

**IS THERE AN ATTENTIONAL PERPETRATOR BIAS IN MEDIA  
COVERAGE OF CRIMINAL ASSAULT CASES?**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Is There an Attentional Perpetrator Bias in Media Coverage of Criminal Assault Cases?

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Previous research has shown that people have the tendency to view the victim as being partly responsible for a violent assault, as though they themselves did something to deserve the crime. Known as victim-blaming, this phenomenon makes the individuals doing the blaming feel safe and that such an assault will not happen to them (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Bal & van den Bos, 2012). The media's focus on the background and character of the perpetrator rather than the victim may contribute to victim blaming by encouraging viewers to sympathize with the perpetrator, while discouraging them from empathizing with the victim. The purpose of this study is to assess the prevalence of these attentional biases in the media during several high-profile mass shooting incidents in 2012. In studying the media bias in these cases, this study aims to add to prior discussion on the subjects of victim blaming and attentional bias, as well as aid in the inspiration and facilitation of future research and discussion on the effects that such biases may have.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the aftermath of the Aurora Theater shooting in July 2012, much of the media coverage focused on understanding the mind of the killer, the circumstances surrounding Holmes' attack, how he obtained his weapons, etc. Relatively little time was spent covering the lives of the victims or their families in the wake of the tragedy. It is not surprising that media sources may focus on these certain parts of a story in an attempt to keep the story interesting and shocking to viewers, but such practices usually serve to keep the focus of the public on a very limited view of the topic at hand. This limited focus may affect the public's perception of the severity of the crime, as well as the respective guilt attributed to the perpetrator and the victim (Chyi & McCombs, 2008; Brems & Wagner, 1994). Previous research has shown that victims of criminal assault are often blamed for their attack (Bieneck & Krahé, 2011). A myriad of reasons have been given as to how the victim provoked such an assault, such as the clothing they were wearing, the people they were with, where they were, etc. However, less is known about whether the media's focus on the background and character of the perpetrator of a crime (versus the victim) may contribute to victim blaming. When the media focuses the frame of an event on the perpetrator with attempts at understanding why they did what they did, they may be encouraging viewers to see the events from the perspective of the perpetrator instead of the victim. The current research aims to understand the effects that result from the tendency to have such a

fascination with the perpetrators of assault cases, while simultaneously tending to devote less time and fewer resources to learning about the victims. This focus on the perpetrator of a criminal assault is essentially the flip side of victim blaming, as the more effort and time spent trying to understand the mind of an assailant, the fewer resources that are able to be devoted to relating to and aiding the victim. Even though this may not directly be blaming the victim, the ultimate effects can be very similar.

Victim-blaming shifts the assignment of blame that the public may have for the perpetrator, and transfers it onto the victim of the assault. It is often measured through asking participants in a self-reporting survey how they felt about a particular scenario with which they were presented, in which they are asked to assign responsibility for a crime to the perpetrator or the victim. As blame is shifted onto the victim, the belief in a “just world” where innocent people are not attacked without reason is reinforced (Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2014). Brems & Wagner (1994) found that victims are blamed more in sexual assault cases, while perpetrators retain most of the blame for robbery cases. Similarly, Bieneck and Krahe (2010) found that there is a “leniency bias” in sexual assault cases, where blame is shifted more onto the victim in cases where the victim and perpetrator had known each other prior to the attack. These findings show that the amount of victim blaming seen may depend on the type of assault committed, as well as whether or not the perpetrator and victim had any prior relationship. Understanding how media works to frame this type of information to spin a story may offer more valuable insight into the mechanisms underlying victim blaming and attentional bias.

The public's perception of the perpetrator may be altered as a result of the media coverage, and the effects of such altered perceptions could be widespread. Prior studies have shown that the way victims are perceived directly affects the decisions by the jurors in a criminal assault case (Pugh, 1983). This may in turn lead to decreased conviction rates or lighter sentences for the perpetrator. Knowing that these types of outcomes are possibly a result of altered perceptions due to media biases, demonstrating a tangible presence of these biases is pertinent.

In 2012, there were several mass shooting events that garnered national attention. The Aurora shooting took place and captured media attention because of the calculated manner in which Holmes planned the attack. Later on toward the end of the year, the Sandy Hook Massacre took place, and reached the spotlight because of the particularly shocking nature of killing innocent children. These two events were among the most widely covered and discussed shootings in 2012, and their coverage will be used to test whether there is an attentional bias favoring the perpetrator. This study also focused on the Oikos University shooting and the Wisconsin Sikh temple shooting, both of which garnered much less media attention than either Sandy Hook or Aurora. These four events all occurred in 2012 and were widely covered in the media. Some of their coverage in news articles will be analyzed to determine whether there is a perpetrator attentional bias.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODS**

For this study, a collection of thirty articles covering mass shootings was collected from an online Texas A&M library database. These articles covered the Oikos University shooting, the Aurora Colorado Theater Shooting, the Wisconsin Sikh Temple shooting, and the Sandy Hook Massacre. The articles selected were limited to articles that directly discussed the events themselves, as well as either the perpetrator or victim, and articles that contained subject matter mostly pertaining to indirectly related topics such as gun control policy were excluded. The sentences were counted, and the number of sentence directly referring to the victim, as well as those directly referring to the perpetrator were compared. The total sentence count of each article was obtained, and used to determine the proportion of each article that discussed the victim or the perpetrator. The materials used consisted solely of the articles that were analyzed, the computers used to do the searches, and the software used to make a spreadsheet of the sentence counts obtained. The final counts were tallied and used to calculate the proportion of coverage that is given to the victims and the perpetrators. Due to differences in sample size, two separate chi square analyses were run to determine relationship between incident and bias in coverage. For the purposes of this study, the incidents at Oikos University and the Wisconsin temple were analyzed together, with five articles selected for each. The Sandy Hook shooting was compared with the Aurora Theater shooting, although ten articles were selected for each of these incidents.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

Table 1 shows the amount of sentences in each of the thirty articles that are focused on discussing either the perpetrator or the victims. Overall, the data indicates that the hypothesis is correct, and that there is a significant overall attentional bias in the favor of the perpetrator. Table 2 breaks this data down into the overall numbers for the articles used in this study. Of 1,498 total sentences found relevant to the study, roughly 65% were found to refer to the perpetrator, while 35% were found to discuss the victims.

Table 3 shows the relationship between incident and bias in the coverage of the Aurora Theater shooting and the Sandy Hook massacre. It was found that for these two incidents, there was a significant relationship between the incident being discussed, and the bias being displayed,  $\chi^2 = (1, 2) = 35.8365$ ,  $p < .00001$ . Table 4 shows the relationship between incident and bias in the coverage of the other two shootings, the Oikos University shooting and the Wisconsin Sikh Temple shooting. For these two incidents, there was no significant relationship found between incident being covered and attentional bias,  $\chi^2 = (1, 2) = 3.5084$ ,  $p = .061057$ .



Table 1.

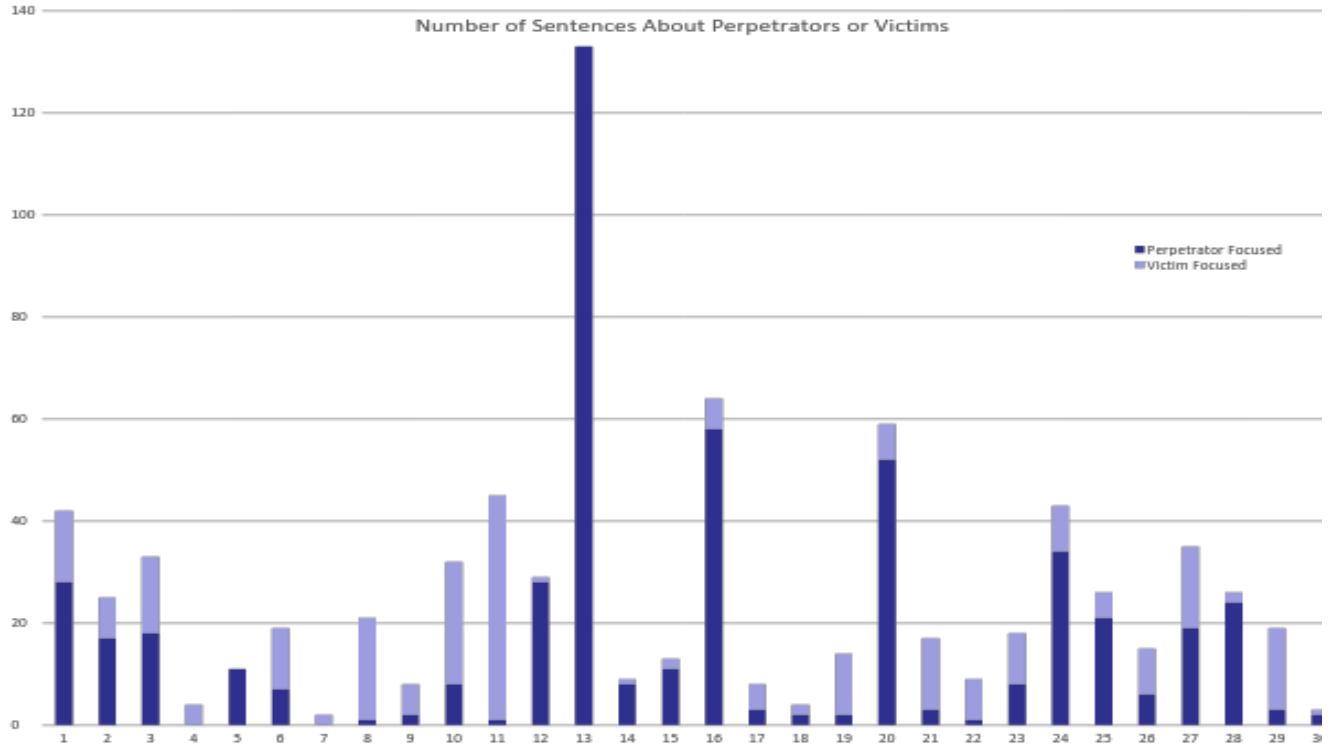


Table 2.

<b>Total Number of Sentences</b>	
	1498
<b>Total Sentences Counted</b>	
	786
<b>Total Perp. Focus</b>	<b>% Counted Sentences w/ Perp. Focus</b>
511	65.01272265
<b>Total Victim Focus</b>	<b>% Counted Sentences w/ Victim Focus</b>
275	34.98727735

Table 3.

	Perpetrator Sentences	Victim Sentences	Row Totals
Aurora Theater	269	93	362
Sandy Hook	68	78	146
Column Totals	337	171	508 (Grand Total)

$\chi^2 = (1, 2) = 35.8365, p < .00001$

Table 4.

	Perpetrator Sentences	Victim Sentences	Row Totals
Sikh Temple	65	51	116
Oikos University	108	53	161
Column Totals	173	104	277 (Grand Total)

$\chi^2 = (1, 2) = 3.5084, p = .061057$

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study indicate a clear bias in media coverage toward the perpetrators of these mass shootings. Compared to the discussion of the perpetrators, relatively little time overall was spent discussing the victims, beyond stating the simple numbers and statistics of the casualties.

There may be several factors that play a role in the expression of a bias toward coverage of the perpetrators. The ability to understand the mind of the perpetrator may allow readers to feel as though they understand why the perpetrator committed the crime. This understanding of why the crime was committed may allow them to feel as though they are themselves far removed from any significant risk of being the victim, or even perpetrator, of such a crime.

In the chi square analyses of the data, it was found that the amount of bias varied depending on the incident. The analyses between the Aurora Theater shooting and the Sandy Hook Massacre showed a significant relationship between incident and media bias. However, in the analysis of the Sikh temple shooting and the Oikos University shooting, no significant relationship was found. This could be the result of the disparity of sample sizes of articles between the events. There were ten articles each covering both Sandy Hook and Aurora, and only five articles each covering Oikos University and the Sikh temple shootings. This was likely due to a difference in

availability of articles about each, as it was much easier to find articles that fit the criteria for the first two than it was for the latter two incidents.

This study is intended to serve as a springboard for further discussion on the topic of attentional bias. It shows that there is in fact a measurable, significant bias toward the media coverage of the perpetrators of mass shootings. Though this study focused solely on mass shooting cases in 2012, it would likely be worthwhile to do further studies in the future covering a wider range of criminal assaults. Knowing whether there is a significant bias in the media coverage of violent assaults of any kind would further open the door for future studies that study both the causes and the effects that such attentional biases may have.

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## APPENDIX

Title	Author	Publication	Published Date
“Oakland college gunman sought to settle score, police say”	Maria L. La Ganga and Victoria Kim	Los Angeles Times	April 04, 2012
“Colorado prosecutors will seek death penalty in movie theater massacre”	Unknown	Fox News	April 01, 2013
“New details released but questions remain week after Connecticut school massacre”	Unknown	Fox News	December 22, 2012
“Newtown victim's daughter confronts Sen. Ayotte over gun control bill vote”	Unknown	Fox News	May 01, 2013
“New report details mental state of Newtown shooter”	Rehema Ellis	NBC News	November 25, 2013
“Mom: My son shouted for kids to flee Newtown gunman”	Michael Melia	NBC News	October 18, 2013
“Newtown Comes Together to Remember Victims”	Bob Connors	NBC News Connecticut	December 14, 2012
“Amid Tragedy, Stories of Heroism Emerge”	Josh Kleinbaum	NBC News Connecticut	December 15, 2012
“Anne Marie Murphy: Died Shielding Students”	Unknown	NBC News Connecticut	December 15, 2012
“In Colorado, Remembering Lives That Were, and Might Have Been”	Jack Healy	New York Times	July 27, 2012
“From a Dark Theater, Tales of Protection and Loss”	Erica Goode and Dan Frosch	New York Times	July 21, 2012
“Don’t Jump to Conclusions About the Killer”	Dave Cullen	New York Times	July 21, 2012
“Aurora Shooting: What Does a Killer Think?”	Dave Cullen	Newsweek	July 29, 2012
“New Details Emerge in Aurora Theater Shootings”	Dan Frosch	New York Times	May 22, 2013
“Back to Columbine”	Jesse Walker	Reason	November 2012
“Update on the Batman Shooter: From Obscurity to Infamy”	Bob Adelman	The New American	September 24, 2012
“Hundreds Mourn Theater Shooting Victims”	Unknown	UPI Top News	July 21, 2012

“The Darkest Night”	Josh Rottenberg	Entertainment Weekly	July 27, 2012d”
“Oak Creek Remembered”	Unknown	News India Times	August 16, 2013
“Sikh Temple Killer Wade Michael Page Radicalized in Army”	Marilyn Elias	Southern Poverty Law Center	November 11, 2012
“Sikhs Remembered for Piety, Kindness”	Cathy Lynn Grossman, Judy Keen, and Oren Dorell	The Christian Century	August 8, 2012
“Finding Middle Ground”	Preeti Sharma	India Currents	September 2012
“We Are Also American”	Jessi Kuar	India Currents	September 2012
“Oakland University Shooting: Accused Oikos University Shooter One Goh was ‘troubled,’ ‘angry,’ said those who knew him”	Harry Harris, Paul Rosynsky, and Robert Salonga	East Bay Times	April 3, 2012
“Oikos Rampage Could Have Been Avoided	Emil Guillermo	Diverse	April 26, 2012
“Pinay Among 7 Oakland Shooting Victims”	Unknown	Filipino Reporter	April 6-12, 2012
“7 Shot Dead in Oakland Campus Rampage”	Joel Ruben and Matt Stevens	Los Angeles Times	April 3, 2012
“Roots of a Rampage”	Katherine S. Newman	The Nation	January 7/14, 2013
“Sandy Hook Elementary School: Six Months Later”	Angela Pascopella	District Administration	June 2013
“In the Wake of Tragedy”	Dana Rudolph	Windy City Times	December 19, 2012