

# NEWS FRAMING OF THE FIRST FEDERAL HATE CRIME TRIAL BASED ON GENDER IDENTITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Welch Suggs)

## ABSTRACT

As hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community continue to rise, it is increasingly important that journalists understand the role they have in covering these issues. News media influences how the community is perceived, and can impact the daily lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. In 2024, the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity offered a historical LGBTQ+ event for the media to cover. A content analysis of the coverage of this trial revealed seven key frames used in both local and national outlets. A few of the frames found include mention of the Shepard-Byrd Act, violence against the transgender community, and emphasis on a secret relationship.

INDEX WORDS: Journalism Thesis, Hate crime, Grady College, Graduate School, The University of Georgia, LGBTQ+, Framing, News media

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IDENTITY

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Pebbles LaDime.

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## **Introduction**

In August of 2019, Pebbles LaDime was murdered in Allendale, South Carolina. Five years later in 2024, her murderer was sentenced to life in prison following the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity (U.S. Department of Justice 2024).

LaDime's murder happened over two decades after the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998. Shepard's murder is often called "one of the worst anti-gay crimes in America" and received a lot of media attention (The Guardian 2014). That same year, James Byrd Jr. was brutally killed. Both men were murdered due to their identity (NPR 2019).

These two tragedies led to the Shepard-Byrd Act, a law designed to prosecute hate crimes. The Pebbles LaDime, Dime Doe, case was the first time the law was used for a trial based on gender identity. Media scholars have researched the framing of Shepard's death, and continue to do so even today. This has provided valuable insight into how the media covers LGBTQ+ people and the issues they face.

As hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community rise in America, it is important that researchers continue examining what the media has to say about it. Using a content analysis, this project analyzed news coverage to reveal themes in the way mainstream and local media outlets framed Pebbles LaDime's murder trial. Seven frames were found in coverage, pointing toward positive changes in news coverage of the LGBTQ+ community. However, analysis also revealed the shortcomings still prevalent in coverage of transgender women of color.

## Literature Review

### *Roots of Framing*

Definitions of framing in mass communication have psychology and sociological roots, and this research study focused on psychology-rooted definitions. In psychology-based roots, researchers are concerned with how something is communicated, and less so on what is being communicated. On the other hand, sociologically-rooted framing definitions look at the way one set of facts is used over another to create an “agenda” (Cacciatore 2016). News media presented, more or less, the same facts when reporting on the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity. While facts were consistent across coverage, slight variations in content contributed to the frames used. Therefore, this project focused on the sociological roots of framing over psychological roots.

The news media shapes public feelings about reality. Frames used in news reporting have been found to have positive and negative impacts. For instance, framing can reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized groups and lead to increased marginalization (Avalos 2024). News media is one of the primary ways that marginalized groups are legitimized, or delegitimized. This can partly be done by ignoring groups and their issues. The transgender community specifically has experienced being delegitimized by news media (Billard 2016).

Overall media representations of gender and sexual minorities have been “unsatisfactory” in the past (Avalos 2024). Stigmatizing and demeaning stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people have led them to be “associated with concepts such as, but not limited to, danger, disease, sexual promiscuity, treachery, and depravity,” according to Avalos.

In reinforcing these negative stereotypes, news coverage of marginalized groups or individuals influences public perception. These stereotypes are often reinforced when the news

media delegitimizes them. This is done to the transgender community through actions such as misgendering, misnaming, and sexualizing transgender people (Billard 2016).

As Osborn noted in 2022, “Media portrayals of marginalized groups shape audiences’ perceptions of these groups, often reinforcing negative stereotypes; depictions of crime and victims also impact the public’s understandings of threat, sympathy, and culpability. This can be especially damaging in the cases of victims of fatal violence, who have no control over their own narratives and no opportunity to contradict offensive or misleading portrayals.”

### *Framing in News Media*

Framing theory is applied to texts through content analysis. This involves categorizing and examining written texts. A conceptual approach and/or a relational approach can be taken during the content analysis. Detecting how often a word is used falls under the conceptual approach, while phrases or word groups fall under the relational approach (Hossain et al. 2022). Using both of these approaches can yield more useful results of analysis and discussion.

Research analyzing original print coverage of Shepard’s murder revealed that a major theme in framing was “alleviating public guilt.” His murder was written in a way that separated readers from the homophobia that fueled it. At the same time, it was still framed as a public tragedy (Ott and Aoki 2002).

Early coverage of the attack focused on how brutal it was, personalizing it so Shepard was the core focus. Ott and Aoki argue in their study that personalizing the attack impacted what news coverage looked like.

With Shepard the focus, the story “was not, and never would become, a story about hate crimes in which Matthew Shepard was simply an example. It was a story about Shepard, in

which hate was the motive for violence.” This is an example of episodic framing choices in coverage, which leave out the wider context of major issues (Osborn 2022).

When transgender or gender nonconforming people experience violence, framing in the media often shifts blame from the perpetrator to the victim. Violence, including deadly violence, is often framed as “justified.” One example is the “trans panic” defense used when perpetrators of violence claim their transgender partner was deceptive about their gender identity (Avalos 2024).

Framing in news media encourages how audiences view certain events, and can fall under episodic or thematic framing. Episodic framing focuses on a specific event, while thematic framing ties in broader issues/trends (Osborn 2022). In other words, episodic framing leaves out context, implying events are isolated incidents. For example, news coverage of Shepard’s murder that did not include discussion of hate crimes or anti-LGBTQ+ violence reflects episodic framing. News coverage of hate crime legislation is an example of thematic framing choices.

Episodic framing gives the impression that an event, like a hate crime, is an isolated event. It doesn’t connect these incidents to broader trends in violence. On the other hand, thematic framing provides context that connects coverage to wider issues.

A focus on transphobic/negative stereotypes deflects blame, sending the message that victims are responsible for the violence done to them. In general, the news media has been found to depict transgender people as “inherently abnormal or deviant” (Osborn 2022).

### *Making A Narrative*

When journalists write stories, they turn reality into narratives. It is the creation of narratives that make events explicit (Madeira 2004). The narratives applied to news stories work with framing to give meaning to the real-life events they represent. Madeira expands on

narrative, claiming they are not created in isolation. Journalists create stories based on the stories that came before, using these previous narratives as “skeletons” to form their own stories. Building upon “story skeletons” over time to create narratives help people relate to the larger world (Madeira 2004).

News media relies on narrative because people do not watch these events as they happen. Instead, people read, or see or hear, about real events through stories in the news. Journalists use narrative to help tell this story. In turn, readers/viewers relate to the rest of society.

As Madeira notes, “Narrative analysis does not simplify an article's subject matter but rather allows for, explains, and exploits all perspectives from which a narrative subject can be encountered,” (2004).

The idea of narrative leads me to the idea of public memory. Narrative gives meaning to news stories, while public memory deals with how the public remembers newsworthy events. A study focusing on public memory in relation to Matthew Shepard’s murder provides a valuable framework for how the public could potentially remember Dime Doe’s case.

Media is the lens through which tragic events are remembered by the public. Therefore, it plays a vital role in the creation of public memory (Woods 2024). Combining theoretical ideas of framing and public memory offers insight into how news coverage informs what audiences remember over time.

The news media can set social norms because it influences public opinion. Exposure to LGBTQ+ people through mass media can influence those who have no contact with people from this community. For those who don’t interact with LGBTQ+ people in their daily lives, the representations they see in media can act as a substitute for real contact (Jacobs and Meeusen 2021). This supports the finding that media depictions of transgender and gender nonconforming

people experience real-life impacts based on both good and bad representation (Pham et al. 2020).

Mainstream news media has been found to have such a vital impact because of how accessible it is. It reaches a diverse and large audience. News media is an important source of information about LGBTQ+ related issues, and also plays a vital role in agenda-setting. For those with little to no contact with LGBTQ+ people, the mass media becomes their main source of information (Jabobs and Meeusen 2021). The news media represents an institution that can, and has, been used to influence anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes (Quist and Wiegand 2002).

Framing and agenda-setting of the news media can have potentially strong influences on the attitudes of individual audience members. These theoretical roots date back to the 1980s and 1990s, and have continued to be applicable as media evolves (Cacciatore et al 2016). Based on previous research in framing, and recent studies about the impact on audiences, news coverage of the Dime Doe hate crime case had the potential to impact various groups of audience members.

#### *Framing of Matthew Shepard*

Journalists use framing in their stories to guide how readers consume news content. Framing is used when journalists report about specific issues or events, and it influences how the content is understood. It contributes to the messages that producers share, and the meaning that readers get from the news (Hossain et al. 2022). The frames applied to news media are not as simple as ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ It goes beyond that. Framing is not about two sides of a binary, but instead encompasses the way the news identifies issues, passes judgment, and offers remedies (Hossain et al. 2022).

News stories seek to ascribe meaning to the events they describe by creating a narrative. Narratives go beyond the facts of what happened. In other words, a focus on framing will not

look at the facts of Pebbles LaDime's death, but will instead look at the way her death and the following case were communicated to the public (Madeira 2004).

A framing analysis of coverage about the 25th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's murder offers a valuable framework for this thesis project. A recent study revealed four themes in anniversary coverage.

These were; "(1) the brutality of the Shepard murder; (2) Shepard as a "young gay college student"; (3) symbolism of the Shepard murder; and (4) social, legal, and political change for LGBTQ people via hate crime legislation," (Woods 2024).

These contributed to how Shepard was remembered because the media shapes public memory (Woods 2024). While multiple researchers have acknowledged the importance of examining coverage of Shepard's murder, less research is focused on LGBTQ+ people of color, like Pebbles LaDime.

Following Shepard's death, the media wanted to apply a meaning to the violence. This led him to become a symbol of homophobic violence. By turning the violence of Shepard's murder into something symbolic, the media applied meaning to it, creating a narrative for the public (Wilcox 2001). He became a martyr. Mass media, such as news media, deliberately and accidentally apply frames to interpret reality (Avalos 2024).

In 2001, Wilcox noted that "symbolically disruptive violence threatens the symbolic world of an individual or group through potential identification with the location, victims, or perpetrators of the violence. If Shepard's murder is an example of this type of violence, it would follow that those who responded symbolically to his death identified in some way with Shepard himself, with his killers, or with the literal or symbolic location of Laramie, Wyoming."



For more than a month, Shepard's murder was in the national spotlight. Mainstream Americans could identify with him, due in part to his identity as a white, all-American, college student. This led to the martyrdom he is remembered with (Wilcox 2001). Two major aspects contributed to Shepard becoming a martyr. The first was his identity as a sympathetic victim. The second was the overall dramatic nature of the story (Ott and Aoki 2002).

### *The Case of Dime Doe*

On August 4, 2019 Pebbles LaDime "Dime" Doe was murdered in Allendale, South Carolina. She was found in a parked car, dead from gunshot wounds (HRC 2019). Five years later, the man who killed her was found guilty in the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity. The trial lasted four days and resulted in the murderer, Daqua Lameek Ritter, being found guilty on all charges. In addition to the hate crime, he was found guilty of one count of obstruction and one federal firearm count (Department of Justice 2024). The jury determined during the trial that Ritter killed Doe because of her gender identity. At the time of Doe's death, she was the 15th transgender person in 2019 to face deadly violence (HRC).

In the years between Doe's death and Ritter's trial, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes rose. In 2023, hate crimes across the country continued a trend of increasing, while violent crime overall continued to fall (FBI 2024). More than 1 in 5 of any hate crime was anti-LGBTQ+ motivated in 2023. This was the second year in a row that reflected that number (HRC 2024).

Hate crime collection data came from over 16,000 agencies in 2023, according to an FBI report that was released in 2024.

The FBI examined incident reports from law enforcement agencies and found "11,862 criminal incidents and 13,829 related offenses as being motivated by bias toward race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender, and gender identity."

Gender-identity based hate crimes rose 16% between the 2022 and 2023 FBI reports. Hate crimes based on sexual orientation rose 23%. The largest category in regards to hate crimes was race and ethnicity-based attacks (HRC 2024). When it comes to coverage of homicide and violence against transgender and gender-conforming people, news narratives are often poor. This is because news coverage of the LGBTQ+ community is usually focused on gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. The news coverage that is created about the transgender community tends to focus on white transwomen (Avalos 2024).

Homicide coverage of the LGBTQ+ community seeks out an “ideal” victim. This tends to be a cisgender, white, gay man. Matthew Shepard is one of the more well-known examples of this. When coverage does look for other victims to report on, white victims are still highlighted at higher rates than victims of color (Avalos 2024).

Based on research like Avalos’s, white victims of anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes receive more coverage than those of color. However, LGBTQ+ people of color are the ones who experience the highest rates of these hate crimes. Transgender women of color are disproportionately targeted, but receive less news coverage.

### *Real-Life Impacts*

Understanding the way the media frames LGBTQ+ people, specifically transgender and gender non-conforming people, can provide vital insight into what the media does right, and what needs to change. People who consume media are directly impacted by the representations they see of themselves. A qualitative study of transgender and gender non-conforming youth revealed a direct correlation between negative representations in news media and increased levels of stress. At the same time, increased visibility led to a sense of community and acceptance (Pham et al. 2020).

The 2020 study from Pham notes, that news coverage of gender and sexuality minorities (GSM) and transgender or gender nonconforming people (TGCN) had real-life correlations.

Pham notes that news coverage “directly affected youth participants both negatively and positively. Coverage that participants felt depicted violence and stigmatization of GSM communities negatively affected mental well-being by increasing feelings of depression and/or anxiety, whereas positive stories about the perseverance and accomplishments of TGNC individuals and communities were perceived as providing hope and resilience.”

In recent years, the media has increased its visibility of transgender people, but this does not always translate into positive representation. A 2016 study focused on U.K. newspapers revealed that transgender readers were experiencing negative backlash directly related to negative media coverage. Participants in the study felt that the media “failed” them (Humphrey 2016). The print media used in Humphrey’s study (2016) revealed negative depictions of transgender subjects, for instance, misgendering. The other misrepresentations pointed out in the study included sensationalism, othering, and transphobia. Multiple participants shared negative impacts in daily life as a result of negative representations of transgender or gender-nonconforming people in the media (Humphry 2016).

Several participants in Humphry’s 2016 study shared that they felt there was a link between negative media depictions and increased instances of violence and harassment. In addition, some participants said negative media depictions can make transgender and gender nonconforming individuals feel shame in their identity.

These findings echo the findings later expressed in a 2020 study (Pham et al. 2020).

While the 2016 and 2020 studies explored different demographics in different regions of the world, the findings shared similar sentiments. The way the media represents transgender and

gender-nonconforming people matters because it has real-life consequences. In two separate studies, researchers found negative impacts came from negative media depictions. At the same time, the media can offer positivity in the sense of community-building (Pham et al. 2020).

Avalos noted in 2024, “while all GSMs are subject to negative mass media representations, trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people are depicted as predatory and deceiving, which can subject them to violence at higher rates than other GSMs.”

Studies like Humphrey’s contribute to my project because they include the lived experiences of transgender people, and offer insight into how media framing impacts this audience. Discussing how the media frames stories about transgender and gender-nonconforming people only offers half of the picture. It is also vital to understand how TGNC people feel about what the media is saying.

Researchers have pointed to the way mass media, including the news, have denied the victimhood of transgender people when they are killed. Media has also played a role in “dehumanizing” transgender people, and blaming them for the violence they face (DeJong et al 2021). This echoes findings that point toward how stigmatized individuals can be blamed for their own stigmatization (Quist and Wiegand 2002).

As noted by DeJong, “Media narratives play an active role in sustaining this culture of violence through the ways in which they shape and deliver stories about trans people and violence. Coverage of trans homicide victims frequently homogenizes trans experiences and fails to acknowledge the nuances in victimization among intersectional identities.”

## Methodology and RQ

### *Framing of Dime Doe's Case*

This project utilized seven coding categories in analyzing coverage of Dime Doe's case; the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity. They represent the seven frames found in coverage. Frames include 1.) the Shepard-Byrd Act 2.) Dime Doe's identity 3.) Dime Doe's murder as a hate crime 4.) A need for LGBTQ+ protections 5.) violence against the transgender community 6.) Dime Doe's murderer named first 7.) emphasis on a secret relationship.

Frames 1 (the Shepard-Byrd Act), 3 (Dime Doe's murder as a hate crime), 4 (a need for LGBTQ+ protections), and 5 (violence against the transgender community) represent themes in thematic framing used by national and local news outlets. Frame 7 (emphasis on a secret relationship) represents a focus on episodic framing elements. In addition, frames 2 (Dime Doe's identity) and 6 (Dime Doe's murderer named first) overlapped with episodic and thematic framing.

*RQ: How did the news media frame the first gender identity-based federal hate crime trial?*

To answer this research question, a content analysis was performed on both mainstream and local coverage. Using two news databases -Global Newsstream and Access World News- articles were pulled that mentioned Dime Doe and hate crime. The timeframe was from 2019, when the murder was first covered, to 2024 when the trial began and concluded. I chose to search for the name Dime Doe because this is the name Pebbles LaDime was given in court documents when the murder first took place. Many news outlets used this pseudonym, and it yielded more results than using Pebbles LaDime.

Raw data from Global Newstream included a total of 56 articles. Raw data from Access World News included a total of 272 articles. Any duplicate articles were removed, as well as

articles that only mentioned Dime Doe but were not about her/the trial. In addition, a handful of articles were removed because they came from international outlets. Finally, 21 articles were removed for being copies of AP News stories published under different outlets.

When these articles were removed from the set, 58 articles (30 from local sources and 28 from national sources) remained. This was the sample used during coding. Outlets included newspapers and online sources. Most online sources were web editions of outlets, such as USA Today and The Herald, while some were online-only, such as The Daily Beast. The project was focused on coding text-based news articles without differentiating between online and print, which allowed for a broader sample size to work with.

Articles were briefly analyzed using deductive and inductive approaches to determine coding categories. Based on previous research related to the framing of Matthew Shepard's murder, I coded for "hate crime," protections for the LGBTQ+ community, and "violence/violent."

I also coded for mention of the "Shepard-Byrd Act," mention of Dime Doe, and mention of a secret relationship. The category "secret relationship" was added after the articles went through initial coding.

### *Coding Categories*

1. mention of the "Shepard-Byrd Act"
2. mention of Dime Doe
3. mention of "hate crime"
4. Fighting for LGBTQ+ protections
5. mention of "violence" or "violent."
6. Daqua Lameek Ritter named first in the story

7. Mention of a “secret relationship” or “rumors of a relationship”

These coding categories represent the seven frames found in coverage of the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity. Frames include 1.) context of the Shepard-Byrd Act 2.) Dime Doe’s identity 3.) Dime Doe’s murder as a hate crime 4.) A need for LGBTQ+ protections 5.) violence against the transgender community 6.) Dime Doe’s murderer named first 7.) emphasis on a secret relationship.

These coding categories were chosen based on an inductive and deductive approach. Categories regarding violence, fighting for LGBTQ+ protections, and the Shepard-Byrd Act were based on previous framing research into Matthew Shepard’s murder. The remaining categories were picked following an analysis of the articles.

Articles were coded and analyzed by hand. The seventh coding category was added when initial coding was finished. This was due to how often articles were referencing a secret relationship between Dime Doe and her killer.

Color coding was used to separate each category. When Daqua Ritter was named before Dime Doe, his name was highlighted in orange. Every time the phrase “hate crime” or “hate crimes” appeared it was highlighted in blue. Phrases that referenced Dime Doe’s identity, such as transgender woman, were highlighted in purple.

Any mention of the “Shepard-Byrd Act” was highlighted in green. The words “violence” and “violent” were highlighted in yellow. Phrases such as “committed to protect,” “pursue justice,” and “continue to defend,” were highlighted in pink. Phrases including the term “secret relationship” were highlighted in gray.

## Results

A total of 30 local news articles and 28 national news articles were coded for seven categories. This revealed themes in framing of Dime Doe's murder and the federal hate crime trial that followed. News articles coded came from 2023 and 2024, despite the timeline reaching back to 2019. When Dime Doe was first killed, her murderer was unknown. Daqua Ritter was not charged with a hate crime until 2023, which is when coverage started to emerge.

### *Category 1- Mention of the Shepard-Byrd Act*

Dime Doe's murder trial was the first federal-hate crime trial based on gender identity under the Matthew Shepard Hate Crime Prevention Act. For this reason, I chose to code for any time the Shepard-Byrd Act was mentioned. This category was coded in green.

Out of the local articles, 46% mentioned the Shepard-Byrd Act. The act was referenced in 14 articles. Thirty-five percent of national articles, a total of 10, mentioned the Shepard-Byrd Act. Articles used it in reference to Dime Doe's murder trial to provide context on the historical significance. This provided a chance for thematic framing choices.

### *Category 2- Mention of Dime Doe*

This category looked at the name Dime Doe in articles to reveal how she was being referred to/talked about. Since the hate crime trial was based on gender identity, I expected to see a majority of the stories focus on her identity as a transgender woman. In the local articles, Dime Doe was referred to with six different terms. These terms were;

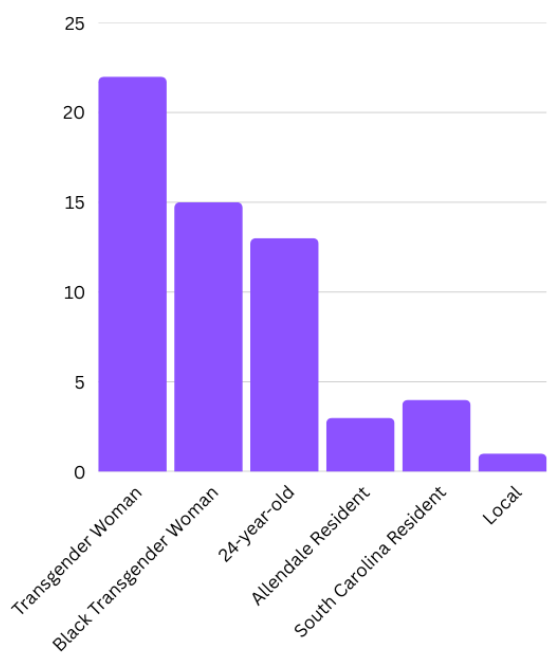
- Transgender woman
- Black transgender woman
- 24-year-old
- Allendale resident



- South Carolina resident
- Local

Out of the 30 local articles, 22 (73%) used the phrase “transgender woman,” 15 (50%) used the term “Black transgender woman,” and 13 (43%) used the term “24-year-old.” These terms often appeared in the same stories. In addition, 4 (13%) of the local stories used the term “South Carolina resident,” 3 (10%) used the term “Allendale resident,” and 1 (3%) used the term “local.” These terms highlight Dime Doe’s identity as an Allendale local, but were less likely to appear.

*(Table 1- Dime Doe’s Identity in Local Articles)*

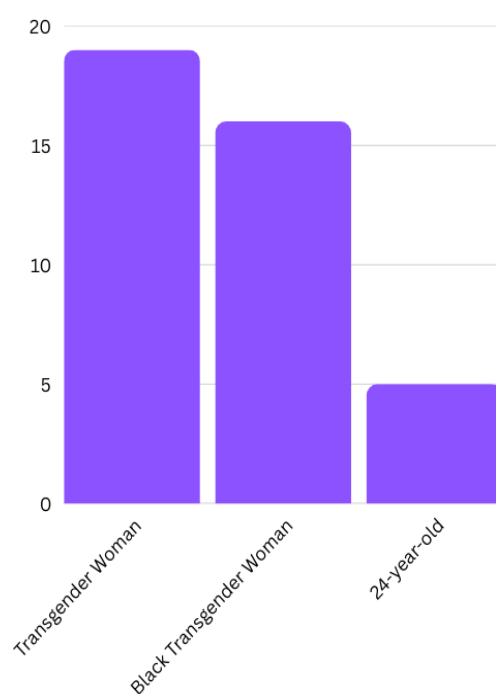


The 28 national articles used 3 terms when referring to Dime Doe. These terms were;

- Transgender woman
- Black transgender woman
- 24-year-old

“Transgender woman” and “Black transgender woman” were the two most used phrases, and often appeared in the same article. National sources were less likely to mention Dime Doe’s age.

*(Table 2- Dime Doe’s Identity in National Articles)*



Out of 28 national articles, “Transgender woman” was used in 19 (67%), and “Black transgender woman” was used in 16 (57%). The term “24-year-old” was used in 5 (18%) articles. National articles did not show the same emphasis on Dime Doe as a local resident.

However, both the national and local sets of articles often highlighted Dime Doe’s intersectional identity. If only one term was used in reference to Dime Doe, it was more likely to be “transgender woman.”

In addition, both local and national outlets often mentioned Dime Doe’s identity before naming her outright. Phrasing that referenced her identity was often used in the headlines of stories. However, more articles than expected highlighted Dime Doe’s intersectional identity.

### *Category 3- Hate Crime Mentions*

In order to see how prevalent the term “hate crime” was in the national and local articles, this coding category counted how many times it appeared. The term was not counted if it appeared in the full name of the Shepard-Byrd Hate Crime Prevention Act, as these were counted in a previous category.

In the 30 local articles, the word hate crime appeared a total of 126 times, for an average of roughly 4 times per article. This included the variation “hate crimes.” The term was counted if it appeared in the body or headline of the article.

In the 28 national articles, the term hate crime (including the variation “hate crimes”) appeared a total of 107 times, an average of about 3 times per story. Both local and national sources emphasized the murder as a hate crime. In addition, the average appearance of the word hate crime per article was similar between the local and national stories.

### *Category 4- Fighting for LGBTQ+ Protections*

The fourth coding category analyzed stories for themes of protecting the LGBTQ+ community. This was the least rigid coding category, and considered multiple phrases. These included phrases with the words;

- “committed to protect,”
- “vigorously defend,”
- “pursue justice.”
- “not hesitate to hold accountable,”
- “remain steadfast,”

Out of the 30 local articles, 7 of them, or 23%, expressed the theme of fighting for LGBTQ+ protections. Out of the 28 national articles, 18 of them, or 64%, mentioned themes of fighting for protections. This revealed that national sources were more concerned with sharing this sentiment. The coded phrases often appeared in the form of quotes. It represented another way that outlets chose to apply thematic framing to their coverage.

Many of these quotes came from remarks given by two people, Brook Andrews and Kristen Clarke. Andrews was the First Assistant Attorney with the U.S. Attorney’s Office for South Carolina at the time of the trial, while Clarke was the Assistant Attorney General with the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. Remarks from the Principal Deputy Associate Attorney General at the time of the trial, Benjamin C. Mizer, were also used to create quotes for news coverage. Versions of the four quotes below were some of the most common quotes that appeared in both national and local coverage.

*“This case stands as a testament to our committed effort to fight violence that is targeted against those that may identify as members of the opposite sex, for their sexual orientation or any other protected characteristic,” Brook Andrews, 2024.*

*"This sentence holds the defendant accountable for the heinous and tragic murder of Dime Doe, a Black transgender woman. Today's sentencing will not bring Dime Doe back but hopefully provides a small measure of comfort to Dime's family, loved ones and the community. This sentencing sends a clear message — the Justice Department vigorously defends the civil rights of every American. We will use all the resources at our disposal to safeguard the rights of the LGBTQI+ community, and we will investigate and prosecute perpetrators of transphobic-fueled violence in our country. In America, trans and gender non-conforming people, deserve to live their lives free from violence based on who they are and who they love," Kristen Clarke, 2024*

*"Bias-motivated violence has no place in our society. With today's sentencing, the defendant is being held accountable for the senseless murder of Dime Doe, a transgender woman of color. We hope that the verdict and sentence in this case provides Ms. Doe's loved ones with some sense of comfort and demonstrates that the Justice Department will vigorously prosecute those who commit violent acts of hate against the LGBTQI+ community," Benjamin C. Mizer, 2024*

The remarks given by officials at the state and federal level might appear as a full quote in articles, or might be abbreviated. Either way, they conveyed sentiments of continuing to protect LGBTQ+ people.

#### *Category 5- Mention of violence/violent*

For this category, the words violent and violence were highlighted to reveal how they were used in the articles. They were used to reference increased levels of violence against

transgender people, the ongoing violence against the community, and the high rates of deadly violence that transgender people experience.

In the sample of local articles, 17 out of 30 (56%) used the word “violence” or “violent.” In the 28 national articles, 18 (64%) used the word “violence” or “violent” at least once. This coding category yielded one of the closest results between both sets of articles.

Examples of phrasing that used these words include;

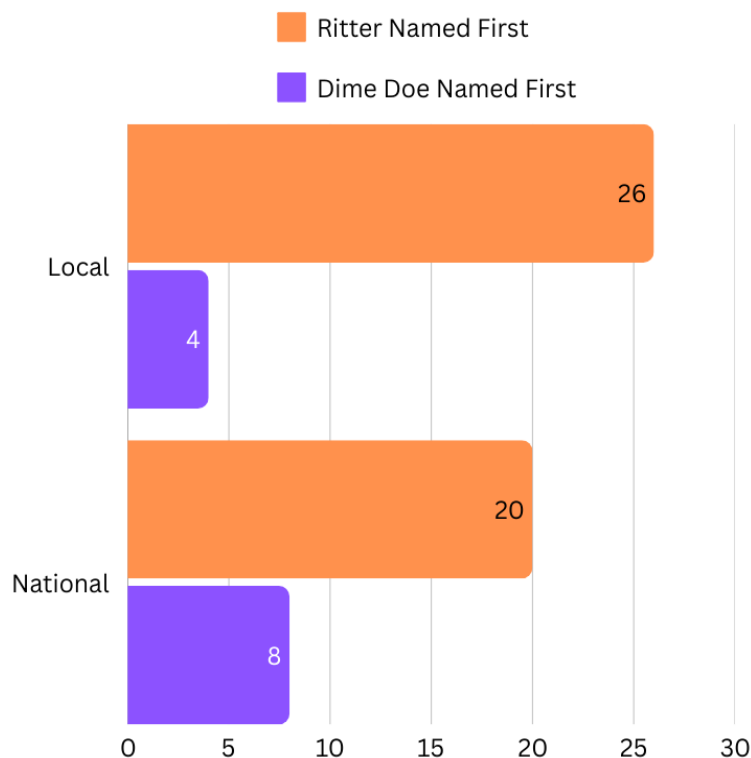
- For decades, transgender women of color have faced disproportionately high rates of violence...
- Black trans women... experiencing epidemic levels of violence.
- ...violence against the LGBTQ+ community is on the rise, including transgender women of color

The words violence and violent often appeared in the quotes used in news coverage. It also appeared in reference to the fact that Ritter was charged with a “violent crime.” More than half of local and national stories referenced anti-LGBTQ+ violence.

#### *Category 6- Daqua Lameek Ritter named first in the story*

The sixth coding category highlighted if Daqua Ritter, the man who killed Pebbles LaDime, was named before her in the story. Articles referred to him as both Daqua Ritter and Daqua Lameek Ritter, so both versions of the name were considered.

*(Table 3- Ritter vs. Dime Doe Named First)*



In 86% (26 of 30) local articles, Daqua Ritter was named before Dime Doe was named. In 71% (20 of 28) national articles, Daqua Ritter was named first. This did not include if the terms “transgender woman” or “Black transgender woman” appeared before Ritter’s name. This category was concerned with which one was referenced by name first.

The local sources were more likely to name Ritter before naming Dime Doe. However, both the local and national sources named him first more often than they didn’t.

#### *Category 7- mention of a secret relationship*

This coding category looked at the sentences in coverage that mentioned a secret relationship between Dime Doe and Ritter. This included the phrases;

- “secret relationship,”
- “rumors of a relationship,”

- “exposure of a sexual relationship,”
- “sexual relationship,”
- “secret sexual relationship,”

When coding the 28 national articles, 25 (89%) emphasized the idea of a “secret relationship” between Dime Doe and Ritter. Out of the 30 local articles, 18 (60%) emphasized a secret relationship. More than half of local and national articles referenced a secret relationship of some kind, but national articles were more likely to do so.



## Discussion

### *Limitations of Study*

This project presented a few limitations. It was coded by hand, presenting a higher risk of human error. The project also considered text-based coverage only. Ritter was arrested a few years after the murder initially happened, which could have affected the amount of coverage produced. If he was arrested immediately, the case might have received more attention.

### *Discussion of Results*

Frame 1, context of the Shepard-Byrd Act, represents thematic framing choices found in both national and local news articles. This frame brought in the broader context of Dime Doe's murder trial by mentioning the piece of legislation being used to prosecute Daqua Ritter. Coding for mention of the Shepard-Byrd Act was chosen because of previous research into coverage of Matthew Shepard's murder. It was also chosen because the trial to prosecute Ritter was the first federal hate crime trial based on gender-identity. Given this historical context, I would have expected to see Frame 1 appear in stories more often. Instead, it was one of the least commonly used frames. This could be due to the fact that Ritter was not charged until a few years after the murder. When Matthew Shepard was murdered, the news coverage represented it as a significant event. However, a similar sense of historical importance was not applied when Dime Doe was murdered, or when her killer was put on trial. Very little coverage appeared in 2019, when the murder happened.

The findings around Frame 1 echo similar research regarding how news media frames transgender women of color. When transgender women of color are victims of violent crime, including homicide, they are less likely to get the same amount of coverage as their white peers. Multiple local and national news outlets failed to position Dime Doe's murder within the wider

context of hate crime legislation. Frame 1 provided an opportunity for thematic framing in stories. However, not every article that mentioned the Shepard-Byrd Act gave readers much more than one or two sentences.

Frame 2, Dime Doe's identity, explored how news articles talked about Dime Doe. Since the trial being covered was the first federal hate crime trial based on gender identity, it was expected that Dime Doe's identity as a transgender woman would be mentioned in every story. This was expected based on the nature and context of the murder trial. However, some articles were able to write about the trial without highlighting Dime Doe's identity. When her identity was mentioned, she was more often referenced in terms of her intersectional identity as a Black transgender woman in both national and local sources. However, the term "transgender woman" was favored slightly, especially when Dime Doe's identity was used in headlines.

In addition, Frame 2 revealed less of a focus on Dime Doe as an Allendale, South Carolina local. The local news outlets were more likely to highlight this aspect of her identity. Dime Doe was not just a Black transgender woman who was murdered, she was a woman killed in a small town that she called home. Local articles were also more likely to emphasise that Dime Doe was a 24-year-old. When her age was mentioned, there was not a focus on her being a "young woman." However, she was only a few years older than Matthew Shepard, and news coverage of his murder has heavily leaned on identifying him as a "young college student."

Despite Pebbles LaDime only being 24 years old when she was killed, the news media was not concerned with framing her as a young woman. Her age was mentioned in passing, similar to how news article mention the ages of most people they name, but it was not a focus of the story.

Frame 3, the murder as a hate crime, examined if news coverage positioned Dime Doe's murder as a hate crime. It also analyzed how often the phrase "hate crime" appeared to examine how the murder was positioned in the broader context of hate crimes and hate crime legislation. The phrases "hate crime" or "hate crimes" appeared over a hundred times throughout both the local and national sources.

A majority of news articles framed Dime Doe's murder as a hate crime, whether they came from a local or a national outlet. This is in-line with thematic framing, and provided readers with context about what hate crimes are and the kind of legislation that prevents them. Even when the Shepard-Byrd Act was left out of coverage, stories still often referenced hate crimes broadly. While articles were likely to frame the murder as a hate crime, this did not always point toward thematic framing choices.

Frame 4, fighting for LGBTQ+ protections, was one of the best examples of thematic framing choices in coverage. This framing category expressed concerns with protecting the LGBTQ+ community, continuing to pass needed legislation, and prosecuting perpetrators of hate crimes. National articles were more likely to apply this frame. It was often done through the use of quotes, with many outlets using quotes from the same sources.

Frame 4 positioned the trial within the wider context of legislation meant to protect the LGBTQ+ community. Quotes used from lawmakers and advocates presented a strong and confident stance; hate crimes are unacceptable and will not be tolerated. This frame is the opposite of the "cautionary tale" narrative that arose from Shepard's murder. With the Dime Doe trial, news coverage sent the message that hate crimes are an inexcusable offense.

Frame 5, violence against the transgender community, explored the news coverage discussed Pebbles LaDime's murder within the broader conversation of violence against the

transgender community. This frame was expected given previous research into framing of the transgender community and Shepard's murder. When transgender people show up in the news, it is often because they are the victim of a violent crime. Frame 5 was also expected given rising rates of violence against the LGBTQ+ community, specifically transgender women.

More than half, but barely more than half, of the news coverage of Dime Doe's murder positioned it within the context of violence against the LGBTQ+ community. This was done by articles mentioning "rising rates," and "disproportionately high" rates of violence. Local and national outlets were almost equally as likely to apply Frame 5 in their coverage. This frame is another example of thematic framing choices.

Frame 6, naming Dime Doe's murderer first, revealed how often news outlets named the man who killed Pebbles LaDime before naming her. It was one of the most commonly found frames in both local and national sources. Stories positioned Daqua Ritter's name first, contributing to a narrative that became about Dime Doe's killer over her. The story conveyed by news outlets was about Ritter facing trial for the murder. News outlets were more likely to create coverage about Ritter sitting trial and facing life in prison than they were about the historical significance of the trial or about LGBTQ+ protections.

Applying Frame 6 leads readers to believe that Ritter is at the core of the story, not Pebbles LaDime. When stories did name Doe first, they were more likely to focus on her over Ritter. However, outlets likely did this because Ritter was the one sitting trial. This did not stop a handful of stories from shifting the focus to Dime Doe, emphasizing her identity and life before getting to the details of her murder. This wasn't a surprise to see, because Ritter was the one standing trial, but some news outlets did find a way to not name him first. These stories were

more likely to highlight who Dime Doe was as a person, and represent a shift other news outlets could take.

Frame 7, emphasis on a secret relationship, was one of the most revealing frames. It put focus on the fact that Pebbles LaDime and Ritter were in a “sexual” relationship that was being kept secret. Despite the secrecy, rumors spread and caused Ritter to lash out angrily by killing her. This frame, used frequently in local and national sources, echoes similar findings into how the news frames transgender individuals. Transgender women tend to be sexualized, and news outlets did this when they focused on a “sexual relationship” between Ritter and Dime Doe. Even when articles did not use the word “sexual” when describing the relationship, it was still described as a secret.

Local and mainstream articles used Frame 7 to justify, even if inadvertently, the anger that caused Ritter to commit murder. Stories put a focus on the fact that Ritter was angry at the thought of their relationship being known, bringing up homophobic comments that were made toward him. This was a focus that his defense team took during the trial, and one that news coverage seemed to run with. Frame 7 creates the narrative that Pebbles LaDime played some kind of role in her own murder, either by being in a secret relationship or by exposing said relationship. While the blame shift could be inadvertent, it does appear to stem from previously identified themes in how news media tend to make transgender individuals seem at fault for their deaths. Focusing so much on the secret relationship between Ritter and Doe, and the anger he felt, implied in a way that what Ritter did was justified. Coverage pushed the idea that Ritter was angry, and would rather kill someone he had been intimate with than risk those close to him thinking he was “gay” in some way. Of course, he had no right to end Pebble LaDime’s life, no

matter how angry he was. Choosing to focus on this frame so much in news coverage does nothing but justify her murder.

The lack of coverage surrounding LaDime's death and court case deserves acknowledgement too.

Pebbles LaDime will likely not be remembered at as wide of a scale as Matthew Shepard, because she was not covered to the same extent. Her death and the landmark court case that followed were boiled down to a handful of points. AP News took the lead in coverage, and a significant number of outlets chose to run this story over writing one of their own. A mix of more than 20 local and national sources ran copies of the AP story instead of writing an original story. While it can't be said why that decision was made, it did take away from what could have been original coverage of Pebbles LaDime. When outlets did create original coverage, much of it drew from the AP stories. This reflects the jarring lack of coverage that transgender women of color receive. It can't be ignored that a majority of the coverage came after Ritter was charged, years after Pebbles LaDime was killed.

News coverage of the LGBTQ+ community, specifically transgender women of color, has improved in recent years. Local and national outlets often chose thematic framing choices over episodic framing, providing context that has not always been seen in the media. A significant amount of coverage that came out did not shy away from calling the murder a hate crime. A significant amount of coverage also called on vigorously defending LGBTQ+ people. Coverage also mentioned Dime Doe's identity as a Black transgender woman more often than not. This focus on her intersectional identity represents changes that have been recommended when covering LGBTQ+ issues/the community.

Despite these positive changes, the news media still has steps to take. There was a startling lack of coverage given the historical significance of the trial. However, there was even less coverage when the murder first took place in 2019. This is especially concerning given the fact that hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community have only risen in recent years.

A focus on the secret relationship between Dime Doe and Ritter is also a bit too similar to themes like the “trans panic defense” in justifying anti-LGBTQ+ violence. Leaning on frames like this could lead into more overt “victim blaming” frames when hate crimes happen.

It is important that journalists are mindful and informed when covering LGBTQ+ people and the issues that impact the LGBTQ+ community. Significant positive changes have been made in recent years, but there are still significant changes that need to happen. This is especially true when it comes to increasing coverage of LGBTQ+ people of color. It is not that Matthew Shepard should have received less media attention, but that Pebbles LaDime should have received more.

News coverage etched Shepard into the public memory of America as one of the most brutal anti-LGBTQ+ murders, but Shepard was not the only person killed because of their sexuality that year. The news media had just as much power to make Pebbles LaDime just as known as Shepard, but it chose not to. There is likely not one answer as to why, and there is not one answer as to what can be done moving forward. However, understanding how the news framed something as important as the first federal hate crime based on gender identity is part of moving forward. It gives future and current journalists insight into what their field is doing, and the potential impact it can have.

When journalists write stories about LGBTQ+ people, they should keep humanity at the center. This is true when covering any group, and is likely to decrease the likelihood of

representing harmful stereotypes. The voices of LGBTQ+ should be the focus of stories that are about them. Journalists should also be aware of language that shifts blame to victims of anti-LGBTQ+ violence. This can be done unintentionally, so journalists need to make sure they are aware of the words they use.



### **Future Research**

Additional research regarding various types of coverage could offer further insight into how this landmark court case was framed by news media. Researchers should continue exploring how the news media talks about hate crimes and anti-LGBTQ+ violence. This will continue to be important as long as anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes continue to rise. Special attention should be given to how the transgender community is represented in the media, especially transgender women of color. They represent a group often left out of news coverage.

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