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“I loved her so much, but I killed her”.
Romantic love as a representational frame for intimate
partner femicide in three Italian newspapers

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Abstract: In Italy law has accepted “honour crimes” perpetrated by men until little more than 30 years ago. As cultural dimensions are often slower to change, it is interesting to analyze the capacity to account for femicides in the press in a period in which the topic has become more and more relevant all over Europe. Building on existing literature, this study explores how three major Italian newspapers frame crimes of intimate partner femicide. Using 166 articles published in 2012, the authors examine - by a thematic analysis conducted along different items - which aspects are conveyed by the news to account for the 53 intimate partner femicides reported in the press in this period. Findings suggest that while Italian news media heavily rely on narratives of love and passion to frame intimate partner homicide, a social discourse justifying the “loss of control” it is also used to sustain representation of femicides as crimes impossible to be prevented or predicted.

Keywords: intimate partner femicide, romantic love, gender violence, newspapers, representations

« *Je l'aimais tellement que je l'ai tuée* ».*L'amour romantique comme cadre de la représentation du fémicide par le partenaire dans la presse italienne*

Résumé : Ce n'est que depuis une trentaine d'années que la loi italienne ne contemple plus les « crimes d'honneur », c'est-à-dire la reconnaissance de circonstances atténuantes pour les meurtres commis par les hommes sur leur femme adultère. Pour comprendre si le changement de la légitimation socio-culturelle dans le sens commun va de pair avec le changement de la loi, on a donc considéré d'intérêt analyser dans la presse nationale les récits récents des fémicides, en se focalisant sur ceux qui ont été commis en 2012. A partir de la littérature scientifique sur ce thème, cet étude décrit la manière de raconter 53 cas de fémicides engageant la partenaire, dans 166 articles publiés par trois des principaux journaux italiens. En conduisant une analyse thématique transversale des articles, on a identifié dans l'amour romantique le cadrage principal par lequel la presse essaye de trouver des explications cernées comme les plus compréhensibles pour ses lecteurs. Ces sont la perte de contrôle à la suite de discussions, voire la peur de perdre l'objet d'amour par jalousie ou séparation, qui résultent les explications les plus souvent invoquées. Ces « causes » apparaissent contingentes et de pertinence individuelle; de plus, elles ne méritent pas - dans les articles de presse analysés - l'évocation d'une quelque asymétrie structurelle d'où il puisse ressortir, par exemple, la mise en question du droit de contrôle masculin, alors qu'il est souvent montré comme stratégiquement poursuivi et tacitement censé allant de soi. On relève donc un discours social où la contingence individuelle d'une « perte de contrôle » descendant de l'amour romantique semble représenter le fémicide comme un crime qu'on ne peut pas prévenir ni prévoir.

Mots-clés : fémicide par le partenaire, amour romantique, violence de genre, presse, représentation

Introduction

Condemnation of gender violence in Italy is recent in history. Until little more than thirty years ago, the crime of violence against women was not only socially ignored, but Italian law considered it admissible in some specific circumstances. In fact, until their abrogation in 1981, two articles of the criminal code – the so-called *honour crimes articles* – provided mild penalties for criminal acts (including homicide) committed against women because of the supposed necessity to protect one's honour. Furthermore, even if in the past three decades the social recognition of gender violence as a social problem has changed with respect to the Italian cultural and political context of the early 1980s, it has been only in recent years that a new law that recognizes stalking and harassment as criminal offences has been introduced

into the Italian juridical system (Law n. 38, 4-23-2009), and that gender based violence as a social problem has started to gain broader social attention (EU.R.E.S., 2012).

Despite the growing consideration paid to gender violence, by the time this research was conducted it was still rather problematic to establish the exact number of women that had been killed in Italy by the hands of their partner or ex-partner in a given period of time. This difficulty was mostly due to the lack of official data produced at government level on this type of crimes¹. For this reason, in order to obtain a reliable figure on the number of intimate partner femicides perpetrated in the year taken in consideration for this study (2012), we had to rely on the estimates provided by two existing researches (EU.R.E.S., 2012; Ioratti et al, 2013) conducted, partially, on police records and, more extensively, on surveys on the news coverage of domestic violence. Notably, accordingly to the data collected by Ioriatti et al. (2013)², 124 women were killed in Italy as a result of domestic violence in 2012, 72 of whom died at the hands of their partner or ex-partner. These numbers, already quite impressive, appeared even more shocking if we consider that the other study produced in 2013 (EU.R.E.S 2013) reported that the total figure of women killed in the same year was 159. Therefore, according to these numbers in 2012 domestic violence, in general, represented the first cause of death for women victims of violent crimes (78 percent) in Italy, while intimate partner femicide, in particular, accounted for more than half (59 percent) of the deaths.

Drawing on these numbers we explore how three Italian newspapers represented femicide over one year of news coverage. For the purposes of this study we took into consideration only the cases of femicide that were (a) perpetrated either by the partner or the ex-partner of the victim, and (b) for which the perpetrator was identified in the news (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Gillespie et al., 2013; Monckton-Smith, 2012; Meyers, 1997). Accordingly, the use of the term femicide is employed here only to define those homicides of women who have been perpetrated by a man who was, or had been, romantically involved with them at the time of the crime (current and former husbands, partners or boyfriends) and does not comprise homicides perpetrated by other family members, such as, for example, fathers, brothers, or sons (Dawson & Gartner, 1998). In particular, we started our analysis looking at how many of the 72 cases of femicides registered in news media in 2012 have been actually reported by the three main national newspapers of the country. Furthermore we explored how these crimes were narrated and the violence framed in the storytelling used to cover the news.

¹ The Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs has recognized the necessity to provide reliable data on gender-based violence despite the complexities presented in monitoring this particular type of crime. As required by the Law n. 119 of the 15th of October, 2013, starting from 2014, the annual report on public security presented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the parliament will include a specific section reserved to the discussion of data related to gender-based crimes in the country.

² This report has been completed for the *Casa Delle Donne Per Non Subire Violenza*, an Italian-based organization that has worked for more than two decades to support women victims of violence.

Our study relies on the idea that the press has the capacity to influence the agenda building of a specific social issue (Blumer, 1971; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) by increasing or diminishing its visibility inside of the public arena (i.e. by determining the newsworthiness of gender violence against women in a specific moment of time), and by making it “meaningful” accordingly to specific ways to account for it. In this respect the press, as an actor of the same society it represents (Tuchman, 1978a), provides interesting indicators of the different representations circulating in the common sense over any particular social fact, while simultaneously reinforcing existing stereotypes and suggesting specific understanding of it (Moscovici, 1984; Tuchman, 1978b; Lalli, 2005). Then, by cutting out a portion of the event-femicide, the press provides a specific “gaze” capable to account for the socially derived knowledge available for this particular social fact (Schutz, 1971).

Building on this premise, we have focused our attention on the way three national Italian newspapers account for femicide in order to detect the broader frames employed to report the crimes. Accordingly, we use the notion of frame in the way that Goffman proposed it (1974): as a concept capable of organizing and making sense of reality by providing a general understanding of a context. In particular, our analysis aims to understand whether the main frames employed by the Italian press in 2012 supported a general understanding of femicides as acts of individual responsibility (Meyers, 1997), or if a more social dimension of power and control emerged in the accounts. Building on previous literature, our hypothesis is that love and passion, as opposed to power and possession, are more likely to be used in the press as acceptable explanations for femicide since they better resonate with the common sense understanding usually employed to make sense of this type of crime.

We will begin by considering previous research on media depictions of violence against women. Next, we will address our research questions and highlight some of the main findings of this study. Finally, the implications of the findings will be discussed.

1. Literature review

Within many cultures romantic heterosexual love is often used to organize gender relations, normalize issues of male dominance and control (Chung, 2005; Garofalo, 2012; Henton et al., 1983; Meyers, 1997; Monckton-Smith, 2012; Rich, 1980; Singh, 2013; Wood, 2001), and promote conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity, thus ideologically legitimating the subordination of women to men (Chung, 2005; Jackson, 1999; Rich, 1980; Singh, 2013; Wood, 2001). Romantic love “embodies a culture of male authorship which is seen as natural, sacred and unproblematic” (Dobash & Dobash, 1980: 7 cit. in Monckton-Smith, 2012, p. 26) and contributes to making intimate partner violence socially acceptable. In particular, as Monckton-Smith (2012) notes, the modern Western discourse sustains a popular conceptualization that frames violence as a legitimate practice among partners. According to conventions of romantic love, practices of male dominance over wom-

en should not be understood as problematic, but rather as signs of intimacy and affection (Chung, 2005).

As already noted in previous studies (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998b; Gillespie et al., 2013; Karadole, 2012; Meyers, 1997; Monckton-Smith, 2012; Richards, Gillespie & Smith, 2011), news coverage of femicide often supports the idea that the perpetrator “lost control”, a common defence for violent men, and one of the “domestic violence myths” (Monckton-Smith, 2012, p. 79). The so-called “crime of passion” is “characterized as an outburst of extreme violence, directed at a loved one, and in response to provocations which threaten the perceived stability of a loving or romantic relationship, and can be considered a demonstration of deep love for the victim” (Monckton-Smith, 2012: 86). Accordingly, “crimes of passion” are often represented in the news more as the outcome of tragic occurrences, rather than as the consequence of structural inequalities between the genders. Moreover, by depicting domestic violence and femicide as acts of passion the media sustain a representation in which both members of the couple are equally considered victims of the situation, and responsible for its dramatic consequences. By presenting lethal domestic violence as a consequence of an individual moment of rage the news media rarely address issues of power, control and domination, thus largely overlooking the social implications of these crimes (Meyers, 1997). In particular, when femicides are depicted in the news as the result of a sudden outburst of violence, rather than being presented as the final act of a history of abuses, violence ends up being rationalized and normalized as an isolated incident that was impossible to foresee and prevent (Bullock, 2007, 2008; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013).

Although femicide is an act of male domination rooted in patriarchy, the gendered nature of violence against women is often obscured in the news (Boyle, 2005; Consalvo, 2003), and as a consequence issues related to the responsibility of men often fail to be explicitly addressed (Lamb & Keon, 1995). Removing the discussion of masculinity when the news recounts particularly violent crimes has been explained by Consalvo (1998b, 2003) as the consequence of a process of hegemonic self-preservation. Even in social contexts where male domination is systemic, a common agreement is in place to set specific boundaries that need to be respected when control is exercised (Hooks, 1990). When a man fails to respect these limits, and “loss of control” results in killing a woman, his masculinity needs to be alienated and removed. An example of this “withdrawal from scrutiny” (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2007, p. 835) is the common practices to de-humanize the perpetrator by depicting him as a “monster” (Consalvo, 2003) or as a beast. Another strategy that media often put in place in order to dismiss issues related to masculinity and male domination is by presenting the perpetrator as being affected by some kind of pathology, as a substance abuser, or as someone with a criminal past (Bullock, 2007; Gillespie et al., 2013; Meyers, 1997; Richards, Gillespie & Smith, 2011). The depiction of violent men as “outsiders” or, as noted by Boyle (2005), as entities devoid of masculinity, helps normalise domestic violence estranging it from the realm of social problems (Bullock & Cubert, 2002).

Victims, on the other hand, receive very different treatment in the news. In particular, several studies have noted that the experience of women with violence is not just openly disregarded (Bullock & Cubert, 2002), but that the news clearly distinguish between victims who deserve public condolence and outrage and those who, on the other hand, should be considered responsible for what has happened to them. This double standard in positioning women with respect to violence has led feminist scholars to the conclusion that news media tends to polarize the crimes of violence against women by differentiating between “virgin/good” and “vamp/bad” victims (Benedict, 1992; Boyle, 2005; Meyers, 1997; Meloy & Miller, 2009). Virgin/good victims of violence are constructed in the news as morally impeccable women who did not deserve what happened to them, and whose deaths should be vindicated. On the other hand, vamp/bad victims are depicted in the news as morally questionable, and represented as if they were responsible for what happened to them.

As is the nature of social relations, according to some researches this binary distinction is tied to the race and class (Collins, 1998; Cavender, Bond-Maupin & Jurkin, 1999; Meyers, 1997; Gilchrist, 2010; Jiwani & Young, 2006). Moreover, as Meyers (1997) notices, several aspects of a woman’s life can be scrutinized to victimize her. For example, “details surrounding the act of violence, such as the woman’s use of drug or alcohol or her engagement in prostitution or other illegal and dangerous activities, serve to blame the victim (...) while deflecting responsibility for the real criminal” (Meyers, 1997, p. 120). Victims of lethal domestic violence are also often depicted as co-responsible for their abuse as they were neither able to “stay in their place”, nor strong enough to leave their violent man and thus solve their problem (Alat, 2006; Berns, 1999; Monckton-Smith, 2012).

As most of the studies on the topic have shown, the media largely neglects to acknowledge issues of power in domestic violence related crimes, and fails to address the wider social and cultural context in which the crimes originated (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Monckton-Smith, 2012; Meyers, 1997). According to feminist scholars the systematic failure to address femicide as an issue of male domination can be explained in consequence of the fact that the narratives used to cover domestic violence and femicide in the news are intended to support the *status quo* (Meyers, 1997; Gilchrist, 2010; Radford and Russel, 1992). In particular, it has been noticed (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Meyers, 1997; Richards, Gillespie & Smith, 2011) that femicides are often framed in the news as commonplace crimes that have little or nothing to do with the social and cultural models underlying the relationship between genders. For example, articles often refrain to resort on specific domestic violence related language, whereas lethal domestic violence is often minimized as being just another episode of violence in a long list of crimes (Gillespie et al., 2013).

Similarly, issues related to a presumed social fragility of the couple are sometimes used in the news to suggest that the crimes occurred as a consequence of material or symbolic condition of deprivation, rather than as result of a power struggle (Consalvo, 1998a). On the other hand, when issues of patriarchy are addressed in the

news they are occasionally discussed in relation to the cultural background of the perpetrator only when he is an immigrant man or a member of an ethnic minority. Finally, as Richards, Gillespie and Smith (2011) and Gillespie et al. (2013) note the articles that try to represent domestic violence as the consequence of a larger social problem are usually more likely to question the institutional failure of the system of protection.

2. Research questions

Building on the studies just summarized, this article examines how femicide is represented within three Italian national newspapers. It does so by specifically addressing how intimate partner violence is depicted in the news in relation to narratives about heterosexual romantic love and passion, starting from the following research questions: how extensively did Italian newspaper coverage of femicides rely on the idea of romantic love to account for the reported crimes? And, if used, which aspects and causes were invoked to make them meaningful in relation to *crime passionnel*? Our aim is to extend previous research on news coverage of femicide focusing, in particular, on the close bond that exists between romantic love, loss of control and violence as an organizing concept capable of making sense of femicide. If the press usage of the idea that man act violently upon the necessity to protect and preserve the cohesion of the couple (Meyers, 1997; Monkton-Smith, 2012) has been largely discussed in previous literature, the use of tormented romantic love and loss of control ways to elicit a sympathetic and individualistic representation of femicide, rather than a critical one, has attracted less attention³. Furthermore, our study is one of the first of this kind conducted on the Italian press, thus providing important context for the discussion of the different ways in which violence against women, in general, and femicide, in particular, are represented in this context.

3. Method

This study focuses on the 2012 coverage of three of the major Italian national daily newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*)⁴, considering both their paper-based and online editions. This particular timeframe was chosen since 2012 was a year in which the discussion of domestic violence gained significant visibility in Italy (Ioriatti et al., 2013). The decision to examine news articles published in national newspapers, rather than local ones, was made with the intent to enhance understanding of the agenda setting in the news-making journalistic process at national level. As Meyers has noted in 1997, domestic violence usually finds little space in the national news. It is mostly reported by local media, which suggests that its newsworthiness is closely connected to a dimension of spatial and cultural proximity (Gilchrist, 2010). Therefore, it is important to consider how the major Italian

³ An exception can be found in Monkton-Smith, 2012.

⁴ The three generalist newspapers most sold in Italy, accordingly to ADS national data (consulted on <http://www.humanhighway.it> - October 10, 2013).

newspapers depict domestic violence not just as news of local interest, but also as a nationally significant issue.

As already mentioned above, the bulk of the cases has been drawn from the list compiled by Ioriatti et al. (2013) that included the 124 women that, accordingly to the data collected in their research, have been killed by family members, partners or ex-partners in Italy in 2012. As we were interested only in femicides perpetrated by intimate partners, our research took into consideration only those cases of femicide for which the perpetrator was clearly identified in the news as the intimate partner of the victim. Based on this dataset, in all, 72 cases met the selection criteria. Once the case list was completed, the web databases of the three national newspapers selected for the study were searched using three different keywords to make sure not to overlook any case: the name of the victim, the name of the perpetrator, and the name of the locality where the incident had occurred. When an article published online appeared to be identical with the one published in the paper-based edition of the newspaper, only the printed one was kept. All opinion pieces and short articles were included in the final sample. In the end, out of the original 72 cases of intimate partner femicide assessed, a total of 53 cases were found to have been covered in at least one of the three national newspapers by at least one piece of news (see Table 1). The corresponding 166 articles retrieved with the search constitute the bulk of our analysis.

It should be noticed that the small sample of cases, combined with the lack of other official data on the crimes, does not allow for strong hypothesis capable to explain the principles of exclusion or inclusion applied to femicides cases by the national newsmaking process, nor to make clear-cut assumptions regarding fluctuation in news coverage.

Table 1. Frequency of Articles and Cases By Newspapers in 2012

	Corriere della Sera	La Repubblica	La Stampa
<i>Number of cases covered</i> (Total N = 53)	39 (74%)	23 (43%)	39 (74%)
<i>Number of articles</i> (Total N = 166)	66 (40%)	27 (16%)	73 (44%)
N. of cases covered with 3-6 articles	8	-	5
N. of cases covered with 2 articles	6	4	17
N. of cases covered with 1 article	25	19	17
Total cases covered exclusively by single Newspaper	11	2	9

However, some provisional considerations can still be drawn over some of the trends emerging from our analysis. In particular, femicides involving immigrant

men, implicating multiple victims, or presenting particularly cruel executions appeared more newsworthy both in terms of case coverage and in the number of articles published. More specifically, 11 out of the 12 cases where the killer was found to be an immigrant man were covered by the newspapers, while only 1 case out of 4 engaging an Italian killer was accounted for in the national news. On the contrary, the newsworthiness of foreign victims dropped dramatically when the killer was Italian: among the 10 cases of femicides that involved a foreign couple 9 were covered in the news, while just 1 out of the 6 deaths of a foreign woman by the hand of an Italian man attracted national coverage. Multiple victims, premeditation and presence of an accomplice, as well as the use of fierce violence are also characteristics that influenced the newsworthiness of a crime. The crimes presenting these elements usually attracted a higher number of articles incorporating more detailed and complex narratives of the crimes. Accordingly, it might be infer that when a femicide appeared too much as a common crime it was less likely to capture extended news media attention (Boyle, 2005), and was being accounted for in the press in a briefer, plainer and hastened manner.

Once organized, the corpus of the 166 articles was analyzed through thematic analysis. 18 items were thus isolated and organized according to two three main frames, the first one concerning the *explicit* evocation of “Romantic Love” as the crucial plot of the story, and the other two frames concerning the ways by which the press tries to “explain” the “facts” of the story: “Loss of Control”; and “Other Contextual Elements” (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frames employed to explain the crime

<i>Frames</i>	<i>Themes</i>
<i>Romantic Love</i>	Femicide explicitly presented as <i>crime passionelle</i> Violence motivated by jealousy Violence motivated by unrequited love Violence motivated by separation or divorce Perpetrator explicitly presented as “in love” with the victim Victim explicitly presented as “in love” with the perpetrator
<i>Loss of Control</i>	Perpetrator was in love and lost control Violence is explicitly connected to a <i>raptus</i> Femicide occurred “out of the blue” Violence followed an argument between the victim and the perpetrator Article make reference to recurring arguments among the victim and the perpetrator Loss of control was used by the perpetrator as self defence
<i>Other Contextual Elements</i>	Crime could be connected to perpetrator substance abuse (alcohol/drugs) or mental illness Perpetrator described as a monster-violent-bad man Crime is linked to poverty/social marginality Violence linked to perpetrator cultural background (immigrant origins) Victim should have known better Violence briefly reported as commonplace violence

The frame of the “Romantic Love” included all the accounts utilized by the press to connect the femicide to dimensions of love, passion, and jealousy. In particular, all the pieces of information presenting the femicide as the result of the decision to disrupt the couple (either as a consequence of separation or divorce) were included under this frame. The “Loss of Control” looked specifically at how the articles described the actual occurrence of the femicide, focusing on what was accounted to have happened immediately before and after the violence. Finally, the frame of the “Other Contextual Elements” gathered all the themes that were employed in a recurrent way by the press in order to provide further context for the crimes.

In order to better substantiate our findings the general tone of the article, and how the different themes were utilized in the coverage of the most relevant stories were thoroughly examined and recorded. For the purposes of our research recurring themes in the same article were recorded just once.

4. Results

Accordingly to our analysis 32 articles reported the femicide using exclusively the “Romantic Love” frame; 60 articles presented the crime by combining both the frames of the “Romantic Love” and the “Loss of Control”; and 42 articles, explained the femicide exclusively as the outcome of “Loss of Control” of the perpetrator. Moreover, 119 articles were found to comprise in the storytelling at least another background theme in order to provide further context to explain the crimes. Those background themes were not used in an alternative way to the “Romantic Love” and/or the “Loss of Control” frames, but as concurring elements employed in the news to build more complex narratives to account for the crimes. Finally, 32 articles presented the femicides without comprising either a dimension of “Romantic Love” or a situation of “Loss of Control” (See Table 3).

Table 3. Frames use by article

<i>Frame</i>	<i>Number of Articles</i>
Romantic Love	32
Loss of Control	42
Romantic Love combined with Loss of Control	60
Neither Romantic Love nor Loss of Control	32
	(166)
Other contextual elements	119

These 32 residual articles were found to be either: (a) brief reports adopting a just-the-facts approach (19 articles); (b) accounts of crimes emerged in situation of extreme degradation (5 articles), or (c) articles or opinion pieces that aimed to pre-

sent alternative explanations for the crimes less grounded in the common sense understanding of femicide (8 articles). It is important to notice that our analysis has not observed any relevant difference in the way in which the three national newspapers reported the stories⁵.

4.1. *Romantic love*

In all, out of the 166 articles retrieved in the national press, 92 were presented in the news as being primarily linked to a dimension of love and passion, thus implying the existence of a strong connection between intimate partner femicide and a state of tormented love. In particular, jealousy, and the inability to accept the partner's decision to end the relationship were often presented in the news, either combined or alone, as the two main motives for *crime passionnel*. Examples of the use of romantic love and passion as a way to frame femicide could be found in sentences such as:

"Homicide near Verona: he was jealous and strangled his wife with a scarf" (Corriere, March 5, 2012);

"She wanted to leave him and he threw her in the [river] Po" (Corriere, November 6, 2012);

"He shot to death the woman of his life who had left him" (La Stampa, May 17, 2012).

The state of "being in love" was explicitly evoked in 18 articles. In particular the perpetrator was literally described as being deeply "in love" with his victim, thus reinforcing the common understanding that femicides can occur in presence of feelings of love and affection. The idea that the perpetrator killed his victim despite his feeling for her was employed, for example, in the case of the homicide of Annamaria, shot to death by her husband who resented her insistence in the frequentation of a group of charismatic Christians. Annamaria's husband was described in the press as a man deeply devoted and in love with his wife, but incapable to accept her faith and the way she lived it. To him, Annamaria's devotion appeared to be insane, and completely out of control. So, one night, after she awakened him to speak about something related to her church, he felt so exasperated to reach out for his gun and to shot her in the chest. The idea that Annamaria was killed as the result of an act of love was supported in the press through the use of the perpetrator's declarations of love for his victim. In fact, Annamaria's husband was quoted in the news as follow:

"I loved [her] so much and I have destroyed everything. I have destroyed her life and also mine" (Corriere, March 24, 2012).

Notably, by framing the femicide as an expression of love, the media elicited a sympathetic representation of the killer, capable to suggest his diminished responsi-

⁵ This uniformity is probably attributable to the newspapers' use of news agencies to gather information over the crimes.

bility for the crime. This is, for example, the case of the femicide of Cristina, killed by her ex-boyfriend who could not accept her decision to end the relationship. Cristina’s killer was reported saying:

“I haven’t been capable to eat or to sleep for the past three months. I could not live without her: I killed her because she didn’t even want to speak to me anymore” (Corriere, June 1st, 2012).

4.2. *Loss of control*

Overall, the “loss of control” was found to be the most pervasive strategy used in the press to explain the circumstances that lead to the femicides. The idea that the perpetrator lost control over his action before bursting into violence was employed in 102 articles. The “loss of control”, often framed in the news as a “*raptus*”⁶, was found to be used in the press in two distinctive ways: (a) coupled with romantic love to provide further context for the crime, or (b) as a way to provide an acceptable explanation for those femicides that did not offer first-hand elements to connect them to the *crime passionnel*.

In particular, out of the 92 articles that linked the femicides to romantic passion, the large majority (60) explained the circumstances that led to the crime as the result of a sudden impulse, driven by feelings of jealousy, desperation, or rage. For example, Gabriella was strangled by her husband in an “outburst of jealousy sparked after reading some text messages on her phone” (*Corriere*, March 5, 2012), and Alessandra was killed in a moment of insanity by her “jealous and suspicious husband” after he discovered an email from her alleged lover (*Repubblica*, May 30, 2012). Similarly, the “loss of control” was used to describe the state of mind of a man who had killed his estranged wife, her new partner, her oldest daughter and the boyfriend of the latter to avenge the fact that she started dating another man:

“Jealousy is probably at the origins of the murderous raptus. ‘I must die, she was unfaithful to me’ said the truck-driver while he was being blocked” (Corriere, March 5, 2012).

The idea that the perpetrator killed the victim in an excess of anger was also used to frame the stories in which the victims were cruelly stalked by the persecutor before being killed. For example, an article on the femicide of Julissa, a young woman killed by her abusive ex-boyfriend whom she had reported 6 times to the local authorities for harassment and intimidation, stated:

“[the authorities] have not yet questioned [the perpetrator] in order to understand what has founded his murderous rage: maybe he acted in response to [the

⁶ A word commonly employed in the journalistic jargon to denote an outburst of violence, usually connected to madness. The analogies and similarities noticed in the use of the “*raptus* of madness” and the “love *raptus*” could deserve future interesting considerations.

victim] refusal to have sex with him, or in reaction to her reiterated request to be left alone” (Corriere, June 6, 2012).

Most of the 102 articles that used the “loss of control” supported the idea that the perpetrator acted upon a sudden reaction by recalling that the victim and the perpetrator had some kind of argument before the violence started, or that the couple argued frequently, thus suggesting the possibility that the perpetrator snapped in reaction of long-standing tensions in the relationship. In particular, the idea that that the femicide was triggered by an argument, or by lasting tensions in the couple, was suggested in 83 articles out of 102, both in presence and in absence of romantic love.

“We needed to talk [about the breakup], but I didn’t want to fight. I didn’t know what to tell her, or how. We started to argue there, near the ravine. She insisted and I suddenly put my hands around her neck” (Repubblica, January 7, 2012);

“Those who knew the family recall that the atmosphere had been tense for months: the murderer left the house as a result of the unending fighting” (La Stampa, January 12, 2012);

“They met as the woman was entering in her car, and after a brief argument he reached her with 3 gunshots” (La Stampa, June 31, 2012);

“The [man] exploded in a murderous raptus at the end of an argument with her ex-girlfriend” (La Stampa, October 7, 2012);

“Again, on her last night alive she woke me up to discuss [her demand to move into a house closer to her religious congregation]. I was exhausted, and blinded with fury. I had a raptus and I shot her” (Corriere, March 24, 2012).

The “loss of control” was also employed to normalized the idea that femicides are crimes difficult to predict, and therefore arduous to prevent. In particular, the idea that the violence leading to a femicide occurred as an “isolated incident” that no one could have possibly foreseen was suggested in 51 articles. For example, an article that reported the circumstances of the femicide of Antonietta read as follow:

“Nothing could have anticipated what happened yesterday in an isolated area of San Sebastiano at the Vesuvio. Both [the perpetrator’s] parents and [the victim’s] sisters told the police that they were not aware of any disagreements between the couple, and that the man had never shown signs of mental instability (...). The reasons are to be found only in a crisis of the couple” (La Stampa, November 12, 2012).

Sometimes the frame of the “isolated incident” reinforced the causality of the crime, as in the case of the violent death of Rosina, killed for having changed her mind about marrying her perpetrator a few days before the wedding: “They were supposed to get married on Monday, but she changed her mind and so he killed her” (Repubblica, June 8, 2012), stated one article.

Finally, it has been noticed that the 42 articles that presented the “Loss of Control” frame without combining it to “Romantic Love” did use it in order to provide an explanation for the crime, thus connecting the outburst of violence to a sudden loss of control, or a temporary mental breakdown that left little space for a rational interpretation of the events. In these articles, the idea of the *raptus* was not just used to provide a general understanding of what occurred before the crime, but was employed to offer a valid explanation to a crime otherwise difficult to account for. It is this, for example, the case of the 90 years old husband who killed his old wife Teresita:

“He killed his wife with a hammer in the grip of a raptus, then he tried to kill himself” (Repubblica, May 30, 2012).

4.3. Other contextual elements

Despite being the most pervasive frames the “romantic love” and the “loss of control” were often used, either altogether or separated, in combination with other recurring themes, that usually referred to some specific background of the couple, in order to provide further context for the crime. These additional themes were commonly detected in the news stories that attracted complex narratives to account for the femicide.

In 25 articles, the perpetrator was depicted as unstable at the moment of the crime, either because he was depressed, worried about his medical conditions/work situation, or because he was struggling with substance abuse. In these occasions the articles create a causal nexus between the femicide and the perpetrator being “worried”, “fragile” or incapable to account for his actions because dramatically affected by his addiction. In particular, the idea that the perpetrator could have been incapacitated by a state of depression was found in 10 articles in which the perpetrator either attempted, or committed suicide after the crime.

“The heart surgery, a precarious health, the depression: these should be the reasons that had pushed a retired tailor to grab a knife and kill his wife before committing suicide” (Corriere, May 3, 2012);

23 articles presented the perpetrator as a deviant individual by describing him as a ruthless person and as a good-for-nothing, or by recalling his criminal records. In particular, in articles the killer was described as being cruel and capable of killing in cold-blood. An example of this could be found again in the depiction of Julissa’s killer, who was reported to have called the woman’s mother after the crime: “‘I have killed your daughter at last’ he told her with a sneer” (*Corriere*, June 6, 2012).

Moreover, in a handful number of articles (5) the perpetrator was portrayed as being either a “monster,” or as a “beast”. This particular depiction was used exclusively in the coverage of those femicides characterized by a particularly horrifying level of deviancy. This is the case, for example, of the femicide of Maria, who was

burned to death by her husband after being beaten by him and his lover while she was 9 months pregnant. In two articles published on the story the aunt of the victim was quoted as saying,

“He was a monster, and we had him in our home. We knew he was a violent man, but we couldn’t image the he would have done what he did” (La Stampa, July 06, 2012; La Stampa, July 07, 2012).

15 articles linked the femicide to a situation of extreme material and/or symbolic poverty, thus implicitly suggesting that this specific type of crime could also be connected to socio-economic factors. For example, in the femicide of Antonella, a young woman killed by her boyfriend who persecuted her on the social media, stated:

“Both [her and the perpetrator] lived in low-income families: the one of Antonella was under the care of social services. They were two simple-minded youngsters, who didn’t even have the words to tell such a dreadful story” (Repubblica, January 7, 2012).

18 articles discussed the specific cultural background of the perpetrator. Of those 18, half (9) had as the killer an immigrant man. For example, the cultural background of the perpetrator was widely discusses in the femicide of Kaur, a young woman originally from India killed by her husband who suspected her infidelity. Interestingly, in this case, the news focused not as prominently on the perpetrator’s desire of sentimental or sexual possession of his wife or to romantic love principles, but rather on his alleged reaction to her decision to adopt Western habits. Kaur’s femicide was framed using titles such as:

“She wanted to live as an Italian. The Indian husband kills her” (Corriere, May 9, 2012);

“Punished with death as she dressed as a Westerner” (Repubblica, May 9, 2012).

The victims were openly blamed in 33 articles suggesting that they were unfaithful, that they did something they shouldn’t have done, or implying that they should have known better. For example, one of the cases where this link was made has been the femicide of Andrea Christina a young stripper originally from Eastern Europe who was beaten to death by her boyfriend and his 3 accomplices. Despite the cruelty of the murder, 4 articles out of 5 gave a sympathetic depiction of the perpetrator, framing him as an Italian mature man looking for a last chance to feel young and loved. On the other hand, Andrea Christina was depicted as a beautiful young and cunning woman who dumped her murderer after “constantly pestering him with demands for money” (*Repubblica*, January 28, 2012) while “having sex with other men” (*Corriere*, January 29, 2012), thus suggesting that she abused of the man’s love.

Even if more intricate, a similar use of romantic love as a way to blame the victim was found in the femicide of Vanessa, a beautiful young woman who had left her long-standing boyfriend to move in with an older man, despite the opposition of her family. Even if the description of Vanessa’s killer was never sympathetic, the “victim blaming” frame was clearly present in 4 out of the 8 articles that reported the story. In fact, Vanessa was framed positively in the news [“she was beautiful” (*La Stampa*, April 27, 2012), “working hard not to be a burden on her family while dreaming to do something with her art diploma” (*Corriere*, April 27, 2012)] until the story reached the point of her decision to live with the man she felt in love for and who ended up killing her. Her choice of being with that man, despite the fierce opposition of her family and, especially, of her father, “changed her” (*La Stampa*, April 27, 2012; *Repubblica*, April 27, 2012), inducing the journalists to frame Vanessa as a “lost girl” who had entered a world of marginalization and substance abuse that estranged her from her family and friends.

“Her father describes Vanessa’s ‘folie d’amour’ in this way: ‘We argued, and she decided to leave our home to follow that good-for-nothing’ (Repubblica, April 28, 2012).

5. Discussion

Our findings suggest that narratives of romantic love and loss of control were extensively employed in the Italian newspapers to represent intimate partner homicides, and that their use largely contributed to organize the representation of femicides as either unpredictable isolated acts of love preservation or as the result of an irrational rage, rather than as the outcome of an asymmetrical relationship in which a man acted violently to maintain control over the object of his love.

In particular, the frames of “romantic love” and “loss of control” were adopted to legitimate and justify (i.e. “normalize”, Boltanski, 1990) lethal violence against women in two distinctive ways: (a) to sustain that femicides should be understood as the tragic and unexpected outcome of a contingent lack of the individual capacity of discernment, as well as (b) to mitigate the perpetrator’s responsibilities for his crime. The representation of intimate partner homicide as a crime of passion motivated by a sudden reaction to a situation perceived as dangerous for the stability of a romantic relationship was frequently detected in the articles analyzed for this research. The use of the “loss of control” to normalize femicide as unpredictable crimes was also reinforced in the news by depicting the homicides as the tragic outcome of a “*raptus*”. By definition, a person who is overcome by a “*raptus*”, or by a sudden “*murderous rage*”, is someone who has “lost it” and acts on an impulse, rather than through the power of rationality.

Therefore, when the news frames a homicide as the outcome of a “*raptus*” they implicitly suggested an interpretation of the circumstances incompatible with premeditation, while also casting doubts on the perpetrator’s mental state at the moment

of the attack. Notably, the particular characteristic of the “*raptus*” emphasizes the idea that femicides were often the product of isolated mental or moral breakdowns, thus downplaying the responsibility of the perpetrators. Moreover, the description of the perpetrator as someone who is often reported as “asking forgiveness” or as saying that “he has destroyed his life, too”, implied the possibility of sharing a sentiment of “pity” towards him, even before than suggesting a feeling of public condolence and outrage for his victim.

The conclusion often presented in the press that the perpetrator acted upon a moment of emotional instability deriving from love contributes in positioning the femicide in the dimension of the unexpected, and sustains the commonplace understanding that this type of crime cannot be predicted or prevented. The unpredictability of intimate partner violence was accounted for in the news with the only exception represented by the lack of “better judgement” of the victim. The idea suggested in this type of victim blaming was that the inexplicable motives leading to the fatal loss of control could have been anticipated by the victim as she got involved with a jealous and, sometimes, even violent man, or by implying that the victim could have somehow deserved what has happened to her. On the other hand, the explicit condemnation of the perpetrators was predominantly observed only in those articles that presented them as de-humanized “monsters”. The non-human state of the “beast” was used to held the perpetrator accountable for his actions, as if “male blaming” could only be found outside of our liberal normal “humanity”.

In the majority of the accounts “romantic love” was used as the main frame capable to establish a meaningful connection with the “loss of control”, the “jealousy”, the “crisis of the couple”, the “*raptus*”, that sustains the idea that love, passion and violence are *naturally* entwined, and ultimately suggests that individual feelings can justify the extreme act of taking for granted (implicit) strategies of control over a woman’s body (see Mercader et al., 2004; Cotée, 1996; Boisvée, 1996). This connection was made particularly evident in the recurrent indicator that the femicide was triggered by an argument busted between the victim and the perpetrator. The act of fighting introduces a moment of negotiation within the couple where the man is authorised to explode in order to reaffirm, both physically and socially, his superiority over the woman. The traditional idea arises: men are pushed to irrational violence by women engaging them in trivial, unnecessary arguments, making them lose their intrinsic capacity of “rational discernment”. By representing femicide as the result of a fight the articles normalized femicide, and ignored structural inequalities and gender dynamics. Moreover, femicides appeared also to be normalized in the news by depicting the victims and the perpetrators as couples that argued frequently, thus reinforcing the idea that the homicide resulted from a situation where “understandably” the man could no longer control himself. The representation of the femicide as the aftermath of a fight, possibly sustained by long standing tensions, reinforced the idea that the perpetrator “snapped” in reaction to an “unacceptable” provocation when the crime occurred. Finally, framing femicide as the result of a private

fight indicates that crimes of violence against women can always be rationalized into specific individual motives, thus ignoring the social framework of male violence.

The fact that the “loss of control” was observed in the Italian newspapers in a substantially higher number of articles than registered in previous research (among others: Gillespie et al., 2013; Boisvert, 1996) suggests a nexus between the use of narrative of romantic love and this particular explanation of femicide. Moreover, the fact that the frame of the loss of control was employed also in some of the stories where longstanding abuses were reported, sustains the idea that this frame is particularly pervasive inside the Italian news media context.

According with the idea that romantic love should be characterized by individualism and freedom (Giddens, 1992), issues of power and control were concealed within the news, and the structural reasons for femicide were only seldom addressed. Social causes capable to account for the violence were invoked only in the few occasions in which the news tried to incorporate explanations beyond those traditionally connected to romantic love. These were the cases, for example, of the articles that link an episode of femicide to a situation of poverty and marginalization, thus failing to recognize and address the existing structural inequalities and dynamics between genders that transcend the lines of social class.

The overall representation of femicide in the Italian newspapers mostly validates a depiction of traditional masculinity that describes the perpetrators as men who, having lost control over their partner or ex partner, are tacitly forced to react in order to re-establish their power by using physical violence. In fact, covered under the “romantic love” frame, the perpetrators’ actions are explained in the press as the result of the perceived menace of losing their partners, or as a consequence of having their honour compromised, thus affirming their necessity to re-establish their position over the couple. The idea that the victims acted in ways that could hold them partially accountable for what happened to them mitigates the responsibilities of society at large, while firmly re-positioning the discussion of femicide at the individual level.

The only exception to this narrative construction was found in the news that depicted the femicides involving an immigrant man and an immigrant woman. Only in those cases, what was otherwise left in the realm of the “inexplicable” became suddenly culturally “explicable”. In particular, the femicides implicating immigrant couples were the only ones in which the press explicitly addressed issue of patriarchy and domination. However, this specific explanation of the crimes appears to be rooted in the institutionalized cultural separation between the “Western modern life” and the “traditional Islamic habits”, rather than in a proper understanding of gender relations. Accordingly, the use of this narrative reinforces the construction of an us/them dichotomy that could be seen instrumental to exclude immigrant perpetrators from “our liberal society”, while estranging issues of male domination from the Italian culture. As a matter of fact, by addressing issues of culture and power only in the cases involving couples of immigrants origins the articles implicitly sustain the

common opinion that usually - except the contingency of isolated and individual "loss of control" - our culture of freedom is protected from issues of dominion, and that this type of crimes "are committed by foreign men, a perception reinforced by the media" (UN HCR 2012, 8).

Conclusion

Femicide in Italy is still largely represented in national newspapers by reproducing traditional understandings of romantic love, or by defining the crime as the outcome of irrational behaviours. Like the main characters of a contemporary tragedy the murderers are represented as men who act moved by feelings of jealousy and tormented passion and who suddenly lose control in an extreme act of domination over the body and the life of the woman they love. Then, like in the gloomiest dramas the ending is not a happy one. By offering a depiction of femicide strictly connected to tormented love, the newspapers convey a representation that confines femicide to the private dynamics of that particular couple, or in a dimension of individual action that little has to do with socialization processes to gender roles, power relations and processes of gender construction. In this scenario, romantic love is often used by the press to legitimate the men's necessity to re-gain control over his feminine partner who tried to escape her role as object of possession, ultimately working as a resonant indicator (Schudson, 1989) for the otherwise inexplicable conclusion that men are justified in their violence. In other words, the main frames employed in the news to account for femicides appears to be still strongly influenced by the cultural understanding that until thirty years ago lawfully recognized with the *honour crimes* the supremacy of a man over a woman.

Despite a growing societal attention on violence against women, the narratives of femicide presented by the three major Italian newspapers in 2012 still largely reproduce the myths and stereotypes of gender violence. In particular, as we have shown in our analysis, the news rarely address the structural factors that put women at risk, and refrain to properly discuss the issues of symbolic domination and gender hierarchies that organize the socially derived knowledge over a difference that appears to be impenetrable. It seems as if the newspapers lack a legitimate frame to explain why "ordinary men" kill the partners they love. To overcome this symbolic void, the media assume the existence of a "raptus" embedded in the male experience of romantic love. With the exception of those crimes for which an accountable explanation could be easily found in other social explanations (substance abuse, poverty, foreign background, non-human state of a "beast"), the tragic repetitiveness of femicides is depicted in the news as the consequence of mere contingency: isolated individual outbursts of violence validating the idea that intimate partner femicides are not just impossible to prevent and to predict, but that they are part of the "natural course of things".

Our study addressed just one year of news coverage of domestic violence in three major Italian newspapers, and of course its scope is therefore limited. Howev-

er, the pervasiveness of romantic love and individual loss of control as the main frames to explain femicide in Italian journalistic representations appears to be evident, and suggests that much still need to change to achieve more gender-sensitive representation of femicide and violence against women in the Italian news media.

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