

Article

The Covenant School Shooting: Media Coverage and Backlash against the Transgender Community

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Abstract: On 27 March 2023, Aiden Hale broke into the Covenant School, a private Christian academy in Nashville, TN, and killed three students and three staff members. Hale, a former student at the school, was transgender. Although assigned female at birth, Hale identified as male, asked to be called by a male name, and used he/him pronouns. In the aftermath of the shooting, a newfound wave of anti-trans rhetoric soared, once again putting members of the transgender community in harm's way. In this article, we review the details of the Covenant School shooting and consider them in the context of the anti-trans movement in the United States, a movement that has escalated as transgender people have become more visible and more vocal in society. We then present findings from an extensive content analysis of newspaper coverage in the two weeks following the shooting (27 March–10 April). In so doing, we add to the literature on K-12 school shootings and gender studies, specifically stigma towards the transgender community.

Keywords: K-12 school shootings; gender studies; transgender stigma; criminal justice



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1. Introduction

Nashville, TN, was rocked by mass violence on 27 March 2023, when a heavily armed former student shot and killed six people at the Covenant School. The perpetrator, Aiden Hale, was transgender.¹ Due to the identity of the perpetrator and the current political environment—one in which conservatives and liberals engage in contentious debates about gender equality and gun rights—the shooting was highly divisive. In this article, we analyze news coverage and media framing of the Covenant School shooting in the two weeks following the event. News content and media framing are important because they make certain issues salient to the public; sway public opinion about what caused an incident, who is responsible, and what should be done about it; and persuade public officials to enact specific policies (McCluskey 2016). Thus, we explore how media depictions of the shooting and the shooter have shaped public discourse about transgender rights. In particular, we consider the impact of the shooting on the burgeoning anti-trans movement in the United States.

2. The Covenant School Shooting

On the morning of Monday, 27 March, 28-year-old Nashville resident Aiden Hale broke into the Covenant School in Nashville, TN, and shot and killed six people (Hassan and Cochrane 2023). Armed with two assault rifles and a handgun, Hale entered the school at 10:11 A.M. by shooting through a set of glass doors (Brasch et al. 2023; Petras et al. 2023). He walked through the school for sixteen minutes, firing 152 rounds along the way, before being confronted and killed by responding police officers at 10:27 a.m. The six victims were identified as students Hallie Scruggs, Evelyn Dieckhaus, and William Kinney, all nine

¹ "Transgender" is an umbrella term that describes individuals whose gender expression or identity differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth (McLemore 2018; Seely 2021).

years old; custodian Mike Hill, 61; substitute teacher Cynthia Peak, 61; and Head of School Katherine Koonce, 60 (Hassan and Cochrane 2023).

The Covenant School shooting was unique in several respects. First, the Covenant School is a private, Christian elementary school. It is affiliated with the conservative Covenant Presbyterian Church, and it serves 200 students from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade (Hassan and Cochrane 2023). Most K-12 school shootings in the US take place at public schools; in fact, private school shootings comprise just 6% of US K-12 school violence (Rains 2023). Second, the shooter in this incident was transgender. This is surprising because the vast majority of K-12 school shooters are cisgender men. The Covenant shooting was only the fourth mass shooting since 2018 committed by a transgender or nonbinary individual (Phillips 2023; Tulp 2023).

In the Covenant case, the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNPD) initially identified Hale as a woman and referred to him by his birth name, Audrey Hale. The authorities later clarified that Hale was a transgender man (Brasch et al. 2023). Based on this discovery, MNPD Police Chief John Drake claimed that Hale—a former Covenant student—may have felt “resentment” towards the school and insinuated that Hale’s gender identity played a role in the attack. Despite these assertions and a detailed analysis of a “manifesto” written by Hale, no clear motive has been established for the shooting (Hampton et al. 2023). As of this writing, litigation is ongoing regarding whether Hale’s writings (or “manifesto”) will be released to the public. In June 2023, Hale’s parents transferred ownership of his writings to the families of the Covenant School students, who are vigorously battling against their release (Pagones 2023).

3. K-12 School Shootings

Although many lay people and scholars speak of all school shootings/violence as a single category, it is important to differentiate K-12 school shootings from other categories of school shootings (Crews 2017; Kowalski et al. 2021). Crews (2017) suggests that we consider K-12 school shootings, public mass shootings, university shootings, and international school shootings as separate, distinct categories. As Crews notes, differentiation is important because these types of school shootings “have different catalysts, motivations, types of occurrence, and offenders” (Crews 2017, p. 2).

Because the US federal government does not formally track school shootings, information must be gleaned via independent sources. One such source is the *Washington Post’s* “School Shootings in America” data set, which charts K-12 school shootings that have occurred since the 1999 Columbine High School shooting (Cox et al. 2023; Rocheleau 2022). Their definition of a K-12 school shooting is “any incident of interpersonal gunfire in a K-12 school” (Cox et al. 2023). Other reliable sources include *Education Week’s* “School Shooting Tracker”, which tracks shootings that occur in the current year, and the “K-12 School Shooting Database”, which tracks shootings since 1970 (Reidman 2022). Scholars have identified several K-12 school shooting trends. A majority of K-12 school shooters are white, cisgender males, and are current students (41.9%) at the school they target (CHDS 2023; Tulp 2023). Most shooters show outward signs of crisis in the hours, days, and/or months prior to the event; thus, there are signals that danger is to come (NIJ 2022). According to the *Washington Post*, school shootings are also on the rise. Since Columbine in 1999, there have been 386 shootings; 2022 was the year with the highest number of K-12 shootings since Columbine (Cox et al. 2023).

To put the current analysis in context, in the US, 30 K-12 school shootings that resulted in injury or death occurred between January and September 2023. From these shootings, a total of 48 people were injured or killed: 16 people were killed (12 children and four adults) and 32 people were injured (*Education Week* 2023). In 2022, there were 51 K-12 school shootings that resulted in injury or death (*Education Week* 2023).

K-12 shootings are of particular concern because students and parents expect that school is a safe, protected space. Due to this presumption of safety, the public views school violence as especially tragic and preventable (Reeping et al. 2021). Moreover, K-12

shootings receive disproportionate media coverage compared to other events, so they weigh on the American psyche. The media reports that school shootings are one of the biggest problems facing Americans (Elsass et al. 2014). For example, a 2022 American Psychological Association study reports that nearly three-fourths (73%) of adults indicated that mass shootings were a “significant source” of stress (APA 2022). Furthermore, a 2018 Pew Research poll found that a majority of teens now report that they are concerned a mass shooting will take place at their *own* school (Graf 2018). Fear of mass shootings also impacts behavior. The 2019 American Psychological Association report “Fear of Mass Shootings” found that one-third of American adults report they avoid going to certain places and/or attending certain events due to their fear of falling victim to a mass shooting (APA 2019).

Beyond those injured or killed, there are serious mental health consequences for people impacted by K-12 school shootings (Reeping et al. 2021; Rajan et al. 2019). Students exposed to violence at school often experience long-term mental health consequences. Lowe and Galea (2017) report that the most common psychological outcomes of exposure to K-12 school violence are posttraumatic stress disorder and major depression. Other outcomes include generalized anxiety disorder, acute stress, alcohol use, drug use, panic disorder, adjustment disorder, and antisocial personality disorder (pp. 65–74). Students’ learning may also be impacted by school violence. A sense of safety is critical to the learning process. When students’ sense of safety and security is disrupted, their learning process is compromised (Reeping et al. 2021). In some cases, exposure to K-12 violence leads to additional tragedy. For example, two Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students died by suicide a year after the shooting, and a Sandy Hook parent of a victim died by suicide seven years after the event (Reeping et al. 2021).

4. The Covenant School Shooting in the Wake of the Anti-Trans Movement

In many ways, the political, social, and psychological outcomes of the Covenant shooting have resembled those of other school shootings. However, the Covenant School shooting triggered an additional, unexpected consequence: an escalation of the anti-transgender movement in the United States.

The anti-transgender movement is a national campaign led by socially conservative groups and individuals to limit the rights of transgender people (Turban 2023). The movement originated in the mid-2010s when trans individuals were experiencing increased visibility, acceptance, and legal protections under the Obama administration (Ansara and Hegarty 2013; Branigin and Kirkpatrick 2022; Fadulu and Flanagan 2019). In retaliation, right-wing politicians and organizations launched an assault on the trans community, citing the need to protect children, uphold traditional values, safeguard religious freedom, and promote “equal rights” over “special rights” (Branigin and Kirkpatrick 2022; Fadulu and Flanagan 2019; Turban 2023). Since 2020, the anti-trans movement has rapidly expanded in size and scope.

Anti-trans activists have utilized rhetoric, legislation, and discrimination to attack the trans community. The right has popularized transphobic rhetoric in offline and online spaces, including social media, entertainment and news media, schools and universities, health care facilities, and legislatures (Anti-Defamation League 2023). Inspired by this rhetoric, Republican legislators have introduced hundreds of anti-trans policies in recent years. These policies restrict trans people’s ability to play sports, serve in the military, access gender-affirming medical care, update their identification documents, and use bathrooms that align with their gender identity (Branigin and Kirkpatrick 2022; Turban 2023). Politicians have also targeted the broader LGBTQ+ community by limiting drag performances and banning books about LGBTQ+ issues (Hanson 2023; McFetridge et al. 2023). Furthermore, the anti-trans movement has contributed to widespread prejudice and discrimination. Trans people—especially trans women of color—are much more likely than the general population to experience poverty, unemployment, homelessness, bullying, social exclusion, and interpersonal and systemic violence (Anti-Defamation League 2023; Fink and Palmer 2020; Lowry et al. 2020; Wood et al. 2022). Together, these factors put trans people at

disproportionate risk of substance use, depression, anxiety, and suicide (Lowry et al. 2020; Wanta et al. 2019; Wood et al. 2022).

Negative media framing of transgender people is one of the driving forces behind the anti-trans movement. News and entertainment media frequently erase trans voices; dehumanize, criminalize, pathologize, and sexualize trans people; rely on simplistic and derogatory stereotypes; and depict a narrow range of identities (Capuzza 2015; Fink and Palmer 2020; Wood et al. 2022). This coverage fuels negative public attitudes and rhetoric about trans people (Billard 2016; Osborn 2022; Wood et al. 2022). Additionally, the media frequently invalidates trans people's identities through misgendering (Billard 2016; DeJong et al. 2021; Capuzza 2015; Osborn 2022; Wood et al. 2022). Misgendering is the intentional or unintentional act of designating someone as a gender with which they do not identify (Ansara and Hegarty 2013). For instance, media outlets utilize incorrect pronouns, titles, and gendered terms; apply gender-neutral terms to individuals who prefer gendered terms; use objectifying biological language; and refer to individuals by their "dead name" (Ansara and Hegarty 2013; Galupo et al. 2020; McLemore 2018). Not only does misgendering provoke individual feelings of stigmatization, distress, and alienation, but it also delegitimizes and misrepresents the trans community as a whole (Billard 2016; Galupo et al. 2020; McLemore 2018; Seely 2021).

Available evidence suggests that the anti-trans movement intensified after the Covenant School shooting. Following the attack, right-wing politicians, celebrities, and commentators denounced Aiden Hale as a hateful "lunatic" and accused the trans community of indoctrinating and mutilating children, being "violent terrorists", and discriminating against Christians (Fausset 2023; Nirappil 2023). Several public figures claimed that the Covenant shooting—the fourth mass shooting committed by a transgender or nonbinary person since 2018—was proof of an "epidemic" of trans mass shooters (Nirappil 2023; Phillips 2023). This rhetoric shifted national attention from gun policy to trans politics and facilitated the enactment of discriminatory legislation (Anti-Defamation League 2023; Hanson 2023; Nirappil 2023). Between 2020 and 27 March 2023, 61 anti-trans laws were passed in state legislatures. After the shooting, state legislatures enacted 31 anti-trans laws in just six weeks (2023 Anti-trans Legislation 2023). Thus, it is likely that the Covenant School shooting bolstered the anti-trans movement in the United States. In this article, we consider how media framing of the shooting may have contributed to this escalation.

5. The Power of Media Framing

News media framing of current events is a powerful and at times contentious process. Framing has been defined in various ways by sociologists and communications scholars. Goffman (1974) first set forth the concept as a process that guides the perspectives of individuals and groups in society. In Goffman's view, "definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (1974, p. 11). Entman (1993) expanded on Goffman's conception, stating:

"Framing . . . involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". [italics in the original]
(p. 52)

More recently, Birkland and Lawrence conceptualized framing as "the communicative process of highlighting and focusing on certain aspects of reality . . . [Through framing], issues and events take shape in public discourse as various actors make claims about causes and solutions" (Birkland and Lawrence 2009, p. 1407). Additionally, Vliegenthart (2012, p. 937) states that "framing in mass communication is about how (political) issues are presented . . . framing is not an activity limited to media actors, but is done by all social actors and individuals—consciously or not".

Framing is especially important when it comes to news media coverage of crime. For example, news media coverage framed the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, CO, as a prime indicator of a national problem: growing rates of school violence (although official statistics pointed to no such pattern). Columbine reigns as the “representative” school shooting, receiving more media attention than any other school shooting before or since (Birkland and Lawrence 2009). In fact, even though numerous school shootings have surpassed Columbine in terms of victim toll, it remains “emblematic” of mass violence in the United States (Astor 2017).

K-12 school violence receives disproportionate attention from the news media when it takes place in “unexpected” settings. As Birkland and Lawrence (2009) note, youth violence among populations that are not stereotyped as deviant or violent invites increased speculation about causes and motivations. In the case of the Covenant School shooting, the attack happened at a private Presbyterian academy in Green Hills, an affluent Nashville suburb with low crime rates. In 2019, the average price of a single-family home in Green Hills was \$945,795 (Ruhling 2019).

Media framing of violent crime influences the perceived relationship between crime and gender. Specifically, media framing frequently results in the “gendering” of crime. Statistically, women offend at far lower rates than men; thus, cases involving female offenders are deemed newsworthy and receive more media coverage and visibility (Sandman 2022; Estrada et al. 2016; Greenfeld and Snell 1999). News reports on female offenders are also more likely to provide reasons for the offense (30% of the time) compared to reports on male offenders (10% of the time) (Sandman 2022; Estrada et al. 2019). The media typically characterizes female offenders as “bad, mad, or sad” (Berrington and Honkatukia 2002; Brennan and Vandenberg 2009; Eastal et al. 2015). Generally, the female offender is portrayed as either a demonic woman with premeditated ill intent or as a victim of medical and/or mental illness (Sandman 2022).

Public perceptions of crime and mental illness are also shaped by the news media. Oftentimes, depicting crime as caused by mental illness is a strategy reserved for white offenders (Fox and DeLateur 2014; Leary et al. 2003; McGinty et al. 2014). Media coverage emphasizes the mental health of white mass shooters, but it casts non-white perpetrators of extreme crimes as “racial folk devils” (Duxbury et al. 2018, p. 767). This “violent crime-mental illness” frame stigmatizes people with mental health conditions, most of whom do not offend (Glied and Frank 2014). Furthermore, by omitting people of color from this exculpatory frame, media outlets insinuate that people of color are inherently more culpable, demonic, or criminal than white offenders. These phenomena motivated us to examine the media framing of the Covenant School shooting since the perpetrator was a white, transgender man assigned female at birth.

Based on a review of the literature, and with a specific interest in the rarity of non-cisgender K-12 school shooters, we set forth the following central research questions:

- (1) Which name is Hale referred to by the news media?
- (2) Does the news media use gendered language to refer to Hale? If so, what language is used, and what are the implications of its usage?
- (3) Does the news media use degendering language to refer to Hale? If so, what language is used, and what are the implications of its usage?
- (4) Does the news media mention Hale’s transition from female to male? If so, how is his transition characterized, and what are the implications of this characterization?

6. Methodological Approach

6.1. Content Analysis

Content analysis is a methodology used extensively in academic studies of news media. As noted by Hodgetts and Chamberlain (2014, p. 382), analytic steps include: (1) formulating a testable research question; (2) establishing items, or content, for analysis; (3) defining mutually exclusive variables central to the analysis; (4) piloting/refining the coding schema; (5) coding the data; and (6) interpreting findings, writing reports, and

sharing with the social scientific community. The study of news media via content analysis is systematic and replicable, and it allows researchers to report on trends in coverage (Hodgetts and Chamberlain 2014). A central limitation of this approach, identified by Hall (1997), Hodgetts et al. (2006), and Winter (2014), among others, is the assumption that the “meaning” of news coverage exists in the news items themselves. Rather, meaning is generated when audiences draw conclusions about the news items they consume. Therefore, we cannot be certain what meanings audiences ascribe to the media they consume (Hodgetts and Chamberlain 2014; Hodgetts et al. 2006).

As the usage of content analysis has increased over time, three central tenets have emerged: content analysis (1) is objective, (2) is systematic and (typically) quantitative, and (3) considers both manifest and latent content (Holsti 1969; Weber 1990; Riffe et al. 2005; Gray et al. 2007). As Gray et al. (2007) explain, objectivity in content analysis is achieved when the research team explicates the rules by which they will classify their data and ensures that all members of the team follow suit. As they note, “As long as the rules of the game have been spelled out, we can evaluate how conclusions were reached, and we can expect that any researchers who follow those rules, regardless of their own personal values, beliefs, or interests, will document the content of material in exactly the same way” (Gray et al. 2007, p. 285). Thus, a well-designed content analysis should be easily replicable (Huff 1990; Carley 1997).

The second tenet of content analysis—that it is systematic and quantitative—is achieved through the rigorous application of criteria to all data. That is, different approaches cannot be applied to different sets or categories of data without losing the systematic nature of the technique. Content analysis is quantitative because it involves the enumeration of both the frequency and intensity of one’s data (Gray et al. 2007).

Finally, content analysis allows for consideration of both manifest and latent content (Erdener and Dunn 1990; Holsti 1969; Duriau et al. 2007). A manifest analysis involves studying the explicit nature of the content (e.g., what exactly appears in a newspaper heading). A latent analysis involves the study of meanings *implied* by the communicator but not explicitly stated. The latter is clearly more challenging than the former. Hence, a well-trained research team is essential to achieve both validity and reliability in content analysis.

A common approach to the study of mainstream news is content analysis of news media (Riffe and Freitag 1997; Prasad 2008). This approach has been utilized for most of the last century (e.g., Woodward 1934; Berelson 1952). Content analysis of news is fruitful in several ways, including the richness and scope of the data it can cover, its flexible nature, and its unobtrusive quality (Cho and Lee 2014).

6.2. Methods

6.2.1. Sampling

Our sample was comprised of newspaper coverage of the Covenant School shooting. Our sampling frame included coverage of the event by the five largest US daily newspapers (in order of print circulation)^{2,3,4} and three central Nashville newspapers. We selected these newspapers for two reasons: we wanted to analyze papers with the largest audience base, and we wanted to compare local and national reporting on the event. See Tables 1 and 2 for circulation information about national and local newspapers, respectively.

² <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/us-newspaper-circulations-2022/>; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272790/circulation-of-the-biggest-daily-newspapers-in-the-us/>.

³ Both sources cited above list the *New York Post* at Position 5; however, because the *New York Post* is considered a tabloid newspaper, it is excluded from our analysis, with the *Los Angeles Times* taking its place.

⁴ We decided to sample based on print circulation rather than digital circulation, because, as the Pew Research Center notes, “digital circulation is more difficult to gauge”. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/#:~:text=The%2520estimated%2520total%2520U.S.%2520daily,in%2520a%2520new%2520Decoded%2520post>.

Table 1. Circulation of National Newspapers (Turvill 2022; Watson 2023).

Newspaper	Daily Print Circulation
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	697,493
<i>New York Times</i>	329,781
<i>USA Today</i>	159,233
<i>Washington Post</i>	159,040
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	142,382

Table 2. Circulation of Local (Nashville) Newspapers.

Newspaper	Circulation
<i>The Tennessean</i>	21,559 (daily)
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	38,000 (weekly)
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	11,000 (weekly)

We used consecutive day sampling to capture the essence of the media coverage in the immediate aftermath of the Covenant shooting. Consecutive day sampling is a convenience sampling method used in media analysis that samples seven or more consecutive days of content (Kim et al. 2018).⁵ In this study, we sampled articles published in the two weeks (27 March–10 April) following the shooting. We chose this timeframe because 35% of news stories about mass shootings are published in the two weeks after the event (McGinty et al. 2014). Moreover, we needed to limit our sample size to a reasonable number of articles. Our two-week timeframe resulted in a sample size of 223 articles from eight newspapers. See Table 3 for a breakdown of articles analyzed by paper.

Table 3. Articles Analyzed by Paper.

Newspaper	Total Number of Articles Analyzed
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	5
<i>New York Times</i>	8
<i>USA Today</i>	39
<i>Washington Post</i>	27
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	13
<i>The Tennessean</i>	71
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	24
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	41
Total	223

We analyzed the headlines, subheadings, and content of all 223 articles. It is common practice in communications to also analyze photos and related newspaper content; however, we focused on the central components of the article to simplify our analysis. We did not analyze videos, photos, captions, embedded social media posts, etc.

Our sample is as follows:

⁵ While consecutive day sampling is used in content analysis, it is important to acknowledge that it is a form of convenience sampling, which brings with it limitations. Generally, consecutive day sampling is deemed acceptable for short periods of time; reliability goes down if content is analyzed for six months or longer (Riffe et al. 1993).

National Newspapers:

1. *Wall Street Journal*
2. *New York Times*
3. *USA Today*
4. *Washington Post*
5. *Los Angeles Times*

Local (Nashville) Newspapers:

1. *The Tennessean*
2. *Nashville Scene*
3. *Nashville Ledger*

6.2.2. Analytic Approach

Establishing reliability and validity to achieve rigor is a crucial tenet of both quantitative and qualitative inquiry (Yin 2014). As Morse et al. (2002, p. 14) state, “[W]ithout rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility”. Thus, our research team of two focused on attaining interrater reliability before coding our data. Interrater reliability, also known as “intercoder reliability” or “intercoder agreement”, is defined as “a measure of the extent to which independent judges make the same coding decisions in evaluating the characteristics of messages” (Lombard et al. 2002, p. 587). Interrater reliability does not ensure validity. However, without interrater reliability, “the data and interpretation of the data can never be considered valid” (Lombard et al. 2002, p. 589).

In order to achieve interrater reliability, we conducted a pilot test by independently coding 52 articles (39 from *USA Today*, eight from the *New York Times*, and five from the *Wall Street Journal*). Afterward, we reviewed our codes and revised our coding rules until we reached 80–90% agreement, which is the normative standard in content analysis research (Lombard et al. 2002). By establishing interrater reliability, we strengthened both the reliability and validity of our data (Lombard et al. 2002).

In addition to interrater reliability, we prioritized the “trustworthiness” of our data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trustworthiness can enhance the value of qualitative research studies (Amankwaa 2016). Trustworthiness, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), consists of four elements:

- (1) Credibility (roughly, truth value)
- (2) Transferability (roughly, applicability)
- (3) Dependability (roughly, consistency)
- (4) Confirmability (roughly, neutrality) (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Schwandt et al. 2007, pp. 18–20)

To increase the trustworthiness of our data, we engaged in several activities suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). For credibility, we triangulated (cross-checked) (Schwandt et al. 2007) our data by using different sources (newspaper outlets, search engines) and different investigators. For dependability, we established interrater reliability in advance. For confirmability (Guba 1981), we followed a step-by-step research process and updated the process as needed. For example, we agreed upon the primary and secondary search engines to be used (Google Chrome, Safari) and the procedures for locating articles. To find all relevant articles, we visited each paper’s home website and searched for the following terms (one by one, in this order): “Nashville school shooting”; “Covenant School shooting”; “Audrey Hale”; “Aiden Hale”. Moreover, we met on a regular basis to discuss and modify our process, and we kept detailed notes of all modifications. Thus, our research team of two enhanced the trustworthiness of our project by working together to create an “audit trail” of our activities (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Our project utilizes a grounded theory approach. As an inductive pursuit, grounded theory allows researchers to generate theory from the data at hand, rather than taking a top-down, deductive approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) characterized the grounded theory approach as the discovery of theory from data. Glaser and Strauss’ conception of

grounded theory has been criticized primarily for its assumption that the data can “speak for itself” (Glaser 2003, p. 173). Modern proponents of grounded theory argue that Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) conception is an unproblematic and even naïve view of data (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). Today, grounded theory scholars typically follow a constructionist version of grounded theory, which “assumes that neither data or theories are discovered, but researchers construct them as a result of their participants and emerging analyses” (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014, p. 154). This approach suggests that researchers and participants are co-constructors of data; after all, researchers are subjective human beings whose characteristics can influence the collection and interpretation of data (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014; Charmaz 2009; Mills et al. 2006).

In grounded theory, data collection and analysis take place in concert (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). Our data analysis unfolded in two stages: initial coding (also referred to as open coding) and focused coding (also known as selective coding). During initial coding, we read through all of the data and established an initial set of codes that represented the most significant and frequent ideas in our sample of articles. We also utilized the constant comparative method at this stage, in which we compared data with data, data with code, and code with code. During focused coding, we created focused codes that were more directed, selective, and conceptual than our initial codes, and we considered relationships between the codes (Charmaz 2006). Researchers use focused coding to determine which codes “best capture what they see happening in the data”; from this, they “raise these codes up” to the categories of data that they are most interested in (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014).

After inductively coding our data, we compared our themes and categories to those found in the literature. Existing studies on media depictions of transgender people have identified themes such as misnaming and misgendering, stereotyping, pathologizing, delegitimization, underrepresentation, dehumanization, and improper application of terms (Billard 2016; Capuzza 2015; DeJong et al. 2021; Osborn 2022; Wood et al. 2022). Importantly, these themes are prevalent in the discourse associated with the anti-trans movement (Anti-Defamation League 2023). We noted a high degree of similarity between our themes and the themes in the literature. Therefore, we were confident that our categories faithfully described the media coverage of the Covenant School shooting in the context of the contentious political climate in which it occurred.

7. Coding Framework

The four central categories that developed via our analysis⁶ are as follows:

- (1) **First Name Used:** We noted instances in which the perpetrator of the crime was identified by his birth name or by his chosen name. Using a first name (often a birth name) with which an individual no longer identifies is known as “deadnaming” (Seely 2021; Wood et al. 2022).
- (2) **Gendered Language Used:** We noted instances in which the perpetrator was described using language associated with his sex assigned at birth or with his chosen gender. We coded both pronouns (“he”, “she”) and other gendered terms (“gunman”, “woman”).

⁶ Because the current project looked solely at early reporting of the Covenant School shooting, depictions of Hale may have changed as further details emerged. That is, it is possible that distortions in reporting were not a result of journalists’ or officials’ choices or intent, but rather the “fog” of early, partial details. A cursory look at reporting in the months following the shooting suggests that Hale continued to be referred to by his legal name, Audrey Elizabeth, and that his gender identity continued to be cast as uncertain and/or emerging. For example, the *New York Times* articles “Nashville Shooting: Police Say Shooter was ‘Under Care for an Emotional Disorder’”, updated 3 July 2023, and “What We Know About the Nashville School Shooting”, published 13 September 2023, both referred to Hale as “Audrey E. Hale” and stated there was “. . . confusion about the shooter’s gender identity. . .”. Articles published in *USA Today* also continued to refer to Hale as “Audrey Hale”. For example, the articles “Nashville Police, FBI Refusing to Release Covenant School Shooter’s Writings Amid Lawsuits” (3 May 2023) and “Autopsy: Covenant School Shooter Struck by 4 Bullets; Toxicology Report Released” (13 June 2023) refer to Hale by his legal name. Future research should, in a comprehensive manner, explore whether depictions of Hale changed as more became known about Hale.

- (3) **Degendering Language Used:** We noted instances in which “degendering” or gender-neutral terms were applied to the perpetrator. In this category, we included overtly degendering terms such as “they” or “person”. We also coded words like “shooter” and “assailant” as degendering because most media coverage of mass shootings refers to perpetrators using gender-specific terms (“gunman”, “32-year-old man”).⁷ Gender-neutral terms may be viewed as a “polite” way to address gender-ambiguous people. However, these terms are invalidating and harmful when they are applied to people who prefer gendered terms. As noted by [Reisner et al. \(2016\)](#), a central factor in the well-being of transgender individuals is gender affirmation, defined as “an interpersonal and shared process through which a person’s gender identity is socially recognized” (p. 32).
- (4) **Characterization of Transition:** We noted whether Hale’s transition was mentioned, and if so, how it was characterized. We paid attention to instances of ignoring or accurately addressing Hale’s transition; misgendering; humanization; and delegitimization. These factors are important because they may be associated with negative public perceptions of transgender individuals and the political and social marginalization of the trans community ([Billard 2016](#); [Capuzza 2015](#); [Osborn 2022](#); [Wood et al. 2022](#)).

We analyzed our data with a focus on the four themes above. Within each theme, we set forth research questions based on our review of the literature and our interest in the media framing of the perpetrator’s gender.

8. Findings

8.1. Theme 1: First Name Used

RQ1.1: Is Hale identified using a female or male first name?

[Female = 148; Male = 14]

A vast majority (91.4%) of references to Hale used his name at birth, Audrey or Audrey Elizabeth, rather than his chosen name, Aiden. Most articles in our sample did not reference the name Aiden at all. Of the national papers, two of the five used Hale’s male name. Of the local papers, two of the three used Hale’s male name. That is, one could have easily read coverage of the Covenant School shooting, nationally or locally, and not learned Hale’s chosen name.

See [Table 4](#) for information on first name used.

Table 4. First Name Used by Number of Articles and Ratio of Female to Male.

Newspaper	N = Female First Name	N = Male First Name	Number of Articles	Ratio of Female/Male
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	6	0	5	1.20/0.000
<i>New York Times</i>	5	0	8	0.625/0.000
<i>USA Today</i>	25	4	39	0.641/0.103
<i>Washington Post</i>	16	0	27	0.593/0.000
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	11	2	13	0.846/0.154
<i>The Tennessean</i>	64	4	71	0.901/0.056
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	2	0	24	0.083/0.000
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	19	4	41	0.463/0.098

⁷ While a comprehensive analysis of gendered vs. gender-neutral terms used by news media when reporting on mass shootings was beyond our scope, we did analyze the terms used to describe coverage of two widely covered mass shootings that took place shortly before the Covenant School shooting. Specifically, we considered language used by the top five national newspapers (the same used in the present study) when discussing the Monterey Park, CA, shooting at a dance studio (January 2023) and the Uvalde, TX, school shooting at Robb Elementary School (May 2022). Routinely, all five newspaper outlets used gender-specific terms during their initial coverage of the two shootings.

The newspaper that referred to Hale using female names most often was *The Tennessean*, followed by the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The newspaper that referred to Hale using male names most often was the *Los Angeles Times*, followed by *USA Today* and the *Nashville Ledger*.

8.2. Theme 2: Gendered Language Used

RQ2.1: Is gendered language used suggestive of female or male?

[Female = 122; Male = 137]

Unlike the heavy usage of Hale's birth name, roughly half of the references in our sample (52.9%) identified Hale as a man and used male-gendered language ("he", "man"), and roughly half (47.1%) identified Hale as a woman and used female-gendered language ("she", "woman", "girl"). The paper that used female-gendered language most often was the *Wall Street Journal*. The paper that used male-gendered language the most often was *The Tennessean*. On average, national papers employed more female language than local papers did (0.86 instances per article and 0.52 instances per article, respectively). National and local papers utilized male language at approximately the same frequency (0.53 and 0.51 instances per article, respectively).

See Table 5 for information on the gendered language used.

Table 5. Gendered Language Used by Newspaper.

Newspaper	Female Gendered Language	Male Gendered Language	Number of Articles	Ratio of Female Language/Male Language
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	8	2	5	1.60/0.400
<i>New York Times</i>	10	4	8	1.25/0.500
<i>USA Today</i>	10	26	39	0.256/0.667
<i>Washington Post</i>	20	12	27	0.741/0.444
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	6	8	13	0.462/0.615
<i>The Tennessean</i>	30	60	71	0.423/0.845
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	12	5	24	0.500/0.208
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	26	20	41	0.634/0.488

RQ2.2: Is Hale referred to as a juvenile or an adult?

[Juvenile = 6; Adult = 63]

We were interested in whether Hale was characterized by newspaper media as a juvenile or an adult, since characterizing offenders as young or child-like can diminish their perceived culpability (Muschert and Janssen 2012). When Hale's age was referenced, he was almost always (91.3%) referred to as an adult ("man", "woman", "transgender man"). He was identified as a juvenile in six instances (8.7% of all instances). Importantly, Hale was described as a "girl" in all six instances.

RQ2.3: Is Hale referred to using strictly male/female nouns, or is Hale referred to using nouns that include recognition of his transgender status?

[Strictly Male/Female = 95; Transgender Recognition = 14]

We found that a strong majority (87.2%) of references described Hale using strictly male or female nouns ("man", "woman"), and 12.8% of references described him using nouns that recognized his transgender status ("transgender man"). See Table 6 for the usage of nouns. National newspapers were more likely than local newspapers to utilize both strictly male/female nouns and transgender nouns.

Table 6. Usage of Male/Female Nouns vs. Transgender Nouns by Newspaper.

Newspaper	Strictly Male/Female	Transgender Recognition	Number of Articles	Ratio
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	1	1	5	0.200/0.200
<i>New York Times</i>	4	1	8	0.500/0.125
<i>USA Today</i>	10	9	39	0.256/0.231
<i>Washington Post</i>	16	1	27	0.593/0.037
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	11	0	13	0.846/0.000
<i>The Tennessean</i>	24	1	71	0.338/0.014
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	3	1	24	0.125/0.042
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	26	0	41	0.634/0.000

8.3. Theme 3: Degendering Language

RQ3.1: Is Hale referred to using tentative language (suspect, alleged) or using accusatory language? (shooter, killer)⁸

[Tentative = 122; Accusatory = 639]

A strong majority (84%) of references to Hale characterized him using accusatory language, such as “shooter”, “attacker”, etc. Less frequently (16%), Hale was referred to using tentative language, which communicated a reduction in his culpability. See Tables 7 and 8 for a summary of findings pertaining to Theme 3.

Table 7. Summary of Findings, RQ3.1–3.5.

Newspaper	Total Number of Articles	Tentative: Accusatory	Unstable Mental Health	“Shooter”	“Suspect”	Age
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	5	30:13	1	8	30	4
<i>New York Times</i>	8	3:66	2	31	3	2
<i>USA Today</i>	39	21:121	0	97	21	5
<i>Washington Post</i>	27	7:111	0	99	6	4
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	13	11:83	0	60	10	5
<i>The Tennessean</i>	71	34:100	0	92	34	11
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	24	0:23	0	22	0	1
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	41	16:122	0	109	16	8
All Papers	223	122:639	3	518	120	40

⁸ While a comprehensive analysis of tentative vs. accusatory language used in the news coverage of other K-12 mass shootings committed by non-transgender individuals is beyond the scope of this article, we conducted a preliminary analysis of the terms used to describe coverage of two widely covered mass shootings that took place shortly before the Covenant School shooting. Specifically, we considered language used by the top five national newspapers (the same used in the present study) when discussing the Monterey Park, CA, shooting at a dance studio (January 2023) and the Uvalde, TX, school shooting at Robb Elementary School (May 2022). The five newspapers appeared to use *both* tentative and accusatory language during their initial coverage of the two shootings. In coverage of the Monterey Park shooting, more tentative and/or neutral language appeared to be used by four of the five papers, whereas one of the five papers appeared to use more accusatory than tentative/neutral language. For example, the following terms were routinely used by these papers: *Wall Street Journal* [“suspected gunman”; “72-year-old man”; “man”; “shooter”]; *New York Times* [“Mr. Tran”; “gunman”; “72-year-old suspect”; “suspect”]; *USA Today* [“elderly man”; “gunman”; “suspect”; “man”]; *Los Angeles Times* [“suspected gunman”; “man”; “Hemet, CA resident”; “suspect”]. Conversely, the *Washington Post* used largely accusatory language [“gunman”; “shooter”; “Tran”]. In coverage of the Uvalde shooting, more accusatory language appeared to be used by three of the five papers, whereas two of the papers appeared to use tentative/neutral and accusatory language equally. For example, the following terms were routinely used by these papers: *Wall Street Journal* [“Uvalde shooter”; “gunman”; “18-year-old man”; “shooter”]; *New York Times* [“gunman”; “armed man”; “shooter”]; *USA Today* [“gunman”; “18-year-old gunman”; “active shooter”; “Texas school shooter”]. Conversely, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* used both accusatory and tentative/neutral language: *Washington Post* [“Ramos”; “gunman”]; *Los Angeles Times* [“gunman”; “suspect”].

Table 8. Summary of Findings, RQ3.6–3.10.

Newspaper	Total Number of Articles	Propensity for Harm	Trans Identity	History with Covenant	Overt Degendering	Miscellaneous Terms
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	5	2	0	0	0	0
<i>New York Times</i>	8	2	1	0	3	1
<i>USA Today</i>	39	3	2	4	6	0
<i>Washington Post</i>	27	4	2	3	3	0
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	13	1	2	5	8	5
<i>The Tennessean</i>	71	3	0	11	16	14
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	24	0	0	0	1	0
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	41	2	0	7	8	7
All Papers	223	17	7	30	45	27

RQ3.2: In how many instances is Hale’s mental health characterized as unstable?

[Instances = 3]

Given media rhetoric that transgender individuals suffer more than the general populace from mental health issues and/or that gender-affirming hormone therapy makes transgender individuals mentally unstable (Nirappil 2023), we tracked characterizations of Hale’s mental health status. While references to Hale’s mental health were relatively rare (N = 3), when they did appear, they were extremely negative. For example, Hale was described as a “deranged attacker” and a “deranged lunatic trans person”. Characterizations of unstable mental health were found once in the *Wall Street Journal* and twice in the *New York Times*.

RQ3.3: In how many instances is Hale referred to as a “shooter”?

[Instances = 518]

The word most often used to characterize Hale as the perpetrator of the crime was “shooter”, used 518 times.

RQ3.4: In how many instances is Hale referred to as a “suspect”?

[Instances = 120]

Because we were interested in the news media’s use of tentative and accusatory language to describe Hale, we identified 120 instances in which “suspect” was used. In comparison, the accusatory term “shooter” was used 518 times.

RQ3.5: In how many instances is Hale’s age mentioned?

[Instances = 40]

Given our interest in whether the news media characterized Hale as a juvenile or an adult, we identified how often Hale’s age was mentioned. The fact that Hale was 28 years old was mentioned 40 times.

RQ3.6: In how many instances is Hale’s propensity to cause harm characterized in extreme terms?

[Instances = 17]

We also looked for extreme depictions of Hale’s capacity for committing violence, such as “mass shooter” or “heavily armed suspect”. Hale’s propensity to cause harm was characterized in extreme terms 17 times.

RQ3.7: In how many instances does degendering language include a reference to Hale’s transgender identity?

[Instances = 7]

Given that Hale identified as a transgender man, we noted instances in which the news media used language that referenced Hale’s transgender identity without designating

him as male or female (e.g., “trans shooter”, “trans person”). In total, we found seven instances of degendering language that referenced Hale’s transgender identity.

RQ3.8: In how many instances is Hale’s history with the Covenant School referenced? (former student, Covenant student, etc.)

[Instances = 30]

Since Hale was a former student at the Covenant School, we identified how many times Hale’s connection to the school was mentioned. Hale’s connection was mentioned 30 times. The newspaper that mentioned this fact most often was the *Los Angeles Times*. Statistically, only 3.9% of K-12 school shooters are former students of the schools they attack (Reidman 2022).

RQ3.9: In how many instances is Hale overtly degendered?

[Instances = 45]

We were also interested in how many times Hale was overtly degendered. Whereas gender-neutral terms like “shooter”, “suspect”, and “former student” are applied to cisgender women and men, terms like “person”, “someone”, “child”, and “they/them” are not usually applied to cisgender people. Rather, these terms blatantly characterized Hale as genderless. We found 45 instances of overt degendering. See Table 8 for information about overt degendering.

RQ3.10: In how many instances is Hale described using miscellaneous terms?

[Instances = 27]

We noted the number of times that Hale was described using miscellaneous terms (“graduate”, “student”, “teammate”, “resident”, etc.) rather than terms like “shooter” and “attacker”. These terms frequently served to humanize Hale by highlighting his personal relationships and accomplishments (DeJong et al. 2021; Elmasry and el-Nawawy 2020). We found 27 instances of miscellaneous terms.

8.4. Theme 4: Characterization of Transition

RQ4.1: Does the language used address Hale’s transition, or does it ignore it/shy away from it?

[Address = 116; Ignore = 81]

Due to our interest in news media framing of transgender people, we noted whether coverage of the shooting directly addressed or avoided Hale’s transgender status. For instance, phrases like “Hale identified as transgender” described Hale’s gender identity in a straightforward manner. Conversely, phrases like “There was confusion about the gender identity of the assailant” shied away from, ignored, or obscured the topic of Hale’s transition. The use of these phrases suggested that reporters, police officers, and politicians who commented on the shooting felt uncomfortable or uncertain discussing Hale’s gender identity. Overall, news media addressed Hale’s transgender status 58.9% of the time and ignored it 41.1% of the time. National newspapers were slightly more likely to use phrases that addressed Hale’s transition (67.8% of phrases) compared to local newspapers (59.3% of phrases). While Hale’s transition was clearly addressed more often than it was ignored, it remains worrisome that almost one-half of mentions ignored this topic. See Table 9 for information on Theme 4.

Table 9. Summary of Findings, RQ4.1–4.6.

Newspaper	Total Number of Articles	Address: Ignore	Male: Female: Trans	Voice of Hale	Transition Delegitimized	“Trans”	Misgendered
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	5	4:0	1:0:3	0	1	4	0
<i>New York Times</i>	8	7:8	4:4:4	0	2	5	3
<i>USA Today</i>	39	26:11	17:8:11	2	1	19	9
<i>Washington Post</i>	27	15:13	9:10:12	0	0	12	10
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	13	13:6	9:7:6	1	2	6	4
<i>The Tennessean</i>	71	24:13	35:11:5	1	6	12	13
<i>Nashville Scene</i>	24	2:1	2:2:0	0	0	1	1
<i>Nashville Ledger</i>	41	25:29	20:32:9	1	3	9	21
All Papers	223	116:81	97:74:50	5	15	68	61

RQ4.2: Is Hale identified as male, female, or trans (with no mention of a specific gender)?

[Male = 97; Female = 74; Trans, No Gender = 50]

We analyzed whether descriptions of Hale’s transition included male terms, female terms, or strictly transgender terms, with no mention of a specific gender (e.g., “Police said Hale was transgender”). We found that 43.9% of the time, Hale was identified using male terms; 33.5% of the time, female terms; and 22.6% of the time, strictly transgender terms. The *Washington Post* and the *Nashville Ledger* were the only newspapers that utilized more female terms than male terms, whereas *The Tennessean* and *USA Today* used significantly more male terms than female terms. Local news outlets were more likely than national outlets to include a larger proportion of both female terms and male terms, but they were much less likely than national outlets to include strictly transgender terms. We observed that female terms were frequently used to reinforce the idea that Hale was, in fact, a woman (e.g., “Audrey Hale is a biological woman who, on a social media profile, used male pronouns”) (Brasch et al. 2023). On the other hand, male terms and strictly transgender terms were sometimes utilized in a tentative or skeptical way. This delegitimized Hale’s gender identity by suggesting that it was a trivial preference or temporary phase.

RQ4.3: In how many instances does the “voice of Hale” come through?

[Instances = 5]

Although rare, Hale’s voice came through in some articles via direct quotes from social media posts, text messages, and/or writings. We found five instances in which Hale was directly quoted; in all of these instances, he was informing others about his chosen name. Three of these instances were found in national papers, and two instances were found in local papers. The lack of quotations from Hale is unsurprising because Hale’s personal writings were not released to the public, and his social media accounts were deleted shortly after the shooting. In addition, reporters may have refrained from quoting Hale because doing so may have humanized him, lent him credibility, or triggered copycat attacks (DeJong et al. 2021; Hampton et al. 2023).

RQ4.4: In how many instances is Hale’s transition delegitimized?

[Instances = 15]

On occasion, media outlets trivialized Hale’s transgender identity by using words that framed his transition as a phase rather than a fact. For instance, phrases like “appeared to identify as male in recent months”, “recently began using male pronouns”, and “a temporary problem” insinuated that Hale was simply “going through a phase” or “pretending” to be a man. Similar language has been used to justify restrictions on gender-affirming medical care (Turban et al. 2022). We found 15 instances in which Hale’s transition was delegitimized. Six of these instances (40%) were found in national newspapers, and the

remaining nine instances (60%) were found in local papers. *The Tennessean* was the media outlet that employed the most delegitimizing language (six instances). The *Washington Post* and the *Nashville Scene* were the only papers that did not utilize delegitimizing phrases.

RQ4.5: In how many instances is Hale described as “transgender” or “trans”?

[Instances = 68]

Hale was described as “transgender” or “trans” 68 times. Some articles discussed Hale’s transition without using one of these terms (e.g., “The shooter was assigned female at birth but used he/him pronouns on social media”) (Rodgers and Beyeler 2023). Out of all of the media outlets, the *Wall Street Journal* utilized the words “transgender” or “trans” the most (four uses in five articles), whereas the *Nashville Scene* utilized these words the least (one use in 24 articles). National newspapers, on average, employed these terms more often than local newspapers did (0.56 uses per article and 0.22 uses per article, respectively).

RQ4.6: In how many instances is Hale misgendered?

[Instances = 61]

Hale’s gender was widely misrepresented in early coverage of the Covenant shooting. Numerous articles stated that the “police initially identified Hale as a woman”. Even after the authorities discovered that Hale was transgender, police officers and reporters continued to refer to Hale as female. When we analyzed descriptions of Hale’s transition, we found 61 instances in which Hale was misgendered. Most of these instances were references to Hale being misgendered by the police, although reporters occasionally misgendered him. The *Nashville Ledger* misgendered Hale the most (21 instances in 41 articles, or 0.51 instances per article), and the *Wall Street Journal* misgendered him the least (0 instances in four articles). Interestingly, although the *Wall Street Journal* was the least likely to misgender Hale in descriptions of his transition, it was the most likely to utilize Hale’s dead name and female-gendered language overall. On average, national and local papers misgendered Hale at approximately the same rate (0.26 and 0.25 instances per article, respectively).

9. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we examined how the perpetrator of the Covenant School shooting, Aiden Hale, was characterized by the news media in the two weeks following the shooting. Additionally, we sought to explore how media framing of the shooting and the shooter escalated the burgeoning anti-trans movement in the United States. We conducted an extensive content analysis of 223 articles from eight national and local newspapers. From this analysis, we identified four key themes: First Name Used, Gendered Language Used, Degendering Language Used, and Characterization of Transition.

In the themes First Name Used and Gendered Language Used, we examined the misnaming and misgendering of Hale. We discovered that over 90% of references to Hale’s name used his birth name rather than his chosen name. Even though Hale’s chosen name was publicized on the day of the shooting, news outlets continued to employ his birth name throughout our two-week timeframe. Conversely, Hale was described using male-gendered terms more often than female-gendered terms: male terms were employed in 53% of references, and female terms were employed in 47% of references. There are several possible explanations for this contradiction. Journalists rely on law enforcement sources for information about crime, and law enforcement relies on official government identification to determine perpetrators’ names (Billard 2016; DeJong et al. 2021). Whereas names possess this legal element, pronouns and other gendered terms do not. Moreover, it is relatively easy for journalists to avoid referencing subjects’ first names in their articles, but it is difficult to successfully omit pronouns and other gendered terms.

Utilizing transgender people’s chosen names and pronouns is vital to the well-being of transgender individuals and the trans community. Both scholars and LGBTQ+ advocates agree that employing proper names and pronouns is a critical component of the gender

affirmation and acceptance process⁹ and promotes positive mental health outcomes for trans people (Pollitt et al. 2019). Unfortunately, media outlets frequently misgender and deadname transgender subjects, which delegitimizes and disenfranchises trans individuals and communities (Billard 2016; DeJong et al. 2021; Capuzza 2015; Osborn 2022; Wood et al. 2022). Significantly, the articles in our analysis misgendered and deadnamed Hale far more often than articles in other studies on media representations of trans people (Billard 2016; DeJong et al. 2021; Osborn 2022; Seely 2021). This disrespectful and inaccurate coverage of Hale has fueled the negative discourse associated with the anti-trans movement.

Earlier, we suggested that the frequent misgendering of Hale might have been a consequence of preliminary information that was either unclear or out of date. However, more recent reporting on the case has continued to use Hale's legal name, Audrey Elizabeth, rather than his chosen name, Aiden. In subsequent articles, journalists have shied away from the usage of gendered pronouns altogether and have referred to Hale solely by his last name (Seely 2021). Through these decisions, the news media has contributed to the misgendering and non-affirmation of Hale.

In the theme Degendering Language Used, we observed that the media frequently applied gender-neutral terms to Hale, even though he used male-gendered language at the time of his death. In particular, we noticed that journalists refrained from using pronouns to describe Hale and utilized overtly degendered terms like "person" and "they/them". Degendering language in news articles was often negative in nature. For example, far more accusatory language was employed than tentative language. Rarely, gender-neutral terms were used to humanize Hale (e.g., by referencing his social relationships and achievements). On the whole, degendering terms usually served to invalidate Hale's gender identity and promote harmful stereotypes.

In the theme Characterization of Transition, we noted instances in which the news media ignored or accurately addressed Hale's transition, misgendered him, delegitimized him, and humanized him. We found that news media coverage failed to accurately address Hale's transition over 40% of the time. When reporting on Hale's transition, the media misgendered or did not affirm Hale's chosen gender 56% of the time. Journalists routinely used female terms to reiterate that Hale was—regardless of how he identified—a woman. Furthermore, the news media also used delegitimizing phrases to describe Hale's transition as "fake" or "just a phase". Finally, when describing Hale's transition, news articles frequently did not use direct quotes from Hale, which would have humanized him and legitimized his transition (Elmasry and el-Nawawy 2020; Hampton et al. 2023).

Skepticism and delegitimization of an individual's decision to transition are commonly regarded as a form of stigma or pushback against the transgender community. Known as "cisgenderism" or "cissexism", this phenomenon refers to "the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth" (Lennon and Mistler 2014, p. 63). For instance, Hale's transition was often couched by the media in uncertain or skeptical terms. Such non-affirmation is a significant stressor for transgender people and provided considerable fodder for politicians and pundits in the aftermath of the shooting (Puckett et al. 2023).

Finally, we were interested in how Hale as a perpetrator, and Hale's crime, were framed given his gender identity. Since women commit crimes at lower rates than men, when they do commit crimes, the mainstream news media takes note (Duxbury et al. 2018). Thus, the media may have used Hale's legal first name rather than his chosen name because a female shooter is more "newsworthy" than a male shooter. We also know from the literature that the media relies heavily on law enforcement officials' accounts of crime, which shapes the public's understandings and definitions of crime (DeJong et al. 2021; Welch et al. 1997). Thus, as previously noted, the media's overuse of Hale's legal name may have been due to a reliance on law enforcement reports. Lastly, Hale's gender identity

⁹ It is important to note that not all transgender individuals elect to change their names, preferring (or deciding) instead to go by their birth name (Pollitt et al. 2019).

was exploited by right-wing politicians and commentators to fuel disproven claims of an “incredible rise in transgender shooters” (Tulp 2023).

As with any social science endeavor, our project brings with it both strengths and weaknesses. We add to the body of literature on K-12 school shootings and gender studies by exploring newspaper coverage of a school shooting in which the perpetrator was a transgender man. This runs counter to the trend in which a strong majority of K-12 shooters are cisgender men (CHDS 2023; Tulp 2023). We bring attention to the importance of gender affirmation for the mental, physical, and emotional health of transgender individuals, especially as the transgender community becomes both more visible and vocal.

Our project brings with it several limitations. We only analyzed coverage of a select number of newspapers; a larger sample would have impacted our findings. Also, we were most interested in initial coverage of the shooting; thus, we studied the two-week period immediately after the crime. Studying a broader window of time would have impacted our findings. While we analyzed the data with an eye towards four distinct themes, there exist additional themes that could be pursued related to this topic. Finally, our sample only included the central written components of newspaper articles; we did not analyze photos and related content. Future research should attend to negative transgender stereotypes in coverage of the Covenant School shooting. Also, given the fact that some media coverage linked Hale’s gender identity to his motive for committing the crime, future research should attend to coverage that offers Hale’s gender identity as a reason or motive for the crime. Future research should also analyze additional aspects of newspaper coverage of the Covenant School shooting, including photos and related artifacts, article placement, and article length.

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