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VICTIM BLAME OF MISSING PEOPLE BASED ON RACE AND MEDIA FRAMING.

by

CIARA PEEBLES
B.S. University of Central Florida, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Sociology
in the College of Sciences
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of a missing person's race and framing of their personal characteristics on participants' attribution of victim blame. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk ($N = 428$) and completed a 2x3 between-subjects experimental study. The victim's race (Black vs. White) and news media framing of the victim's personal characteristics (positive vs. mixed vs. negative) were manipulated, and victim blame was assessed through reactions to a mock news article about the missing person's case. A two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted (with the participants' race and Modern Racism Scale score as covariates), and results indicated that there was no significant main effect of either victim's race or media framing on attributions of victim blame. Their interaction was also not significant. The Modern Racism Scale was significantly positively correlated with attributions of victim blame. Because the primary analysis did not reveal significant results, it is important for future studies to further investigate and modify type of media framing techniques and assess their nuanced effects in relation to missing persons news stories.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Media criminology examines the relationship between crime and media in various forms by applying criminological and sociological theory (Greer, 2007; Jewkes and Linnemann, 2017). One important media form is crime news media, which focuses on sharing the latest crime news to the public. Similar to other types of news media, the majority of crime media aims to share news stories that garner the most public appeal and interest to efficiently gain the attention of general audiences. Researchers have studied trends in which story components influence media coverage. One of the main features that determines the potential value of any crime new stories is the newsworthiness of a crime story is, or the perception that it is worth reporting to the public (Jewkes and Linnemann, 2017).

Multiple factors influence the newsworthiness of a story, including the background and characteristics of the crime victim. Research has assessed what type of victims elicits the most public engagement and media coverage, which is rooted in the idea of an ideal victim, defined as “a person or category of individuals who, when hit by crime most readily is given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim” (Christie, 1986). Ideal victim status is often determined in part by race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and other demographic characteristics (Biehal, Mitchell, and Wade, 2003; Lundman, 2003; Greer, 2007; Gilchrist, 2010). This study specifically focuses on victim race, as several studies have theorized that White victims are more likely to be framed in a positive light than racial minority victims in the news media (Wanzo, 2008; Jeanis and Powers, 2017; Slakoff and Brennan, 2019). Furthermore, more studies have shown that Black victims are more likely to be framed in a negative light, and it has been commonly deduced that Black people are portrayed as perpetrators of crime more than they are as victims of crime (Dixon, 2006; Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2010). The framing

of an individual's background in a news story can also directly influence the news audiences' perceptions and attitudes towards crime victims. To investigate how the general news audience reacts to victims in media stories, many researchers have applied attribution theory to examine victim-blaming (Dukes and Gaither, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018). Blame attribution has most often been studied in relation to cases of sexual assault and domestic violence (George and Martínez, 2002; Bryant and Spencer, 2003; Donovan, 2007), so this study adds to the limited empirical research of blame attribution in relation to racial bias, victim framing, and missing persons cases. The main objective of the current study is to examine if and how individuals' level of victim blame fluctuates based on the race (Black vs. White) of a missing adult victim and media framing of the victim's background (positive vs. negative vs. mixed) before the victimization occurred. The results of this study may provide further insight into how impactful media framing can be on news consumers. To explore these questions, I first review past scholarly work on missing persons cases, media framing of victimization, news audience perception, and the social psychological topic of victim blame.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

General Background on Missing Persons

A missing person is defined as someone who has disappeared and their current location and fate is unknown (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2013). Once a person has been declared missing, they will be considered missing until their location and/or status of their well-being has been identified (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2013). An individual's disappearance is often voluntary, as the majority of missing people are recovered alive and unharmed (Tarling and Burrows, 2004; Newiss, 2005). Tarling and Burrows (2004) specifically found that over three-quarters of disappearances were resolved within two days. However, many other missing adults and children are missing due to involuntary or vulnerable circumstances, such as abduction or homicide. This category of missing people includes adults and children who were abducted or kidnapped, have a history of mental instability and/or substance use, or are juvenile runaways (Tarling and Burrows, 2004; James, Anderson, Putt, 2008; Holmes, 2016). Missing persons in this category run the risk of being mentally and physically harmed, and ultimately may never be recovered or are found deceased.

Missing persons are frequently shown in the news media to increase the chances of their recovery, as sharing details to the public may lead to information relating to their current whereabouts (Jeanis and Powers, 2017). However, there are missing persons cases that are never publicized on the news, making it much more difficult for people to receive the closure of knowing what happened to a missing friend or relative. News coverage is especially important for missing persons cases, as the public attention and appeals for information from the news generates a higher chance for the safe recovery of missing individuals (Holmes, 2016). Despite

this, there is limited research on the disparities within media coverage on missing persons, the profiles of types of missing persons, circumstances and reasons surrounding one's disappearance, and police and policy responses to missing persons (Biehal et al., 2003).

Because of the sparse amount of research relating to missing persons, it is difficult for police agencies, media, and the general public to provide and gather information on how to properly handle their cases. This is because there are little to no policy guidelines on how exactly missing persons cases should be reported in the news by the media and police, potentially leading to limited or inaccurate narratives of news stories on missing persons (Siddiqui and Wayland, 2021). Potential consequences of this include: a lack of external support for families of missing loved ones, certain types of missing persons receiving less media and law enforcement attention than other cases, and many missing persons cases staying unresolved and becoming cold cases due to lack of knowledge and attention (Biehal et al., 2003; James et al., 2008; Parr and Stevenson, 2013; van de Rijt, Song, Shor, and Burroway, 2018). Expanding scholarly research in this area could help immensely with raising public awareness. More research can also be used to guide prevention and intervention strategies for individuals that are at risk of going missing. Prevention strategies currently focus on identifying the risk and protective factors for why individuals go missing in order to reduce disappearances and create more preventive frameworks for missing persons (James et al., 2008). Intervention strategies concentrate on updating missing persons procedures and enhancing the response of agencies and community sectors to cases as soon as a person is reported missing (James et al., 2008). Additional research can also help provide more information and support for loved ones of missing persons, as well as create resolution for more missing persons' cases (Biehal et al., 2003). This specific study may be able to help examine how public attitudes are impacted by news reporting on missing persons

cases. To develop effective prevention and intervention strategies and expand future research, there is first a need to understand the scope of missing persons cases in the United States using national data sources.

The FBI National Crime Information Center (NCIC) collects national crime data on a variety of subjects, including data on current and past missing persons records that were reported to law enforcement agencies throughout the country each year. In 2019, the FBI's NCIC reported that more than 609,000 people were reported missing to law enforcement agencies in the United States (NCIC, 2020). There are no significant gender differences in missing persons cases between men (n=311,008; 51%) and women (n=298,190; 49%) (Slakoff and Fradella, 2019; NCIC, 2020). In terms of race, the majority of missing persons reported in 2019 were identified as White/Caucasian (n = 359,768; 59%), while the second highest number of cases were African American (n = 205,802; 34%) (NCIC, 2020). Because African Americans are estimated to only make up 13.4% of the national population, this statistic indicates that Black people are being reported missing at a disproportionate rate when compared to White people in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). However, research has shown that cases of missing Black people are featured in the news media at a substantially lower rate as cases as missing White people (Stillman, 2007; Wanzo, 2008; Gilchrist, 2010; Liebler, 2010; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). In addition, missing girls and women receive much more attention on news media than missing men do, despite the fact that men have a higher chance of being reported missing (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Taylor, Boisvert, Sims, and Garver, 2013; Sommers, 2016). Because of this, the underrepresentation of Black people and overrepresentation of White women in the news has been a consistent pattern identified in studies that investigate media coverage involving missing people's cases (Sommers, 2016; Jeanis and Powers, 2017; Moss, 2018).

Past Research on Missing Persons and Missing White Woman Syndrome

The majority of research on missing persons has primarily focused on media coverage and race and gender disparities for missing persons cases, and how newsworthiness of a missing person impacts the likelihood of news coverage for their case (Gilchrist, 2010; Slakoff, 2013; Sommers, 2016; Jeanis and Powers, 2017). Other research on media coverage has shown that neither race nor gender of missing persons are accurately represented in the news coverage of missing persons when compared to the national statistics of missing cases (Sommers, 2016; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). For example, Sommers (2016) conducted an analysis comparing the FBI missing persons database to missing persons articles that appeared on four major news sites (CNN, Chicago Tribune, The Minneapolis Star Tribune, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution) in the year 2013. The study results revealed that only 22% of missing persons cases that appeared in the news involved Black individuals (Sommers, 2016). Regarding gender, only 43% of news articles in 2016 focused on missing men/boys, even though men consisted of nearly 52% of the FBI database (Sommers, 2016). Overall, White women were more likely to have their cases appear on the news and were also likely to have repeated media coverage (47.74% of all media articles sampled; Sommers, 2016). Men and racial minorities also received much less online news coverage than women and White people (Sommers, 2016). Additionally, Slakoff and Fradella (2019) conducted a content analysis on almost 200 internet news articles (from years 2010, 2011, 2017, and 2018) and compared the concordance between the media representation of missing persons and national FBI NCIC statistics on missing cases for the year 2019. Results indicated that only 19.59% of news articles analyzed involved missing Black women and girls, even though this subgroup was estimated to make up 33.84% of national missing persons cases (Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). White missing girls and women were overrepresented (their cases

represented 68% of all media coverage despite only making up about 59% of FBI's national reported cases) and had more repeated media coverage than other groups (Slakoff and Fradella, 2019).

The trend of primarily emphasizing missing person cases with White woman victims in news media coverage is a significant issue since Black people go missing at a disproportionate rate. This disparity emphasizes the need for additional research related to missing persons as potential crime victims, particularly that which aims to understand and address the race disparity in news media representation of missing persons. Examining how these news disparities influence news audiences is also important since news is typically seen as an accurate representation of crime, therefore shaping people's perceptions of how much they should fear crime, who perpetrates the most crime, and who is most likely to be victimized (Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz, 1997; Romer, Jamieson, and Aday, 2003; Callanan, 2012). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how news consumers perceive missing persons based on a missing person's race and the framing of their news story. In this context, framing refers to how information is described and organized in a news story in order to convey a specific perspective to an audience (De Vreese, 2005). Importantly, I will assess how framing of a missing person's background (positive vs. negative vs. mixed) and race interact with one another to influence a news audience's perceptions.

News media and its disproportionate coverage of White missing victims at the expense of other victim populations led to the creation of the term "Missing White Woman Syndrome" (MWWS), which describes the phenomenon of news stories focusing primarily on young, middle to upper class White women and children (Stillman, 2007; Liebler, 2010; Everbach, 2013; Moss, 2018; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). Previous studies have examined several types of news media.

Two content analysis studies assessing the prevalence of MWWS within television news media indicated that the cases that were the most featured involved White victims, women, and children: this may influence a news audience to believe that White women and children are the most likely population to go missing (Wanzo, 2008; Moody et al. 2009). In addition, Liebler (2010) analyzed various types of media pieces where the concept of MWWS was specifically mentioned and discussed (such as magazines, cartoons, and various news stories) and concluded that cable news coverage plays a large part in propagandizing MWWS. Jeanis and Powers (2017) analyzed both television news and print news Louisiana's missing persons cases from 2009 to 2013 and found that missing White people received three times as much media attention than missing minorities, as well as having a higher coverage intensity (more articles and higher word counts on the articles) than missing racial minorities received.

Recent research has also started to investigate how MWWS occurs in online news media sites, as more people rely on the Internet and mobile news apps to keep up with the news (Gaskins and Jerit, 2012; Chan-Olmsted, Rim, and Zerba, 2013; Sommers, 2016; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). The results from these studies indicate that MWWS is not just prevalent in television or print news, but in the online news media channels as well. Despite the fact that news consumers may use different media types to receive news updates, they are just as likely to be exposed to patterns of MWWS. Not only do these studies support the general phenomenon of MWWS in Western news media, but they also add to the existing literature for missing victims since much empirical research has only focused on victims of violent crime and media coverage (Sorenson et al., 1998; Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak, 2009; Gruenewald et al., 2013; Bouchard, Wong, and Gushue, 2020).

Although the focus of the current study is on missing persons cases involving adults, it is important to note that the disparity in media attention based on race also applies to missing children. Past research indicates that Black/other racial minorities and male children are underrepresented in the media coverage of missing children (Min and Feaster, 2010; Taylor et al., 2013; Simmons & Woods, 2015; Sommers, 2016; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). One study further investigated how race and gender of a missing child was associated with recovery chances of missing children in New York and found that Black children remained missing longer than other children of different races (van de Rijt et al., 2018). Although MWWS affects both children and adults, missing children are still more likely to receive news coverage than missing adults. This can be attributed to a couple of reasons: children are typically seen as more helpless and vulnerable (Fritz and Altheide, 1987; Grosholz and Kubrin, 2007), children's disappearances are more likely to be due to abductions/kidnappings (Biehal et al., 2003), and the likelihood that an adult's disappearance is possibly intentional due to their own agency (i.e., running away/starting a new life) and behavior (Taylor, Woolnough, and Dickens, 2019). These factors are important to consider since the media and public perception of missing cases are likely impacted by the age of a missing individual, and a missing adult's case may not be viewed with the same urgency and gravity as a missing child's case (Grosholz and Kubrin, 2007; Taylor et al., 2013). However, there is still a sizable portion of adults who do not voluntarily go missing, as the FBI NCIC's has over 14,000 missing persons cases that are assumed to be involuntary/due to abduction/kidnapping and another 44,480 are assumed to be endangered out of the total reported missing persons cases (NCIC, 2020). Although this is a small portion, the risk assessment for missing adults may not accurately reflect on the true amount of involuntarily missing persons, due to how adults can be coded as 'voluntarily' missing even if they are

mentally handicapped or have escaped violent/abusive situations (Biehal et al., 2003; James et al., 2008). The lack of research on missing adults may contribute to why law enforcement can have difficulty with determining if a missing adult left voluntarily and will return on their own or if they are a victim of foul play (Newiss and Webb, 1999; Henderson, Kiernan, and Henderson, 2000). This suggests that there is a need for more empirical research that focuses primarily on missing adults.

Past research points to missing women being overrepresented in the news, but this is especially the case for White women in which they are often portrayed as ‘damsels in distress’, conveying the message that they are vulnerable and innocent (Stillman, 2007). This can be further connected to the concept of White femininity/womanhood, which expands on the idea that the White female body represents the ultimate form of purity and innocence and that White lives in general are more valuable than others (Dyer, 1997; Entman and Rojecki, 2001; Gilchrist, 2010). It is also common for Whiteness to be equated to beauty and attractiveness (Ghannam, 2008; Slakoff, and Fradella, 2019). This highlights that there is a social hierarchy with different subgroups of women, and this reinforces the devaluation and invisibility of racial minorities that are victimized by crime (Meyers, 1997; Collins, 2000; Gilchrist, 2010). Therefore, the present study represents an important contribution to this literature due to the focus on White and Black missing adult women and the critical race feminist/intersectional approach.

Critical Race Feminism and MWWS

The disparities involving media coverage of missing persons cases indicate that missing Black adult women are especially at risk for media neglect, which may impact the number of resources that are allocated to investigate their cases and the amount of information that can be collected to aid in the investigation (Moss, 2018). This problem can be viewed with a critical race theory/feminist outlook. Critical race theory states that institutions (such as mass media) emphasize the interests and power of White people at the expense of people of color (Brooks, 1994; Solorzano, 1997). This has led to the creation of critical race feminism (also referred to as Black Feminist thought); a subfield that aims to use the perspective of Black women scholars to illustrate that race and gender intersect to where minority women and girls are doubly oppressed by both sexism and racism (Collins, 2000; Potter, 2013). Patton and Ward (2016) illustrated this by applying the critical race feminist framework to ten cases of missing Black college-aged women and found that not only did their stories receive limited media attention, but that the stories tended to focus on numerous other details at the expense of the missing woman, such as the sensational nature of their deaths if they were found deceased, or positive details about the law enforcement involved in their cases. Positive details about the missing women (such as their pursuits in higher education) were rarely mentioned. These results add to the critical feminist perspective that the media does not highlight these stories or the positive aspects of the Black women in these stories in order to perpetuate the patriarchal White domination in the news media (Collins, 2000; Patton and Ward, 2016). Because this is a well-known issue among missing persons organizations and investigators, organizations such as the Black and Missing Foundation have been created to bring awareness to missing persons of color so that more Black missing individuals can be found and reunited with their loved ones and/or their cases can be closed after

proper investigation and resources has been allocated to their cases (Black and Missing, n.d.; Patton and Ward, 2016). Patton and Ward's study is one of the few studies that specifically analyzes missing Black women in a critical race feminist context. More scholarly research is needed in this to combat the attention inequality that is prevalent in crime news media (Greer, 2007).

Potential Consequences of MWWS

This disparity of race, gender, and age representation in the news media is troubling and may negatively impact the outcome of missing persons cases. Specifically, the underrepresentation of missing racial minorities and adult men in the media may affect the chances of solving the missing person's case and recovering them if they are still alive (Gilchrist, 2010; Sommers, 2016). Media coverage is often seen as an aid by law enforcement and the families and friends of the missing to help with recovering missing persons, as public attention can lead to identification or information of a person's whereabouts (Fyfe, Stevenson, and Woolnough, 2015; Patton and Ward, 2016; Jeanis and Powers, 2017). Resources and information that can be used to solve missing persons cases can come from both formal (such as law enforcement) and informal sources (the general public). Formal examples include missing persons alerts and conducting witness interviews and statements, while informal examples can include volunteer search parties (Fyfe et al., 2015). Oftentimes, media coverage is assumed to have a direct impact on how these other resources are allocated due to the external pressure and urgency caused to the public and law enforcement (Moody et al., 2009; Fyfe et al., 2015; Jeanis, Powers, Miley, Shunick, and Storms, 2021). This can be explained through the lens of agenda setting theory, which suggests that news media directly manipulates the crime stories that

generate the most attention and concern (Alitavoli and Kaveh, 2018). Missing persons investigations can be expensive, and police forces are limited with the amount of time and resources at their disposal, so it is not unwarranted to assume that resources are going to be allocated to the cases that the public and news media agenda deem as the ‘most important’ (Shalev Greene and Pakes, 2014; Fyfe et al., 2015; Jeanis and Powers, 2017). Because of the disproportionate levels of media attention between White/racial minority and men/women missing persons cases, these resources are less likely to be evenly distributed to all missing persons cases, which can impact the chances of certain types of missing individuals being recovered safely (Greer, 2007; Fyfe et al., 2015). An example of the results of this was demonstrated by Newiss (2005), where he analyzed approximately 1000 missing persons cases from the Police National Missing Persons Bureau and concluded that adult males and people of a racial minority/ethnic background were overrepresented in cases where an individual was missing for more than a year and had yet to be recovered. This demonstrates that the overrepresentation of White women may relate to the type of cases being solved. Given this disparity, it is important to also consider how media framing can contribute to factors that have implications for the potential well-being for missing victims and media consumers’ perception and concern towards solving missing cases.

Race Portrayals and Framing in Past Media

Framing describes how information is conveyed and may influence how the audience will process the information (Tankard, 2001; De Vreese, 2005; Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). It is important to focus on the framing of crime news and crime victims for various reasons. First, framing can impact one’s perception of crime victims and the type of people who are most at risk

of being victimized (Wanzo, 2008; Moody et al., 2009). Specifically, MWWS may frame victimization in new stories as if only middle class/upper middle class White girls and women are the most likely to go missing and/or be victimized. This type of disproportionate framing also makes the cases of missing males, missing women of color, and women of lower socioeconomic classes much more likely to be ignored by the media because of the false assumption that these populations are not as likely to go missing as White women and girls (Armstrong, 2013). Framing also can affect the audience's emotional reactions to news media, which can positively or negatively impact how a news consumer feels towards crime victims (Conlin and Davie, 2015). Specific types of news framing are crafted to trigger specific emotions (such as sympathy, sadness, and anger), as these strong emotions have a higher chance of holding the attention of news consumers and can act as a motive to continue following the news story (Price, Tewksbury, and Powers, 1997; Moody et al., 2008; Conlin and Davie, 2015). Because the occurrence of MWWS can influence many stories involving White victims to be framed in an only emotional/sympathetic light, news consumers may be more moved by crime stories that feature White victims (Wanzo, 2008; Jeanis and Powers, 2017; Slakoff and Brennan, 2019). The intensity of these emotional responses can also affect an individual's perceptions of crime (Lecheler, Schuck, and De Vreese, 2013; Lecheler, Bos, and Vliegthart, 2015).

A victim's race may impact the way they are framed in news stories (Moody et al., 2009; Patton and Ward; 2016; Slakoff and Brennan, 2020). There is a substantial amount of research on local and national televised crime news that shows that White people are more likely to be overrepresented as victims, while Black people are underrepresented as victims of crime and overrepresented as perpetrators or suspects of crimes (Romer, Jamieson, & De Coteau, 1998; Dixon, Azocar & Casas, 2003; Dixon, 2006; Entman and Gross, 2008; Bjornstrom et al., 2010).

This pattern can also be explained by the concept of newsworthiness, where stories involving White victims are seen as the more ideal by the mass media, and therefore, their stories of victimization are given preference to be covered on the news (Christie, 1986; Pritchard and Hughes, 1997; Gilchrist, 2010). It is important to acknowledge the framing of Black people as offenders or suspects may lead news readers to unconsciously associate negative personal characteristics to Black people (House, 2017; Feagin, 2020; Lane, Williams, Hunt, and Paulk, 2020). Feagin (2020) specifically coined the term ‘White racial frame’ to describe how this type of framing contributes to the systematic racism and oppression of the Black community. This type of framing being present in the media further contributes to and reinforces past and current negative racial attitudes towards the Black community as more likely to be involved in deviance and criminality compared to other races (Entman, 1992; Dixon, 2006; Welch, 2007; Entman and Gross, 2008; Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Lane et al, 2020).

Not only does the White racial framing of Black people impact how Black people are viewed as offenders, it also can impact how they are viewed when they are the victims or potential victims in a crime story. Compared to research on the framing of Black offenders, there is much less research available on the news framing for racial minority or Black victims. This may be because Black and other racial minority victims are less likely to be considered newsworthy since they do not fit the typical prototype of an ideal victim (Christie, 1986; Greer, 2007). The ideal victim to the public is typically seen as young, attractive White women, so it makes sense that Black victims would not fit this image (Christie, 1986; Ghannam, 2008; Slakoff, and Fradella, 2019). The research that focuses on Black and other racial minority victims provides intriguing results. A qualitative study that examined four major print newspapers (e.g., Los Angeles Times) and the front-page news stories containing female victims

of White, Black, or Latina representation revealed that Black and Latina women victims were significantly more likely to have unsympathetic themes in these stories, as many of the stories framed the victim as a ‘bad person’ or a ‘risk-taker’ (Slakoff and Brennan, 2019). Slakoff and Brennan (2020) provide further support for these ideas by assessing seven U.S. newspapers that featured White, Latina, or Black women victims, and found that news stories with White women victims were significantly more likely to have sympathetic narratives attached to their stories than Black or Latina women victims: sympathetic themes can include the usage of the victim being described as a ‘good person’ or ‘innocent’ (Slakoff and Brennan, 2020). Examining printed news and televised news in Louisiana, researchers examining media attention and the type of framing in missing persons cases found that White victims received nearly three times the amount of media attention than racial minority victims (Jeanis and Powers, 2017). However, all victims (regardless of race) were likely to be framed in a less positive light if they exhibited any deviant behavior or actions (such as consuming alcohol or drugs or having an occupation that violates societal norms) before their disappearance. This resulted in their disappearance being framed as a cautionary tale rather than a tragic event, and often the disappearance was portrayed as if it was their own fault (Jeanis and Powers, 2017). This does give credence to the idea that perhaps victim behavior and lifestyle choices may be more impactful on the narrative framework of a news story than the race of a victim.

The framing of lifestyle and behavioral factors may interact with a victim’s race to explain how a crime victim is perceived by news audiences (Madriz, 1997; Meyers, 1997). As stated before, framing helps give meaning to a news story and influence how the event being framed should be viewed (Tankard, 2001; De Vreese, 2005). Research shows that news framing of Black people tends to be less than ideal: crime, welfare, promiscuity, and other negative traits

have repeatedly framed to be associated with Black people in the news (Entman, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Entman and Rojecki, 2001; Dixon et al., 2003). It is also not uncommon for these traits to be used to frame a victim as having a ‘troubled past’ or for media to hyper focus on the problems and hardships individuals have faced, especially when it is a Black individual (Neely, 2015). Meanwhile, White victims are often portrayed as innocent and wholesome (Meyer, 1997; Entman and Rojecki, 2001). This is consistent with previous work on the White racial frame (Feagin, 2020). Past research also indicates that the presence of negative information is more likely to be stored and processed in people’s minds than the presence of positive information, contributing to the persistence of negative racial biases (Ito, Larsen, Smith, and Cacioppo, 1998; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs, 2001; Smith, Cacioppo, Larsen, and Chartrand, 2003). Relevant to media portrayals and the current study, this could mean that the inclusion of any negative information about a victims’ lifestyle/background can lead to more negative perceptions and attributions by news audiences, regardless of the inclusion of positive information. However, research is needed to specifically evaluate the impact of positive vs. negative vs. mixed (positive and negative) on victim blame attributions.

Applying Critical Race Feminist Theory to News Framing

Critical race feminism has not commonly been applied to studies relating to news framing of the missing Black/minority women, or victimized minority women in general. However, there are several other theoretical perspectives that scholars have used to explain racial disparities in media coverage, such as ethnic blame discourse (Romer et al., 1998, Dixon et al., 2003) and the racial threat hypothesis (Bjornstrom et al., 2010). Ethnic blame discourse is when deviant behavior is framed to only be conducted by the ‘ethnic’ outgroup (Romer et al., 1998,

Dixon et al., 2003). From this perspective, news consumers may assume that the ethnic outgroups (e.g., Black people) are the ones responsible for committing crimes. The racial threat hypothesis refers to the idea when the dominant group (White people) in society uses their status to control the criminal ‘threat’ of the subordinate group (Bjornstrom et al., 2010). These theories are valuable and have been applied to studies relating to race framing in the news, but critical race feminism can extend this because it emphasizes intersectionality and addresses how both patriarchal structure and racism in society affect black women and other women of color (Few, 2007; Moss, 2018). This theoretical framework also provides support for why Black women victims are more vulnerable to be negatively framed in the news, as news media often uses harmful descriptions and stereotypes that reinforces racism towards Black women (West, 2012; Slakoff, 2020). Applying critical race feminist theory in this context has the potential to aid in providing more insight of Black women’s experiences with news framing in the media, given that a lot of research specifically focuses on Black men.

Past scholars have focused primarily on the portrayal of Black men as criminals in the media (Dixon and Linz, 2000; Dixon, 2006; Entman and Gross, 2008); thus, there is not as much literature that focuses solely on Black women in a victim or offender context. Given what is known about the White racial frame reinforcing Black stereotypes and the general disregard for Black women in news media (Welch, 2007; Feagin, 2020; Lane et al., 2020), the inclusion of examining framing with critical race feminist thought is a needed area of exploration in this field of study. However, additional empirical research is needed to identify the consequences that this type of framing has on news consumers’ perceptions of crime victims. It is imperative to examine how the disproportionate framing of White victimization vs. Black criminality may influence the type of reactions a news consumer has towards different races of missing victims in

news stories. Existing research has investigated how a victim's race and framing influence a news consumer's overall reaction to a news story and indicates that racial minorities are more likely to be viewed negatively (Dixon, 2008; West and Lloyd, 2017; Vaes, Latrofa, Suitner, and Arcuri, 2017). With the knowledge that Black women victims and any racial minority community are more likely to experience negative narrative framing, investigating the possible implications that this has on the amount of victim blame that a news audience exhibits towards crime victims of different races is another research topic that is worthy of exploration.

Blame Attribution Theory in Past Research

Blame attribution theory is often applied to investigations of individuals' reactions and perceptions towards victims (Howard, 1984; Van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014; Adolfsson and Strömwall, 2017). The social psychological concept of attribution theory describes how people will use presented information to attribute responsibility in a situation (Heider, 1958; Howard, 1984). Although attribution theory covers a broad range of topics, attribution theory specifically used for victim blame has been applied to a multitude of topics such as victim blame in sexual assaults, victim culpability in violent crimes, and police brutality in the shootings of unarmed civilians (George and Martínez, 2002; Donovan, 2007; Cramer, Nobles, Amacker and Dovoedo, 2013; Dukes and Gaither, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018; Penone and Spaccatini, 2019; Sjöberg and Sarwar, 2020). Many of these studies have assessed blame attribution (degree of blame that individuals assign to victims, or victim blame) based on the victim's race/ethnicity or how a victim's behavior or characteristics are framed by the media. Research has already revealed that White victims receive more media attention than Black victims (Liebler, 2010; Moss, 2018; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019) and those Black and other racial minority victims are

more vulnerable to be framed negatively in news media (Entman and Gross, 2008; Slakoff and Brennan, 2019; 2020). As a result, victim blame that is perpetuated by the media and law enforcement has been identified as a potential negative consequence to victims of crime in past research (George and Martínez, 2002; Lodewijckx, de Kwaadsteniet and Nijstad, 2005; Donovan, 2007; Van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014; Dukes and Gaither, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018; Fix and Fix, 2020).

Although blame attribution theory has not often been specifically applied to missing persons cases, the repercussions of victim blame on criminal investigations and towards the victims of crime more generally have been extensively investigated in past research (Miller, Markman, and Handley, 2007; Cramer et al., 2013). Victim blame can be very harmful to the psychological state and well-being of victims and the victim's loved ones, as victim blame often contributes to retraumatization and distress after said victimization occurs, as well as increasing the likelihood of victim's experience anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Garnets, Herek, and Levy, 1990; Savani, Stephens, and Markus, 2011). Victim blame can also increase the likelihood of prejudice and discrimination towards certain types of victims (e.g., women that were sexually assaulted, or outgroup members experiencing hate crimes), making it more difficult for victims to receive proper justice for the crimes committed against them if they are assumed to hold more culpability than the offenders (Cramer, Clark III, Kehn, Burks, and Wechsler, 2014; Nir and Sophie, 2018). In the context of missing persons cases in the media, it is important to examine victim blame that news audiences display towards these stories, as victim blame may pose a threat to the public's and law enforcement's motivation to fully investigate an individual's disappearance (Sommers, 2016; Jeanis, and Powers, 2017). This can be especially true for

populations (such as women, racial minorities, etc.) that are already at risk of facing victimization simply due to being a part of disadvantaged groups.

It is important to note that most research relating to victim race and victim-blame has focused primarily on victims of sexual assault, which is likely due to how the existence of rape myths directly contributes to the victim-blame and overall negative perceptions of rape victims (Van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014). Past research determined that Black women rape victims were more likely to be blamed for their sexual assault than White women victims by study participants (George and Martínez, 2002; Donovan, 2007; Van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014). Critical race feminism can also be applied to understand these results, as the media representation of black women is often stereotypical and harmful, and that these depictions impact how a news audience views the Black community (Donovan, and Williams, 2002; West, 2012; Slakoff, 2020). Critical race feminist theory can also be applied to understanding rape myths towards black women, as research in critical race feminist theory/black feminist thought has uncovered that negative racial attitudes are often linked to rape myth acceptance (White, Strube, and Fisher, 1998; George and Martínez, 2002). For example, the jezebel stereotype portrays Black women as sexually promiscuous and has been commonly used to justify and disregard the sexual victimization of Black women for decades (Collins, 2002; West, 2012). Although the current study is related to missing victims rather than sexual assault victims, extant literature provides support to the idea that Black woman victims overall may face more victim blame. With the knowledge that missing Black women are less likely to receive attention from the news and face the possibility of being framed in a negative light, it would not be surprising to discover that missing Black women face more blame for their circumstances.

Media framing may influence news consumers' victim blame attributions, which could partially reflect the audience's existing perceptions of well-known biases and prejudices towards minorities (Meyers, 2004; Haider-Markel, Delehanty, and Beverlin, 2007; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018). This research assessed how negative framing and attitudes towards racial minorities contributes to placing culpability on Black people for their victimization (Dukes and Gaither, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018; Fix and Fix, 2020). An example of a factor that has been used by the media to frame Black people as more blameworthy is a victim's involvement with prior criminal activity before their victimization took place (even if it is unrelated to the actual victimization) since it is evident that the society is more likely to associate the Black community with criminal and deviant behavior (Entman, 1992; Entman and Gross, 2008). Two studies involving police-shooting vignettes found that respondents were less likely to fault police officers in a police-civilian shooting if the victim was both an ethnic minority and described to have a criminal background (Duke and Gaither, 2017; Fix & Fix, 2020). Moody-Ramirez and Cole (2018) used Twitter to analyze victim-blaming attitudes in the police shooting deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Their findings indicated that victim-blame discourse was used to justify their deaths, as many posts would refer to the idea that any prior criminal activity that the two men participated in was the reason they were killed. Race and class characteristics were also a consistent factor, as the two men were often referred to as 'thugs', 'savage', or other terms with racist connotations (Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018). With this in mind, inspecting racial attitudes in conjunction with victim blame within the present study may reveal worthy results.

Blame attribution that results from racial bias and media framing would benefit from future exploration. It should be noted that in all of these studies, the criminal activity that is being referenced to frame a victim in a negative light are typically minor criminal offenses, such

as using drugs or theft (Dukes and Gaither, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018; Fix and Fix, 2020). Studies across different forms of crime including sexual assault and police brutality support the idea that victim-blaming behavior may result from negative framing, particularly for Black victims. Ultimately, race must be considered when investigating victim traits that influence victim blame. Currently, there are no empirical studies that have directly applied blame attribution to missing persons cases and media coverage relating to missing persons to my knowledge, which is what this current study aims to explore. Although it is not guaranteed that all missing persons are victims of crime, it is important to determine the impacts of victim race and framing on blame attribution in missing persons cases.

The Current Study and Hypotheses

The present research study was developed to add to the limited empirical research relating to missing persons' cases of adults and media coverage. The study is also framed through a critical race feminist lens, which contributes to the current literature involving missing persons that is largely atheoretical. The majority of existing research has provided insight into the occurrence of MWWS (Slakoff, 2013; Sommers, 2016; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019); however, there is a dearth of research on the repercussions this has on the public perception of missing person's cases and victims. Past studies on missing persons have also primarily used content analyses to answer these research questions (Sommers, 2016; Jeanis and Powers, 2017; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019), adding to the value of the current study since the experimental design will allow researchers to determine causal effects a missing person's race and media framing on victim blame. Results have implications for how victim blame may influence how much concern and attention that news consumers express towards a victim in a news story.

Media attention and crime investigations tend to focus more on missing victims that are assumed to be in immediate physical danger (i.e., circumstances in which the victim is not missing voluntarily and therefore not culpable for their disappearance). This could also potentially affect the amount of attention and resources that are allocated to certain missing persons cases by the news and law enforcement, which directly impacts how likely it is for a missing persons case to be solved. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the extent to which victim race and type of framing impact the degree of blame that individuals will express towards missing persons. Based on the results of previous research, the following hypotheses were generated:

Hypothesis 1: Participants will attribute a greater amount of blame to Black victims of missing persons cases compared to White victims.

Hypothesis 2: Participants will attribute the least amount of blame to positively framed victims in the news. Mixed and negative framing will receive the most victim blame. It is not expected that the mixed vs. negative framing conditions will significantly differ, in line with past research which suggests that the presence of any negative information has a stronger influence on negative perceptions (rather than the absence of positive information) (Ito et al., 1998; Baumeister et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003)

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant interaction between victim race and framing on the amount of victim blame. Specifically, it is hypothesized that highest victim blame will be attributed when victims are Black and articles are framed negatively, and the lowest victim blame attributed when victims are White and articles are framed positively. It is expected that the difference in levels of blame will be smaller between Black and White victims if the victim's framing is primarily positive.

CHAPTER THREE: DATA AND METHODS

Participants and Procedure

An a priori power analysis was conducted with G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, and Lang, 2009). It was determined that a minimum of 416 participants are required to obtain the statistical power (power = .80; alpha = .05; small to medium effect size ($f = .25$) necessary for hypothesis testing (main effects and interactions). To account for missing data and other data exclusions during the data cleaning process, we oversampled by 15% and recruited 480 participants, resulting in approximately 80 participants in each of the 6 experimental conditions.

Participants were recruited to participate in an online experimental study through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), through which individuals (referred to as MTurk workers) complete online tasks and studies developed by researchers (referred to as MTurk requesters). MTurk was selected for this study since it has a large, demographically and geographically diverse pool of workers, as it provides the ability to collect large amounts of data in relatively short time spans (Aguinis, Villamor, and Ramani, 2020). MTurk requesters often pay workers for completing online tasks (this can get converted to U.S. dollars or Amazon gift card credits), which worked as the main incentive in this study to encourage survey responses. To be eligible to participate, individuals had to be located within the United States and be 18 years of age or older. This is because the study was focused on United States crime news media, and all study materials were published in English. MTurk does give researchers the option to recruit workers that have a history of good performance while completing tasks, but no restrictions or other qualification measures were used for this study. However, Black participants were oversampled (ensuring at a minimum of one-third of the total sample identifies as Black) in order to assess

any potential racial differences in the dependent measures. No identifying information was collected. The survey was voluntary, and participants were compensated with \$1.40 for their time. The “Amplify Knight Voices and Broaden Community Connection” grant awarded by the Citizen Science GIS from University of Central Florida’s Sociology Department funded this study. All study procedures and the analytic plan were pre-registered through the Open Science Framework (OSF).

Once approval was obtained from the University of Central Florida’s Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited through MTurk. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Participants were compensated as long as they put their unique survey completion code into MTurk. The survey was displayed on MTurk as a HIT (Human Intelligence Task). Before any study materials could be viewed, participants were required to read an informed consent form and complete a CAPTCHA verification. Once potential respondents indicated that they are a verified MTurk worker and indicate their consent to participate, they were able to move forward with the study. Respondents first read a description of the study that informed them that they would be randomly assigned to read a news article on a current event and to report what they remember about it and their feelings on it. Finally, a brief debriefing page was included at the end of the survey to explain the true purpose of the study. Once the investigators confirmed that the participant input the correct survey completion code, the participants automatically received their compensation.

Description of Vignette

The study was a 2 (race: White vs. Black) x 3 (news media framing: positive vs. mixed vs. negative) between-subjects factorial design experiment. Participants were randomly assigned

to one of six conditions in which they read a news article vignette describing a missing persons case. The news articles were developed by the researchers with the feedback from undergraduate research assistants and are approximately 150 words each. Each condition described the disappearance of a young woman, and information about the victim's personal life and occupation (as a college student) before the disappearance served as the media framing in the vignettes. A neutral photo of the woman of either White or Black race was attached to the article. It should be clarified that the photos used were not real people, and instead were computer generated AI models. Details that were used to create the news media framing include the woman's personal characteristics based on two manipulated factors: 1) the description of the woman's personality, mental health, and family stability from family and 2) her reputation as a college student. The mixed condition included a combination of positive and negative elements for these factors, with one positive statement and one negative statement in both factors about the missing woman. A full vignette with a White woman victim and a positive background description reads as follows (from Appendix A), with the parentheses indicating alternate wordings for the race and framing information:

“Police are asking for public assistance relating to the disappearance of Jordan Ayers. Jordan, a (White) female college student, was last seen leaving a college bar around 12:40 am last Saturday. She told her friends that she decided to walk back to home since the bar was only about seven blocks from her apartment. She stated that she would text them all once she had arrived home. She has not been seen or heard from since. Friends and family generally described Jordan as a (responsible and hard-working student. She is not known to have any mental health or family issues, and is said to be a cheerful and kind individual in everyday interactions.). Police

currently consider her disappearance suspicious. If you believe any information or knowledge relating to Jordan Ayers or her whereabouts, please contact the proper authorities immediately.”

The only parts of the prompt that were manipulated are the race and victim framing. The victim’s age, gender (woman), and name (Jordan) stayed constant. See Appendix A for pictures and full articles for each condition.

Measures

Attention checks

There were multiple attention checks in between survey measures to verify that the participant was paying attention while they read study instructions and answered questions. An example of an attention check question stated ‘To ensure the quality of our data and verify you are following instructions, please select strongly agree for this question’. Participants that failed two or more of the attention check items were excluded from analyses.

Comprehension checks

This were multiple comprehension check questions displayed to the participant after they have finished reading the vignette and completed the dependent measures. The questions asked the participant to identify the race, sex, the type of crime event that took place. They were also asked to describe characteristics of the missing woman they just read about in an open-ended question. An example of a comprehension check question is “What was Jordan’s race in the news story?” where participants indicated what race the woman was based on the vignette photo and description. Participants that failed to identify the race and/or gender of the woman in the vignette were excluded from analyses. Refer to Appendix D for all comprehension check items.

Victim Blame Scale (Stromwall et al.,2013)

Victim blame was assessed with the Victim Blame Scale, created by Strömwall, Alfredsson, and Landström (2013). An example of an item is ‘To what extent do you think that Jordan [the victim] can be blamed for the event?’. The other three items asked about how respondents would rate the victim's fault, responsibility, and acting improperly before her disappearance. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The four items were summed into one victim blame scale score, and higher scores indicated more victim blame being placed on the missing woman for her disappearance. The Cronbach’s Alpha that was calculated for the Victim Blame Scale was 0.90. Appendix B displays all four Victim Blame Scale items used in the study.

Modern Racism Scale

To assess contemporary racial and prejudicial attitudes towards Black people, the Modern Racism Scale (MRS) was used. The scale was created by McConahan (1986) and consisted of seven items to measure racial attitudes towards the Black community. An example of an item from this scale includes ‘Discrimination against Blacks is no longer a problem in the United States’. This scale had a 5-point Likert scale scoring system, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale items were summed into a total score, and higher scores indicated that participants hold more negative racial attitudes towards Black people. The Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was 0.93. See Appendix C for all Modern Racism Scale items.

Demographics

Participants were asked to report their age, gender, racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and level of education. All demographic questions are shown in Appendix E.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Analytic Plan

Data cleaning

After the data collection was complete, the Qualtrics data was exported to SPSS version 27 (IBM) for data analysis. Any duplicate responses (i.e., multiple responses from the same worker ID) or responses where data were missing for the dependent variables were excluded from analyses. Participants who failed two or more attention check items or failed any comprehension check question were also excluded from analyses. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of each measure.

Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics (including means and standard deviations) and bivariate correlations between all variables were all assessed. Frequencies for demographic characteristics were also generated. Associations between participants' race and/or gender and the victim blame dependent measure were assessed to determine if they should be included as a covariate in the primary analyses. There were no gender differences in victim blame ($F(416) = 3.43, p = .065$), so gender was not included in the primary analyses. However, Black participants ($M = 2.24, SD = 1.28$) did report lower victim blame than White participants ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.43$), so participant race was included as a covariate in the primary analyses. Participant race was also dummy coded with the Black participants acting as the reference group.

Primary analyses

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted first to assess the main effects of each manipulation separately (performed first with then without covariates). Then, a two-way between-subjects Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to assess the main effects of the woman's race (H1) and framing (H2) and their interaction (H3) on victim blame (performed first with then without covariates). If the main effect of framing on victim blame is significant, a post hoc analysis will be conducted to determine which groups differ.

Demographics

In total, 486 participants completed the study on MTurk. There were a total of six experimental conditions that participants were randomly assigned to: 1) White missing woman and positive framing ($n = 68$), 2) White missing woman and mixed framing ($n = 70$), 3) White missing woman and negative framing ($n = 74$), 4) Black missing woman and positive framing ($n = 73$), 5) Black missing woman and mixed framing ($n = 70$), and 6) Black missing woman and negative framing ($n = 73$).

Data were exported from Qualtrics to SPSS (Version 27) for data cleaning and statistical analyses. Data cleaning and statistical analyses was conducted and saved through SPSS syntax. Participants who did not complete any of the questions from the dependent measure ($n = 19$), failed two or more attention check items ($n = 5$), failed the open-ended comprehension check item ($n = 11$), or failed at least one comprehension check question ($n = 29$) were excluded from analyses. In total, 58 participants were excluded, such that the final total sample size used in analyses exclusions was 428.

Of the 428 participants included in analyses, 184 participants identified as men (all cisgender) and 233 participants identified as women (231 cisgender, 2 transgender). Four participants chose ‘prefer not to say’ and one participant indicated that they were non-binary. To assess gender differences in victim blame, only men and women were compared. For race, participants could select all that apply from a list of racial identities. Participants who only selected White were exclusively coded as White, and participants that only selected Black were coded as Black. This was done to potential differences in endorsement of victim blame between Black and White participants. Individuals who selected more than one race from the list (including both White and Black), selected “Biracial or Multiracial”, or selected Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or “Other identity” were grouped together and coded as “another race”. The majority of participants were White (53.5%, $n = 224$), one third were Black (33.4%, $n = 140$), and the rest were coded as “Another race” (13.1%, $n = 55$). Race was coded as missing for participants ($n = 4$) who responded, “prefer not to say.” Participants’ ages ranged from 18 years old to 65 years or older ($M = 30.91$, $SD = 13.34$). See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Table 1: Sample Demographics (N = 428)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender (N = 417)		
Man	184	44.1%
Woman	233	55.9%
Non-binary	1	0.0%
Prefer not to say	4	0.1%
Race (N = 419)		
White	224	53.5%
Black	140	33.4%
Asian	43	9.1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	5	1.1%
Biracial/Multiracial	6	1.2%
Other identity	6	1.3%
Prefer not to say	4	0.1%
Education		
High School graduate	48	9.9%
Some College	90	18.5%
Associate's Degree	55	11.3%
Bachelor's Degree	189	38.9%
Graduate Degree	77	15.8%
Other/Prefer not to say	5	0.9%
Socioeconomic Status		
Working class	91	18.7%
Lower-middle class	101	20.8%
Middle class	211	43.4%
Upper-middle class	46	9.5%
Upper class	2	0.4%
Prefer not to say	12	2.5%

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the continuous study variables. The mean score of the Victim Blame Scale (VBS) was 2.37 ($SD = 1.36$) with the total scores ranging from 1 to 7, indicating that there was low endorsement on average of victim blame within the sample. The Modern Racism Scale (MRS) mean score was 1.86 ($SD = 1.01$); because total scores ranged from 1 to 5, this score is below the scale midpoint and implies low levels of negative racial attitudes towards the Black community. Further, Victim Blame and MRS were significantly positively associated with each other ($r(424) = .29, p < .001$). This suggests that higher MRS scores was associated with higher levels of victim blame.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlations (N = 428)

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Victim blame	428	2.37	1.36	—	
2. Modern racism	424	1.86	1.01	.29**	—

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Primary Analysis

To test all three hypotheses, a 3 (media framing) x 2 (missing woman's race) between-subjects ANCOVA was conducted with the VBS as the dependent variable and the MRS and participant race as covariates. First, we assessed the main effect of the race manipulation with a one-way ANOVA (without the addition of covariates), and then a one-way ANCOVA test was

conducted to assess the main effect of the race manipulation when accounting for Modern Racism and participant race. This process (i.e., one-way ANOVA followed by ANCOVA with Modern Racism and participant race) was repeated to also assess the main effect of the framing manipulation. Finally, a two-way ANOVA and two-way ANCOVA was performed to assess the interaction between the race and framing manipulations.

Main effect of race

A one-way ANOVA was conducted without covariates to assess the main effect of the missing victim's race on victim blame (H1). Contrary to what was hypothesized, results revealed that participants attributed more victim blame to a White ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.43$) woman compared to a Black ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.28$) woman ($F(427) = 3.87$, $p = .050$). However, when the MRS and participant race were added as covariates, the main effect of race was no longer significant ($F(418) = 2.23$, $p = .136$). This indicates that the race of the missing woman in the vignette did not significantly affect how much a participant blamed the missing woman for their disappearance after accounting for both participants' race and their MRS score.

Main effect of framing

Next, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess the main effect of framing on victim blame (H2). Results indicated that the effect of the media framing manipulation was not significant ($F(4, 27) = 1.96, p = .142$). There were no differences in victim blame attributions between participants assigned to the negative framing condition ($M = 2.53, SD = 1.35$), the positive framing condition ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.32$), and the mixed framing condition ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.40$). After adding in participant's race and MRS score as covariates, the main effect of framing remained nonsignificant ($F(4, 18) = 2.84, p = .059$), indicating that the type of media framing in the news article vignette was not related to victim blame. Because there was no significant difference found for the framing condition, post hoc tests were not conducted.

Race and framing interaction

Finally, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to assess the interaction between the race and media framing manipulations (H3). First, the model was assessed without covariates, and results indicated that there was no significant interaction ($F(2, 427) = 0.03, p = .972$). With participants' race and MRS score added as covariates, the interaction remained nonsignificant ($F(2, 418) = 0.27, p = .765$). The absence of interaction effect indicates that the relationship between the media framing condition and victim blame did not depend on the victims' race. See Table 3 for the full ANCOVA results.

Table 3: Two-way ANCOVA with race and framing manipulations predicting victim blame, controlling for participant race and the modern racism scale (N = 418)

Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Corrected Model	8	83.81	10.48	6.29	< .001**
Intercept	1	245.77	245.77	147.50	< .001**
Modern Racism Scale	1	67.90	67.90	40.75	< .001**
White (vs. Black) Participants	1	9.84	9.84	5.90	.016**
Another Race (vs Black) Participants	1	3.92	3.92	2.35	.126
Race Manipulation	1	3.54	3.54	2.12	.146
Framing Manipulation	2	9.16	4.58	2.75	.065
Race Manipulation * Framing Manipulation	2	0.89	0.45	0.27	.765
Error	410	683.16	1.67		
Total	419	3087.25		.	
Corrected Total	418	766.97		.	

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Research has shown there is an observed disparity in how the news media frames crime victims based on their demographic characteristics (Moody et al., 2009; Patton and Ward; 2016; Slakoff and Brennan, 2020). Specifically, research indicates that the mass media has perpetuated MWWS in news stories by disproportionately covering cases of missing white women over those of missing Black women (Liebler, 2010; Slakoff, 2013; Sommers, 2016). Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of a missing victim's race and media framing of their personal characteristics on victim blame endorsed by news consumers. Using an experimental design, I assessed if there were differences in participants' self-reported victim blame based on whether they read a mock news article describing a missing persons case with a 1) missing White or Black woman, and 2) positively, mixed, or negatively framed description of her personal characteristics.

Overall, the first hypothesis was not supported; a missing victim's race did not significantly impact participants' self-reported victim blame. When controlling for participants' race and racial attitudes, there were not significant differences in victim blame between a White missing woman and a Black missing woman. The level of victim blame that participants reported was relatively low, regardless of the experimental condition (2.37 on 1-7 scale). This may indicate that although there is a disparity in media coverage in that missing White victims typically receive more coverage than Black victims (Gilchrist, 2010; Sommers, 2016; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019), there is less of a racial disparity in victim blame when cases *are* covered. However, the absence of an effect in the current study does not necessarily indicate that a race disparity in victim blame does not exist in any population. Past research has shown that MTurk

workers tend to be more educated and more liberal than the average person (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012; Krupnikov and Levine, 2014; Huff and Tingley, 2015; Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner, 2015), which could have contributed to the low Modern Racism Scale scores in this sample. In addition, it is possible that nonsignificant race difference is related to the rapid spread of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that has occurred over the past few years, especially in the year 2020 after George Floyd's death, which might have been very salient for participants (Brunson and Stewart, 2021; Patnaude, Lomakina, Patel, and Bizel, 2021). Because the social movement has called attention to the inequality and mistreatment that the Black community from various institutions (primarily law enforcement) and has been receiving growing support in the United States, many White Americans have become more socially conscious and may be making an effort not to engage in problematic anti-Black behaviors, such as perpetuating victim blame of Black and other racial minority victims (Bouie, 2020). This is referred to as prosocial behavior, or prosocial involvement (Thielmann, Spadaro, and Balliet, 2020).

However, it is not clear if this finding reflects an actual shift in individuals' racial attitudes, or if it reflects social desirability bias in that expressing support towards anti-racist prosocial movements is becoming the expected societal norm. As more Americans are becoming aware of the increasing global support for Black Lives Matter, it is possible (although speculative) that this influenced some participants to indicate that they do not hold negative racial attitudes at all in the survey, potentially concealing their true way of thinking. It is also possible that those actively trying to overcome anti-Black bias may overcompensate by exhibiting harsher attitudes towards their White counterparts (Marcucci, 2020), which may have contributed to why participants reported significantly higher victim blame in the White victim condition in the study in the model without covariates (i.e., participant race and modern racism)

included. These findings are also in line with a few previous studies that concluded that victim race was not a significant predictor of victim blame reported by the media or news consumers, and that other factors (such as type of framing) had a stronger influence on audience perception and attitude (Conlin and Davie, 2015; Jeanis and Powers, 2017; Franklin and Garza, 2021).

There was no support for the second hypothesis; there was no significant main effect of the media framing manipulation on victim blame. I expected higher victim blame for participants in the negative and mixed conditions compared to the positive framing condition, consistent with past research that has shown that exposure to any negative information is associated with negative perceptions above and beyond the presence of positive information (Ito et al., 1998; Baumeister et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003). This could be due to several factors. First, participants in this study were only exposed to one article with one condition on a single occasion, whereas studies have shown that repetitive exposure to media framing is more likely to predict individuals' perceptions of and attitudes about media content (Price and Tewksbury, 1997; Nabi, 2003; Lecheler, Keer, Schuck, and Hänggli, 2015). Research has also shown that people have started to become aware of the media's strategies when framing a story, therefore lessening susceptibility of framing effects (Murray-Everett and Harrison, 2021). This also could be due to the type of frame itself; although each vignette did contain a computer-generated picture of a young woman to accompany it, the type of news framing in this experiment was primarily written, whereas it has been argued that visual framing (such as images and videos) has stronger framing effects on news audience compared to written and verbal framing (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, and de Vreese, 2015; Conlin and Davie, 2015). The visuals that accompanied the vignette in this study were also purposefully neutral, and many visual framing studies particularly analyze framing effects to visual frames that are emotionally valenced in

nature in order to intensify audiences' perceptions (Abraham and Appiah, 2006; Brantner, Lobinger, and Wetzstein, 2011; Keib, Espina, Lee, Wojdyski, Choi, and Bang, 2018). The background information that was used within the news frames in this study also could have affected the study sample's responses. There are many elements of an individual's behavior and/or lifestyle that can be used in multiple types of framing in news media. For example, a victim's criminal history has been a common framing piece that is included when investigating for victim blame (Duke and Gaither, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018; Fix & Fix, 2020), and that aspect was not included in the current study frame manipulation. The framing vignette only focused on the manipulation of two factors: reputation as a college student and description of the woman's personality, mental health, and family stability from family and friends. It is possible that framing manipulations created in this specific study were not enough to trigger strong presence framing effects in the sample. It is also possible that some of the aspects of the negative framing condition backfired and instead of evoking victim blame, elicited sympathy for the victim. For example, a victim's mental health history may lead participants to view the individual as more vulnerable and therefore increase victim blame for some participants (even if it decreases it for others.) Future research is necessary to better understand specific forms of framing and the specific reactions they elicit for news consumers.

The interactions between race and media framing were also nonsignificant. The third hypothesis predicted that participants assigned to the White and positive framing vignette condition would receive the least amount of victim blame, and the Black and negative framing condition would receive the most. The difference between victim blame expressed was expected to be smaller between races within the positive framing conditions. However, this third hypothesis was not supported. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and other prosocial

movements that have brought attention to racial inequality may have in part weakened the effects of the white racial frame in news media, or the framing manipulation was not sufficient in evoking negative perceptions of the victim. This further brings into question about whether news consumers have grown aware of the history of media bias towards minorities and are no longer as susceptible to it. Interestingly, bivariate correlations revealed that negative racial attitudes towards Black people was significantly correlated with higher victim blame. This is in line with previous literature that racism and prejudice towards specific races is associated with lower empathy towards the victimization of racial minorities (Mekawi, Bresin, and Hunter, 2016; Moussa, 2018).

Strengths, limitations, and suggestions for future research

There are several notable strengths in this study. One substantive strength to this study is the experimental design, as the majority of current research relating to missing adults have primarily used content analysis on media coverage and general statistics. The experimental design allowed researchers to assess causal associations between a missing person's race, media framing, and their interaction with victim blame. Therefore, this approach complements and extends existing methodological approaches to scholarly research on missing persons. Additionally, the usage of the between-subjects design with vignette helps minimize possible carry-over and context effects from the sample, which can occur when participants are assigned to more than one experimental condition. Another strength of this study is the application of the critical race feminist framework. Critical race feminism (CRF) has not been heavily utilized in scholarly research on Black women's experiences with media coverage, especially in relation to crime news stories. Mass media has been identified as one of the institutions that perpetuates

racial negative stereotypes and acts as a system of oppression for minorities (Patton and Ward, 2016). The inclusion of the CRF perspective adds to the limited literature on how the actions of mass media effects the portrayal and perceptions of Black women's victimization (Collins, 2000; Moorti, 2012; Patton and Ward, 2016). The framework also can be used to explore if standard systems of oppression (e.g., the news media) are no longer as effective in perpetuating negative racial attitudes as previously thought, given that there were lower amounts of victim blame attributed to the missing Black women when compared to the White condition.

With this in mind, this study also has several limitations. First, the study only focuses on perceptions and victim blame attribution towards missing adults, and it is crucial for follow-up studies to compare victim blame for missing adults versus missing juveniles, since previous studies tend to solely focus on one or the other (Conlin and Davie, 2015; Simmons and Woods, 2015; Sommers, 2016; van de Rijt et al., 2018; Liebler, Ahmad, and Gayle, 2020). It is critical to evaluate how the news audience's perceptions contrast between missing juveniles and adults, as age has been identified as a prominent victim attribute that would benefit from more scholarly exploration (Font, 2013; Van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014). Another limitation relates to the phenomenon that survey participants may have answered questions relating to racism in ways that are deemed socially desirable, which is referred to as social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985; Tourangeau and Yan, 2007). The framing within this study also did not incorporate mentions of criminal activity within the news article, and much research that focuses on the negative framing of the Black community focuses on how Black people are portrayed as criminals (Oliver, 2003; Dixon, 2006; Entman and Gross, 2008). The main victim characteristic assessed in this study was the victim's race: other demographic and social identity characteristics that likely influence news consumer perception (such as socioeconomic status or sexual

orientation) were not simultaneously examined which limits the ability to see how intersecting identities impact news audiences' responses.

Given that the overall victim blame reported by participants was low, it would be beneficial for more future research to look beyond victim blame and assess other types of views (e.g., emotional responses, prejudice, helping behaviors) that news audiences experience towards a crime victim when reading crime news stories. Doing so while concurrently examining the amount of media attention and concern may reveal what type of framing best motivates audiences to assist in or hinder the investigations of unsolved crimes. A future study using a qualitative approach in relation to media framing (such as deeper exploration regarding tone, word choice, writing style manipulations within textual frames) may be beneficial in this field. Doing so can make it easier in the future to identify what specific framing techniques trigger news consumers to become aware of media bias in the news. Because the framing within the study was also only one instance of exposure, studies should incorporate methods that utilize repetitive framing for missing persons news stories and potential framing effects from it. It is also important to understand the role of prosocial involvement (e.g., involvement with BLM organization) in individuals' perception of crime news media and race portrayals.

Implications

This study has several potential implications for public attitudes and perceptions of news stories of missing adults. The focus of this study on crime news framing speaks more broadly to the bias present in many news outlets. Because previous studies have found that the presence of negatively framed information about victims has a lasting harmful impact on public attitudes and behavior (Baumeister et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003; Okoroji, Gleibs, and Jovchelovitch, 2021),

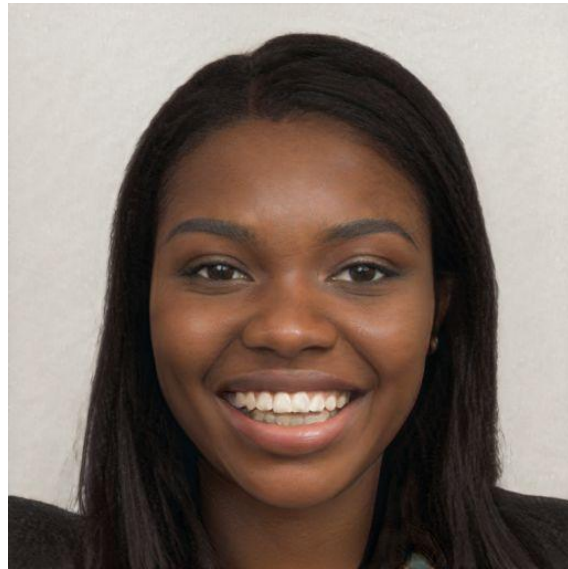
there should be a push for stricter policies on what can be written in official crime news articles and reports. Only information that is relevant to the story should be published, and biased, stereotypical, or unrelated information should be removed and deemed as unethical. The removal of negative and/or stereotypical information in news stories may help create a societal shift in decreasing the occurrence of negative portrayals of racial minorities and women victims in mass media. But this objective is complex and likely requires large amounts of social change in the mass media realm, so scholars should prioritize identifying strategies to educate news consumers of the presence and consequences of media frame bias. There are studies that demonstrate that there already may be a cultural shift taking place on news consumers pushing for more factual reporting and fewer biased news reports (Murray-Everett and Harrison, 2021), making it crucial to think about the future of framing effects on news consumers. Social media has also become an alternative news platform outside of more traditional outlets (Shearer and Gottfried, 2018; Curiel, Cresci, Muntean, and Bishop, 2020), which makes it worthy to look into how social media framing and reporting differs from traditional news networks. Conducting more research that focuses on victim blaming attitudes and other negative perceptions of those involved in criminal justice system (such as law enforcement officers' perceptions of crime victims) may also be helpful in identifying how attitudes correlate with the effectiveness of current prevention and intervention policies. A deeper inquiry into the interface between the criminal justice system and the media is essential to better understand how the actions of mass media reporters affects the investigations of law enforcement, and vice versa.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

This study evaluated the impact of a missing person's race and the framing of their background characteristics on news audiences' victim blame; however, there was not sufficient evidence to conclude that they had a significant effect. Victim blaming attitudes were low in this sample, regardless of their experimental condition. However, results did indicate that higher endorsement of negative racial attitudes was associated with higher levels of victim blame. Although future research is needed to better understand the nuances of media framing on new consumers' attitudes and behavior, it is possible that individuals' awareness of current events relating to inequality (such as Black Lives Matter) may have resulted in participants actively working against the potential influence of negative media framing of racial minorities. It is imperative for researchers to conceptually replicate this study by modifying framing strategies and using multiple methods to determine which factors have the strongest effects on individuals' bias and victim blame.

APPENDIX A: VIGNETTE PICTURES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Pictures:



Positive Framing:

“Police are asking for public assistance relating to the disappearance of Jordan Ayers. Jordan, a (White/Black) female college student, was last seen leaving a college bar around 12:40 am last Saturday. She told her friends that she decided to walk back home since the bar was only about seven blocks from her apartment. She stated that she would text them all once she had arrived home. She has not been seen or heard from since. Jordan is generally described as a (responsible and hard-working student. She is not known to have any mental health or family issues, and is said to be a cheerful and kind individual in everyday interactions). Police currently consider her disappearance suspicious. If you believe any information or knowledge relating to Jordan Ayers or her whereabouts, please contact the proper authorities immediately.”

Mixed Framing:

“Police are asking for public assistance relating to the disappearance of Jordan Ayers. Jordan, a (White/Black) female college student, was last seen leaving a college bar around 12:40 am last Saturday. She told her friends that she decided to walk back home since the bar was only

about seven blocks from her apartment. She stated that she would text them all once she had arrived home. She has not been seen or heard from since. Jordan is generally described as an (hardworking yet under-achieving student. She has had past personal issues with mental health and family, but is said to be a cheerful and kind individual in everyday interactions). Police currently consider her disappearance suspicious. If you believe any information or knowledge relating to Jordan Ayers or her whereabouts, please contact the proper authorities immediately.”

Negative Framing:

“Police are asking for public assistance relating to the disappearance of Jordan Ayers. Jordan, a (White/Black) female college student, was last seen leaving a college bar around 12:40 am last Saturday. She told her friends that she decided to walk back home since the bar was only about seven blocks from her apartment. She stated that she would text them all once she had arrived home. She has not been seen or heard from since. Jordan is generally described as a (troubled and under-achieving student. She has had personal issues relating to mental health and family, and is said to be cold and distant in everyday interactions). Police currently consider her disappearance suspicious. If you believe any information or knowledge relating to Jordan Ayers or her whereabouts, please contact the proper authorities immediately.”

APPENDIX B: VICTIM BLAME SCALE

Victim blame scale (Strömwall et al., 2017):

1. To what extent do you think that Jordan can be blamed for the event?
2. Do you believe that Jordan is responsible for her disappearance?
3. Do you believe it's Jordan's fault that she went missing?
4. Do you believe Jordan had acted irresponsibly in the event?

APPENDIX C: THE MODERN RACISM SCALE

The Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986):

1. Discrimination against blacks is no longer a problem in the United States.
2. It is easy to understand the anger of black people in America.
3. Blacks have more influence upon school desegregation plans than they ought to have.
4. Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights.
5. Blacks should not push themselves where they are not wanted.
6. Over the past few years, blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve.
7. Over the past few years, the government and news media have shown more respect to blacks than they deserve.

APPENDIX D: COMPREHENSION CHECK ITEMS

Comprehension check items:

1. What was Jordan's race in the news story?
2. What was Jordan's gender in the news story?
3. In two sentences, please describe the general characteristics that Jordan was described with.
4. What happened to Jordan in the news story?

APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC ITEMS

1. What is your age?
2. What gender do you identify as?
3. What race do you identify as? (Select one or more)
4. What ethnicity do you identify as?
5. Furthest education completed so far?
6. How would you identify your socioeconomic status?

APPENDIX F: IRB LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board
FWA00000351 IRB00001138,
IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

May 25, 2021

Dear Ciara Peebles:

On 5/25/2021, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Exempt Category 2(i)
Title:	News consumers emotions and perceptions on current events.
Investigator:	Ciara Peebles
IRB ID:	STUDY00002752
Funding:	Name: SOCIOLOGY
Grant ID:	
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP-254-FORM Explanation of Research Ciara Update.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • HRP-255-FORM - Request for Exemption (2) (4) (2).docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • HRP-509 - TEMPLATE-Debriefing Statement Update.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Mechanical Turk Advertisement, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Survey on Qualtrics.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Vignette Conditions, Category: Test Instruments; • Vignette Conditions (word document version) .docx, Category: Test Instruments;

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure

request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Renea Carver". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Renea Carver
Designated Reviewer

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