

“YO NUNCA TE HARÍA DAÑO” - LOS AUTORES DE FEMINICIDIOS EN LA PRENSA PRINCIPAL ITALIANA

*“I would never hurt you” -
The perpetrators of femicide in the italian mainstream press*

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Resumen

Este estudio es un aporte al campo de investigación en torno a los medios y la narrativa de la violencia contra las mujeres. Combinando estudios de feminidad radical y masculinidades como marco teórico y codificación cualitativa y análisis de texto y discurso como metodología, el objetivo es comprender cómo los hombres responsables de feminicidios son retratados en la prensa dominante italiana. Lo que destacan los hallazgos es que los principales medios de comunicación tienen la responsabilidad moral y política de garantizar que los hombres no sean representados como alguien a quien se debe entender o incluso compadecido, sino que se les haga responsables y formen parte de un sistema patriarcal que utiliza la violencia como último acto para tomar el control. sobre las mujeres.

Palabras Claves: feminicidio, representaciones, masculinidad, medios.

Abstract

This study is a contribute to the research field around media and the narrative of violence against women. By combining radical feminisim and masculinities studies as theoretical framework and qualitative coding and text and discourse analysis as methodology, the goal is to understand how the men responsible of femicide are portrayed in the Italian mainstream press. What the findings highlight is that the

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mainstream media have the moral and political responsibility to ensure that the men are not represented as somebody to be understood or even pitied but rather is made accountable and part of a patriarchal system using violence as ultimate act to take control over women.

Key words: femicide, representations, masculinity, media.

Introducción

Femicide is a social and criminal phenomenon widespread across the world. The research and advocacy organization *Femicide Watch* reported a datum from a BBC Monitoring investigation: 47 women were killed each day in 2018¹ around the world by an intimate partner.

This research embarks from a position that mainstream media play a significant role in making an impact on a societal issue such as the femicide. In comparison with alternative media which might have a different and stronger position on what femicide socially embodies, the mainstream ones have a bigger public resonance and hence a bigger normative power to critically address the problem and advocate for an effective solution.

Therefore, this work wants to be a contribution to an ongoing conversation on how mainstream news tackles a sensitive topic by looking through CDA at the mediation of masculinity within a femicide context.

Although acknowledging the globalism of such an extreme case, the present research design will investigate the Italian context. During the year 2018, 93 women were murdered by an intimate man: in a time-frame, every 72 hours, femicide occurred. This work wants to dignify the memory of these women by stressing the importance of a more sociopolitical coverage of femicide.

The mediation of violence against women

One of the works inspiring the present project is *News Coverage of Violence against Women: Engendering Blame* by Marian Meyers (1997). What is significant in Meyers' study is that she addresses the violence against women as a social and institutional issue and she criticised the media crime narratives as filled with predominant male supremacy, patriarchy and misogyny discourses (1997, pp. 6-8). Meyers considers both micro- level (i.e. content)

¹ Research accessed on January 25th at the following link: <http://femicide-watch.org/products/47-women-killed-one-day-around-world-because-their-gender-bbc-news>.

and macro- level (i.e. structural) aspects of problems associated to mediated representations which furnish a complete reading key of social and criminal phenomenon like femicide.

Together with the work by Meyer, the handbook *Gender and the Media* by Rosalind Gill (2007) was a source of reflections on the gender representations in the media as well as on the feminist and masculinity theories developed in the academia. Gill defines news- a key-term of this research work “a cultural product that reflects dominant cultural assumptions about who and what is important [...]. It is not surprising, then, that most news is designed for, about and by men” (2007, p.114). This definition is empirically sustained by her research highlighting the use of psychological discourse and post-feminist discourse in news reportages of rapes that aimed at constructing the crime as unreal or as a false allegation (*Ibidem* 2007, pp.140-146).

On the Italian academic side, Cristina Karadole (2012) looks at femicides in 2006 and urges the media to not diminishing its problematics via stereotypical expressions without raising any public debate about its structural dimensions.

In 2010, Elisa Gioni reviews the saturation of the news coverage of two particular femicides and the double- standards applied in representing foreigner and national victims and offenders. Gioni reflects upon how the media are effective in mobilising the public debate and galvanize the state action when the female victim is Italian, and the murderer is a foreigner man.

In 2014, Chiara Gius and Pina Lalli explore the thematic framework used by the mainstream press to report femicide. Their research critically goes through the textual and discourse analysis of articles written in 2012 and demonstrate how Italian newspapers play the ‘romantic love’ myth to represent and implicitly justify the femicide.

Wendy Kozol rightly observes in her comparative analysis of news coverage and popular media genres focused on domestic violence: “Focus on women’s guilt or victimization displaces attention from male abusers and the patriarchal system that supports these” (1995, p.657). This project responds to her statement bringing the research focus on the male subject of violence against women.

Theoretical frameworks

Two theoretical strands support the data analysis: radical feminism and critical masculinity studies.

The strong advocacy for the abolishment of patriarchy places radical feminism as a political current within the second wave of feminism. Under

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the slogan, “the personal is political,” they advocate for campaigns against whatever reinforces male domination (Chambers, 2005).

What is at stake in this approach is all the discursive and non-discursive practices of the patriarchal power. Following this argumentation, Jane Caputi investigates sexual murders, which are in her own words- “the ultimate expression of sexuality as a form of power” (1989, p.439). This reflection highlights how the specific elements of radical feminism towards violence allow major attention to the structure of the patriarchal communication embedded in the social practices of storytelling and reporting of male abuses.

This study argues that the politics embodied by radical feminists can strongly contribute for critically shedding a light on how the mainstream media might be failing women as citizens in the discursive modalities employed as they cover femicide.

The urgency to have a more exhaustive theoretical understanding of men and male power requests to include masculinity studies which together with radical feminism will enrich the academic dialogue in this project.

Raewyn Connell set a benchmark in the masculinity studies when she introduced the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (2005, p.77). She illustrates with this theorisation that not all masculinities are equal and there are some dominating the others like the homosexual masculinity or the one clustering low-class men. Following this critical stance, the hegemonic masculinity grows in a community wherein both men and women accept through regular social practices models of masculinity (and femininity).

In another recent contribution to the masculinity theoretical framework, Banet-Weiser and Miltner discuss toxic masculinity, “a (heterosexual) masculinity that is threatened by anything associated with femininity (whether that is pink yogurt or emotions)” (2016, p.171). The interpretation of toxic masculinity recalls the ‘old’ one of hegemonic masculinity in problematizing its refusal of acknowledging that men and women are equally human beings with the same feelings, the same tastes and practices, and a pulling on the apotheosis of the “macho/ alpha man” through mass media reaffirming his emotional and physical superiority.

What lacks in the masculinity studies within media is a major attention to the news coverage of the ordinary man. This study intends to contribute to address the gap in the masculinity and media field by supplying analytical and empirical knowledge on the importance of embracing critical masculinity studies- and not only feminist approaches- when it comes to scrutinise violence against women and its perpetrators.

Methodology

CDA is the chosen methodology for the investigated material. It proposes itself to be an “explanatory critique” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p.33) of the power dynamics occurring in the communicative events. This study precisely undertakes to explain the power relations favouring a prevailing mediated framework wherein the Italian public sphere should cast the perpetrators of femicide.

The top-three most read daily-general newspapers under investigation are *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *La Stampa* during the year 2018.² LexisNexis and the newspapers digital archives were the news sources.

Six femicides ranged from a timeframe going from January to June were picked as study cases due to their highest coverage across the newspapers; the rationale behind the choice of this timeframe was that this period registered the peak of femicides in Italy (54 out of the 93 in total). This sampling process brought to the final 80 articles consisting of reports, opinions, and follow-up pieces.

The other analytical tool this project makes use of is thematic coding with the aim of strengthening the validity of the CDA findings through a comparison with the results achieved during the coding. Pat Bazeley provides guidelines (2013, pp.125-134, 190-195) for the coding process to obtain the themes connected to the representation of men, then analysed with the support of the linguistic and discursive analysis.

Analysis of the findings

In the news coverage of femicide realised by *Corriere Della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa* prevailed the combination of informative, sensationalist and technical language to convey representations within the crime news.

Further, the joint use of CDA and coding process resulted in the frame of three main themes characterising how the mainstream Italian press represent the perpetrators of femicide: “*Meet the man*”, “*His drawing of death*”, and “*I would never hurt you*”.

² The ADS (Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa) provided these results. The data have been consulted on the website: www.primaonline.it

Meet the man

A due task of writing about a crime is to identify the subjects involved in the narrated event. All three newspapers invested sentences as well as detailed paragraphs to inform about who the man behind the femicide was. This first theme refers to all the standard information about his persona. The introduction of the man before turning into a killer takes the traditional journalism path: full name, age, birth-town and sometimes nationality if the person is not Italian, as in the case of Abdelmjid El Biti, portrayed as

“A 50-years old man who has Moroccan origins” (La Repubblica, 9.06.18).³

Such data represent a sort of ethnographic map of the man, useful for demographic studies like the one conducted by Karadole (2012) on Italian femicides in 2006. Indeed, it gives the readers a standardised identity card of the killer, a proof of his existence in this world before entering the news feed. The basic information about the man as a persona are enriched with details about his daily personality expressed throughout evaluative comments. *Corriere della Sera* wrote on Alessandro Garlaschi:

Shy character, his social profiles tell about a man at the constant search for money through cheap business proposals (*Corriere della Sera*, 8.02.2018).⁴

This section is part of what Norman Fairclough calls *conversationalization* (1995, p.89), which is the modulation of the crime news discourse around private domain practices attributed to the news subject. Therefore, the result is to deliver a normalised and normalising profile of the man as part of an ordinary context (Hearn, 2004) wherein readers can mirror themselves.

The representation of the male perpetrators continues with a focus on their professional life. The reliance on the professional aspect of the killer is part of what Connell (2005) and Consalvo (2003) casted as an affirmation of a masculinity becoming hegemonic through the work as process of socialization. It is that legitimization of the man's dominance through the economic benefit and the social admiration received in highlighting the man's successful story. This is apparent in the portrayal of Fausto Filippone, who killed his wife and daughter, before he killed himself. *La Repubblica* outlined that

3 Original version: un cinquantenne di origini marocchine.

4 Original version: Personaggio schivo, i suoi profili social raccontano di un uomo alla continua ricerca di soldi con proposte di affari da pochi euro.

(He) had a resume of all respect, and he graduated at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice. He was also member of a charity association (La Repubblica, 21.05.2018).⁵

whereas *Corriere Della Sera* referred at him as “manager of the Brioni firm”⁶ (23.05.2018) throughout the news coverage of this femicide- suicide case. It is the mediated affirmation of the male breadwinner in Italy. Although the man is responsible for the assassination of an intimate person, he comes out in his socio-economic contingency (Chambers, 2005).

The concluding part of the first theme rotates around the relationship between the subjects who are part of a femicide. The identification of the man in relation of their victim plays around the relational discourse with a mix of emotional and informative language.

For instance, in describing the relationship between Manuel Buzzini and her girlfriend Sara Luciani, *Corriere Della Sera* said that

[They] built a love relationship turned almost into a shell to protect Sara from her fragilities (Corriere Della Sera, 11.06.2018).⁷

Here the affective sphere was functional to representing the man as a social agent in an intimate relation. In the reportage about how Luigi Capasso killed the two daughters and almost killed the wife, La Stampa reported in the form of a direct quote what he said to the wife from whom he was about to be divorced:

“Give me the chance to get close to the girls [the two daughters]” (La Stampa, 1.03.2018).⁸

This mediated representation plays around what Schippers (2007) sees as a negotiation of the man and his idea of dominant position within the powerful shifts in the intimate dynamics demanding a reconstruction of his power through the exercise of violence.

5 Original version: Aveva un curriculum di tutto rispetto, e si era laureato all'università Ca' Foscari di Venezia. Era anche volontario del Banco alimentare.

6 Original version: manager della Brioni.

7 Original version: costruito un rapporto d'amore diventato quasi un guscio per proteggere Sara dalle sue fragilità.

8 Original version: <<Dammi la possibilità di avvicinarmi alle bambine>>.

His drawing of death

This section sheds a light on the man into violent dynamics by showing an indulgence on a raw storytelling of the destructive masculinity.

The portrayal of previous violent episodes gives the context wherein the murder is developed. Every account concerning the pre-femicide violent behaviours emerged via indirect or direct quotes of statements made by man or victim relatives or friends. Their language is descriptive, colloquial, loaded with immediate reactions and comments, performing that immediacy and liveness important to the news media (Gill, 2007, p.133).

For instance, La Stampa gave voice to the lawyer of Luigi Capasso's wife:

“A father-boss. [...] he controlled the wife as if she was his property” (La Stampa, 2.03.2018).⁹

This is an example of that toxic masculinity illustrated by Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016): the man turning aggressive in the exact moment he does not dominate over the household. However, in the newspapers there is never a mention of how the violence embraced by men derives from the Italian patriarchal structure, which normalises the male power through any sort of violent tools. The purpose is to prepare the public with what comes next, but also of communicating a sort of expectations of an extreme conclusion in the case of violent relationships.

At a first glance, the reconstruction of the femicide dynamics and the discourse analysis revealed what Marian Meyers calls over-completeness (1994, p.52), which means the presence of irrelevant details in the mediated illustration of the man's agency.

An example is the news coverage on Fausto Filippone. Corriere Della Sera wrote:

[he] killed himself on the highway bridge, after having thrown down few hours earlier Ludovica as well, the 10-old daughter whom the father had been holding her hand along the highway, then into his arms, sit on the edge of the guard-rail. (Corriere Della Sera, 22.05.2018).¹⁰

9 Original version: “Un padre-padrone. [...] sorvegliava la moglie come se fosse una sua proprietà”.

10 Original version: si è suicidato dal viadotto Alento sull'A 14, dopo aver lanciato nel vuoto poche ore prima anche Ludovica, la figlia di 10 anni che il papà aveva tenuto mano nella mano sul ciglio dell'autostrada e poi in braccio, seduto sul guard-rail.

La Stampa said that

The father sets her [the daughter] free in the emptiness (La Stampa, 23.05.2018).¹¹

Was it necessary to indulge on the ‘fatherly behaviour’ the man assumed before brutally kill the daughter? Furthermore, the usage of the verb “liberare qualcuno nel vuoto = set someone free in the emptiness” think about a positive action, a liberating act, rather than a femicide. The image emerging is a negotiation between the fatherly figure and the killer one, which gives a confusing representation of his responsibilities.

The final part of this theme identifies the man in the aftermath of his drawing of death. In the femicide cases analysed, four out of the six perpetrators committed suicide, whereas the (alive) rest of them is under arrest.

But the suicidal killer gained too in the news outlets, in the name of what Meyers calls professional imperatives of reporting what occurred and its developments (1997, p.22), but also with the intention of keeping the reader’s attention high on the criminal case with a feed of insights into the criminal’s mind (Katz, 1987).

For instance, the newspapers mentioned the goodbye notes that Pasquale Vitiello wrote before killing his wife Immacolata and committing suicide:

And even his imaginary final dialogue with the daughter. “I am proud of you” he writes to her “I will look at you from the sky” (*Corriere Della Sera*, 21.03.2018).¹²

Again, there is a continuous process of empathic humanization of the killer, imbued with emotional language to soften the man’s status of criminal (Meyers, 1994) conveying a masculinity not problematized for its destructivity, rather constructed around acceptable patriarchal roles.

Seeing the crime as an event that becomes of public domain through the mediation process, the newspapers relied again on the official and public discourse to draw upon beliefs, evaluations, positioning of subjects within the context of reference (Fairclough, 1995, p.204). In commenting the femicide-suicide of Laura and her boyfriend Manuel, their neighbour said to *Corriere Della Sera*

11 Original version: il padre la libera nel vuoto

12 Original version: E pure un suo immaginario dialogo finale con la figlia. «Sono fiero di te», le scrive, «Ti guarderò dal cielo».

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“They have been together since the beginning of the year. They were very united, he could have never killed her” (Corriere Della Sera, 11.06.2018).¹³

As already emerged in the study on femicide-suicide in the media done by Richards and her colleagues (2013), the news outlets make broad use of the official and unofficial sources to, on one hand, spin the objective construction of the killer given by the official discourse with its categorically modalised statements (Fairclough, 1995, p.162). On the other hand, the unofficial voices offer the possibility to give immediate and far-to-be neutral constructions of the man- either depicting him as an unlikely killer.

“I would never hurt you”

In the last theme, the discursive practices within the crime news order rotate around the psychic, lucid and emotional system of knowledge. By doing so, the man is evaluated according to his capacity of killing consciously or unconsciously due to a mental or emotional problem. This is a traditional attempt in the news coverage of femicide to try to explain why and how such an extreme conclusion of a friendship or intimate relation between a man and a woman occurred (Meyers 1994; Gius & Lalli 2014).

The qualitative analysis detected the recurrent use of the psychiatric discourse to label the femicide as man’s “*folia* = madness”. This is a recurrent media strategy to make sense of a crime.

La Repubblica used the official discourse to reinforce the representation of Luigi Capasso as a mentally unstable man:

Vitagliano [provincial commander of the carabinieri] defined Capasso “in a status of strong agitation and not perfectly lucid in his reasoning in this moment” (*La Repubblica*, 28.02.2018).¹⁴

As observed by Katz (1987), in representing the man as a pathological case, the media dehumanise the man, taking away his crime from the societal roots that are favouring the manifestation of femicide- the patriarchal system. In calling the killer a “*mostro* = monster” as Alessandro Garlaschi was

13 Original version: «Stavano insieme da inizio anno. Erano molto uniti, non avrebbe mai potuto ucciderla».

14 Original version: Vitagliano aveva definito Capasso «<in stato di forte agitazione e non perfettamente limpido nel suo ragionare in questo momento>>».

addressed by his neighbours during his arrest (La Stampa, 8.02.2018), the result is a refusal to identify the killer as a man part of a socio-cultural reality. Another interesting result from the analysis was the representation of the 'lucid man' who planned in detail the femicide and then tried to hide his tracks. This representation enters in apparent contradiction with the image of the 'mad man' acting against his victim due to his psychiatric pathologies. As emerged in the second theme, the three newspapers framed the assessment of the man's lucidity- as well as of his insanity- through the official sources of the crime news.

However, the lucid man was negotiated with the 'mad man', expressing the message that although the killer had planned to commit a femicide, his mind was unstable during the execution of the plan.

For instance, in commenting the double femicide committed by Luigi Capasso, *Corriere Della Sera* opened a follow-up article said that

A mix of premeditation and loss of his mind seems to have armed the hand of Luigi Capasso (*Corriere Della Sera*, 3.03.2018).¹⁵

Norman Fairclough (1995, p.84) explains how these woven contrasting voices, ordered by the dominant media discourse, give the text heterogeneity but also a direction by prioritizing certain voices rather than others. The newspapers' claim for objectivity returns in this section to communicate that yes, the man was both lucid and insane at the same time, because this is the only answer thinkable for such a crime.

Another result is the representations of the man in the midst of his emotions. Interestingly, emotions are represented in what the patriarchal system calls 'feminine -emotional behaviour'. Previously it emerged the manifestation of the toxic masculinity through its physical and aggressive expression of power over the woman, but here, the man is caught in his "emotional storm".

La Stampa said about Pasquale Vitiello's goodbye notes:

The majority [of his goodbye notes] addresses the daughter for whom he has words of affection and dedication; other letters address the parents and a friend to whom he reveals his condition of rejected man. The rage and hatred against Imma took over. (*La Stampa*, 20.03.2018).¹⁶

15 Original version: Un misto di premeditazione e perdita di senno sembra aver armato la mano di Luigi Capasso.

16 Original version: La maggior parte è indirizzata alla figlia per la quale Vitiello spende parole di affetto e dedizione; altre lettere sono rivolte ai genitori e a un amico a cui sfoga la sua condizione di uomo respinto. La rabbia e l'odio nei confronti di Imma hanno avuto il sopravvento.

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There is the subtle yet visible idea behind these mediated representations of the killer under his emotional storm: a personalization and humanization of the crime. As previous studies on mainstream news and femicide acknowledged (Meyers 1997; Gius & Lalli 2014), the news media reduce a complex and socio-cultural issue like femicide within the storytelling of the man's personal feelings during the preparation and execution of femicide.

In sum, if Gius and Lalli (2014) identified love as the leading feeling framing the news coverage of femicide in Italy, the investigated sample showed the perpetrators of femicide as enraged, jealous and even caring about his victims. Luigi Capasso said to one of her kids: “Non ti farei mai del male = I would never hurt you” (*Corriere Della Sera*, 2.03.2018). Alessandro Garlaschi wrote to Jessica: “Sei dentro il mio cuore = You are in my heart” (*Corriere Della Sera*, 10.02.2018). The representations of these men add more personal nuances to the femicide. What lacked from the media side was to do what Susanne Kappeler recommended (1990): position this personal at a political level to structure a critique of the patriarchal gender relations that normalise practices of male violence against women culminating with the misogynist belief that it is legit to kill a woman if she rejects his control masked by a sentiment.

Conclusions

Norman Fairclough (1995, p.204) perceives news as a social action embedded within a sociocultural context. In this research journey, the scope was to unpack the discourses shaping the representations of the perpetrators of femicide with a retrospective on how these discourses reflect the current gender relations in Italy, and to reflect on how the mainstream press cope with such an extreme topic. Radical feminism gave strength to this project with its exhortation in making a woman's issue like femicide part of the political and social agenda. The critical theorizations around masculinity enhanced the importance of having an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural characteristics constructing the responsible of femicide and especially the discursive and fluid negotiations of his identification within the news media. The additional value of critical masculinity studies to this project is to recognise the man as part of a masculine category that must be the object of a mediated critical revision and representation.

This study highlighted how it is not enough to open news sections entirely focused on women's issues and femicide in order to take a normative stand against what lies behind the voluntary killing of intimate partners, daughters, girlfriends.

If media should be considered the lighthouse shedding a light on the problems ongoing in a country, it is imperative that they go over the impartial traditional role assumed so far in the coverage of femicide. After all, femicide is not a political issue until the public sphere- of whom media are big representatives and at the same time mobilizers- acknowledges it as such.

The shortcoming of the coverage intertextuality was a flat tone of the news coverage of femicide: same repertoires, same lurid details, same sensationalism, same discursive practices in representing the event and its involved subjects. Based on these empirical observations, this project wants to suggest to embarking in a feminist elaboration of the Italian news coverage of femicide. This would make possible to convey less information about the crime dynamics and more information about what the society, as a whole needs to change within institutions, laws, and education to combat the plague of violence against women.

Mainstream journalism cannot stop femicide from happening and this study does not ask it to. However, what it is requested to the mainstream newspapers is to be less afraid to “make more noise” when it comes to report this crime, to dare to be truly objective and write that those men chose death to not lose their last element of power over their woman.

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