

COMMODIFYING HOMICIDE IN ROMANIAN ONLINE MEDIA: THE CASE OF ESTERA

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, using content analysis to examine how the murder of Estera, a case involving a child from Baia Mare, was represented in the Romanian online media. The research investigates four key aspects: the type of language used, the portrayal of the victim, the narrative frame used, and the representation of the Baia Mare Roma community, from which Estera was a part of. A total of 67 news articles, published between April 30, 2018 and June 30, 2019, were analyzed using relevant keywords via the Google search engine. Each article was analyzed using a structured grid that mentions the source, publication date, title, and link. The results show that the media overwhelmingly used sensationalist language, focusing on emotional appeal, shocking details of the crimes, and urban legends. Estera was often portrayed in objectified terms, paying little attention to the systemic issues that contributed to her vulnerability. Only one article mentioned the dangerous living conditions in which the Roma community had been relocated conditions marked by toxic waste and abandoned infrastructure. Instead of addressing the structural causes or public policy failures, media coverage emphasized sensationalist details about the victim, the perpetrator and his finding, and the spectacle around the funeral. This focus shifted public attention to social, emotional, and political symbolism, transforming the tragedy into a commodity that generates views, profit, and political capital. The study concludes that Romanian online media, in this case, prioritized the commodification of crime over context, public emotion over journalistic and social responsibility.

Keywords: femicide, child victim, commodification, mass media, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

Mass media has the capacity of transforming criminal investigations into public spectacles, with the main aim of attracting an audience, to the detriment of its informative and educational role. In Romania, an emblematic case in this regard is that of lawyer Elodia Ghinescu, who disappeared in August 2007 and was

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transformed into a true media phenomenon. Her husband, Cristian Cioacă, a police officer, was the main suspect, and the media, especially OTV, speculated intensely on this subject.

OTV, through the show *Dan Diaconescu Direct*, produced, in 2007, 239 episodes dedicated exclusively to this case, thus marking a radical transformation of a criminal investigation into a pseudo-investigative series, with grotesque-spectacular elements, such as thematic torture and dramatized reconstructions. Other media outlets, such as Pro TV, have contributed to this commodification by launching online screenwriting contests, intended to “involve” the public, but which have in fact transformed a person’s drama into participatory entertainment (Evenimentul Zilei 2007). The phenomenon has reverberated in popular culture, from chants in stadiums to the composition of musical ballads and the development of online games (Dobrescu 2011), which denotes a trivialization and even ridicule of domestic violence and femicides. Former OTV director has announced his intention to produce a film entitled *Elodia*, expected to appear in cinemas in 2025, with potential distribution on streaming platforms such as Netflix (Fanatik 2024). This initiative indicates the trend of transforming real tragedies into consumer cultural products, without a genuine concern for the ethical or social implications of such an approach.

Daniela Maci (2019) argues that violent deaths are frequently framed in a neutral or sensationalist tone, particularly by major TV networks such as Pro TV and OTV, which often select content based on audience appeal rather than ethical considerations. This media approach contributes to the trivialization of death and fosters desensitization among viewers. Moreover, Maci (2019) emphasizes that this trend is not ethically neutral; rather, the media carries a significant responsibility for how it frames death, as its portrayals shape the public’s moral and emotional engagement with human suffering.

The Caracal case, involving the kidnapping, abduction, rape, and murder of two teenage girls, Alexandra Măceșanu and Mihaela Luiza Melencu, in 2019, is another revealing example of how contemporary Romanian media transform social tragedies into consumer products designed to gain an audience. Although the facts themselves raise serious issues regarding violence against women, the inefficiency of the authorities and the rights of victims, the media coverage was largely characterized by an aesthetic of sensationalism and the instrumentalization of public pain.

Cernat and Hașdeu (2021) conclude that despite the extreme gender-based violence involved in the Caracal case, Romanian media coverage predominantly focused on institutional failure, particularly police corruption and emergency response inadequacies. While over 3,000 articles appeared within six weeks, the reporting largely sidelined the framing of the crime as a violent gender-based homicide. Instead, narratives highlighting systemic issues diluted the attention to Alexandra Măceșanu as a female victim and obscured broader patterns of violence

against women. Thus, the media's emphasis on institutional critique, though important, inadvertently contributed to depersonalizing the victim and downplaying the gendered dimensions of her death (Cernat and Haşdeu 2021).

According to Badea (2023), online media played a crucial role in shaping the social reality of the Caracal case by mediating its symbolic representations in relation to the public. The media served as the primary channel through which individuals accessed information and formed subjective interpretations of the events. Through an analysis of public comments, the study demonstrated how media coverage influenced societal perceptions, linking symbolic narratives to the broader, objective social issues.

The media, especially stations such as Romania TV and Antena 3 (Florea 2019; Romniceanu 2019; S.T. 2019), opted for a spectacular approach, going as far as macabre reconstructions. The scene of the cremation of Alexandra Măceşanu's body was simulated live, using animal carcasses and barrels, to maintain public interest and stimulate emotional reactions. These actions not only diverted attention from the concrete facts of the investigation, but also contributed to transforming the judicial process into a grotesque spectacle. Another segment that amplified this spectacularization was the constant presence of politician Alexandru Cumpănaşu, who publicly positioned himself as Alexandra's uncle and promoted multiple legally unvalidated theories, including that of international human trafficking. Despite the lack of evidence, television stations constantly gave him airtime, thus contributing to public confusion and the excessive politicization of the case. Cumpănaşu used this media capital to launch his candidacy for the 2019 presidential elections, culminating in excessive symbolic gestures, such as filming an electoral clip in front of the house of criminal Gheorghe Dincă or a live shooting demonstration with a toy gun on national television (Digi24 2019).

These examples demonstrate how, instead of acting as a space for responsible information and civic reflection, televisions and news media have converted tragedy into entertainment, emphasizing the dimension of spectacle for the audience. The real dramas of the victims and their families have been emotionally and commercially exploited, which highlights the process of commodifying murder and undermining the ethical role of journalism in society (Bhalla and Ahirwar 2021).

The way in which the Romanian media has chosen to present murder cases brings to attention the main theme of this research, namely: *Commodifying Homicide in Romanian Online Media*. In this context, I have opted to analyze the case of Estera, a five-year-old girl who, on the afternoon of April 30, 2018, disappeared while playing in front of the block of flats where she lived, in the municipality of Baia Mare. Later that day, her body was discovered by her brothers in an abandoned building, located on the field of the former Cuprom industrial platform. The crime took place in an isolated area, and subsequent investigations showed that the girl had been sexually assaulted and murdered. Although hundreds of people were questioned, the perpetrator, a 17-year-old boy, a distant relative of the victim, was identified only after 14 months.

I chose to explore this case for the present study given the complex social context in which it took place. In 2012, over 2,000 Roma people were forcibly relocated from makeshift shelters in the buildings of the former Cuprom factory. This decision generated numerous controversies and critical reactions from non-governmental organizations, which claimed that the relocation was ethnically motivated. In the immediate aftermath, several people were hospitalized due to exposure to toxic substances left behind in the old industrial laboratories. The situation attracted the attention of international institutions, such as the United States Embassy in Bucharest and the National Council for Combating Discrimination, which expressed concern, although the Romanian authorities validated the legality of the relocation (Sandu 2011).

This paper examines how the Romanian media presented the case of Estera, in relation to the sensitive social context in which it took place. Specifically, I aimed to identify the narrative strategies used in the construction of the media discourse: the way in which the murder is portrayed, the victim's profile, the representation of the community in Cuprom, and the structural problems it faces. The central objective of this study was to analyze through a qualitative framework the process of commodification of crime: whether and to what extent the Romanian media resort to transforming the tragedy into a media product, and what are the techniques through which this process is achieved.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Mass media often relies on newsworthiness factors. By using these criteria and making assumptions about the audience, media outlets not only decide what to report but also how to report it. There are various ways the media can choose to frame or present an event, such as through the language used to describe it, the article's length, its overall tone, its placement in the newspaper, and the inclusion of visual components (Wong and Lee 2021). Violent crimes, particularly homicides, receive significant media attention. Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) found that 83% of the crime news in their sample focused on violent crimes, despite such offenses comprising only a small percentage of total crime in Los Angeles at the time. Another study, of a large sample of homicide-related articles from the Houston Chronicle between 1986–1995, also indicates that stories featured in the main section were more likely to report unusual cases. Such uncommon elements may enhance reader interest, thus increasing the story's appeal (Paulsen 2003).

The inclusion of a photograph (**crime scene photos**, images of victims or perpetrators, dramatic visuals, etc.) was found to be a positive indicator of sensationalism and fear in homicide-related articles. However, it was negatively associated with articles about recent murders or those focusing on a single case. Sensationalism proved to be a strong predictor for front-page placement, whereas

fear-inducing elements were less predictive. This distinction suggests a prioritization of sensationalism over fear, with fear acting more as a byproduct of sensationalist content (Wong and Harraway 2020).

Existing literature suggests that media coverage of homicides is driven primarily by the characteristics of the victim and the nature of the crime. Based on the journalistic motto “if it bleeds, it leads”, *rarity theory* posits that murders involving unusual victims or circumstances (e.g., multiple victims, absence of firearms, children, the elderly, women, etc.) receive more media attention than those involving “common” victims or circumstances. This is due to a heightened demand for emotionally impactful stories (Petersen 2016).

MEDIA AND STEREOTYPING

News media tends to use particularly evocative images with broad appeal. Burns and Katovich (2006) explain that this disproportionate representation of sensational and violent crimes through imagery distorts the accuracy of crime reporting. Events aligning with stereotypical narratives are more likely to be deemed newsworthy, as “stereotypes about race and gender are easily understood by the target audience due to their widespread social acceptance” (Buckler 2015, 25). This facilitates the audience’s assimilation of information. Features such as “high magnitude” (multiple perpetrators, brutality, unusual circumstances), and factors such as the victim’s gender and race or ethnicity, play a significant role in event selection. Media attention is shaped by societal biases, emotional reactions, and perceptions of who constitutes a “worthy” or “deserving” victim. The intersection of these factors determines which stories reach the front pages and receive extensive coverage (Gekoski *et al.* 2012). Similarly, Lundman (2003) discusses how media coverage is influenced by emotional responses and societal perceptions of what is considered newsworthy. Cases involving children or provoking strong sympathy or outrage often receive amplified media attention. These intense emotional responses become integral to the narrative, enhancing its news value and ensuring widespread coverage.

In homicide cases, the victim type significantly impacts media coverage (Gekoski, Gray and Adler 2012; Schildkraut and Donley 2012). While female victims generally receive more attention, there are exceptions. Women involved in drug trafficking, sex work, or homelessness may be perceived as less newsworthy and often stereotyped as “complicit” in their own victimization (Lundman 2003). Conversely, victims fitting societal ideals young, attractive, middle-class, white women are often deemed more “worthy” of attention, aligning with socially constructed notions of innocence and victimhood (Gekoski *et al.* 2012). Also, perceptions of dangerousness are often based on stereotypes related to neighborhood and socioeconomic context (Quillian and Pager 2001). In the

absence of detailed information about victims, the racial composition and socioeconomic status of an area can serve as proxy indicators of the victim's social standing, innocence, or danger (Quillian and Pager 2001).

Major crimes are often framed as what Innes (2004) calls *signal crimes* incidents that receive sustained, repeated media coverage. Innes argues that "constructing a signal crime through media communication involves journalists using specific rhetorical and representational techniques to frame an incident as a symbol of societal state and social order" (pp. 16–17). Moreover, public narratives of major crimes often encompass the full process from initial shock, to social reflection, to eventual distancing and restoration of social order. The public memory of a crime differs from the private memory, as it allows the reconstruction of a sense of control. In this context, crimes become a battleground for competing visions of how society should be governed, with control over crime narratives reflecting a form of social and political power.

The *mediated witness* (Peelo 2006) is another key concept in analyzing media portrayals of crimes, describing a stylized dialogue constructed through techniques meant to emotionally align the reader with the victim. This form of virtual victimization is distinct from the real experiences of victims' families, friends, and acquaintances. High-profile cases are often framed as being supported by those directly affected, yet this alignment is actually a vehicle for broader social commentary. Through this process, newspapers and audiences reassert a sense of control and reaffirm a particular view of society and its problems. Victims are objectified and transformed into public commodities (Peelo 2006).

COMMODIFICATION AND EXPLOITATION

Commodification refers to the process by which goods and services are transformed into marketable commodities (Tunnell 1992). This involves turning basic products into socially meaningful objects perceived as essential by consumers. Capitalism has the distinct capacity to commodify nearly any phenomenon, whether tangible or abstract (Tunnell 1992). Consequently, crimes or, more specifically, news about crimes are transformed into a product ready to be bought and generate profit (Tunnell 1992).

Public perception of crime and the tendency to overestimate violent crime rates are closely linked to media portrayals of criminality, offenders, and victimization. In addition to media influence, these perceptions are shaped by informal social networks and individuals' personal experiences. In the United States, fear of crime is exacerbated by limited access to official crime data (Kohm 2009). In the absence of such data, the public relies heavily on media, which often presents statistics alarmingly, for example, citing "one violent crime every 24 seconds" rather than population-adjusted annual rates that offer a more

accurate picture (Kohm 2009). This distortion allows the media to manipulate, at least indirectly, the level of fear in society.

In this context, crime news and crime-based entertainment are not merely informative tools, but commercial media products designed for profit. News and entertainment companies prioritize content that maximizes audience size and advertising revenue over objective information dissemination (Tunnell 1992). A relevant example is how the media amplified fear of sexual predators, particularly in cases involving child abuse. In the 1980s, this issue was framed as an “emerging epidemic,” despite data not supporting such a view. Zygmunt Bauman (2006) examines this in the context of *liquid modernity*, where television not only reflects reality but crystallizes public fears. In this framework, sexual predators become “derived fears” symbols of individual vulnerability in a world perceived as increasingly dangerous. This fear is intensified by a societal sense of helplessness in preventing such threats (Kohm 2009).

Jean Baudrillard (1998) extends the analysis of *consumer culture* to media, arguing that it not only transmits information but also creates symbolic realities. In a consumer-based society, media operates as a system of sign production. Thereby, news and images about crimes, as commodities, are interplayed with the existing social order of accepted symbols and social statuses (Baudrillard 1998). Baudrillard asserts that media plays a central role in shaping public perception of reality, determining what is considered important and valuable. Within this logic, crimes and victims are not merely reported events, but part of a meaning-making system that sustains social order and existing hierarchies (Mahmud 2024).

MEDIA PRACTICES AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF FEMICIDE IN ROMANIAN CONTEXTS

Balica (2017) critically examines how Romanian online media frequently employ both direct and indirect *victim-blaming techniques*, contributing to a narrative that shifts responsibility from perpetrators to victims. This deflection not only distorts public understanding but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes that may normalize or trivialize abusive behaviors. Journalists often fail to connect femicide incidents with prior domestic abuse, portraying them as isolated events rather than the outcomes of prolonged violence. This omission limits the recognition of **systemic patterns** and undermines preventive efforts.

In a more recent study, **Balica, Marinescu, and Balica (2020)** argue that media coverage of femicide is primarily driven by commercial considerations, leading journalists to prioritize cases involving celebrity victims or perpetrators. This selective attention stems from the media’s commodification of violent crime, turning tragic events into profitable content. Social media platforms further amplify this commodification by serving as distribution channels for femicide-related articles, generating additional advertising revenue.

The authors identify a dual *commodification* process: while media outlets exploit celebrity-related crimes for profit, celebrities simultaneously engage in *self-commodification* through personal branding on social media. This process involves celebrities becoming both intermediaries for product promotion and commodities themselves, as their personal images become marketable assets. The intersection of these two commodification processes creates a media landscape in which celebrity status significantly influences coverage and public attention regarding femicide cases (Balica, Marinescu and Balica 2020).

The analysis by Balica, Marinescu, and Balica (2020) revealed that media coverage showed minimal interest in exploring the historical context of victim–offender relationships or documenting prior violence. Journalists provided limited information about relationship dynamics, with Romanian media covering relationship separations in 31 articles and Moldovan media in 26. Other contextual factors such as relationship duration, divorce intentions, or new partners received little attention across both countries.

The authors further demonstrate how journalists used the *commodification of social media* personas to develop more sophisticated victim-blaming strategies. For example, while the victim cultivated a glamorous public image through modeling and a luxurious lifestyle, the offender similarly built his identity around his professional medical credentials. Instead of providing balanced coverage, journalists selectively appropriated these online personas, creating a deliberate contrast that reinforced harmful stereotypes. Significantly, researchers noted that media outlets disproportionately emphasized victim's sexualized magazine appearances when utilizing her self-constructed imagery, revealing how the commodification of victims' social media presence can perpetuate gender biases in femicide reporting (Balica, Marinescu and Balica 2020).

Balica (2021) conducted a separate study on intimate partner femicide in Romania, examining how such cases were represented in online media between 2011 and 2015. Analyzing 2,282 articles covering 184 femicide incidents, the research revealed significant shortcomings in journalistic practices. Media coverage frequently failed to contextualize femicide cases, inadequately describing the surrounding circumstances. Moreover, there was a notable absence of correlation between documented domestic violence and the subsequent intimate partner femicides, which obscures the continuity of abuse and limits public understanding of risk factors. The study also identified an over-reliance on official sources, such as police and prosecutor press releases, which restricts the depth and diversity of reporting. Additionally, stereotypical portrayals of victims and perpetrators persist, potentially undermining the effective communication of preventive strategies. Importantly, the media rarely offered information about victim support services, representing a missed opportunity to raise awareness and facilitate access to protection mechanisms. These findings underscore the need for

more comprehensive and context-sensitive media reporting to enhance public understanding and contribute to femicide prevention efforts (Balica 2021).

Regarding the representation of violence against children in the media, Marinescu (2020) demonstrates a broader pattern in Romanian mass media, showing that children are predominantly portrayed as innocent victims in narratives about violence, thus eliciting a strong emotional response from the public. This victim-centered portrayal emphasizes the dramatic and personalized aspects of violent events, focusing on individual cases rather than addressing broader social or systemic contributors. The study of Marinescu (2020) reveals that journalists rely heavily on official sources, particularly police reports, which limits the narrative to law enforcement perspectives and constrains critical examination of structural factors. As a result, the author concludes that media coverage tends to spotlight individual perpetrators and victims while often neglecting the social, economic, and institutional contexts underlying violence against children.

Acting as gatekeepers, journalists reconstruct events according to conventional news values such as sensationalism and immediacy. This approach can obscure the complexity of the issue and hinder public understanding of prevention and intervention strategies. These findings highlight the need for more comprehensive and contextually informed media practices to enhance societal awareness and support effective responses to violence against children (Marinescu 2020).

Across these studies, a clear pattern emerges: Romanian media tend to under-contextualize violence, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and prioritize commercial narratives over informative or preventive content. Greater journalistic responsibility and more context-sensitive reporting are essential to reshape public understanding and improve societal responses to femicide and domestic abuse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To support the analysis presented in this paper, a qualitative approach was adopted, using content analysis as the main research method. The objective was to examine how the murder case of Estera was represented in the Romanian online media.

The selected data collection period was from April 30th, 2018, to June 30th, 2019. Using relevant keywords “Crimă în Baia Mare”, “fată ucisă în Baia Mare” și “fată violată și ucisă Baia Mare” (eng. “Baia Mare murder”, “girl killed Baia Mare”, and “girl raped and killed Baia Mare”), 67 articles reporting on Estera’s case were identified through the Google search engine.

Each selected article was included in a structured analysis grid that recorded the article’s source, date of publication, title, and a direct link to the material. Relevant expressions from these articles are presented and analyzed qualitatively in the forthcoming sections. For clarity, the expressions and words are presented in both English and Romanian.

Research question: How was the Estera case represented in articles published by online media in Romania?

Research objectives:

1. *Analyzing the type of language used by online media in reporting the Estera case;*
2. *Investigating the way in which the victim was portrayed in online media discourse;*
3. *Examining the narrative framework and perspective through which the case was presented in online media;*
4. *Analyzing the representation of the Baia Mare community in online media articles.*

The analyzed corpus consists of a selection of 67 press articles published online, between April 30, 2018 and June 30, 2019, by various national and local online media sources in Romania. All articles deal with the case of Estera.

The grid of articles was organized into four essential columns:

1. *Source: the media institution that published the article (e.g., Digi24.ro, Stirileprotv.ro, Adevarul.ro).*
2. *Date: the date of publication of the article, which allows observing the evolution of media coverage over time.*
3. *Title: the exact title of the article, useful for analyzing the discourse, narrative framing and elements of sensationalism.*
4. *Link number: a numerical identifier that corresponds to a detailed list of hyperlinks to the original articles.*

Table 1

Analysis Framework

Category	Indicators	Coding Guide
1. Type of Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sensationalist tone ○ Use of emotionally charged words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Adjectives like “tragic”, “horrific” ○ Tabloid-style headlines ○ Emotionally driven narratives
2. Portrayal of the Victim (Estera)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Victim’s age/gender emphasized ○ Moral or character traits mentioned ○ Victim-blaming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Phrases like “innocent girl”, “unfortunate victim” ○ Implicit blame (e.g., behavior, location) ○ Humanizing vs. objectifying portrayal
3. Narrative Framework and Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Point of view (e.g., victim, journalist, authority) ○ Use of direct quotes or paraphrasing ○ Dramatized narration ○ Framing devices (e.g., justice, tragedy, social issue) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Quotes from police, family, or community ○ Crime-report format vs. opinion ○ Framing as justice delayed, societal failure, etc.

Category	Indicators	Coding Guide
4. Representation of Baia Mare Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Description of community (positive/negative) ○ Stereotypes or generalizations ○ Mention of ethnicity, poverty, social issues ○ Collective responsibility or isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Terms like “dangerous neighborhood”, “marginalized area” ○ Ethnic/racial framing ○ Highlighting systemic issues or blaming the locale
5. Sources Cited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Official institutions ○ Family/friends ○ Local witnesses ○ NGOs or experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Police statements, ○ NGO commentary ○ Named or anonymous sources
6. Visual and Structural Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Presence and type of images ○ Headlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Crime scene images ○ Clickbait titles

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotional and Sensational Language

„crima oribilă”, „cadavrul fetei”, „a fost găsită într-o baltă de sânge”, „a ucis-o în chinuri”, „violată și ucisă cu multă cruzime”, „sfârșit cumplit”, „cu sânge rece”

eng. “horrible crime”, “the little girl’s corpse”, “she was found in a pool of blood”, “he killed her in agony”, “raped and killed with great cruelty”, “terrible end”, “in cold blood”

These terms emphasize the brutality and the extreme violence of the crime, media often using sensational language to amplify the emotional impact of the story (Petersen 2016; Wong and Harraway 2020). Words like “horror”, “cruelty”, “blood”, and “brutality” evoke strong emotional reactions, particularly fear and outrage. This sensationalism, as pointed out by Gilliam and Iyengar (2000), increases the media appeal of the story, but can distort the public’s perception by framing the event in a particularly shocking way, prioritizing shock value over nuance.

The murder of Estera is detailed with a chilling account: “raped and killed” (rom. „violată și ucisă”), which reflects the brutality of the crime. The words “face full of blood” (rom. „fața plină de sânge”) create a graphic image of the violent nature of the crime, which was committed in an abandoned building, another indicator of the unsafe environment where vulnerable children are often left unattended. The mention of “hole” (rom. „groapă”) and the description of the murder scene near the former industrial site points to the dangerous and neglected spaces that children frequent, by exposing them to an unsafe environment.

The sensationalized details about Estera's death, such as the use of a "brick" (rom. „cărămidă”) to inflict the fatal blow, underline the brutality of the crime. The specifics regarding the manner in which Estera's body was left in the abandoned factory reflect the complete disregard for the safety of children in this area. This ties back to the broader neglect and absence of social support and security.

The media selects information and the way it is presented based on what is considered "newsworthy" (Wong and Lee 2021). In the case of Estera, headlines such as "The raped and murdered girl from Baia Mare was buried in a wedding dress", or "Horrible crime in Romania" reflect an emotional and tragic framing that amplifies the emotional impact.

„individul a recunoscut oroarea”, „criminalul i-a zdrobit capul”, „cumplit este că era rudă cu victima”

eng. "the individual admitted the horror", "the criminal crushed her head", "the horrible thing is that he was related to the victim"

These framing examples paint the crime in grotesque terms and hints at the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. The fact that the murderer was a relative is framed as even more horrifying, playing into the narrative of betrayal and familial trust being shattered. The stereotypical portrayal of the criminal as "evil" or "inhuman" serves to dehumanize the perpetrator, making the crime seem even more senseless and shocking. As Buckler (2015) notes, media tends to emphasize stereotypes related to violence, portraying the criminal as an outlier to societal norms.

The language used repeatedly includes terms like "beast", "savagery", "monster", or "horrific crime" (rom. „fiară”, „sălbăticie”, „monstru”, „crimă oribilă”), suggesting a horror-like narrative framework designed to evoke fear and outrage. Graphic details about the mutilated body, sexual violence, and the family's suffering are reported with morbid insistence, indicating a sensationalist approach that maximizes the emotional reaction of the audience (Wong and Harraway 2020).

Mediated Witness and Victim Objectification

The Romanian online media constructed Estera's portrait in line with the stereotype of the *ideal victim* (Gekoski *et al.* 2012). Although she came from a very poor Roma family, the narrative presents her as "a cheerful, beautiful little girl, cared for by her parents, an angel who was supposed to go to school". A narrative identity is built in order to counterbalance the stigma of class and ethnicity, making the child acceptable as a "victim worthy of empathy" in the eyes of the public. This mechanism indicates what Quillian and Pager (2001) suggest: in the absence of details, the public uses social and ethnic context and cues to decide who "deserves" compassion.

„biata de ea”, „micuța Estera”, „cea mai mică dintre cei nouă frați”, „copilă”, „nu a avut parte de niciun ajutor”

eng. “poor thing”, “little Estera”, “the youngest of the nine children”, “child”, “she had no help”

The use of words like “poor thing” (rom. „biata de ea”) and “little one” (rom. „micuța”) personalizes the victim and plays into societal ideals of innocence and vulnerability. This aligns with Gekoski *et al.* (2012) account that media coverage often amplifies cases involving young, innocent victims, particularly women and children, as more “worthy” of attention. By emphasizing Estera’s youth and helplessness, the media creates a narrative that maximizes public sympathy and outrage and makes the case more compelling.

„Estera va fi înmormântată vineri în rochie albă de mireasă”

eng. “Estera will be buried on Friday in a white wedding dress”

The idea of framing Estera’s funeral with the imagery of a “wedding dress” evokes a deep emotional response, drawing attention to her innocence and prematurely ended life. This aligns with the concept of *mediated witness* proposed by Peelo (2006), which suggests that the media constructs an emotional bond between the victim and the audience, amplifying the narrative of loss and victimhood.

At the same time, the media instrumentalizes this suffering, using the victim’s story to evoke emotional responses and to shape public perception. The white coffin, the wedding dress, thousands of flowers and candles, these elements construct a public ritual of grief. Estera becomes a collective symbol, a narrative commodity; not a murdered child, but an instrument for expressing social fear, the need for justice, and social control. This commodification of suffering (Tunnell 1992; Baudrillard 1998) turns the crime into an emotional product for mass consumption. The media indirectly sells fear and helplessness with the purpose of maintaining public attention and advertising revenue.

Fear and Fear Amplification

„Crima înfiorătoare”, „Îngeri Negri”, „senzație de groază”

eng. “Gruesome crime”, “Black Angels”, “sense of horror”

The legend of the “Black Angels” (rom. „Îngeri Negri”) taps into the collective cultural fear and urban myth, which reintroduces themes of danger and societal unrest, even if the legend itself is not directly related to the crime or the narrative of the article does not make any connection between the two.

The repeated use of terms like “hell” (rom. „infern”), “terror”, (rom. „teroare”), “sensation of horror” (rom. „senzație de groază”) and referencing an urban legend (the “Black Angels”) contributes to the overall framing of the crime as something not just tragic but terrifying, evoking fear in the audience. As Bauman (2006) discusses, media is one of the factors behind the ever-present societal anxiety, fueled by both real and imagined threats, of the *liquid modernity*. The urban legend associated with the case serves as a backdrop, intensifying the perception of danger and societal vulnerability.

«Legenda „Îngerilor Negri” din Baia Mare», „În Baia Mare, în perioada anilor 1980”, „această grupare nu a fost niciodată confirmată că exista cu adevărat”.

eng. «The Legend of the “Black Angels” from Baia Mare», “In Baia Mare, during the 1980s”, “this group has never been confirmed to really exist”.

By discussing the crime of Estera and the urban legend in the same context, without necessarily linking the two, the media creates a narrative that suggests the crime is part of a larger social issue or ongoing societal fear. This aligns with the idea of *signal crimes* (Innes 2004) where major crimes are framed as symbols of broader societal problems. The legend of the “Black Angels” not only sensationalizes the case, but also taps into deep-rooted fears and historical memory, creating a more complex narrative that links the crime to past horrors and societal myths.

The case of Estera led to a moral panic reaction: parents declare that “we can no longer let our children outside”, the community is “in a state of shock”, and people speak about “beasts with the face of a man”. Crimes of this nature become excuses for expressing broader social anxieties: poverty, marginalization, distrust in institutions. The media contributes to the construction of these *symbolic realities* (Baudrillard 1998), where fear becomes a media product with social and economic value.

The discourse used in online articles analyzes the case through a lens marked by intensely emotional expressions: “heinous crime” (rom. „îngrozitoare crimă”), “murdered and raped by a beast with a human face” (rom. „ucisă și violată de o bestie cu chip de om”), “577 criminals walk free among us” (rom. „577 de criminali se plimbă liberi printre noi”). This type of formulation has the role of amplifying collective fear, directing attention to a heightened perception of insecurity.

This practice is explained by Kohm (2009), who emphasizes that public perception of crime is often distorted by the way the media chooses to present the facts. In the absence of easy access to official data and a critical analysis of the context, the public becomes dependent on a media narrative in which danger is omnipresent and uncontrollable. In the case of Estera, the fact that “the perpetrator has not been found a year after the crime” becomes not only a reported fact, but

also a source of amplified anxiety, through formulations such as “he could flee the country” or “577 criminals are walking freely among us”.

Instead of contextualizing this information through an analysis of the systemic causes: the lack of resources in the judicial system, the slowness of procedures, or the shortage of specialized personnel, the media opt for a simplified and emotional representation. Tunnell (1992) explains this approach as part of the transformation of crime news into media products designed to maximize the audience, to the detriment of objectivity. Thus, the emphasis falls on shock, indignation and immediate reactions, instead of a balanced presentation based on journalistic investigation.

A situation in this sense is the citation of the number of files with an unknown perpetrator: “In Romania there are 577 murder files with an unknown perpetrator”. This real fact is presented in isolation, without being correlated with official data, institutional explanations or systemic measures. It is not mentioned whether journalists requested information from the authorities or whether this number has been increasing, decreasing or constant in recent years. The lack of such contextualization favors exactly what Bauman (2006) calls the *theatricalization of fear in liquid modernity*, in which the media crystallize collective fears and amplify them through symbols – in this case, the figure of the unknown, free, and uncontrollable criminal.

By associating statistics with the Estera case, the press creates a narrative bridge between a crime and an alleged widespread threat, indirectly suggesting that such cases can be repeated at any time. Thus, the reader is not invited to reflect on the structural causes of crime or on the functioning of the penal system, but is introduced into a narrative space of anxiety and distrust in the state.

Living Conditions and Marginalization

The words in the texts like “abandoned”, “invaded by vegetation”, “without windows”, “without doors”, and “filth” (rom. “abandonat”, “invadat de vegetație”, “fără ferestre”, “fără uși”, “mizeria”) clearly describe the deplorable conditions in which the Roma community resides after their forced relocation to the former chemical plant area in 2012. The media articles describe the environment as “apocalyptic”, emphasizing the disrepair and abandonment of the buildings that were once part of the chemical factory.

The relocation of the Roma community into these unsafe, dilapidated buildings is a key point. The words “toxic chemicals” and “left behind lab” directly link the unsanitary environment to the industrial site, where there were still remnants of dangerous substances, posing a threat to the health of the residents.

The community’s plight is reflected in the testimonies of local residents who describe how these conditions are not just physical but socially isolating as well. People mention that “every year a child dies in suspicious circumstances” due to

the unsafe environment. The term “filth” (rom. „mizeria”) paints a vivid picture of not only the mess, but also the lack of care from authorities toward this marginalized group. The negative impact of such relocation without basic infrastructure or services is a human rights issue that affects their mental, emotional, and physical well-being, contributing to a cycle of neglect.

The response from the authorities seems rather reactive than proactive. While the local mayor offered assistance with funeral costs and rewards for information, the systemic issues of housing conditions and safety were not addressed. The relocation of Roma people to the industrial site, followed by the health crises (toxic substance exposure), reflects the short-term thinking of the authorities and their failure to consider the long-term implications of such policies.

The Embassy of the United States of America concern and the NGOs’ involvement raise the issue of human rights violations in how these communities are treated. The forced relocation and subsequent exposure to toxic environments coupled with the lack of proper infrastructure shows how deeply institutional racism and neglect run within the local governance structures. The text makes it clear that unsafe conditions are a major factor in the vulnerability of the children in this area. “Dogs wander freely” (rom. „Câini se plimbă nestingheriți”) suggests a lack of control over the environment, and “filth” also likely includes the presence of dangerous animals or situations that exacerbate the risk for the children. The texts highlight that these unsafe areas, like the abandoned buildings, create opportunities for criminals to take advantage of vulnerable children.

The water basins mentioned in the news articles have also proven deadly, with several children drowning in the past. This further underscores the lack of safety and supervision. When people speak of the fear of letting their children outside, it becomes clear that the community has lost trust in the local authorities to provide a safe environment for their families. The year-by-year fatality reports contribute to a sense of desperation and helplessness among the community.

„Nici măcar recompensa de 10 mii de lei”, „Oamenii i-au adus flori și jucării”

eng. “Not even the 10 thousand lei reward”, “People brought her flowers and toys”

The mention of rewards and public displays of sympathy (flowers, toys) further commodifies the crime, turning it into a public spectacle that invokes both financial incentives and emotional reactions. As Tunnell (1992) and Baudrillard (1998) argue, the media often transforms crime into a product consumed by the public, where the victim becomes a commodity for emotional and social reflection. The tragic nature of the case can fuel both media consumption and community engagement, providing a sense of catharsis or social validation to those following the case.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the analysis of the Estera case highlights how the Romanian media practices a profound commodification of violence, transforming tragedy into an emotional product intended for mass consumption. As Tunnell (1992) and Baudrillard (1998) point out, crimes become *symbolic commodities* inserted into a system of meaning production, in which suffering is packaged and sold to generate profit and maintain public attention. By using emotionally charged language terms, such as “beast”, “monster”, or “horrible crime”, the press constructs a horror narrative designed to arouse outrage and fear (Buckler 2015; Wong and Harraway 2020).

The representation of Estera, although coming from a very poor Roma family, is shaped according to the stereotype of the *ideal victim* (Gekoski *et al.* 2012), which confirms Quillian and Pager’s (2001) hypothesis regarding the influence of social and ethnic context on how the public decides who deserves compassion. This process of selective humanization becomes a tool for emotional connection between the public and the victim, in line with the concept of *mediatized witness* proposed by Peelo (2006), which emphasizes the role of the media in creating a collective sense of loss.

In the absence of clear official data and critical contextualization, the public becomes dependent on the media narrative, which, as Kohm (2009) states, amplifies distortions and sensationalism. In this framework, crimes acquire the status of *signal crimes* (Innes 2004), symbols of broader social problems. Through legends such as the “Black Angels”, the media feeds collective fears and cultural myths, and this dramatization of insecurity reflects what Bauman (2006) calls the *theatricalization of fear in liquid modernity* – a perpetual spectacle in which social anxieties are crystallized through symbolic images of uncontrollable evil.

Thus, the press not only informs, but directs social reality, in a process of double commodification of suffering and fear, with significant implications for public perception and understanding of violence. Moreover, this study’s conclusions, regarding the lack of social and structural contextualization of the Estera case, directly correspond to the findings of Balica (2017; 2021) and Marinescu (2020), which signal the chronic tendency of the Romanian press to ignore causal relationships and the history of abuse in favor of an isolated, spectacular and commercial narrative framework. The predilection for official sources (Marinescu 2020; Balica 2021) thus limits the comprehension of the deep causes of violence and contributes to a superficial and even stigmatizing representation of victims. Therefore, both the Estera case and the aforementioned studies converge in demonstrating that the Romanian press does not function only as an information channel, but also as a mechanism for producing and selling suffering, with important consequences for public understanding, social responsibility, and violence prevention.

Out of the 67 analyzed articles, only one addressed the issue of housing and the dangers to which the Roma community is exposed due to relocation. Additionally, the online media failed to raise an alarm regarding the children who drowned in abandoned pools or the individuals hospitalized due to poisoning from toxic substances. At the scene, several containers with various chemical substances, remnants of a former laboratory, were found. Instead, the analyzed articles focused on the fact that, at the time, the mayor, Cătălin Cherecheș, supported the girl's family with everything necessary for the funeral and offered a reward for the capture of the perpetrator. Online media fails to initiate discussions about concrete public policies to prevent tragedies such as Estera's killing. Rather, it contributes to the political capital of the Baia Mare mayor by highlighting his charitable acts following the crime.

The crime involving Estera and her family's tragedy are portrayed in online media through sensationalist language that appeals to emotions. Consequently, the victim is objectified and her transformed image is consumed as collective emotion rather than being a subject of authentic social reflection. By putting shocking details of the crime, urban legends, and amplified public fear at the forefront, the media commodifies Estera's case, turning it into a source of profit. In this process, the media fails to inform the public about the real dangers faced by the Roma community, especially those related to housing conditions imposed by administrative decisions.

Another consequence of commodifying this case is the generation of political capital. Instead of analyzing and explaining the administrative and political decision-making processes that led to the relocation of the Roma community to a hazardous area exposed to health and safety risks, media attention centers on the mayor's charitable gestures such as providing financial aid to the grieving family. By appealing to emotion and presenting only partial context without a critical analysis of structural causes, the media risks distorting public perception. Thus, instead of fostering debate and awareness regarding the authorities' responsibilities, the media discourse may lead to increased sympathy toward the involved political actors.

The media's treatment of Estera's case illustrates a broader pattern of sensationalism and commodification in the coverage of violent crimes, especially when marginalized communities are involved. By focusing on emotional appeal, urban legends, and political gestures rather than structural causes and systemic neglect, the media fails in its role as an agent of public accountability. The Roma community's vulnerability rooted in policy decisions and administrative failures is largely ignored, while public attention is redirected toward symbolic acts of compassion by political figures. This not only distorts the public's understanding of the underlying issues but also reinforces existing inequalities by offering visibility without justice. To move beyond spectacle, media coverage must shift toward critical, contextual reporting that exposes structural violence and demands long-term policy change.

An essential aspect, but almost completely ignored in the media discourse on the case of Estera, is the social and infrastructural context in which the tragedy occurred. The criminal investigation revealed that the girl was in the abandoned building not due to parental negligence or chance, but to satisfy a physiological need, since that area, lacking basic utilities, informally functioned as a public toilet for the residents of the neighborhood. This information, although crucial, was not treated seriously by the online media, which preferred to focus the narrative on the monstrous character of the aggressor and the dramatic elements of the crime. Thus, public attention was directed towards an emotional register, to the detriment of a critical analysis of the institutional responsibilities and the structural causes that contributed to the victim's vulnerability. The lack of adequate health infrastructure, combined with the authorities' indifference to the living conditions in that marginalized area, was a determining factor in the tragedy, but one that remained largely invisible in the public space.

The statements of residents of the former industrial complex in Baia Mare, such as that of Estera's grandmother who mentions that: "Three children died here. One child was thrown on his head from the window last year. Three others drowned in the water tanks. We have nothing but problems here" (Sabău 2018). This reveals a systematic reality of danger and institutional negligence. However, the media treated Estera's case as an isolated event, spectacular in its atrocity, but disconnected from a history of recurring tragedies that marked that space.

The absence of a systemic approach signaled a lack of interest in identifying and exposing the structural conditions that perpetuate the risks to which children from marginalized communities are exposed. Instead of documenting a profound social crisis generated by institutional abandonment, extreme precariousness and non-existent infrastructure, the media preferred to dramatize Estera's case, missing the opportunity to bring public policies and the failure of child protection in disadvantaged areas into discussion. The death of Estera fits into this larger pattern of tragic events, where children are at risk due to a combination of environmental hazards and social neglect. The repeated deaths of children in the area, whether by drowning or falling from windows, highlight that this isn't an isolated issue but a systemic failure.

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