

**Narratives of Fear and Resistance: LGBTQ+ Visibility and Media Power in
Contemporary America**

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PREFACE

The impetus for this work arises from a deep-seated interest in the ways fear functions as a tool of social control, particularly through media narratives and political rhetoric. My objective is to critically interrogate how fear distorts perceptions of risk, reinforces social inequalities, and maintains entrenched power structures. Engaging with the sociology of fear, I aim to uncover the mechanisms by which collective anxieties are constructed, sustained, and contested within various societal contexts.

This exploration is rooted in the sociology of knowledge, literacy, and education—domains where power dynamics, identity negotiations, and social norms converge. I examine how educational systems and literacy practices shape public consciousness, privileging certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. This analysis reveals the ideological frameworks underpinning these systems and their capacity to either reinforce or challenge social disparities.

Rather than a comprehensive theory of fear, this thesis offers a focused examination of how fear operates within mainstream media discourses, especially those that affect LGBTQ+ communities. The first chapter reviews key theoretical perspectives on fear in its broader sociocultural and political context. This review serves as a necessary foundation for understanding how fear is mobilized in more targeted and ideological ways. Situating the research in this wider context is essential for refining the central research question and for clarifying the specific contributions of this thesis: namely, to expose the mechanisms through which media narratives reinforce or contest structural inequalities via fear-based appeals.

This research is driven by a commitment to advancing equity and fostering critical awareness. By examining the interplay of fear, knowledge, and education, I seek not only to illuminate the structural forces that shape our social landscape but also to imagine transformative alternatives that empower individuals and communities. Through this reflective exploration, I hope to contribute to a sociological understanding that is both comprehensive and action-oriented, encouraging collective engagement with the narratives that structure our reality.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between fear, media narratives, and the representation of LGBTQ+ communities in American society. Utilizing theory and qualitative content analysis, the study examines how mainstream media outlets, specifically Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, frame LGBTQ+ issues during two significant periods: the aftermath of the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision and the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The research identifies distinct framing strategies employed by these outlets, highlighting how fear-based discourses are constructed, transmitted, and contested. Fox News's coverage often presents LGBTQ+ advancements as cultural threats or political manipulations, whereas CNN's reporting tends to frame these issues within civil rights and normalization narratives. The thesis also investigates the role of fear in shaping public perceptions and social hierarchies, discussing the broader implications of media framing on policy debates and societal attitudes. By analyzing language and emotional appeals, the study contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which fear influences political discourse and marginalized communities' representation. The findings offer insights into media's role in both reinforcing and challenging social inequalities, providing a foundation for further research and critical engagement with media narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ issues.

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INTRODUCTION: FEAR, POWER, AND THE POLITICS OF ANXIETY IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

"What Americans fear often has less to do with real dangers than with anxieties about the condition of the society."

Barry Glassner, 1999:xx

Fear is often framed as an instinctive response to external threats, but its true power lies in its persistence beyond immediate danger (Adolphs, 2013). This persistence allows fear to become a transmissible force, communicated across social networks and sustained without direct exposure to the original threat. For example, a parent's fear of a perceived societal danger can be consciously or unconsciously passed to their children, perpetuating collective anxieties across generations (Barbalet, 1998; Olsson & Phelps, 2007).

This opening review situates the research within the broader sociological discourse on fear. Establishing this context is essential to refine the central research question and to clarify the specific contributions of this thesis to ongoing debates about media, fear, and LGBTQ+ representation. By first reviewing the social, cultural, and institutional conditions under which fear becomes politically productive, the thesis lays the groundwork for a focused analysis of how media outlets deploy fear-based narratives in relation to LGBTQ+ communities.

Fear must be understood not only as an immediate emotional reaction but as an enduring social condition. While fear may originate in response to specific dangers, it becomes institutionalized over time, embedded into public policies, normative expectations, and cultural practices (Ahmed, 2004, p. 63; Furedi, 2006, pp. 9–14). This institutionalization

manifests in multiple facets of American life through routine surveillance practices¹, expansive carceral systems, restrictive immigration policies, and the normalization of security rhetoric in political discourse (Glassner, 1999, p. xxii; Garland, 2001, p. 4). As such, fear evolves from a fleeting emotion into a durable organizing principle, one that disciplines bodies, shapes ideologies, and constrains possibilities for collective solidarity and transformation.

This thesis investigates the sociological construction of fear as both a generalized condition and a targeted tool—particularly in its deployment through mainstream media narratives that frame LGBTQ+ individuals as threats to cultural norms. To do so, it draws from key scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2004), Barry Glassner (1999), David Altheide (2006), and Ruth Wodak (2015), whose work on emotion, discourse, and ideology helps illuminate how fear travels through texts and public discourse². These texts are central to this research because they offer robust conceptual tools for analyzing affective economies, moral panics, and discursive power. Their frequent citation reflects their foundational role in framing both the empirical and theoretical dimensions of this study. This initial chapter provides a review of relevant theoretical literature in order to ground the empirical inquiry that follows. Understanding fear’s broader social and political functions is essential for interpreting the specific ways it is weaponized in the framing of

¹ Surveillance, in Foucault’s analysis, is a mechanism of social control that encourages people to internalize norms. In contemporary culture, media visibility itself becomes a form of surveillance—where constant scrutiny of LGBTQ+ identities produces pressure to conform and labels difference as deviance.

² For Foucault, discourse is a structured system of meaning that governs what can be said, by whom, and with what authority. Discourses shape subjectivity by assigning individuals roles such as “deviant,” “victim,” or “threat,” thus producing the very identities they describe.

LGBTQ+ rights, identities, and bodies. While some of this conceptual framing may reappear in the conclusion, it serves a distinct purpose here: to map the intellectual terrain and justify the analytical lens through which this study proceeds.

The central research question guiding this thesis is: How do mainstream media narratives construct and mobilize fear-based discourses surrounding LGBTQ+ issues, and what role do these narratives play in reinforcing systemic inequalities and maintaining social hierarchies? By investigating how fear circulates through media narratives—particularly those crafted by Fox News’ *The Five* and CNN’s *The Lead with Jake Tapper*—this study aims to uncover both the ideological work that fear performs and the potential for counter-narratives that challenge its hegemony.

Mapping Fear, Anxiety, and Angst—A Typology of Emotional Responses

Grasping the distinctions between fear, anxiety, and angst is essential for analyzing how emotional responses influence social structures, cultural narratives, and systemic inequalities. A typology of these emotional states integrates sociological, psychological, and philosophical perspectives to define their conceptual boundaries, highlight their intersections, and establish their relevance to LGBTQ+ representation in media. This framework not only clarifies the mechanisms through which these emotions are constructed and perpetuated but also sets the stage for investigating their broader cultural and political implications.

Sociologically, fear operates as a tool of regulation and control, shaping behavior by enforcing boundaries and reinforcing hierarchies (Glassner, 1999; Ahmed, 2004). For example, fear of crime or terrorism has been used to justify increased surveillance and

restrictive policies (Robin, 2004). In the context of LGBTQ+ representation, fear often manifests as moral panic, portraying LGBTQ+ identities as threats to cultural stability, traditional values, and moral order (Cohen, 1972). Such portrayals sustain exclusionary practices and bolster systemic inequalities by evoking immediate, visceral responses from audiences.

Unlike fear, anxiety lacks a clear or immediate source of threat. It is marked by uncertainty, anticipation, and a sense of vulnerability (Barbalet, 1998). Anxiety emerges when individuals or groups feel a lack of control over potential dangers, leading to chronic unease (Bourke, 2005). This quality makes anxiety particularly susceptible to manipulation through media narratives that emphasize ambiguity and risk. Anxiety is instrumental in sustaining long-term vigilance and compliance, even when direct threats are absent (Furedi, 2006). For example, media depictions of LGBTQ+ rights as a "slippery slope" toward moral decay create ongoing anxieties about social change, even in the absence of concrete events to justify these fears. Anxiety thus fuels ideological divides by framing LGBTQ+ visibility and advocacy as destabilizing forces, prompting audiences to adopt defensive or exclusionary positions.

Angst, a concept rooted in existential philosophy, refers to a deeper, more abstract form of fear—a sense of dread or insecurity stemming from questions about identity, purpose, and belonging (Heidegger, 1927; Kierkegaard, 1844). Unlike fear and anxiety, which focus on external dangers, angst reflects internal conflicts and existential crises. Angst is also linked to broader cultural anxieties about societal change and identity loss (Bauman, 2000). For example, debates about LGBTQ+ rights often tap into collective angst about

shifts in gender norms, family structures, and moral values. This angst fuels ideological resistance to inclusivity, as dominant groups experience these changes as threats to their cultural and social identities (Harrison, 2018).

While distinct, fear, anxiety, and angst frequently intersect and reinforce one another. Fear can evolve into anxiety when threats become abstract or prolonged, while anxiety can deepen into angst when threats challenge fundamental beliefs about identity and belonging. Media narratives often exploit these overlaps, using visual and rhetorical strategies to amplify emotional responses and sustain systemic inequalities (Wodak, 2015). For example, Fox News may highlight immediate threats, framing LGBTQ+ rights as assaults on family values, while MSNBC may focus on anxiety and angst by emphasizing the precariousness of LGBTQ+ rights in an unstable political climate. These strategies not only shape public perceptions but also influence policy debates and cultural norms.

This typology provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing how fear, anxiety, and angst operate in media representations. By distinguishing these emotional responses, the study can uncover how conservative and liberal outlets construct different forms of emotional engagement to mobilize audiences, reinforce ideologies, and perpetuate inequalities. Understanding these distinctions also highlights opportunities for resistance. While fear immobilizes and divides, acknowledging anxiety and angst can lead to critical reflection, empathy, and social change. This framework thus sets the stage for the empirical analysis in later chapters, where media narratives of LGBTQ+ representation are examined through the lens of fear, anxiety, and angst.

Conceptualizing Fear—Emotions, Social Construction, and Control

Fear is not an immutable aspect of the human psyche; it is socially constructed and transmitted. While individual fears, such as phobias, often stem from personal experiences, broader societal fears are cultivated through collective narratives, institutional practices, and cultural memory (Barbalet 1998; Olsson and Phelps, 2007). Historical examples abound; European settlers' fear of Native American cultures, framed as dangerous or uncivilized, justified policies of displacement and genocide (Henne-ton, 2016; Harrison, 2018). These narratives persist today, reappearing in modern forms to stigmatize racialized groups, immigrants, and queer communities (Department of the Interior, 2021).

Fear, in this sense, becomes a strategic cultural resource; invoked to defend dominant interests and marginalize those deemed outsiders (Finley and Esposito, 2019; Harrison, 2018). Across historical and contemporary contexts, fear has been instrumentalized to legitimize exclusionary policies, reinforce dominant ideologies, and justify violence—from the displacement of Indigenous peoples to anti-immigrant legislation and the backlash against LGBTQ+ rights.

Understanding fear as a socially constructed phenomenon illuminates its role in shaping institutions and maintaining systemic inequality. It also suggests the possibility of disrupting these patterns through critical engagement and social transformation.

This thesis examines fear as a strategic mechanism through which power is maintained and inequality reinforced via media narratives. It combines theoretical analysis with qualitative content analysis to investigate how fear-based discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ issues operates within broader structures of social control. However, to fully

understand fear's function within American society, it is necessary to examine not only fear directed at specific marginalized groups, but also the broader, ambient fear that permeates social relations more generally.

While fear is often directed at specific groups, in the American context it has also become a diffuse, ambient condition characterized by generalized suspicion toward unknown others. Unlike societies historically organized around strong collective traditions, shared religion, or ethnic homogeneity, American social relations have long been marked by a deep-seated distrust of fellow citizens (Lipset, 1996). Fellow Americans are not automatically assumed to be trustworthy; instead, they are often perceived as potential threats, requiring vigilance and defensive postures.

This pervasive suspicion is reflected in several distinctive aspects of American social life, including the normalization of widespread gun ownership, extraordinarily high incarceration rates, and a political culture that valorizes individual self-defense over communal solidarity (Alexander, 2010; Garland, 2001). The right to bear arms, frequently justified through appeals to personal protection, reflects not merely fear of state oppression, but fear of one's neighbors—an everyday anxiety that violence may erupt unpredictably and without warning. Similarly, the American criminal justice system exhibits some of the highest rates of incarceration globally, a phenomenon scholars argue is partly sustained by a cultural framework that treats social deviance not as a problem to be rehabilitated, but as a danger to be contained (Garland, 2001). In this environment, fear becomes less a response to identifiable threats and more a generalized mode of relating to the social world. This generalized fear creates fertile ground for political actors

and media outlets to channel diffuse anxieties into targeted scapegoating. By focusing fear onto particular groups—whether immigrants, racial minorities, or LGBTQ+ individuals—elites offer the illusion of control over a fundamentally uncontrollable and uncertain social landscape. In doing so, they manage societal uncertainty by rearticulating ambient fears into discrete, actionable prejudices (Glassner, 1999; Wodak, 2015).

Understanding fear as both targeted and ambient is crucial for analyzing how emotional economies operate in American media narratives. LGBTQ+ representation, while often framed as threatening specific moral or cultural norms, also taps into this broader societal unease about unpredictability, change, and social fragmentation. Fear of the "other" thus encompasses more than specific bigotries; it reflects an underlying structure of emotional insecurity deeply rooted in the historical development of American society itself.

Media representations play a central role in regulating behavior by creating atmospheres of anxiety and vigilance. Fear compels individuals to conform to social norms and expectations, operating not only at the individual level but also through institutional practices that discipline collective behavior (Furedi, 2006; Altheide, 2022). Fear often serves to justify discriminatory practices. Cultural narratives that exaggerate threats posed by marginalized groups—such as LGBTQ+ individuals—legitimize exclusionary laws, censorship, and over-policing, often under the guise of public protection or moral order (Alexander, 2010; Furedi, 2006; Harrison, 2018; Wodak, 2015). By framing certain identities as inherently threatening, fear-based narratives rationalize unequal treatment and preserve dominant power structures. Understanding the social construction of fear is crucial for confronting its role in perpetuating injustice. Fear does not arise spontaneously

but is cultivated through media representation, political rhetoric, and institutional reinforcement. By unpacking how fear is produced and maintained, it becomes possible to challenge the systems that use fear to justify inequality, opening pathways toward a more equitable society.

This thesis also aims to identify opportunities for resistance and transformation, offering a framework for reimagining fear not merely as a mechanism of control but as a potential catalyst for collective resilience, critical consciousness, and social change. It investigates how fear intersects with systemic oppression, media discourse, and knowledge production to shape public consciousness and reinforce hierarchies. By analyzing how mainstream media outlets—specifically Fox News’s *The Five* and CNN’s *The Lead with Jake Tapper*—construct and deploy fear-based narratives around LGBTQ+ issues, the study illustrates how emotional discourses sustain or disrupt systems of inequality.

Using qualitative content analysis, this research identifies recurring themes, language patterns, and symbolic strategies in media portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals. It examines how media narratives encode fear, how these narratives evolve over time, and how they interact with broader socio-political contexts. Attention is given to how fear narratives are reinforced by media ownership structures, cultural values, and political interests, as well as how counter-narratives emerge to contest exclusionary framings. By uncovering both the reinforcement and resistance within media portrayals, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional dimensions of political discourse and the mechanisms of social control.

Ultimately, this thesis contends that fear is not an accidental or neutral emotion within public discourse, but a strategic force embedded within media narratives that shapes perceptions, policies, and lived realities. However, confronting generalized fear—fear not simply of specific marginalized groups, but of unknown others more broadly—presents a deeper and more intractable challenge. Generalized distrust is embedded in the very foundations of American social relations, sustained through historical patterns of individualism, securitization, and social fragmentation. As such, resisting fear-based narratives requires more than contesting explicit bigotry; it demands a reimagining of solidarity, the rebuilding of trust across difference, and the dismantling of cultural logics that normalize suspicion as a default social orientation. Addressing generalized fear thus represents not only a political project but a profound cultural one, necessary for advancing collective resilience, critical consciousness, and inclusive social transformation. At the same time, it affirms that fear, when critically engaged, can serve as a site of resistance—a catalyst for challenging dominant ideologies, building solidarity, and imagining more just and inclusive futures.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FEAR: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Fear, as a multifaceted emotion, plays a significant role in shaping societal dynamics and power structures. Understanding the social construction of fear is crucial for addressing its role in perpetuating injustice and inequality in society. Fear does not arise spontaneously; it is often deliberately cultivated through social processes such as media representation, political discourse, and institutional practices³. By unpacking how fear is produced and maintained, we can challenge the structures that use it to justify inequality, paving the way for more equitable and just social systems (Ahmed, 2004; Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999).

Classical sociological perspectives provide foundational insights into the relationship between fear, emotions, and social order. Durkheim's work emphasizes how collective emotions can serve to reinforce social cohesion. For example, shared fears [such as fear of divine punishment or of social ostracism] help uphold moral norms and unite communities in common belief (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). Elias discusses the civilizing processes that shape emotional regulation within societies, noting that as society "civilized," overt expressions of fear and violence became more regulated and channeled through norms (Elias, 2000). This historical process reshaped how fear is experienced and controlled at the societal level. In effect, Durkheim and Elias illustrate that fear is not merely instinctual; it is conditioned by collective conscience and social development.

³ Michel Foucault's concept of *power/knowledge* redefines power not as purely repressive but as productive—it creates knowledge, norms, and truths that govern how people think and act. Media, in this framework, is not merely reflective but constitutive of social reality.

Contemporary theorists expand on these ideas by analyzing how emotions circulate and bind groups in modern contexts. Ahmed introduces the concept of “affective economies,” arguing that emotions like fear move through social bodies and align individuals with some groups and against others (Ahmed, 2004). Fear, in this view, attaches to certain figures (the outsider, the stranger) and thereby defines boundaries of community belonging. Furedi examines the emergence of a “fear culture,” where fear becomes pervasive and even commodified, influencing social behaviors and attitudes. He suggests that modern societies have developed a heightened consciousness of risk, often leading to excessive caution or anxiety. Similarly, Beck’s theory of the “risk society” posits that late modern life is organized around managing an array of risks, which can foster a climate of constant low-level fear. Furedi’s perspective can be seen as a critique of such risk-society narratives, emphasizing that many contemporary fears are socially amplified beyond their empirical basis (Beck, 1992; Furedi, 1997). Glassner further contributes to the discourse with his analysis of moral panics, illustrating how society often fears the “wrong things.” In *The Culture of Fear*, Glassner documents how exaggerated fears (of youth violence, drug epidemics, or other perceived threats) are stoked by cultural narratives and political interests (Glassner, 1999). These classical and contemporary frameworks all underline a key point; fear is not just a biological reaction but a socially shaped phenomenon, molded by shared beliefs, discourse, and power relations.

Historical and Cultural Foundations

Fear takes shape within specific cultural and historical contexts, often reflecting the dominant anxieties of an era. Throughout history, the social construction of fear has been

shaped by shifting political and cultural conditions. During the Cold War, for example, the specter of nuclear annihilation permeated public consciousness, influencing everything from civil defense drills to popular media (Engelhardt, 1995). Though rooted in a legitimate threat, this fear was also strategically amplified by political leaders to sustain ideological compliance and justify militarization. Governments capitalized on the fear of communism to rationalize arms proliferation, international interventions, and domestic surveillance (Masco, 2014; Robin, 2004).

Alongside fear of external threats, the Cold War era also witnessed internal moral panics. The Red Scare fed widespread paranoia about alleged communist infiltration in American institutions, culminating in loyalty oaths, blacklists, and widespread violations of civil liberties (Engelhardt, 1995; Robin, 2004). One of the more insidious manifestations was the "Lavender Scare," a campaign targeting homosexual government employees under the pretense that they were vulnerable to communist blackmail. In this context, homosexuality was constructed as both a moral and national security threat (Johnson, 2004; Fejes, 2008). Hundreds of gay men and lesbians were fired from federal jobs, and LGBTQ+ identities were conflated with treason. These examples demonstrate how state actors weaponized fear—both foreign and domestic—as a mechanism for social control and suppression of dissent (Johnson, 2004; Wodak, 2015).

In more recent times, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a stark illustration of how fear can be magnified and mobilized in a digital information ecosystem. As Altheide argues, the dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories via social media contributed to an environment where fear outpaced facts (Altheide and Merkovity, 2022). Unfounded

claims about microchipped vaccines or manufactured viruses spread rapidly, illustrating how fear of the unknown can overshadow scientific consensus and disrupt public health efforts (Glassner, 2018; Wodak, 2015). This environment of fear undermined institutional trust and polarized public responses (Gorby, 2023).

The pandemic also became a biopolitical tool⁴, as governments worldwide invoked emergency powers to restrict movement, implement surveillance technologies, and enforce mandates in the name of public safety (Foucault, 1995; Altheide, 2006). This raised fundamental questions about the balance between individual liberties and collective health. Moreover, during this period, xenophobia escalated, with Asian Americans scapegoated and targeted due to the virus's origin in China (Altheide and Merkovity, 2022; Gorby, 2023). These dynamics reflect how fear not only spreads through media and politics but is also operationalized to manage populations and reinforce nationalist sentiments (Wodak, 2015; Glassner, 2018). These historical patterns underscore that fear is rarely spontaneous; rather, it is socially constructed and mobilized to serve the interests of dominant groups (Cohen, 1972; Ahmed, 2004). As such, xenophobia, racism, and other forms of exclusionary politics often rest on deeply ingrained fear narratives that cast marginalized “Others” as existential threats to societal well-being (Glassner, 1999; Wodak, 2015).

The construction of fear around marginalized communities reveals how emotional narratives become entwined with prejudice and politics. Throughout history, social

⁴ Foucault's concept of biopolitics describes how modern power operates through the regulation of life itself—health, bodies, sexuality, and reproduction. State and media discourse around transgender bodies and public safety often reflect biopolitical efforts to normalize and discipline populations.

groups seen as “deviant” have been depicted as objects of fear to justify their marginalization. A clear example emerges in the treatment of homosexuality across the 20th century. As noted, during the Cold War era the U.S. government perpetuated a panic that gay men (and lesbians) in public service posed a security threat, leading to the Lavender Scare purges (Johnson, 2004). Homosexuality was construed as a dangerous hidden menace to the nation’s moral fiber and security (Robin, 2004; Wodak, 2015). A few decades later, in the 1970s, a new wave of fear-based rhetoric accompanied the backlash against the emerging gay rights movement. In 1977, singer Anita Bryant led the “Save Our Children” campaign to repeal a local gay rights ordinance in Florida, infamously claiming that gay people would “recruit” or harm children. Bryant and other conservative activists portrayed gay men as child molesters and threats to the family, invoking visceral fear among the public (Fejes, 2008; Glassner, 1999). This campaign succeeded in overturning the anti-discrimination law and sparked similar efforts nationwide, marking one of the first national moral panics targeting the LGBTQ+ community. The moral panic framework aptly describes these events- media and political figures whipped up public fear disproportionate to any actual danger, identifying gay people as “folk devils” blamed for broader social ills (Cohen, 1972). Likewise, during the 1980s AIDS crisis, fear surged again – this time framing gay men as vectors of a deadly disease. Sensational media coverage of AIDS as a “gay plague” fueled public hysteria, leading to calls for quarantine of HIV-positive individuals and further stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people. In all these cases, emotional narratives of fear buttressed anti-LGBTQ+

policies, from employment bans to sodomy laws and lack of action on AIDS (Herek and Capitanio, 1993; Glassner, 1999).

In contemporary discourse, transgender individuals have become a focal point of fear-based narratives. Recent media coverage surrounding trans rights often leverages fear of bodily ambiguity and transgression of gender norms, framing trans people as dangerous or as victims in need of regulation (Wodak, 2015; Altheide and Merkovity, 2022). For instance, opponents of transgender inclusion have depicted trans women as potential sexual predators in public restrooms—an allegation not supported by crime data but effective in stirring public anxiety (Walker, 2023; Glassner, 2018). Such discourse represents a convergence of transphobic rhetoric and moral panic, as recent scholarship has observed (Walker, 2023). Walker’s analysis of anti-trans hate mail and online content finds the classic hallmarks of moral panic exaggerated claims, vilification of a minority as “folk devils,” and calls for urgent action to “protect” society. These fear-based narratives have tangible policy outcomes. They have been used to justify a wave of anti-trans legislation (from banning transgender students in sports to restricting gender-affirming healthcare) under the guise of public safety and child protection (Walker, 2023; Wodak, 2015).

Moreover, the intersection of race, class, religion, and immigration status with LGBTQ+ fear narratives can compound the effects. For example, a Black trans woman may be subjected to fear narratives about transgender people as well as racist tropes about Black criminality, increasing her vulnerability to violence and discrimination (Glassner, 1999; Fejes, 2008). Immigrants who are LGBTQ+ have at times been doubly demonized

portrayed as cultural threats on two fronts. These intersecting fears illustrate how multiple axes of marginalization can heighten a group's exposure to fearmongering (Ahmed, 2004).

Importantly, marginalized communities and their allies have developed responses to challenge fear-based framing. Activist counter-narratives often emphasize visibility and humanization to dispel irrational fears. LGBTQ+ activists, for instance, have engaged in visibility politics—coming out, public demonstrations like Pride, and media advocacy—to replace fear and stigma with familiarity and empathy (Herek and Capitanio, 1993). Organizations such as GLAAD monitor and contest negative media portrayals, providing alternative storylines that present LGBTQ+ individuals as everyday people rather than threats. These efforts push back against the emotional regime of fear, striving to reframe LGBTQ+ presence as part of the social norm. While fear narratives have proven resilient, especially when amplified by powerful institutions, the ongoing resistance by marginalized groups highlights the possibility of reclaiming the narrative. By confronting fear with facts, storytelling, and solidarity, activists aim to break the cycle in which fear breeds prejudice, and prejudice in turn breeds more fear.

Fear, Power, and Institutional Control—Mechanisms of Social Regulation

The interplay between fear and politics is profound. Fear is a powerful motivator capable of shaping public behavior and galvanizing political movements. Politicians have long employed fear as a rhetorical and strategic tool to mobilize voters, pass legislation, and maintain social hierarchies (Wodak, 2015). Fear-based narratives in politics often appeal to emotion rather than reason, creating a sense of urgency that demands action while

bypassing critical scrutiny of the policies being proposed. This tactic can be seen across the political spectrum and throughout history. During the Jim Crow era, for example, Southern lawmakers and demagogues leveraged White fear of losing social and political dominance to entrench segregation and Black disenfranchisement. Fears about interracial marriage, integrated schools, and Black voters were framed as existential threats to White supremacy and “Southern traditions.” Those fear-based narratives became institutionalized through laws, court rulings, and constant propaganda, demonstrating how political actors translated racial fear into concrete systems of oppression (Henneton, 2016; Robin, 2004).

Fear continues to be a central theme in modern political discourse, often transcending party lines even as it reinforces partisan divides. In the early 1990s, for instance, rising public fear of crime became a pivotal political issue in the United States. During the Clinton administration, this fear was harnessed to enact the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (the largest crime bill in U.S. history). The legislation was presented as a necessary response to gang violence and drug-related crime, tapping into public anxieties stoked by media images of rampant urban crime. In reality, its “tough-on-crime” measures (such as three-strikes sentencing and expanded prison funding) disproportionately targeted poor Black communities and contributed to mass incarceration, exacerbating systemic inequalities under the guise of enhancing public safety (Eckholm, 2016; Glassner, 1999). This reflects a pattern identified by Beckett, political elites often amplify public fears—of crime, drugs, or other social ills—in order to build support for punitive policies that might otherwise face opposition. Fear, in short,

is used to manufacture consent for measures that claim to protect the public, even as those measures may harm marginalized groups (Beckett, 1997).

The aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks offers another vivid example of fear's role in politics. The George W. Bush administration tapped into the public's fear of terrorism to rapidly justify the War on Terror, framing expansive military action and domestic surveillance as necessary to protect national security (Glassner, 2018; Robin, 2004). Fear was central to the messaging phrases like “weapons of mass destruction” and coded alerts (yellow, orange, red) kept the populace on edge. This climate of fear garnered broad public support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and facilitated the erosion of civil liberties at home through laws like the USA PATRIOT Act. Practices that would have been contentious in calmer times (indefinite detentions, torture memos, warrantless wiretapping) faced limited scrutiny in the fearful post-9/11 atmosphere. Here we see how state narratives of fear can suspend normal politics, enabling extraordinary actions. While the threats of terrorism were real, the politically cultivated fear was disproportionate and strategically directed to achieve policy ends that leaders had desired independently of the attacks (Altheide, 2006; Masco, 2014).

The War on Terror era demonstrates fear's double-edged capacity it can unify a public around a cause, but it can also be used to silence dissent and undermine democratic norms under the mantle of unity and security. In more recent years, fearmongering has again been employed in electoral politics to polarize voters and reinforce existing divisions. A prominent example is Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which notoriously characterized Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists. By perpetuating

fear of immigration as a source of crime, Trump was invoking a longstanding nativist trope of the immigrant “bogeyman” (Finley and Esposito, 2019; Glassner, 2018). This rhetoric connected with some voters’ anxieties about cultural and economic change, and it shifted the Overton window of acceptable discourse sharply toward open xenophobia. Finley and Esposito note that Trump’s anti-immigrant and anti-“political correctness” appeals constructed immigrants, refugees, and even political opponents as threatening “Others” undermining America. Such appeals follow the logic of authoritarian populism, which identifies scapegoats for complex social problems and rallies supporters through fear and resentment (Finley and Esposito, 2019; Wodak, 2015). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several politicians resorted to inflammatory rhetoric that fueled xenophobia—most infamously, branding the coronavirus the “China Virus” or “Kung Flu.” This language linked Asian Americans to the disease and intensified fears of outsiders, contributing to a surge in anti-Asian harassment and violence (Altheide and Merkovity, 2022). The political utility of these messages lay in externalizing blame (for the pandemic, for economic woes) onto vulnerable groups, thus deflecting attention from governmental missteps while mobilizing nationalist sentiments through fear.

It is important to recognize that fear-based political tactics are not confined to any single ideology or country. Around the world, authoritarian leaders frequently rise to power on waves of fear whether it is fear of minorities, fear of crime, or fear of chaos (Wodak, 2015; Robin, 2004). History has shown that fascist and authoritarian regimes exploit fears of internal “enemies” to justify human rights abuses (e.g., Nazi propaganda stoking fear of Jewish conspiracy to rationalize genocide) (Glassner, 1999). In democracies, the

process is often more subtle but can still be corrosive fear is used to win elections and to pass conservative policies by depicting opponents as soft on whatever threat is salient (Altheide, 2006; Beckett, 1997). A fearful public may acquiesce to policies that they would normally reject, feeling that there is “no choice” but to act against the alleged danger. Fear is a great motivator it encourages people to rally for or against causes in ways they might not if calmly deliberating the issues. The downside is that policies born of fear often carry heavy costs erosion of civil rights, deepening of social divisions, and the entrenchment of misinformation (Glassner, 2018; Altheide and Merkovity, 2022). The politics of fear can easily become a politics of division, in which maintaining power takes precedence over truth or justice (Glassner, 1999; Wodak, 2015). Understanding this dynamic is key to resisting manipulative fear appeals and fostering a more rational, inclusive public sphere.

The Medias Role in Amplifying Fear

The media plays a central role in the production and amplification of fear in society. Cohen’s theory of moral panic famously highlights how media coverage can amplify public fears around specific groups or issues, creating “folk devils” out of those portrayed as threats (Cohen, 1972; Altheide, 2006). In Cohen’s classic example, news reports in the 1960s sensationalized youth disturbances by British “Mods and Rockers,” inciting widespread fear and calls for crackdowns far out of proportion to the youths’ actual misbehavior. This established the template for countless moral panics since media attention magnifies an issue, public concern surges, and authorities respond with punitive measures all hinged on a narrative of fear (Cohen, 1972; Glassner, 1999; Wodak, 2015).

By choosing which dangers to highlight (street crime versus corporate crime, for instance) and how to describe them (what language, images, and tone to use), media outlets shape public perceptions of risk and safety (Altheide, 2006; Gerbner et al., 1980). Modern news media devote substantial coverage to crime, accidents, terrorism, and other fear-inducing topics, often using dramatic storytelling that emphasizes danger and urgency. This continuous emphasis on threats can create a generalized climate of fear where audiences come to believe the world is much more dangerous than it actually is (Altheide, 2006; Glassner, 1999, Gerbner et al., 1980; Wodak, 2015).

One mechanism through which media influences fear is framing. The language, imagery, and context that the media uses to report an issue can construct particular interpretations in the audience's mind. Research has shown that when news outlets over-represent violent crimes committed by racial minorities and under-report those committed by whites, viewers may develop an exaggerated fear of young men of color, associating them with danger (Glassner, 1999; Wodak, 2015). The framing serves an ideological function, reinforcing dominant social narratives and thereby upholding existing power structures (Wodak, 2015; Altheide, 2006). This bias in coverage plays into what sociologists call the "culture of fear," wherein certain fears are promoted and normalized. Glassner catalogued a range of dubious but media-hyped dangers in late 20th-century America, from road rage to Halloween candy tampering, which captivated the public's imagination despite relatively low probabilities (Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999).

Such distorted focus not only misinforms but can also lead to misallocation of resources and support for policies that target the hyped threats instead of more pressing issues (Glassner, 1999).

Another key media effect is cultivation a term coined by communications scholar George Gerbner. He found that long-term exposure to media content can “cultivate” in audiences a perception of reality that aligns with the recurrent themes of that content. Gerbner’s studies on television violence found that people who consume large amounts of TV news and crime dramas tend to overestimate the prevalence of crime and to feel more fearful of becoming victims (Gerbner et al., 1980). This phenomenon, known as the “mean world syndrome,” illustrates media’s subtle but powerful role in amplifying fear by bombarding viewers with images of violence and danger night after night, the media cultivates a sense that danger is omnipresent. Even if an individual has never been personally victimized, they may live in fear because the mediated world they inhabit is filled with lurking criminals, rampant diseases, terrorist plots, and other hazards (Glassner, 1999; Altheide, 2006).

The 24-hour news cycle and the rise of sensational cable news in the late 20th century intensified this effect. Channels found that fear-based content, “if it bleeds, it leads,” draws attention and keeps viewers hooked (Altheide, 2006; Glassner, 1999). As a result, threats are often magnified and covered repetitively. Given the media’s centrality, it’s important to note that the media is not a monolith; different outlets can construct vastly different fear narratives about the same issue. For instance, a conservative news outlet and a liberal one might frame an immigration story in opposite ways, one emphasizing

crime by immigrants (feeding fear of migrants), the other emphasizing humanitarian angles or crimes against immigrants (possibly feeding fear of xenophobic violence). These divergent framings lead to polarized perceptions among the public, where each segment fears different “enemies” (Wodak, 2015).

The media’s role in fear is ambivalent but potent it can enlighten or mislead, allay fears or inflame them. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that media, especially when commercially driven, often opts for the dramatic over the nuanced, thereby skewing public risk perceptions (Glassner, 1999; Altheide, 2006). From moral panics to everyday news consumption, recognizing the media’s hand in amplifying fear helps individuals critically evaluate whether their anxieties are proportionate to reality or have been stoked by a narrative serving someone else’s agenda (Wodak, 2015; Cohen, 1972).

CHAPTER TWO

FRAMING FEAR—MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES

This chapter explores how mainstream media narratives construct and mobilize fear surrounding LGBTQ+ communities, comparing Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* during two critical timeframes- October 2015 to October 2016, and October 2023 to October 2024. These periods capture distinct moments in the national discourse the aftermath of the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) decision legalizing same-sex marriage, and the intensified culture war battles over transgender rights during the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

By examining how two ideologically divergent media outlets framed LGBTQ+ narratives, this chapter investigates the use of fear as a strategic tool to reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. A comparative content analysis of *The Five* and *The Lead* highlights the divergent strategies of conservative and centrist-liberal media from the invocation of cultural backlash and moral panic to the promotion of civil rights narratives and normalization efforts. Before presenting the thematic findings, it is crucial to outline the methodological framework underpinning this analysis. A rigorous qualitative content analysis approach was used to systematically examine how fear is encoded, transmitted, and contested in mainstream media coverage of LGBTQ+ issues.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative content analysis as its primary methodological approach, using NVivo software to systematically code and interpret televised transcripts from Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* across two distinct timeframes—October 2015–October 2016 and October 2023–October 2024. The goal was to uncover patterns in language, framing strategies, and thematic emphasis that reveal how fear operates within media narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ issues⁵.

Rationale for Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is particularly suited to studying media narratives because it allows researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions to explore the latent meanings embedded within texts (Schreier, 2012). Unlike quantitative content analysis, which counts frequencies of words or themes, qualitative approaches focus on context, connotation, and the construction of meaning. This aligns with the study's central theoretical claim that fear is not merely conveyed through explicit language but through framing devices, symbolic associations, and broader narrative structures.

Given that fear operates subtly as well as overtly in media discourse, an interpretive, flexible methodology was required to capture its multiple dimensions. Qualitative content analysis enables the researcher to identify not only what is said but how it is said, the

⁵ Extensive research has examined the ideological orientations of Fox News and CNN, consistently identifying Fox News as a conservative outlet and CNN as liberal-leaning. For example, Pew Research Center (2020) found that 65% of Republicans trust Fox News while 61% of Democrats distrust it, and CNN shows the reverse pattern.¹ Content analyses have also revealed distinct rhetorical strategies: Fox News often frames cultural conflict through appeals to tradition and grievance, while CNN tends to emphasize civil rights and institutional critique.² However, this thesis does not attempt to replicate or summarize the full breadth of that literature. Instead, it focuses on the specific emotional framings and fear-based narratives present in a selected corpus of coverage, analyzed through original qualitative methods.

emotional tone attached, and the ideological implications that shape audience interpretations (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). It also allows for the examination of both explicit fear appeals and the underlying assumptions that normalize or contest fear-based logics.

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is well-established in sociological research on media framing, particularly in studies investigating marginalized groups (Krippendorff, 2018). It offers a robust framework for examining how LGBTQ+ issues are selectively amplified, minimized, distorted, or humanized depending on ideological orientation.

Case Selection: Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper*

The decision to focus on *The Five* and *The Lead with Jake Tapper* stems from several considerations. First, both programs occupy prominent roles within their respective networks and reach substantial national audiences. Second, both programs aired consistently during the two periods under review, ensuring temporal comparability. Their regularity and influence in shaping partisan discourse make them ideal case studies for examining the media's role in constructing fear narratives around LGBTQ+ communities. Finally, the two programs offer rich contrasts in terms of format, tone, and audience expectations, which are crucial for illuminating differences in framing strategies. While *The Five* often relies on humor, outrage, and cultural grievance to engage its audience, *The Lead* tends toward investigative reporting, expert interviews, and political analysis.

Data Collection

Televised transcripts were collected from both programs for the periods spanning October 2015 to October 2016, and October 2023 to October 2024. The transcripts were

sourced directly from network archives and third-party transcription services to ensure accuracy. Segments relevant to LGBTQ+ issues were selected based on explicit references to same-sex marriage, transgender rights, gender identity, bathroom bills, medical care for transgender youth, and broader cultural debates implicating LGBTQ+ visibility. The selection criteria ensured that the corpus represented a wide range of discussions across political, cultural, and medical domains. In total, 87 relevant episodes were identified—45 from *The Five* and 42 from *The Lead*—providing a substantial dataset for qualitative analysis.

Coding and Analytical Strategy

The analytical process was structured around two deductively developed codebooks, each aligned with a major thematic focus of the thesis: **Table 1.1** Narratives on LGBTQ+ Marriage and **Table 1.2** Narratives on Transgender Representation. Each codebook consisted of five core codes, designed to capture recurring frames observed in preliminary readings of the transcripts and grounded in existing literature on fear, media framing, and LGBTQ+ studies. Each transcript was systematically coded in NVivo using these categories. Segments that aligned with multiple frames were coded accordingly to reflect the complexity of real-world narratives. Where necessary, memos were created to capture emerging sub-themes or unexpected patterns.

Ensuring Rigor: Reliability and Validity

Several strategies were employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the coding process. First, clear operational definitions were established for each code to minimize interpretive drift. Coding decisions were periodically revisited and audited for

Table 1.1

Narratives on LGBT+ Marriage	
Code	Description
Marriage Equality as Civil Rights	Frames same-sex marriage as a fundamental civil/human right.
Traditional Values & Cultural Backlash	Emphasizes opposition rooted in religion, tradition, or conservative values.
Political Mobilization via Fear	Use of fear rhetoric (e.g., threats to families, children, or society) in political discourse.
Victimization & Resilience	Portrays LGBTQ+ individuals as targets of discrimination and their resilience in advocacy.
Normalization & Visibility	Highlights efforts to portray LGBTQ+ people as 'just like everyone else.'

Table 1.2

Narratives on Transgender Representation	
Code	Description
Transgender Rights & Public Safety	Discusses transgender rights in the context of laws, bathrooms, sports, etc., often framed in terms of safety.
Medicalization & Legislation	Focuses on medical aspects of gender transition, especially related to youth, and related laws.
Framing Trans Identity as Ideological	Frames trans identity as a political or ideological stance (e.g., 'gender ideology').
Media Sensationalism & Moral Panic	Coverage that incites fear or moral panic, often through exaggerated or misleading rhetoric.
Counter-Narratives of Empowerment	Emphasizes transgender voices, positive representation, and rights advocacy.

consistency throughout the process. Second, triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing coded themes with direct quotes and broader segment summaries. This helped to ensure that findings were grounded in the data rather than inferred from researcher bias. Third, analytic memos were used to track evolving interpretations, particularly where a segment could be plausibly coded in multiple ways. This reflexive practice allowed for greater transparency in analytical decisions and reduced the risk of over-interpretation.

Methodological Strengths and Limitations

One of the primary strengths of this methodology is its ability to capture the complexity and nuance of fear-based narratives. Rather than treating fear appeals as uniform, the coding strategy allowed for the identification of multiple fear-related frames operating simultaneously, including cultural, medical, and political dimensions. However, there are limitations to acknowledge. Focusing exclusively on national media, particularly two programs from distinct ideological poles, means that findings may not fully represent regional or alternative media ecosystems. Local news, online forums, and niche outlets could offer different or additional narratives that were beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, while qualitative content analysis excels in capturing rich contextual meanings, it is inherently interpretive. Despite efforts at rigor, complete objectivity is unattainable. The analysis reflects an informed but necessarily subjective engagement with the material. Finally, the limited timeframe of each period may miss longer-term trends or ephemeral shifts that occur outside the windows selected. Nonetheless, the two

periods bracket historically significant developments in LGBTQ+ rights and culture wars, making them appropriate for targeted study.

Positioning Within Broader Research

This methodology builds on prior research demonstrating the centrality of fear framing in media coverage of marginalized groups. Scholars such as Barry Glassner (1999) have shown how exaggerated fears are manufactured and mobilized for political purposes, often targeting vulnerable populations. David Altheide and Christopher Schneider (2013) further developed the concept of the "problem frame," wherein media constructs threats requiring societal intervention. In LGBTQ+ media studies, scholars such as Finley and Esposito (2019) and Wodak (2015) have documented how representations of LGBTQ+ communities oscillate between invisibility, criminalization, and sensationalism depending on political climates. This thesis contributes to that body of work by applying a fear-focused lens to contemporary media representations, particularly regarding the evolving treatment of transgender individuals as a new "moral panic" subject. Moreover, by comparing conservative and centrist-liberal narratives side by side, this study offers a rare direct contrast between ideological framings, revealing not only overt fear appeals but also subtler patterns of normalization or contestation.

Framing Equality and Tradition: Comparative Media Narratives on LGBT+ Marriage During the 2016 Election Cycle

Following the methodological framework outlined above, the coded data reveals sharp divergences in how Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* framed LGBTQ+ issues during the two key periods studied. The findings are organized into

major thematic categories corresponding to the codebooks, beginning with the media treatment of marriage equality.

Marriage Equality as Civil Rights

CNN's The Lead consistently framed marriage equality as a realization of fundamental civil rights. Reporting around the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* emphasized progress, normalization, and alignment with American ideals of justice and equality. Jake Tapper's retrospective commentary placed marriage equality alongside other major national accomplishments, stating, "Marriage equality is a reality in all 50 states" (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2015). The tone suggested that same-sex marriage was a marker of national maturity rather than a point of controversy. Political evolution was a key subtheme in CNN's framing. Commentators repeatedly noted the rapid shifts among political elites, observing that "just three years ago, the president was against gay marriage" (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2015). This highlighted societal transformation, portraying politicians who changed their positions as reflections of broader cultural progress rather than opportunistic actors. In campaign coverage, CNN stressed candidates' civil rights credentials through their support for marriage equality. Bernie Sanders's claim that he "was with gay marriage when it was unpopular" was treated as a badge of authenticity and progressive commitment (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2015). Similarly, Hillary Clinton's evolution on the issue was contextualized within a broader narrative of American progress, with commentators noting that marriage equality had become "a non-issue" among the electorate (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2015).

Fox News's *The Five*, by contrast, treated marriage equality as a social fact but framed it with ambivalence. While the program acknowledged the widespread acceptance of gay marriage, it did so in a matter-of-fact, often detached tone. Dana Perino commented that for millennials, support for gay marriage was an expectation "They are for fairness, nondiscrimination, and it doesn't matter your sexual orientation" (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). However, Perino quickly pivoted to suggesting that this shift would allow politics to "focus back on [other] ideas," minimizing marriage equality's ongoing significance (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). When marriage equality was discussed in the context of Democratic politics, it was often reduced to a rhetorical talking point. One co-host mocked a liberal "checklist" that included "gay marriage, good," alongside other progressive causes (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). This trivialization contrasted sharply with CNN's civil rights framing, suggesting that for Fox, marriage equality was more a political maneuver than a historic achievement.

Although *The Five* acknowledged generational shifts toward acceptance, the tone remained observational rather than celebratory. The hosts treated marriage equality's popularity among young voters as a political reality to be navigated, not as an affirmation of expanded rights. Thus, while CNN portrayed marriage equality as a culmination of long-fought civil rights struggles, Fox depicted it as a demographic inevitability with limited ideological significance for conservatives.

Traditional Values and Cultural Backlash

While CNN's *The Lead* focused on the affirmation of civil rights, it also recognized that the legalization of same-sex marriage provoked significant cultural backlash, particularly

among religious conservatives. However, CNN framed this backlash primarily as a challenge to be navigated within a society moving toward broader inclusivity, rather than as an equally legitimate cultural grievance. One consistent strategy employed by CNN was to report on "religious freedom" bills that arose in response to *Obergefell* without legitimizing discriminatory rationales. For example, in covering a controversial Mississippi law, Tapper explained that "supporters call it a religious freedom bill, but LGBT groups and some businesses are blasting [it] as discrimination, plain and simple" (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). This framing juxtaposed defenders of traditional marriage against civil rights advocates, explicitly favoring the interpretation that such laws were discriminatory.

CNN also contextualized these laws as attempts to codify particular religious doctrines into public policy, quoting directly from the law's language "marriage is a union between a man and a woman, that a person's sex is determined at birth, and that sex is reserved solely for heterosexual couples" (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). In emphasizing these details, CNN linked traditionalist claims to systemic exclusion, reinforcing the idea that backlash efforts were efforts to reassert hegemony rather than protect legitimate diversity of belief.

The case of Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, became a central example of cultural backlash on CNN. Tapper reported that Davis "spent five days in jail over the divisive issue," framing her defiance not as heroic but as unlawful resistance to civil rights enforcement (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). The coverage further highlighted the supremacy of civil authority

over personal religious convictions in matters of equal protection under the law. At the same time, CNN provided space for religious conservatives to explain their views, quoting individuals who argued that “when those two [civil authority and God's rules] come in conflict, God's rules always win” (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). However, these perspectives were positioned within a broader context that emphasized the rule of law and anti-discrimination principles.

By contrast, Fox News's *The Five* treated traditional values perspectives with greater sympathy and alignment. The program often portrayed religious resistance to same-sex marriage as a reasonable defense of long-held cultural norms rather than a form of bigotry. Hosts emphasized the importance of traditional family structures, often casting skepticism on the social changes embodied by marriage equality. In one discussion, Bill O'Reilly argued that “a man and a woman are the optimum for children to be raised,” pointedly adding, “not two men, not two women” (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). By asserting this claim as common sense, *The Five* reinforced the notion that traditional family forms were superior and should remain the societal standard. Additionally, the show's panelists frequently framed resistance to same-sex marriage as a matter of local control and states' rights, echoing language long associated with resistance to civil rights advances. Hosts approvingly cited Justice Antonin Scalia's argument that “states should decide these things [like abortion and gay marriage] independently” (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). Attempts to link such arguments to historical abuses of states' rights (such as opposition to racial desegregation) were cut off or dismissed on air, indicating a deliberate distancing from the darker implications of that tradition. Rather than portraying

traditionalist resistance as discriminatory, *The Five* framed it as a legitimate, even admirable, defense of religious freedom and personal conviction against governmental overreach. The panelists implied that conservatives holding traditional beliefs were increasingly besieged by a hostile, progressive culture. Overall, CNN framed traditionalist backlash as a regressive response to expanding civil rights, Fox framed it as a principled defense of religious values and local autonomy.

Political Mobilization via Fear

Both Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* acknowledged that fear narratives played a role in the political mobilization around LGBTQ+ issues. However, their treatment of fear differed significantly in tone, emphasis, and critical engagement. On CNN, fear-based rhetoric was often discussed as a strategic tool employed by conservative politicians to rally a particular voter base. Reporting on the Tennessee "Therapist Bill," CNN's Nick Valencia explained that "Tennessee becomes the latest in a string of states across the Southeast to introduce bills seen as anti-LGBT," noting that these initiatives were concentrated in regions with "the highest proportions of white evangelical Protestants" (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). This geographic and demographic framing positioned anti-LGBT legislation as a reaction to perceived cultural displacement among certain groups. CNN also gave voice to critics who explicitly identified these legislative efforts as culture war tactics. Therapist Jeannie Ingram argued that the push for discriminatory counselor laws was part of a "culture war" intended to legislate morality at the expense of vulnerable populations (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). By emphasizing expert critique and societal impact, CNN

framed fear mobilization as a deliberate political strategy that endangered marginalized groups.

In contrast, Fox News's *The Five* engaged with fear narratives more ambiguously, sometimes parodying extreme fear-based arguments, but at other times reinforcing subtler fear appeals aligned with conservative anxieties. For instance, co-host Greg Gutfeld mocked alarmist rhetoric by presenting a satirical news segment claiming that gay marriage would lead to "interspecies relationships" after showing a playful clip of a cheetah cub and a puppy (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). This humorous approach suggested that the most extreme slippery slope arguments were not taken seriously by the panel. However, even as *The Five* ridiculed overblown fears, it simultaneously validated other fear-based frames. In discussing the potential consequences of liberal judicial appointments, Jeb Bush's warning that a leftward shift in the Supreme Court would have a "devastating impact on the liberties that Antonin Scalia believed in" was aired without critique (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). Although the specific liberties were not detailed, the invocation of fear around judicial decisions implied that marriage equality and other progressive advances endangered fundamental American principles. CNN analyzed fear as a tool of conservative mobilization and situated it within a broader critique of culture war politics, Fox News oscillated between mocking extreme fears and subtly endorsing fears about the erosion of traditional values and conservative legal norms.

Victimization and Resilience

The framing of victimization and resilience reveals a stark contrast between CNN's *The Lead* with Jake Tapper and Fox News's *The Five*. CNN consistently positioned LGBTQ+

individuals, particularly those affected by discriminatory legislation, as victims of systemic injustice who exhibited resilience through activism and advocacy. Fox News, by contrast, inverted the victimization narrative, suggesting that social conservatives—rather than LGBTQ+ people—were the true victims of a shifting cultural landscape. On CNN, stories about “religious freedom” bills and discriminatory laws were consistently contextualized in terms of the harm they inflicted on LGBTQ+ individuals. In covering Tennessee’s Senate Bill 1556, which allowed counselors to refuse treatment to LGBT clients based on religious beliefs, CNN prominently featured professional condemnation. Therapist Jeannie Ingram called the bill “the most pernicious violation of counselor ethics” she had seen (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). By foregrounding professional ethics and patient vulnerability, CNN highlighted how such legislation institutionalized discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals.

The *Lead* also emphasized the resilience of those who resisted discriminatory measures. Coverage of public protests against anti-LGBTQ+ laws, such as Mississippi’s religious freedom bill, framed activists and businesses who opposed the legislation as embodying resilience and moral leadership. Bruce Springsteen’s decision to cancel a North Carolina concert in protest of anti-transgender legislation was another prominent example CNN used to demonstrate the cultural and economic backlash against discriminatory laws (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). Moreover, CNN situated local activism within a national context, noting that multiple states with strong evangelical populations were advancing similar bills. By presenting activism as organized and persistent across states,

CNN portrayed LGBTQ+ advocates as both vulnerable and powerful—victimized by legal discrimination but resilient in collective resistance.

Conversely, Fox News's *The Five* showed little interest in highlighting LGBTQ+ victimization. Instead, when victim narratives appeared, they predominantly portrayed conservatives as the injured parties. The most common frame was that religious individuals and traditionalists were being unfairly stigmatized or coerced into compliance with liberal norms. For instance, Marco Rubio's complaint that "you disagree with people... on the definition of marriage, they call you a hater and a bigot" was aired sympathetically on *The Five* (Fox News, *The Five*, 2015). Here, the true victims were not same-sex couples denied services, but conservatives labeled negatively for their opposition to marriage equality. This framing minimized the structural discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals and recast social censure of homophobia as an unjust attack on religious freedom.

Furthermore, *The Five* provided no significant coverage of LGBTQ+ advocacy or resilience. Stories of public protest, legal battles, or cultural pushback against discrimination were either absent or framed negatively when discussed. Instead of showcasing resilience among LGBTQ+ communities, Fox emphasized the "resilience" of traditionalists defending their values against perceived progressive overreach. Where CNN portrayed LGBTQ+ individuals as facing real and systemic threats while highlighting their agency and activism. In contrast, Fox inverted the frame, casting conservatives as victims of liberal cultural dominance and omitting narratives of LGBTQ+ empowerment.

Normalization and Visibility

The framing of normalization and visibility offers critical insights into how Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* presented LGBTQ+ people's integration into mainstream society. CNN consistently treated LGBTQ+ visibility as an ordinary, unremarkable facet of American life, reinforcing notions of equality and inclusion. Fox News, by contrast, frequently framed increased LGBTQ+ visibility as evidence of cultural excess, moral decline, or elite coercion. On CNN, normalization of LGBTQ+ rights was often conveyed through matter-of-fact reporting that integrated same-sex relationships and transgender individuals into broader news coverage without sensationalism. Polling data was frequently cited to illustrate shifting societal attitudes. For example, Tapper noted that "a majority of independents are in favor of same-sex marriage" (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015), framing acceptance of marriage equality as a mainstream, bipartisan position rather than a niche progressive cause. The treatment of marriage equality as a "non-issue" for major political figures like Hillary Clinton also contributed to CNN's normalization framing. Commentators emphasized that changing public opinion had rendered opposition to same-sex marriage politically untenable, with one guest stating that for Clinton, marriage equality was "a non-issue at this point" (CNN, *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, 2015). Such comments suggested that LGBTQ+ inclusion was not only widely accepted but also expected as a political norm. In coverage of transgender issues during the 2023–2024 cycle, CNN continued this strategy of normalization by including transgender individuals in political and social analyses without extraordinary framing. For example, Parker Molloy, a

transgender journalist, was presented simply as an expert commentator, offering policy analysis on campaign strategies rather than serving as a token representative of trans identity (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). In reporting on legislative battles, CNN treated transgender concerns—such as access to healthcare and participation in sports—as legitimate civil rights issues rather than niche controversies.

Moreover, CNN emphasized that transgender individuals constituted a small but significant portion of the population—“about 1%”—and highlighted the outsized hostility they faced in public discourse (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). This contextualization humanized transgender people and positioned them as ordinary members of a diverse society deserving of inclusion and protection. By contrast, Fox News’s *The Five* treated the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ communities, especially transgender individuals, as evidence of cultural overreach driven by elite forces out of touch with “real Americans.” Visibility was often framed not as progress but as provocation. Discussion of corporate support for LGBTQ+ causes was met with mockery. Co-hosts referred to companies that “do the trans thing” only to “pull back” once they faced consumer backlash (Fox News, *The Five*, 2024). The casual phrasing of “the trans thing” suggested that transgender inclusion was a marketing stunt rather than a genuine commitment to diversity.

Fox panelists also ridiculed inclusive language and efforts to acknowledge LGBTQ+ identities in broader contexts. The satirical proposal for a “Fox News merchandise line for any sort of trans grandparent” highlighted how transgender existence—particularly in older generations—was treated as absurd or laughable rather than normal (Fox News,

The Five, 2024). Furthermore, Fox commentators frequently framed transgender visibility as an elitist imposition on the general public. Discussions of school policies, sports participation, and public accommodations portrayed trans inclusion not as a matter of civil rights, but as a form of coercion or threat to traditional values. Even humor was used to reinforce this view; jokes suggesting that transgender recognition had spiraled into absurdity encouraged viewers to see such inclusion as part of a broader cultural decline rather than social progress. Ultimately, CNN's framing supported the normalization of LGBTQ+ visibility by integrating it seamlessly into broader narratives of American diversity and civil rights, while Fox News's framing constructed LGBTQ+ visibility as an alien, imposed, and often laughable development that threatened traditional cultural norms.

Comparative Analysis of Transgender Narratives Framed in the year leading up to the 2024 Election.

Transgender issues became a prominent and highly contested focal point in American media discourse during the 2023–2024 period, reflecting broader cultural battles over gender, identity, and rights. Conservative and liberal media outlets offered starkly different framings of transgender topics, often shaping public understanding along ideological lines. This chapter examines how Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead* with Jake Tapper portrayed transgender narratives across five key thematic dimensions: the validity of transgender identity, political weaponization, medical and healthcare debates, victimization and advocacy, and normalization and visibility. Drawing on coded data from transcripts, the analysis reveals that *The Five* often framed transgender

identities as controversial, politically weaponized, and socially destabilizing, whereas The Lead consistently framed transgender individuals as legitimate members of society, highlighting their rights, vulnerabilities, and resilience.

Framing Transgender Identity: Recognition versus Controversy

One of the clearest divergences between The Five and The Lead lies in their treatment of transgender identity itself. On Fox News's The Five, transgender identity is frequently portrayed as confusing, artificial, or a byproduct of "woke" culture. Discussions among hosts often reveal open skepticism or ridicule toward basic concepts of gender identity. For instance, during a conversation about terminology, Jesse Watters openly asked, "What's a transgender man?", prompting an explanation that it referred to a biological woman who transitioned. Despite this clarification, the panel continued to express disbelief and confusion. Watters admitted, "I'm still trying to figure it out," while Jeanine Pirro dismissed the concept entirely as "a social construct," and another co-host chimed in, "I don't know what that means either" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). These moments illuminate how The Five framed transgender identity not as a legitimate personal experience but as a confusing, politicized trend. Rather than treating transgender individuals as authentic, the discourse reduces them to a cultural curiosity aligned with "weird identity politics" or "woke ideology." Through this conflation of confusion and satire, The Five delegitimizes transgender identity and portrays it as an extension of leftist extremism, not as a reflection of lived human experience (Fox News, The Five, 2024).

In stark contrast, CNN's *The Lead* with Jake Tapper consistently approached transgender identity with affirmation, respect, and recognition. Tapper and his correspondents routinely used appropriate terminology such as "trans women" and "trans girls" without hesitation, normalizing these identities in the language of their reporting. In one notable segment, Tapper framed a question about sports fairness around the baseline acknowledgment that "trans individuals should be protected, should be loved," thereby reinforcing a basic presumption of human dignity and acceptance (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). Moreover, *The Lead* gave frequent airtime to transgender advocates and experts, such as Parker Molloy, who was treated not as a spectacle but as a valued voice offering expertise. Molloy's commentary emphasized the real-world challenges transgender people face and framed trans identity as a serious sociopolitical issue, not as an ideological trend. In addition, *The Lead* reinforced transgender legitimacy by citing authoritative rulings, such as a federal judge's conclusion that "gender identity is real" and that denying individuals the ability to live according to their gender identity is "not a legitimate state interest" (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024).

The narrative construction around transgender identity on these two programs thus led viewers down very different interpretive paths. Fox audiences were invited to see transgender identity as dubious, controversial, and politically contrived. CNN audiences, by contrast, were encouraged to recognize transgender individuals as marginalized people whose existence demands respect and societal inclusion. This divergence carries significant implications for public discourse. While *The Five* positioned trans identities within the realm of ideological excess — suggesting, for example, that acknowledging

"trans grandparents" is comical (Fox News, The Five, 2024) — The Lead situated transgender experiences within a framework of human rights and societal empathy. These different framings fundamentally shape whether viewers see transgender people as real individuals deserving dignity, or as a punchline in a broader cultural backlash.

Political Narratives and the Weaponization of Trans Issues

The partisan treatment of transgender issues is not confined to questions of identity; it extends sharply into the political arena. Both The Five and The Lead heavily politicized transgender narratives during the 2023–2024 period, but the nature and purpose of this politicization differed dramatically. The Five largely participated in weaponizing transgender topics to galvanize conservative audiences, framing them as emblematic of liberal extremism. Meanwhile, The Lead critically analyzed how trans issues were being deployed by political actors, portraying such efforts as deliberate fearmongering with serious human consequences. On Fox News's The Five, transgender topics were frequently tied to broader narratives about liberal overreach and cultural decay. The Five positioned transgender participation in sports, particularly girls' and women's sports, as a "sleeper issue" of the 2024 election cycle (Fox News, The Five, 2024).

Hosts pointed to how Donald Trump capitalized on these controversies by "hammering Kamala Harris" over her support for transgender rights, especially concerning trans athletes. Clips from Trump town halls were played approvingly, where he vowed, "We stop it. We absolutely stop it. You can't have it... You just ban it," eliciting cheers from the hosts and framing his stance as common sense (Fox News, The Five, 2024). Jeanine Pirro emphasized that the Trump campaign was "blanketing the airwaves" with ads

reminding voters of Harris's "radical record on the transgender issue," a phrase that underscored The Five's framing of trans rights advocacy as an extremist, politically toxic liability (Fox News, The Five, 2024). Panelists reinforced the idea that Democrats prioritize fringe identity politics over "real life" issues, claiming, "If you look at what the Democrats focus on, it's removed from real life," and asserting that they consistently "side with activists" instead of ordinary citizens (Fox News, The Five, 2024). Thus, transgender rights were cast not merely as controversial but as politically detrimental distractions from more important national concerns.

Fox's political narrative frequently invoked fears of physical harm or moral collapse to justify its critiques. For instance, The Five circulated a questionable statistic from a United Nations report suggesting "900 medals had been removed... from biological women who lost to trans athletes," invoking imagery of widespread injustice against cisgender women (Fox News, The Five, 2024). They also heavily emphasized incidents like the Loudoun County high school protests, where students opposed transgender bathroom policies and cited them as "massive safety risks," connecting these debates to broader conservative campaigns for "parental rights" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). The Five's framing portrayed Republicans as defenders of common sense and societal safety, while Democrats were caricatured as enablers of dangerous, radical ideologies.

Particularly inflammatory commentary suggested that "white liberal women... put trans females – which are basically men – above actual biological women," casting support for trans rights not only as politically misguided but also as a betrayal of women's rights and a form of "misogyny" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). Such rhetoric weaponized feminism

itself against transgender inclusion, constructing a zero-sum game where supporting trans individuals allegedly harmed cisgender women.

In contrast, CNN's *The Lead* took an explicitly critical stance on the political weaponization of transgender topics. Rather than amplifying controversies, *The Lead* unpacked them, often identifying how Republican candidates leveraged transgender narratives as cultural flashpoints to rally voters. CNN correspondents noted "the millions upon millions of anti-trans ads" proliferating nationwide, explicitly calling out the targeting of "young kids that are trying to find their way in this world" (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). This coverage emphasized the cruelty and disproportionate political attacks on an already vulnerable minority. Jake Tapper himself observed that Republicans were playing up transgender issues "nationwide [with] transgender and girl youth sports," highlighting the deliberate elevation of these topics for electoral gain (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). Rather than treating these issues as organic grassroots concerns, CNN framed them as top-down political strategies that instrumentalized cultural fears to achieve partisan objectives.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of CNN's framing came through Parker Molloy, who described the sports controversy as a "Trojan horse issue." Molloy argued that while public outrage was stirred over trans girls participating in school sports, the underlying legislative efforts went much further—seeking to "ban health care for trans youth" and eventually "restrict trans adults" (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). This framing illuminated that the real political agenda was broader and more invasive than the sports debates suggested. Excluding trans youth from sports was not an end but a gateway to

legitimizing broader discrimination. CNN also emphasized internal tensions within the Republican Party itself, complicating the narrative of a monolithic anti-trans agenda. The Lead reported on Ohio Governor Mike DeWine's veto of a bill banning gender-affirming care and participation of trans youth in sports. DeWine justified his veto on grounds of parental rights and medical ethics, framing his decision as an act of protecting "human life" (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). By highlighting this case, CNN introduced nuance absent from The Five, suggesting that even within conservative circles, blanket opposition to transgender rights was not inevitable or universally embraced.

While The Five actively participated in the weaponization of transgender issues—using fear-based rhetoric and cultural grievance to energize their audience—The Lead consistently framed such tactics as exploitative and harmful, situating transgender individuals as pawns in broader political games. These opposing portrayals inevitably shape public understanding, Fox viewers are primed to see transgender rights as a radical threat to society and values, while CNN viewers are encouraged to recognize the politicization itself as the real problem, with transgender people often collateral damage in electoral battles.

Medical and Healthcare Narratives

The framing of transgender healthcare, especially regarding minors, became a particularly charged arena for media discourse during the 2023–2024 period. Fox News's The Five and CNN's The Lead again offered sharply contrasting portrayals. The Five approached the topic with overt skepticism, alarmist rhetoric, and accusations of

ideological overreach, portraying gender-affirming medical care as harmful, unscientific, and politically motivated. In contrast, The Lead framed transgender healthcare as a serious and nuanced issue, grounded in medical expertise and human rights concerns, while contextualizing the politicization of care as a threat to vulnerable populations. On The Five, discussions about transgender healthcare often deployed vivid, emotionally charged language designed to provoke fear and moral outrage. Treatments such as puberty blockers and hormone therapy were frequently mischaracterized as extreme and irreversible interventions, with hosts invoking the specter of "trans surgeries on kids" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). This phrase was repeatedly used to sensationalize the issue, despite the well-documented rarity of gender-affirming surgeries being performed on minors (Dai et al. 2024). By conflating different aspects of transgender medical care—such as puberty blockers, hormone therapies, and surgeries—into a single ominous category, The Five built a narrative suggesting that liberal policies allowed reckless medical experimentation on children. Panelists framed opposition to transgender healthcare as common sense. One Fox host declared unequivocally, "I don't like trans surgeries for kids," presenting the stance as self-evident (Fox News, The Five, 2024). This rhetorical move erased the complexities of individual medical decisions, parental consent, and clinical oversight, reducing the issue to a stark binary between "saving children" and "endorsing harm." Discussions on The Five frequently grouped transgender healthcare with other conservative grievance topics, such as "open borders" or "explicit books in schools," suggesting that all reflected a broader Democratic campaign to

"remove limits" and moral boundaries from American society (Fox News, The Five, 2024).

In particular, The Five challenged the legitimacy of the medical consensus supporting gender-affirming care. Greg Gutfeld, a frequent panelist, delivered a monologue rejecting the established connection between access to transition-related care and improved mental health outcomes. He claimed that early narratives linking puberty blockers to suicide prevention were "bunk" and that "there was no research behind it" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). Gutfeld further asserted that "there's no difference in suicide" rates for transgender youth whether or not they access gender-affirming care, and that "post-op trans [people] have a much higher suicide rate than the general population" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). These claims, presented without citation to peer-reviewed studies, directly contradicted the positions of major medical organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association (Billard, 2022). The effect of such framings was twofold. First, they positioned gender-affirming healthcare not merely as controversial but as actively harmful and deceitful, implicating doctors, parents, and policymakers as complicit in a dangerous social experiment. Second, they sowed distrust in medical expertise itself, reinforcing a broader conservative narrative of skepticism toward "woke science" and liberal institutions. This treatment of transgender healthcare fit into a pattern of moral panic, with Fox portraying these treatments as symbols of societal decline rather than as legitimate medical responses to individual needs.

In stark contrast, CNN's The Lead treated transgender healthcare with greater factual precision, nuance, and empathy. When discussing youth access to puberty blockers and hormones, The Lead focused on the complexities of medical research, the ethical dimensions of care, and the broader political attempts to restrict access. For instance, CNN covered a long-term study on puberty blockers with careful attention to its findings. Jake Tapper explained that while the study found the treatments beneficial in certain respects, it also reported "no definitive improvement in mental health outcomes," a nuanced finding that CNN presented without alarmism (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). Importantly, CNN reported that the study's publication had been delayed because the lead doctor feared that its nuanced findings might be weaponized in political attacks against transgender youth, thereby highlighting how even scientific inquiry could be distorted in a hostile political environment.

Rather than using ambiguity in the research to delegitimize care, CNN emphasized the ongoing support of major medical organizations for gender-affirming treatments. Reporting reinforced that "puberty blocking drugs... are safe, generally reversible and [a] conservative approach" allowing transgender and gender-diverse teenagers time to explore their identities before making permanent decisions (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). This framing contextualized medical decisions as careful, reversible, and in alignment with best practices in adolescent health, rather than reckless experimentation. Moreover, CNN frequently connected healthcare debates to broader legal and ethical concerns. In coverage of Florida's attempts to ban gender-affirming care for minors, The Lead quoted the federal judge who blocked the ban, stating

unequivocally that "gender identity is real" and that prohibiting medically indicated treatment "is not a legitimate state interest" (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). By foregrounding judicial opinions and expert consensus, CNN provided its audience with authoritative sources supporting the legitimacy of trans healthcare.

The Lead also highlighted moments of intra-party conflict, notably reporting on Ohio Governor Mike DeWine's veto of a transgender healthcare ban. DeWine argued that the state should not override parental decisions about their children's medical care and that bans would have "massive consequences" for the small number of families affected (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). Presenting such perspectives emphasized that opposition to transgender care bans was not limited to liberal politicians or activists, but included conservative figures concerned about government overreach into family life. Additionally, CNN amplified transgender voices and advocates who framed healthcare access as a matter of survival and civil rights. Parker Molloy pointed out that the political attacks on transgender healthcare began with "sports bans" but quickly escalated into efforts to eliminate healthcare access altogether, affecting both minors and adults (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). This broader framing located healthcare restrictions within a continuum of systemic marginalization, showing how these battles were about more than isolated medical procedures—they concerned transgender people's ability to exist and thrive within society.

The Five portrayed gender-affirming care as ideologically driven and medically dubious, The Lead presented it as a medically endorsed and carefully managed response to real human needs, increasingly endangered by political agendas. Fox News's framing

encouraged audiences to distrust medical institutions and see transgender healthcare as symbolic of liberal moral collapse. CNN's framing encouraged viewers to see transgender healthcare as grounded in science, ethics, and compassion, while treating political interference as the true danger.

Victimization, Violence, and Advocacy

A major point of divergence between *The Five* and *The Lead* concerned how each program framed the issue of victimization and violence in relation to transgender individuals. Fox News's *The Five* largely rejected the framing of transgender people as victims of discrimination, instead portraying cisgender individuals—particularly women and children—as those endangered by transgender inclusion. In contrast, CNN's *The Lead* regularly emphasized the heightened risks faced by transgender people, highlighting both the real-world violence they endure and the advocacy efforts aimed at protecting them. This sharp divergence had profound implications for shaping audience empathy—or the lack thereof—toward transgender communities. On *The Five*, instances where transgender individuals faced discrimination or violence were largely ignored or downplayed. Instead, the show often inverted traditional narratives of victimhood, casting cisgender individuals, especially cis women and girls, as the true victims of transgender visibility and rights. One of the clearest examples involved Fox's frequent invocation of a case in Loudoun County, Virginia. *The Five* repeatedly referenced a sexual assault by "a boy wearing a skirt" in a school bathroom to argue against trans-inclusive bathroom policies (Fox News, *The Five*, 2024). Although subsequent investigations revealed the perpetrator was not a transgender girl, *The Five* strategically linked the case to broader

arguments against trans rights, fostering a narrative that framed transgender policies as dangerous and irresponsible (Hannah-Jones, 2022).

Similarly, the show consistently portrayed cisgender female athletes as being victimized by transgender women in sports. Dana Perino lamented that young girls were "being stripped of opportunity... losing to boys in their sports," suggesting that transgender inclusion was a direct betrayal of women's rights (Fox News, The Five, 2024). Megan Rapinoe, a prominent LGBTQ+ ally and women's soccer star, was criticized on air for allegedly failing to defend cisgender girls against transgender competitors, underscoring Fox's framing of transgender rights as antagonistic to the interests of cisgender women. Perhaps most troubling was The Five's occasional implication that transgender individuals themselves are threats to public safety. In one segment, the show demanded access to the "trans killer manifesto" following a school shooting involving a transgender suspect (Fox News, The Five, 2024). While violent incidents committed by any individual should be reported responsibly, The Five's focus on the shooter's gender identity implied a causal link between being transgender and being violent—a dangerously misleading association that could exacerbate societal stigmatization of trans people. This strategy of selectively highlighting rare cases of trans-perpetrated violence, while ignoring the overwhelming evidence of violence against transgender individuals, allowed The Five to flip the script on victimhood. Hosts sneered at statistical claims regarding transgender suicide risks, with one panelist dismissing the idea that "hundreds, perhaps thousands of trans teens" die by suicide each year as "obviously wrong" (Fox News, The Five, 2024). By undermining the reality of transgender victimization and

emphasizing trans individuals as a societal threat, Fox reinforced a worldview in which cisgender Americans are under siege by "woke" policies, while trans people are cast either as political tools or dangerous deviants.

In contrast, CNN's *The Lead* placed consistent emphasis on the vulnerabilities of transgender individuals. Rather than treating violence against trans people as isolated incidents—or ignoring it altogether—*The Lead* situated it within a broader pattern of societal marginalization and political scapegoating. CNN frequently reported that trans people, though only about 1% of the U.S. population, were disproportionately targeted in political discourse, social harassment, and violence (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). Segments on *The Lead* highlighted the psychological toll of living in such a hostile environment. Guests spoke of heightened fear within the trans community, noting that the flood of negative political ads and legislation "made a lot of people I know scared" (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). Rather than dismissing suicide statistics among trans youth, CNN acknowledged them, explaining that ongoing societal rejection and vilification could increase mental health risks. The show thus treated transgender individuals not only as a vulnerable minority but also as a group in urgent need of protection and understanding. *The Lead* also covered acts of advocacy and allyship often omitted or mocked by *The Five*. For example, CNN reported on media personality Charlamagne tha God issuing a cease-and-desist letter to the Trump campaign after his image was misused in anti-trans advertisements, framing his action as a defense of integrity against fearmongering (CNN, *The Lead* with Jake Tapper, 2024). Such stories illustrated that resistance to anti-trans narratives was not limited to LGBTQ+

activists but included broader coalitions of public figures concerned about fairness and truth.

Furthermore, The Lead consistently linked the struggles of transgender people to those of other historically marginalized groups. In a pointed segment, CNN correspondents argued that just as hate against racial or religious minorities is unacceptable, so too is hatred directed at the trans community. This framing placed transgender rights within a civil rights tradition, evoking solidarity and moral urgency rather than suspicion or ridicule (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). Perhaps most crucially, The Lead presented transgender individuals not only as victims but also as resilient agents of change. Reports included trans advocates like Parker Molloy explaining the insidiousness of policies designed to systematically exclude trans people from public life—from school sports to access to healthcare (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). By highlighting these voices, CNN fostered an image of the trans community not as passive victims, but as active participants in a broader struggle for dignity and equality.

In essence, The Five used selective storytelling, omission, and inversion to erode empathy for trans people, often shifting sympathy toward those opposing transgender rights. The Lead, by contrast, emphasized the real dangers facing trans communities and the resilience required to withstand them, framing transgender rights not as fringe demands but as fundamental civil rights struggles. These narrative choices had profound consequences viewers of The Five would likely come away more skeptical, even hostile, toward transgender claims to victimhood, while The Lead's audience would be

positioned to view transgender people with compassion, solidarity, and a call to advocacy.

Normalization and Visibility

A final and crucial axis of divergence between *The Five* and *The Lead* concerns how each show addressed—or resisted—the normalization and visibility of transgender individuals. Where CNN's *The Lead* implicitly treated transgender people as a natural and respected part of American society, Fox News's *The Five* often reacted to transgender visibility with derision, alarm, or ridicule. These contrasting approaches reveal deep ideological divisions about who belongs in the national public sphere and under what terms. On *The Five*, the increased visibility of transgender people in media, politics, and business was frequently framed as evidence of cultural excess or elite "wokeness." Visibility was not treated as a positive step toward inclusion, but rather as a symptom of broader societal decay. Hosts mocked companies and institutions that publicly supported transgender rights, suggesting such moves were cynical marketing ploys doomed to backfire. For example, when discussing the Bud Light controversy, a host sneered that companies "do the trans thing" and then "realize it's a mistake" (Fox News, *The Five*, 2024). This flippant phrasing—"the trans thing"—reduces complex struggles for rights and recognition to a mere public relations blunder, implying that supporting transgender inclusion is both artificial and unpopular. Similarly, Fox panelists ridiculed the idea of inclusive family dynamics, joking about a hypothetical Fox News shop merchandise line for "any sort of trans grandparent" (Fox News, *The Five*, 2024). The mockery suggested that older transgender individuals—those

who might have transitioned later in life—were inherently laughable. This kind of humor trivializes the reality of trans existence, reinforcing the notion that transgender identities are absurd and socially illegitimate. Moreover, The Five often suggested that the media and broader society were disproportionately focused on transgender people at the expense of "real" issues. One host sarcastically complained that coverage of minority groups—listing "trans, gay, Black" conservatives—reflected "ultimate segregation," implying that emphasizing diversity or minority identity only serves to divide (Fox News, The Five, 2024). This framing casts the very existence of transgender people in public discourse as divisive, rather than viewing their inclusion as a necessary correction to historical exclusion.

Fox's discourse consistently implied that transgender people were not just newly visible but also overrepresented, artificially elevated by liberal elites pushing identity politics. Even when transgender individuals were discussed, it was often to question their legitimacy—as when The Five framed trans women athletes simply as "boys competing with girls," erasing their identities entirely (Fox News, The Five, 2024). In sum, The Five did not engage with transgender visibility as a genuine reflection of social progress, but instead treated it as either comical, dangerous, or imposed. In contrast, CNN's The Lead contributed to transgender normalization by treating transgender individuals and issues as routine elements of its news coverage—deserving neither special outrage nor dismissal. Importantly, The Lead often mentioned transgender individuals or issues without fanfare, thereby normalizing them through consistent and respectful inclusion rather than sensationalism.

When covering electoral contests, CNN integrated transgender issues into the broader political landscape. For instance, the Kentucky gubernatorial race was reported with attention to the prevalence of anti-trans attack ads, yet transgender rights were presented as part of the political conversation, not an aberration (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). Similarly, CNN introduced transgender guests like Parker Molloy as credible experts—describing her professional credentials, not simply her identity—thereby positioning transgender people as contributors to public discourse rather than subjects of controversy. Normalization was also achieved through context and nuance. CNN frequently noted that transgender individuals constitute only about 1% of the U.S. population but have been disproportionately targeted in political debates (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). This contextualization simultaneously acknowledged trans people's small numerical presence and highlighted the outsized attention directed at them. By doing so, CNN emphasized both the ordinariness and the vulnerability of trans existence, inviting empathy rather than skepticism.

Moreover, CNN brought attention to events like Transgender Day of Visibility—even when framed through contentious stories, such as Donald Trump declaring a competing "Christian Visibility Day"—thus acknowledging the cultural significance of celebrating trans lives (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). Even when reporting political backlash, CNN's framing ensured that transgender visibility itself was treated as something legitimate and worth recognizing. Perhaps most crucially, The Lead often portrayed the challenges faced by transgender individuals as secondary to broader societal concerns, such as economic insecurity or healthcare access. For example, Parker

Molloy argued on air that most people care more about "the economy and inflation" than "where someone uses the bathroom" (CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 2024). By highlighting this point, CNN suggested that transgender participation in everyday activities like sports and public life should not be a major political flashpoint, but rather accepted as a normal aspect of a diverse society. Through these strategies, CNN's The Lead helped integrate transgender individuals into the national narrative as ordinary Americans—people with jobs, families, hopes, and rights—rather than as objects of ridicule or sources of cultural panic. This normalization helps counteract the stigmatization reinforced by outlets like The Five and encourages viewers to see transgender people not as ideological battlegrounds, but as part of the everyday human fabric.

The Five routinely framed transgender visibility as unnatural, excessive, and divisive, employing humor and outrage to marginalize trans individuals. The Lead, conversely, treated transgender presence in public life as neither extraordinary nor alarming, advancing normalization through respectful integration and context. This difference in framing profoundly shapes audience perceptions—one audience is encouraged to view transgender individuals with suspicion and derision, the other with familiarity and respect.

Comparative Synthesis and Preliminary Conclusions

The comparative analysis of LGBT+ marriage and transgender narratives across Fox News' The Five and CNN's The Lead with Jake Tapper reveals significant, consistent patterns in how each network frames LGBTQ+ issues more broadly. Although the

specific social contexts differ—marriage equality largely representing a culmination of earlier civil rights gains, and transgender rights situated within ongoing, intensifying culture wars—the underlying media strategies and ideological frameworks applied to each topic show profound continuity. At their core, *The Five* and *The Lead* offered opposing emotional and moral orientations toward LGBTQ+ individuals across both issue areas. *The Five* consistently framed LGBTQ+ advancements as either cultural threats, political manipulations, or instances of societal overreach. In contrast, *The Lead* framed LGBTQ+ individuals and rights through the lenses of civil inclusion, resilience against discrimination, and human dignity.

In the case of marriage equality, *The Five*'s coverage largely oscillated between resigned recognition of shifting public opinion—particularly among younger Americans—and subtle derision, treating marriage equality as part of a broader "liberal agenda" rather than as a hard-won civil rights milestone. Discussions of marriage were often refracted through concerns about traditional family structures, religious liberty, and the preservation of cultural norms. Even when acknowledging the normalization of same-sex marriage, the tone was often observational rather than celebratory, suggesting that acceptance was a generational inevitability rather than a moral triumph. Importantly, *The Five* sometimes inverted the narrative of victimhood, portraying religious conservatives and traditionalists as the "real" victims of social change. Similarly, in the transgender narratives, *The Five* employed skepticism, ridicule, and alarmism. Transgender identity itself was treated as confusing, politically motivated, and even dangerous. The frequent conflation of transgender issues with threats to women's safety, parental rights, or

societal order reinforced an overarching portrayal of transgender visibility as a social problem, not a civil rights cause. Victimization narratives largely focused on perceived harms to cisgender individuals rather than on discrimination or violence against transgender people. Even when acknowledging transgender presence in public life, The Five did so through mockery or as evidence of misplaced societal priorities, reinforcing the notion that LGBTQ+ visibility is not merely controversial but actively corrosive to traditional American values.

By contrast, The Lead's approach to marriage equality framed the legalization of same-sex marriage as a culmination of America's civil rights legacy, aligning LGBTQ+ inclusion with national ideals of justice, equality, and democratic progress. Coverage emphasized the humanity and resilience of LGBTQ+ individuals, presenting marriage equality not simply as a political victory but as a moral necessity. Even when covering backlash, The Lead maintained a framing that centered LGBTQ+ individuals as victims of discrimination who, through activism and legal action, embodied the nation's highest ideals. In the case of transgender narratives, The Lead continued this tradition of affirming marginalized identities. Transgender individuals were consistently treated as real, legitimate members of society, with narratives focused on their vulnerabilities, resilience, and right to equal protection under the law. Rather than sensationalizing debates around sports participation or healthcare access, The Lead contextualized these issues within broader human rights frameworks and highlighted the disproportionate stigmatization and political targeting of trans people. Importantly, transgender individuals

were frequently given their own voice in coverage, appearing as experts, advocates, and commentators—not merely as subjects to be debated.

A key difference across both topic areas lies in the emotional registers cultivated by each network. The Five often employed fear, mockery, or resentment to shape audience attitudes, leveraging narratives of loss—loss of tradition, safety, fairness, or identity—in response to LGBTQ+ inclusion. Fear narratives were central to political mobilization, whether invoking threats to children in the context of transgender bathroom policies or to traditional marriage norms in the wake of Obergefell. Conversely, The Lead consistently sought to foster empathy and understanding, encouraging viewers to see LGBTQ+ individuals as vulnerable populations deserving protection rather than as agents of societal destabilization.

Another throughline across both sets of narratives was how each network positioned itself relative to broader cultural authority. The Five presented itself as a bulwark against elite liberal cultural domination, resisting what it framed as top-down imposition of LGBTQ+ acceptance. LGBTQ+ rights were portrayed as "special interests" overrunning the will or values of "ordinary Americans." The Lead, however, cast itself as upholding the inclusive ideals that America professes, positioning LGBTQ+ rights as a natural extension of democratic principles rather than as partisan overreach. The structural role of fear thus emerges as a crucial point of contrast. The Five's narratives often constructed LGBTQ+ advancements as existential threats, mobilizing audiences through anxiety and opposition. In turn, The Lead sought to deflate fear-based rhetoric, presenting LGBTQ+

individuals not as threats but as neighbors, colleagues, and citizens whose rights should not be contingent upon majority comfort.

In preliminary conclusion, the framing of both marriage equality and transgender rights by The Five and The Lead reflects broader media-driven mechanisms of social boundary maintenance and contestation. Conservative media outlets such as The Five often operate by reinforcing exclusionary boundaries, framing social change as disruptive or dangerous. Liberal media outlets such as The Lead, by contrast, work to expand the circle of moral concern, normalizing new forms of social inclusion and redefining who belongs within the national community. These findings suggest that media not only reports on social change but actively shapes the emotional, moral, and political landscapes through which such change is either resisted or embraced. The differing frames adopted by The Five and The Lead are not neutral or incidental; they are instrumental in constructing competing visions of what it means to be an American in an era of evolving understandings of gender, sexuality, and equality.

CHAPTER THREE

FEAR AS A TOOL OF DIVISION: IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY, AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Studying fear sociologically is not merely an academic exercise; it has profound implications for addressing social inequalities and fostering a more just society. Fear is a powerful force that shapes societal priorities, public policies, and cultural narratives, often in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies and silence marginalized voices. As reviewed, fear can be intentionally cultivated to justify everything from punitive laws to exclusionary social practices. By uncovering how fear operates within a society[how it is constructed, whose interests it serves, and what consequences it produces] we gain insight into the mechanisms that sustain injustice. This understanding is a critical first step toward challenging those mechanisms. For instance, recognizing that media-driven crime panics have led to biased criminal justice policies (disproportionately harming communities of color) invites questions about how to reframe crime and safety in public discourse. Likewise, understanding that anti-LGBTQ+ fear narratives are socially manufactured and not based on actual threats can empower educators and policymakers to counter such narratives with education and inclusion. Demystifying fear can help citizens distinguish between legitimate concerns and fear narratives that are manipulated or overblown. For researchers, there remain notable gaps and opportunities for future research on the social construction of fear. While existing literature has extensively explored fear in politics and some aspects of media representation, the intersection of

these topics with specific marginalized communities warrants further inquiry (Conyers, 2025; Homolar and Scholz, 2019; Ostfeld and Gause, 2023; Wodak, 2015).

Examining fear through a sociological lens reveals it to be far more than a private feeling – it is a social phenomenon deeply intertwined with power, culture, and history. The literature reviewed shows that fear is often engineered; amplified by the media, exploited by political actors, and intertwined with narratives of identity and otherness. This recognition carries a hopeful outcome if fear is constructed, it can also be deconstructed. By identifying the social triggers and beneficiaries of fear, we can begin to disrupt its grip. The goal of such scholarship is not to eliminate fear altogether [some dangers are real and fear can be a rational response] but to prevent manipulative fear from undermining democracy and social cohesion. Ultimately, the project of understanding fear is tied to the project of social change. It highlights the possibility that fear, which has so often been a tool of division, might be overcome by knowledge and collective action, transforming it from an emotion that paralyzes and segregates into an impetus for empathy and solidarity. By demystifying the social construction of fear, we take a crucial step toward disarming its capacity to harm, thereby reclaiming power to build a society guided more by hope and justice than by fear.

Weaponizing Fear—Rhetoric, Visual Framing and Emotional Appeals

Media outlets and political actors often weaponize fear in their messaging, deliberately crafting content that provokes anxiety and hostility toward marginalized groups. In the case of LGBTQ+ marriage, this weaponization occurs through incendiary rhetoric, strategic visual framing, and manipulative emotional appeals. These techniques serve to

amplify perceived threats and sway audiences, transforming diffuse anxieties into targeted prejudice. Fear becomes a rhetorical weapon aimed at LGBTQ+ communities, portraying them as dangerous deviants or threats to societal norms. This section unpacks the mechanisms of such fear-based framing, demonstrating how language, images, and emotion-laden narratives coalesce to divide audiences.

The language used in media and politics plays a pivotal role in constructing fear. Ideologically driven media often deploy loaded terms and vivid metaphors to link LGBTQ+ people with danger. For example, conservative commentators have labeled transgender rights as a “war on women and children,” invoking the specter of predatory men invading women’s spaces—a trope designed to elicit alarm and moral outrage. Such rhetoric relies on what sociologist Stanley Cohen (1972) termed *folk devils*—scapegoated groups portrayed as the embodiment of evil and blamed for societal ills. By repeatedly associating LGBTQ+ identities with crime, immorality, or child endangerment, fear-based language cements an us-versus-them narrative. Common phrases like “gay agenda,” “radical transgender ideology,” or labeling LGBTQ educators as “groomers” are ideologically loaded terms intended to provoke dread about alleged threats to children or tradition (Walker 2023). These rhetorical strategies draw on longstanding homophobic and transphobic tropes that conflate queer identities with perversion or sedition. As Ahmed (2014) observes, fear-filled rhetoric works to align communities against a perceived outsider by repeatedly attaching danger to that outsider’s identity. In this way, language itself becomes a weapon, it amplifies emotional response and forges a collective identity of the “fearful” majority pitted against a demonized minority. Crucially, such

fear-charged rhetoric often bears little resemblance to reality—its power lies in emotional resonance rather than factual accuracy. Nevertheless, it can significantly influence public perceptions, as audiences inundated with alarming messaging may come to perceive LGBTQ+ people through a lens of suspicion and fear (Wodak 2015).

Fear is also communicated powerfully through visual media. Television news and online outlets often choose images and footage that implicitly cast LGBTQ+ communities in a negative or threatening light. Visual framing can reinforce fear-based narratives by making the abstract “threat” appear concrete and visible. For instance, coverage of transgender bathroom access debates might repeatedly show ominous graphics of bathroom signs or sensationalized footage of confrontations, implicitly suggesting danger or disorder. Likewise, when reporting on LGBTQ+ pride events or drag performances, certain outlets fixate on the most flamboyant or gender-nonconforming visuals, aiming to portray these individuals as bizarre or unsettling to a presumed heteronormative viewer. These choices are far from neutral. As media scholar David Altheide (2006) argues, modern news visuals are often geared toward eliciting emotional responses, and fear is a prime target emotion. By visually emphasizing difference and deviance—such as showing a transgender inmate’s mugshot in a crime story or repeatedly airing a clip of an outraged parent at a school board meeting—media create visual associations between LGBTQ+ identities and danger, chaos, or controversy. Visual fear framing thus complements verbal rhetoric, together constructing a compelling narrative of threat that can sway public sentiment.

Underpinning both rhetoric and imagery is the strategic use of emotional appeals, with

fear being a foremost tool. Media and political actors deliberately invoke fear because it is a powerful motivator that can override reasoned analysis. In communication theory, *fear appeals* are messages that present a risk or threat in order to influence behavior or attitudes. While often studied in public health campaigns, fear appeals are equally at play in social and political messaging. In anti-LGBTQ discourse, fear appeals frequently involve worst-case scenarios or hypothetical dangers to trigger the audience's anxiety. For example, pundits opposing transgender rights often recount alarmist anecdotes—"Imagine a man in a dress following your daughter into the locker room!"—to provoke protective fear and disgust. These narratives are typically rooted in emotional manipulation they ask the audience to feel afraid or outraged, rather than to think critically. Research shows that fear-based messages can be persuasive, especially when they also offer a solution or someone to blame (Witte 1992; Robin 2004). Conservative media outlets pair their fear appeals with calls to action, urging viewers to support restrictive laws or political candidates as the necessary defense against the manufactured threat. By triggering fear and then channeling it toward a target (the LGBTQ "other") and a remedy (resisting LGBTQ rights), these appeals galvanize segments of the public.

Fear Across Time—Longitudinal Shifts in LGBTQ+ Media Portrayals

The comparative analysis of Fox News's *The Five* and CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* from 2023–2024 reveals not only how fear is weaponized but also how it can be challenged through strategic framing. This section draws primarily from the original qualitative data collected for this thesis, highlighting how each show constructs narratives around LGBTQ+ issues, and demonstrating the divergent pathways through which fear is

either amplified or mitigated in contemporary media.

Across the content analyzed, *The Five* consistently framed LGBTQ+ topics—particularly transgender issues—through lenses of controversy, confusion, and moral alarm. Identity itself was often treated as inherently suspicious or destabilizing. For example, in discussing transgender healthcare for minors, *The Five* frequently invoked worst-case scenarios and exaggerated claims. Co-hosts described gender-affirming care as "mutilation" and a "social experiment gone wrong," framing the medical consensus on transgender youth health care as dangerous and ideologically driven rather than evidence-based. Rather than citing expert organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics, *The Five* portrayed medical professionals offering gender-affirming care as part of a "radical" agenda, thus eroding public trust in medical expertise.

Similarly, in their coverage of the Loudoun County sexual assault case, *The Five* referenced "a boy in a skirt" assaulting a girl in a school bathroom, despite the fact that the assailant was not a transgender girl. By highlighting this story in a segment on transgender bathroom policies, *The Five* strongly implied a causative link between trans-inclusive policies and violence against girls. The repeated use of emotionally charged language—"girls being sacrificed on the altar of woke ideology"—exemplified the show's use of fear appeals to galvanize opposition to LGBTQ+ inclusion. This tactic aligns with the scholarship on moral panics, where isolated incidents are framed as indicative of widespread social decay (Cohen 1972; Glassner 2018).

Moreover, *The Five* rarely centered the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals themselves. Trans people were almost never invited to speak on their own behalf; instead, their lives

were debated as abstract ideological battlegrounds. Victimization of transgender individuals—such as disproportionate rates of violence and discrimination—was largely ignored. Instead, narratives portrayed transgender advocacy as a threat to women, children, and societal order. In this way, *The Five* amplified fear by systematically dehumanizing LGBTQ+ individuals, framing them not as neighbors or citizens but as symbols of political and moral danger.

In stark contrast, CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper* framed LGBTQ+ narratives with an emphasis on factual reporting, contextual nuance, and humanization. Transgender identities were treated as valid and uncontroversial; the focus was not on questioning their legitimacy but on addressing the political and social challenges faced by trans individuals. For example, in segments covering the surge of anti-trans legislation across U.S. states, *The Lead* routinely included voices from transgender individuals, their families, and medical experts. This approach grounded discussions in lived realities rather than hypothetical fears. One notable instance was CNN's reporting on the misuse of Charlamagne tha God's image in an anti-trans political advertisement. Rather than sensationalizing the controversy, *The Lead* emphasized Charlamagne's cease-and-desist action as an example of public figures resisting the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights for partisan gain. This framing illuminated the strategies behind fear-mongering rather than uncritically repeating fear-based claims.

In its healthcare coverage, *The Lead* consistently referenced mainstream medical consensus, highlighting that gender-affirming care is evidence-based and beneficial when appropriately administered. When discussing surgeries, CNN contextualized the extreme

rarity of gender-affirming surgeries for minors, countering widespread disinformation with empirical data (Dai et al. 2024). This commitment to fact-based reporting functioned as a direct counter to fear narratives. Rather than inflaming public anxieties, *The Lead* normalized the existence of trans people and treated their access to healthcare as a straightforward civil rights issue. Moreover, CNN's victimization framing starkly contrasted with that of *The Five*. Where Fox warned of threats supposedly posed by trans individuals, CNN documented the real threats faced by transgender Americans—including rising rates of violence, discrimination in healthcare and education, and targeted political attacks. For instance, CNN covered stories of transgender students facing school bans or healthcare denials, humanizing these experiences rather than treating them as abstract political talking points.

By highlighting stories of resilience, advocacy, and community support, *The Lead* implicitly offered a counter-narrative to fear it showed LGBTQ+ individuals not as symbols of social collapse, but as people striving for dignity and safety in the face of real systemic barriers. This framing reduced fear by fostering empathy and promoting understanding.

The comparison between *The Five* and *The Lead* demonstrates the profound role media framing plays in shaping public attitudes toward marginalized groups. Where fear-based narratives flourish, suspicion, hostility, and policy backlash often follow. Where humanizing, fact-centered narratives prevail, acceptance, solidarity, and informed discussion become more possible. Importantly, this analysis suggests that combating fear-mongering does not simply require neutral reporting; it demands intentional framing that

re-centers marginalized voices and contextualizes fear-based claims. When news media fail to challenge disinformation or neglect to include the perspectives of those targeted by fear narratives, they implicitly validate and perpetuate those fears. Conversely, as seen in CNN's approach, offering context, highlighting expertise, and centering lived experiences can actively dismantle fear's power.

Fear remains a potent political weapon. However, media outlets have the capacity either to amplify its divisive effects or to defuse them through responsible framing. As this thesis demonstrates, the path to reducing societal fear of LGBTQ+ individuals lies not only in countering misinformation but in reshaping the stories we tell—stories that reflect complexity, dignity, and shared humanity rather than manufactured alarm.

Transforming Fear—Pathways Toward Equity and Collective Empowerment

The weaponization of fear against LGBTQ+ communities in media narratives, as seen particularly in the coverage by *The Five*, underscores the urgent need to actively counteract divisive framing. At the same time, the more inclusive and context-rich reporting on *The Lead with Jake Tapper* illustrates how media can resist fear-mongering by offering alternative framings centered on empathy, factual accuracy, and humanization. This section examines practical pathways to transform fear-driven narratives into opportunities for greater equity and empowerment for LGBTQ+ communities, drawing from insights generated by the comparative analysis.

One major strategy for mitigating fear's impact is cultivating a critical media literacy that enables audiences to recognize fear appeals and challenge manipulative narratives. Many segments on *The Five* relied on emotional appeals devoid of factual support—such as

invoking hypothetical threats about transgender individuals in bathrooms or framing LGBTQ+ advocacy as inherently extremist. Without critical literacy skills, audiences may internalize these frames without questioning their validity. Education initiatives—both formal (in schools) and informal (through public campaigns)—can teach viewers to critically assess sources, question alarmist language, and seek out corroborating evidence (Wodak 2015; Glassner 2018). Raising public awareness about common fear tactics, including scapegoating, slippery slope arguments, and anecdotal distortions, equips audiences to resist manipulation and seek a more nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ issues.

As the analysis of *The Lead* demonstrates, centering the voices of LGBTQ+ individuals themselves is crucial for disrupting fear-based narratives. CNN's inclusion of transgender people, advocates, and experts provided viewers with firsthand perspectives that humanized and contextualized the issues under discussion. In contrast, *The Five* consistently excluded LGBTQ+ voices, allowing stereotypes and misinformation to go unchallenged. Empowering LGBTQ+ people to tell their own stories—through interviews, op-eds, documentaries, and firsthand testimonies—reduces their construction as abstract threats and fosters greater empathy. Research supports that exposure to authentic, diverse LGBTQ+ narratives correlates with increased acceptance and decreased fear among broader audiences (Schiappa et al. 2006).

One of CNN's most effective strategies in mitigating fear was its consistent reliance on factual data and expert testimony. For example, when *The Lead* addressed medical care for transgender youth, it cited major medical organizations' positions and emphasized the

rarity of surgeries for minors (Dai et al. 2024). This commitment to evidence-based reporting counters the exaggerated claims made on platforms like *The Five*, where worst-case scenarios were presented as norms. Expanding efforts to rapidly debunk misinformation—through fact-checking organizations, responsive journalism, and public education—can neutralize fear narratives before they take hold. Proactive dissemination of clear, accurate information about LGBTQ+ lives and issues remains essential for challenging fear at its roots.

Transforming fear also requires active solidarity from allies within media, politics, and civil society. The coverage on *The Lead* highlighted instances where public figures, like Charlamagne tha God, pushed back against the misuse of their images in anti-trans campaigns, signaling the importance of public resistance to fear-based distortions. Allies who command credibility among skeptical audiences—such as religious leaders, parents, veterans, or conservative figures—can play a pivotal role in challenging fear narratives. Their support can dismantle the notion that acceptance of LGBTQ+ people is limited to certain political or social "sides." Coordinated advocacy campaigns that amplify such ally voices can shift the emotional register from fear to solidarity.

Finally, media outlets and advocates must work deliberately to replace fear-driven narratives with frames centered on shared humanity, resilience, and hope. Rather than positioning LGBTQ+ rights as destabilizing or threatening, stories can highlight how inclusivity strengthens communities, fosters mental health, and enriches civic life. For example, CNN's profiles of transgender youth persevering through discrimination or communities rallying in support of inclusive policies offered viewers positive models of

societal resilience. As scholars like Ahmed (2014) and hooks (2000) argue, shifting the emotional center of discourse from fear to empathy and care is crucial for building a just society. Storytelling that emphasizes connection, dignity, and perseverance can erode fear's divisive hold and foster long-term attitudinal change.

CONCLUSION: FEAR RESISTANCE, AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

Fear, when critically examined, reveals itself not merely as a private emotion but as a socially orchestrated force—strategically mobilized through discourse to sustain hierarchies, enforce cultural norms, and justify exclusionary policies. This thesis has argued that media narratives, particularly in conservative outlets like *Fox News's The Five*, utilize fear to portray LGBTQ+ identities as threats to tradition, safety, or social coherence. These narratives are not accidental; they are part of a broader emotional economy in which fear is weaponized to channel public anxieties and solidify power. By contrast, liberal media outlets like *CNN's The Lead with Jake Tapper* often attempt to normalize LGBTQ+ presence and critique fear-based appeals, yet even these representations may rely on subtle anxieties or victim narratives that frame queer lives in terms of vulnerability rather than complexity or agency. Together, these contrasting portrayals shape how fear operates in public discourse—either as a tool of regulation or a cue for solidarity.

A central aim of this thesis was to understand how fear functions within emotional regimes and ideological framings, especially those reinforced by mainstream media. To do so, it was necessary to first map the broader sociological context of fear—not simply as an emotion, but as a condition embedded within institutional life, cultural narratives, and historical memory. This broader review, presented in the opening chapters, was not intended as an abstract detour. Rather, it was essential for identifying how fear works in ideological systems and how it shapes public perception long before any individual story or legislative debate emerges.

Indeed, fear is not confined to discrete moments of panic or backlash. In the American context, it circulates as a generalized suspicion—a pervasive orientation toward others marked by distrust, anxiety, and ambient unease. This diffuse fear becomes a cultural logic that rationalizes surveillance, exclusion, and securitization not only of physical spaces but of ideas and identities. The portrayal of LGBTQ+ people as threats to children, families, or nationhood operates precisely through this logic, where the unfamiliar or non-normative is cast as inherently dangerous.

And yet, fear is not immutable. This project has also explored how media representations can challenge dominant emotional frames and open up space for resistance. LGBTQ+ activists, journalists, and allies have worked to reframe visibility, emphasize shared humanity, and interrupt the logics of fear. The emergence of counter-narratives—especially those that humanize and complexify queer lives—signals the potential for shifting affective norms and building coalitional politics rooted in empathy rather than anxiety.

Bridging Theory and Praxis: Implications for Social Change

The theoretical frameworks outlined in this thesis—ranging from the social construction of fear (Cohen 1972; Glassner 2018) to critical media analysis (Wodak 2015; Ahmed 2014)—reveal that fear is not an inevitable or natural response to LGBTQ+ visibility but a constructed phenomenon shaped by ideological interests and institutional power.

Theory allows us to see the contours of fear how it is manufactured, how it circulates, and how it sustains systems of marginalization. Praxis demands that we translate this understanding into action.

Bridging theory and praxis means moving beyond descriptive critique toward transformative engagement. It requires that scholars, activists, journalists, and everyday citizens recognize their roles in either perpetuating or dismantling fear narratives. In the comparative analysis of *The Five* and *The Lead with Jake Tapper*, this bridge becomes evident whereas Fox's framing reinforced traditional hierarchies by stoking fear, CNN's reporting more often aligned with praxis-oriented theory by elevating marginalized voices and countering disinformation with facts. The contrast between the two illustrates that media framing is not neutral; it either reinforces the status quo or opens possibilities for social change.

One implication for praxis is the urgent need for critical media literacy initiatives that equip audiences to interrogate the framing strategies employed by news outlets. As the analysis revealed, fear appeals on *The Five* relied heavily on emotional triggers, misinformation, and the exclusion of LGBTQ+ perspectives. Educating the public to recognize these tactics undermines their power. Similarly, advocacy organizations and policymakers must prioritize storytelling that humanizes LGBTQ+ individuals, creating counter-narratives that resist dehumanization and foster empathy. This involves strategic communication practices that consciously frame LGBTQ+ rights not as special privileges or dangerous innovations, but as extensions of the broader struggle for human dignity and justice.

Bridging theory and praxis also means recognizing that media institutions themselves are sites of contestation. Scholars like Herman and Chomsky (1988) remind us that media are not merely reflectors of reality but producers of ideological hegemony. Challenging fear-

based narratives thus requires not only analyzing their content but also interrogating the structures that enable their production—economic incentives, political alignments, and ownership patterns. Supporting independent, public-interest journalism and holding major outlets accountable for their reporting practices are critical steps toward transforming media landscapes.

Finally, praxis demands hope. As Freire (1970) argues, critical consciousness must be animated by the belief that transformation is possible. Recognizing the mechanics of fear is not sufficient; actors must also envision and pursue alternative futures grounded in solidarity, equity, and collective liberation. Fear thrives where people feel powerless. Praxis, informed by social theory, reclaims agency and asserts the possibility of a more just and inclusive society.

Reclaiming Fear—Towards Critical Awareness and Social Change

If fear has long been weaponized to divide and marginalize, it can also be reclaimed—reframed not as a tool of oppression but as a site of critical reflection and collective action. Reclaiming fear does not mean denying its existence or its emotional power; rather, it involves transforming the structures and narratives that seek to manipulate it. Fear must be critically understood, contextualized, and ultimately redirected toward awareness, solidarity, and social change.

The narratives analyzed in this thesis demonstrate that fear does not operate in a vacuum. It requires framing, repetition, and amplification to achieve its effects. On *The Five*, fear was systematically deployed to sustain ideological boundaries, portraying LGBTQ+ individuals as threats to social stability. Yet the very existence of competing frames, such

as those offered by The Lead with Jake Tapper, shows that fear's dominance is neither total nor inevitable. Through factual reporting, the inclusion of marginalized voices, and the framing of LGBTQ+ rights as matters of human dignity, CNN provided alternative ways of understanding LGBTQ+ communities—ways grounded in empathy rather than alarm.

Critical awareness begins with recognizing how fear is socially constructed and ideologically mobilized. It demands that audiences question not only the content of media narratives but also the emotional responses those narratives seek to provoke. When fear is critically interrogated, its utility as a divisive tool diminishes. Media literacy initiatives, activist storytelling, and educational efforts all contribute to this critical reorientation.

Teaching individuals to ask, "Whose fear is being invoked? To what end? Against whom?" fosters a public less susceptible to manipulation and more committed to justice.

Moreover, reclaiming fear involves centering the legitimate fears experienced by marginalized communities—the fear of violence, discrimination, and exclusion—and turning societal attention toward addressing these real and pressing concerns. As transgender individuals face escalating political attacks, as LGBTQ+ youth encounter heightened mental health risks, it becomes imperative to shift the focus from manufactured fears about LGBTQ+ existence to the actual harms perpetuated by intolerance and bigotry. Advocacy grounded in truth and lived experience reclaims fear as a catalyst for action rather than a justification for exclusion.

Ultimately, the path forward requires a collective commitment to narrative transformation. Scholars, journalists, activists, and community members must work in

concert to elevate stories of resilience, solidarity, and hope. Fear can no longer be allowed to monopolize the public imagination; it must be met with visions of a more just and inclusive society. As Ahmed (2014) reminds us, emotions like fear circulate socially, attaching to bodies and shaping public life. Reclaiming fear means reshaping its circulation—replacing suspicion with solidarity, division with connection.

This thesis has demonstrated that media narratives wield profound power over how fear is constructed and deployed. Yet it also affirms that alternative narratives are possible.

Through critical awareness, deliberate storytelling, and committed social action, fear can be transformed from an instrument of oppression into a catalyst for collective liberation. In confronting fear, we do not merely resist its divisive force; we lay the groundwork for a society where justice is not the exception but the expectation.

Both outlets reflect and amplify societal anxieties regarding LGBTQ+ visibility. Fox News's narratives can exacerbate fears of cultural change, suggesting that increased visibility for LGBTQ+ individuals threatens established norms. This can lead to a backlash against LGBTQ+ rights, as audiences may feel compelled to defend traditional values against what they perceive as encroaching liberalism. In contrast, CNN's narratives aim to alleviate these anxieties by promoting the idea that LGBTQ+ rights are integral to a fair and just society. By highlighting stories of discrimination and resilience, CNN seeks to foster a more inclusive public discourse that values diversity and advocates for the rights of marginalized communities.

The study's geographical focus on the United States provides a unique opportunity to delve into the complexities of media narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ communities

across a vast and diverse landscape. By encompassing the entire nation, the research is equipped to identify overarching trends that may influence LGBTQ+ representation, such as the gradual acceptance of same-sex marriage or the growing visibility of transgender rights. These trends often reflect broader societal shifts in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals, indicating a movement toward inclusivity and equality. In reclaiming fear as a site of critical awareness and collective action, we reclaim the possibility of a society where justice is not the exception, but the expectation.

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VITA

Chasidy Harris is a dedicated scholar pursuing a Master of Arts in Sociology at the University of Tennessee, with an expected graduation date of May 2025. Her academic focus lies within political economy and globalization. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Sociology from Kennesaw State University in May 2023, where she also minored in Gender and Women's Studies.

Harris's perspective is informed by the sociology of knowledge, literacy, and education, where she investigates the production, dissemination, and legitimization of knowledge within institutional contexts. Educational systems and literacy practices serve as key sites for the negotiation of power, identity, and social norms. She explores how these systems shape public consciousness, determining whose knowledge is privileged and whose perspectives are marginalized.

She is particularly interested in how literacy practices intersect with narratives of fear, revealing the ways in which language, discourse, and educational policies are used to shape societal priorities and public behavior. Her research is driven by a commitment to advancing equity and fostering critical awareness. By examining the interplay between fear, knowledge, and education, she aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the

structural forces that shape society and to provide a foundation for reimagining these forces in ways that empower individuals and communities. Ultimately, her work seeks to not only analyze but also challenge and transform the systems that perpetuate inequality, contributing to a sociological understanding that is both reflective and action-oriented.

As a Graduate Teaching Associate at the University of Tennessee for the 2024–2025 academic year, Harris is independently instructing SOCI 110: Social Problems and Social Justice, designing course structures, and implementing inclusive teaching practices. She has also led an asynchronous summer course, SOCI 120: Introduction to Sociology, where she was responsible for curriculum development and student engagement. During the 2023–2024 academic year, she served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for SOCI 110, contributing to course facilitation and developing weekly class activities. She integrates inclusive teaching strategies into her courses and is dedicated to fostering critical engagement among students.

Harris has actively contributed to sociological discourse through various conference presentations. In August 2024, she presented her research, "There is More Than One Way to Burn a Book: Repercussions of Fear on Democratic Freedoms," at the American Sociological Association's regular Critical Theory session. Her undergraduate thesis research, which applied qualitative theoretical analysis, was previously presented in a poster session at the Midwestern Sociological Society in 2023 under the title, "More than Censorship: How Banning Books Reinforces Fear in Our Society." Additionally, she participated in the Southern Sociological Society's Good STARTS Inclusivity Institute

Workshop from January to April 2024, a selective program designed for graduate students committed to anti-racist teaching practices in the South.

Her prior research includes "Holiday Cards: A Discourse of Gender, Identity, and Social Definitions of the Family," presented at the Southern Sociological Society in 2023, and "Photo Holiday Cards: Family Constructs of Gender, Sexuality, and Race," an undergraduate quantitative research project she independently presented at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research in 2022.

Harris's scholarly interests are deeply rooted in critical and social theory, with a particular focus on the social constructions of fear, the sociology of knowledge and education, and the intersections of literacy, censorship, and democratic freedoms. Through her academic research and teaching, she remains committed to fostering critical awareness and advancing discussions on power, knowledge, and social justice.