandon Theesfeld did in Ally Kostial's case. For example, one article only gave Yazeed's age in his appositive, another only providing age and where he lived (Clarke; Medina "Police confirm"). In fact, some reporters were less forgiving with how they referenced Yazeed. For example, one article stated the lede as "Ibraheem Yazeed, the man accused of kidnapping Aniah Blanchard," which made clear from the beginning that he was the suspect in Blanchard's case (Medina "Aniah Blanchard update"). The limited details about Yazeed directed more attention towards the main story of Blanchard's murder and made his connection to the case clear. Another article referenced Yazeed as "the man accused of killing [Blanchard]" when introducing him so as to be transparent with the reader about how he was connected to Blanchard's case (Nunnally). Active voice made the writing concise while also emphasizing the severity of the crime.

Active voice also helped with clarity regarding the current standing of the case. For example, one article provided updates and a timeline of the crime starting with how "U.S. Marshals arrested a man," followed with "Police identified Ibraheem Yazeed, 30, as a suspect in the case," and continued to give short paragraphs explaining case details, including forensic testing of the Blanchard's blood sample (Cox Media Group National Content Desk). The short updates on the case not only helped the reader follow along with the current status of the investigation but helped prevent a victim-blaming narrative from emerging. With consistent, brief and objective updates, following along with the case was simple and easily understood. Readers were not left trying to fill in the missing pieces, which may elicit doubt.

The final major characteristic in the coverage of Blanchard was an emphasis on finding justice for her death. In the coverage, a handful of articles called for justice for Blanchard by including sources and quotes from significant public figures who called for action on the case and finding peace for Blanchard's loved ones. A couple of examples stood out amongst the coverage. First, one article quoted Brandon Hughes, the Lee County District Attorney involved with charging Yazeed for the murder, as saying how "the process of seeing justice done on behalf of Aniah and her family will not be swift, but it will be thorough" (Cox Media Group National Content Desk). The quote emphasized the attention the justice system planned to put into seeking justice for Blanchard's murder, which suggested the high significance of this case to the reader, thus leaving them more apt to follow updates on the trial. Another notable quote was from Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, whose statement appeared in several articles regarding Blanchard's case. In the included quote, Ivey noted how "I will be keeping them [Aniah's family] in my prayers and ask the people of Alabama to continue to do so as well" (Clarke; Medina "Police confirm"). Like Hughes's quote, it called for peace for both Blanchard and her loved ones. An important aspect of the quotes was how both kept the focus on Blanchard by not mentioning Yazeed. By doing so, readers were more apt to remember Blanchard from the story and have a positive connotation of her; if public figures take the time to speak about her and be included in various publications about Blanchard's murder, it implied that Blanchard was a promising woman, thus making more people likely to follow the story and fight for justice on her behalf. Where murder is a sensitive news topic, including the statements from the public figures at the end may have been an attempt to end the disturbing topic on a more inspirational note. Although the quotes were at the end, including the quotes about justice for Blanchard created a

positive connotation because the reader will associate Blanchard as a woman held in high regard to others and as someone worth remembering.

## CONCLUSION

While analyzing the print news coverage of both Kostial and Blanchard's murders, several observations were apparent. The first involved quantitative patterns. Overall, Blanchard's case received significantly more coverage than Kostial's. Blanchard's complete sample resulted in 53 articles whereas Kostial only yielded 22 articles. A contributing factor to this was likely due to Blanchard's familial relationship with Harris, which gave her case prominence. Because Blanchard received more coverage, there was a greater variety of sources to see how different publications talked about the same case. On the other hand, there was not much source variety covering Kostial's murder with most of the articles coming from publications including the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* or *Daily Mississippian*. Because it was the same publications continuously covering Kostial's case, it follows that the journalists would talk about Kostial consistently across several articles. Another important note to make is how *Daily Mississippian* is a student-run newspaper out of the University of Mississippi. Although I do not believe that discredits the reporting and coverage of Kostial's case, it may be worth noting in future research if there is a difference in coverage between student-run versus professional publications.

Another quantitative pattern observed in the coverage involved the amount of times each of the articles mentioned the women by name in both the headline and the lede, the opening statement of the article which identifies the key components of the story to follow. Blanchard was mentioned by name in the headlines 10 out of the 18 articles in the sample, and in eight out of the 18 articles in the lede; however, the coverage of Kostial only mentioned her by name in

the headline three times out of the 18 articles and in the lede six out of the 18 articles. The fact that Kostial's coverage rarely referenced her by name may return to the fact of how the same authors and publications wrote the majority of the articles, which tended to simply refer to her as an "Ole Miss student." By adding Blanchard's name to her coverage, the coverage felt more personal by recognizing the individual herself. On the other hand, excluding Kostial's name resulted in the reader feeling more detached from the case and finished the article without recognizing the woman's name, only that she was a student and a homicide victim, which contributes to the issue of vagueness discussed in the analysis.

In addition, several qualitative observations and connections between Kostial and Blanchard's coverage were made throughout the analysis. First, Kostial's case seemed more doubtful than Blanchard's in two significant ways. First, Blanchard's coverage had more concrete explanations on the timeline and what happened in the case than Kostial's. For example, several sources explained how it appeared Yazeed watched Blanchard throughout the store they were both in and how he forced her against her will to go with him, which may have led a reader to feel that she truly was a victim. On the other hand, Kostial's case did not have as detailed of a timeline, and several articles in the sample mentioned the unclarified relationship between Kostial and Theesfeld, which added doubt and may have led a reader to believe there was a deeper story behind her murder if they had an established relationship beforehand. The reason for the difference in timelines and clarity may have simply been because of the difference in evidence available for each of the cases, but unfortunately it appeared to come back negatively on the victim, especially in Kostial's case.

Secondly, there was less emphasis on the suspect in Blanchard's case than Kostial's. Theesfeld received significantly more attention and detail than Yazeed. The sample included



whole articles focused specifically on Theesfeld, which spent a significant amount of time on his educational background, notably how he was also a student at Ole Miss. An important observation made here was how Theesfeld is a White man whereas Yazeed is a Black man. The racial difference between the two suspects may have played a role in how each was covered, Theesfeld being framed as the promising Ole Miss student gone wrong while Yazeed being framed as a criminal. Yazeed did have a criminal background prior to Blanchard's disappearance and murder, but that background was what reporters focused on when the story included him, stereotyping Yazeed as a violent Black man. The reporting appeared to constantly justify Theesfeld's character in Kostial's coverage while emphasizing negative aspects of Yazeed's in Blanchard's coverage. The framing of the perpetrators likely influenced the framing of the victims themselves. In Kostial's coverage, the readers were left with a less severe, even a promising depiction of Theesfeld, which undermined the impact of Kostial as a victim; however, Blanchard's coverage left readers with an adverse and hostile view of Yazeed, thus Blanchard was clearly seen as a victim to this seemingly unfavorable suspect. In fact, stereotyping amongst the male suspects of the murders was more apparent than stereotypes of the female victims in this case study.

A positive finding was that the use of stereotypes was not as prominent of a pattern as anticipated at the start of the research. There did not appear to be clear stereotypical language regarding the victims used in either Kostial or Blanchard's media coverage, such as a Jezebel trope or otherwise. The problems throughout the coverage came from other components, such as syntagmatic relationships, including placement of names and details, and paradigmatic relationships, such as how each of the women were described with Kostial predominantly as a student, Blanchard as the stepdaughter of a UFC fighter. Although stereotyping may not be as

prominent of a problem as initially thought, there were still aspects affecting how the victims were depicted in the homicide coverage, some of which involved traditional journalistic standards.

While attempting to answer the set research question, more questions came up throughout the study where future research may be helpful. First, if possible, it may help to find two cases on more equal standards. Although the cases of Kostial and Blanchard were demographically similar, Blanchard had a high-profile association because of her stepfather whereas only a handful of local sources and journalists covered Kostial. If there are two cases which are both demographically similar yet are more equal in the distribution and variety of coverage, it would be beneficial to enhance the findings of this research while also potentially offering new observations and patterns.

In addition, it may be helpful to go back and focus more on stereotypes, which was not as significant in this case study. To do this, beneficial future research would be to look at it from a historical approach by seeing how the coverage of an older homicide case compares to a contemporary one. This would allow researchers to see if the use of stereotypes and rhetorical devices have changed over time. Building on this, it would be interesting to do further investigation on if the suspect's race or gender plays a role in the framing of a victim. Whether that be with a new case study or building off the existing comparison of Theesfeld and Yazeed, it would be interesting to research if stereotypes and word choice regarding the suspect impacts the framing and depiction of a victim in homicide reporting.

In this case study, a significant impact of the framing of female homicide victims boiled down to traditional journalistic practices. Journalists are trained to delay identification, use an inverted pyramid structure of main points followed by specific details later, and cover several

angles in a story to provide balance. Technically speaking, they are following set guidelines; however, the rules of journalistic writing may unknowingly be affecting how news coverage talks about victims. By not mentioning a woman's name early on in an article, by providing more details on the suspect than the victim, and by placing personal details of a victim as the last sections in an article following an inverted pyramid structure, the identity of Kostial and Blanchard were sometimes lost. A reader finishes an article being able to remember details regarding the suspect of her murder, her family, and her education before being able to remember her. Although traditional journalistic practices work for other types of coverage and reporting, it may not be the most sensitive in terms of the victims, as found with this case study. The response does not need to be so drastic as to overhaul the standards of journalistic writing, but it begs the question of how to balance objectivity in reporting with sensitivity to the victims so as to not lose the women in the words.

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