



La revue *Aleph. langues, médias et sociétés* est approuvée par ERIHPLUS. Elle est classée à la catégorie B.


Media Witch Hunts : A Comparative Thematic Analysis of the Portrayal of the Meredith Kercher Murder Suspects in the Daily Mail's Coverage

مطاردة الساحرات الإعلامية : تحليل موضوعي مقارنة لتصوير المشتبه بهم في قضية قتل

ميريديث كرتشرفي تغطية الديلي ميل

Chasses aux Sorcières Médiatiques : une Analyse Thématique Comparative du Portrait des Suspects du Meurtre de Meredith Kercher dans la Couverture de Daily Mail.

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	Soumission	Publication numérique	Publication Asjp
	16-07-2024	21-09-2024	25-11-2024

Éditeur : Edile (Edition et diffusion de l'écrit scientifique)

Dépôt légal : 6109-2014

Edition numérique : <https://aleph.edinum.org>

Date de publication : 25 novembre 2024

ISSN : 2437-1076

(Edition ASJP) : <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/226>

Date de publication : 25 novembre 2024

Pagination : 91-111.

ISSN : 2437-0274

Référence électronique

Bochra Dakhane, « Media Witch Hunts : A Comparative Thematic Analysis of the Portrayal of the Meredith Kercher Murder Suspects in the Daily Mail's Coverage », *Aleph* [En ligne], Vol 11 (4-2) | 2024, mis en ligne le 25 novembre 2024. URL : <https://aleph.edinum.org/13293>

Référence papier

Bochra Dakhane, « Media Witch Hunts : A Comparative Thematic Analysis of the Portrayal of the Meredith Kercher Murder Suspects in the Daily Mail's Coverage », *Aleph*, Vol 11 (4-2) | 2024, 91-111.

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Introduction

Amid the myriad of global murder cases in the 21st century, the case of Meredith Kercher stands out not only for its tragic circumstances but also for the unparalleled media frenzy it generated. Often referred to as the “trial of the century” and the “crime story of the decade” (Gies & Bortoluzzi, 2016), this case transcends the typical narrative of murder mysteries replete with forensic details. Instead, it is emblematic of systemic flaws in justice, marked by speculative narratives, gendered stereotyping, and a striking lack of definitive evidence. From the outset, the investigation conducted by the Italian police was plagued by procedural lapses, culminating in the rapid imprisonment of three suspects within four days of the crime. Such haste not only undermined the integrity of the inquiry but also shaped public perception through a mediated lens of speculation rather than factual rigor.

The media's role in constructing and amplifying public narratives around high-profile criminal cases is particularly significant in this context. Sixteen years after the murder, Amanda Knox, despite her acquittal, continues to be a polarizing figure in public opinion. This sustained scrutiny highlights the centrality of media framing in shaping collective memory and public discourse. Among the various elements of news reporting, headlines are especially pivotal. As the primary point of engagement for readers, headlines not only condense complex narratives into digestible formats but also frame the interpretative lens through which audiences approach the story (Ecker et al., 2014 ; Wiley & Rayner, 2000).

This study focuses on the portrayal of the suspects in the UK media coverage of the Meredith Kercher murder case, with particular attention

to *The Daily Mail's* headlines. The analysis concentrates on Amanda Knox, the sole female suspect, alongside the other accused individuals—Raffaele Sollecito, Patrick Lumumba, and Rudy Guede. Through a systematic examination of these headlines, this research aims to identify the dominant themes and recurring narratives surrounding the suspects. Moreover, it seeks to interrogate the differential framings and portrayals employed by *The Daily Mail* to depict the suspects' involvement in the case. To this end, the study addresses the following research questions :

1. What are the dominant themes and narratives surrounding the suspects in *The Daily Mail's* headline coverage of the Meredith Kercher case ?
2. How do the thematic framings and portrayals of the suspects in *The Daily Mail's* headlines differ from one individual to another ?

By addressing these questions, this article contributes to the broader discourse on media framing and its implications for public understanding of justice, gender, and criminality in contemporary society.

1. From Theory to Action : Literature, Methods, and Case Analysis

1.1. The Case Timeline and Suspects

On 2 November 2007, the body of Meredith Kercher, a 21-year-old British undergraduate student, was found murdered and sexually assaulted in her bedroom at a cottage she shared with three women in Perugia, Italy. Forensic investigations at the crime scene led the police to identify several suspects : Amanda Knox, a 20-year-old American exchange student and Kercher's roommate ; her 23-year-old Italian boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito ; Patrick Lumumba, the Congolese owner of a bar in Perugia ; and Rudy Hermann Guede, a 20-year-old Ivorian national.

Following the discovery of Kercher's body, both Knox and Sollecito became the focus of police attention due to their alleged suspicious behavior at the crime scene shortly after the body was found. According to police reports, the young couple was seen engaging in intimate behavior (kissing and cuddling) minutes after the discovery. Additionally, it was claimed that Knox displayed strange behavior, such as doing cartwheels at the police station before giving her statement—a claim later vehemently denied by Knox and her legal team. Shortly after, Patrick Lumumba was arrested as a third prime suspect, based on a statement given by Knox. However, she later alleged that

her statement was made under duress, as she had been frightened, exhausted, and coerced by a dozen Italian police officers without legal representation. Lumumba was subsequently cleared of all charges and released from prison a few days after his arrest.

As substantial forensic evidence established Rudy Hermann Guede's presence at the crime scene, he was extradited to Italy from Germany, where he had fled two days after the murder. Guede was charged with Kercher's murder, allegedly committed with the assistance of Knox and Sollecito.

While the case initially appeared to be a straightforward homicide, it gained international significance due to the lack of forensic evidence linking Knox, Sollecito, or Lumumba to the crime scene. Guede, on the other hand, was sentenced to 16 years in prison on appeal (reduced from 30 years) as the sole perpetrator. He was released on 24 November 2021. In contrast, Knox and Sollecito were sentenced to 26 and 25 years in prison, respectively, and endured four years of appeals before the Italian Supreme Court ruled them innocent in 2015.

1.2. Literature Review

The news media plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of crime and justice, making it nearly impossible to avoid crime news coverage. Yanich (2005), in a quantitative analysis of local news broadcasts in the United States, observed that crime news constitutes 10 to 50 percent of all news stories, underscoring its dominance in daily reporting. This finding, however, is limited by its focus on local media, which may not fully reflect trends in national or international coverage. Moreover, the most captivating crime stories feature elements such as drama, conflict, sound, and evil, which enhance their newsworthiness (Amari, as cited in Amzat et al., 2007). While Amari's work highlights the role of these narrative elements, the study does not provide systematic empirical evidence, relying instead on qualitative observations that may be subject to interpretive bias.

When reporting on homicides, journalists often prioritize cases that reinforce entrenched social structures, ideologies, and biases. Meyers (1997) conducted a content analysis of homicide coverage in major newspapers, revealing that media narratives frequently emphasize the gender, race, and ethnicity of victims and offenders. However, Meyers' study is limited to a specific cultural and temporal context, raising questions about its applicability to broader media environments. Jewkes (2015) introduced the concept of "the oversaturation of the extraordinary" in crime reporting, arguing that

cases are deemed more newsworthy when they deviate significantly from cultural norms. While this theoretical framework is widely cited, Jewkes' analysis relies heavily on anecdotal evidence, with limited quantitative validation. Examples of such "extraordinary" cases include crimes involving vulnerable victims, such as women, children, and the elderly (Lynch, 2002 ; Meyers, 1997), or monstrous perpetrators (DiBennardo, 2018). However, the overrepresentation of such cases in media coverage has been critiqued for distorting public perceptions of crime trends.

The Meredith Kercher murder case garnered extensive global media coverage, making it a compelling topic for scholarly analysis, particularly in the social sciences. Media coverage predominantly focused on Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito, polarizing public opinion into factions supporting either their innocence or guilt (Bortoluzzi, 2016). Bortoluzzi's analysis of news articles from British and Italian outlets highlights stark differences in media framing, but the study is limited by its reliance on a relatively small sample size, which may not fully capture the breadth of media discourse. The British and Italian press constructed Knox and Kercher as a sinner and a saint, respectively, crafting an archetypal murder narrative (Holohan, 2016). This construction, as Holohan notes, relied heavily on cultural stereotypes, yet the study provides limited insight into how these narratives were received by diverse audiences. Knox's identity has remained under intense scrutiny, as demonstrated by her tweet "SIAMO INNOCENTI" following the reinstatement of the guilty verdict by the Italian court. This reaction underscores the persistent influence of media portrayals on her public image (Clifford, 2016). Clifford (2014) also examined Knox's self-representation on Twitter, noting how it contrasts sharply with her media-created image as a criminal. However, Clifford's work primarily focuses on Knox, offering limited discussion on the portrayal of other key figures in the case.

Raffaele Sollecito, Knox's ex-boyfriend and alleged accomplice, was primarily portrayed in connection to Knox (Gies, 2016). This portrayal reflects a broader trend in media coverage, where male suspects are often overshadowed by their female counterparts in high-profile cases. Meanwhile, Rudy Guede, the sole individual convicted for Kercher's murder, received limited media attention. Heim (2016), in a critical discourse analysis of Italian media, highlighted how Guede's portrayal was shaped by racialized narratives linking criminality to national affiliation. While Heim's study provides valuable insights, it focuses exclusively on Italian media, leaving gaps in understanding how Guede was framed in international outlets.

Media coverage of crime and suspects is critical for raising public awareness, seeking witnesses, and ensuring transparency. However, it also carries significant risks, such as shaping public perceptions of guilt or innocence and disseminating misinformation about the investigative process. The Meredith Kercher case stands out for its extensive media coverage and for being one of the first major cases where global media and social media played significant roles throughout the judicial proceedings. Despite this, existing research has inadequately examined the portrayals of all suspects and the convicted perpetrator. Most studies have focused on Amanda Knox, analyzing her depiction as innocent or guilty and comparing portrayals across different geographical contexts. Consequently, other suspects and perpetrators have been marginalized, often mentioned only in relation to Knox.

This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing themes in the portrayal of the suspects during the first month of their arrest in *The Daily Mail*, a prominent English-language source on the case at the time. A systematic content analysis will be conducted to examine the frequency, tone, and thematic framing of media reports, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how media narratives are constructed in high-profile criminal cases.

1.3. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative thematic analysis** to examine *The Daily Mail's* online news headlines and their representations of the suspects in the Meredith Kercher murder case : Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito, Patrick Lumumba, and Rudy Guede.

The headlines selected for analysis were required to meet the following criteria :

- Relevance : They had to be directly related to the Meredith Kercher case.
- Temporal Scope : They must have been published between November 7, 2007—the day before the arrest and detention of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito—and December 3, 2007, by which time all suspects had been detained.
- Mention of Suspects : They must have referred to the suspects either directly by name or indirectly through contextual description.

These criteria ensure that the data captures the early stages of media framing, a period critical to understanding how initial narratives about the suspects were constructed. However, it is important to note that these criteria inherently limit the scope of the study to a specific time frame and source, which may exclude significant later developments or alternative media perspectives.

The data were sourced from the *An Injustice Anywhere Website*, an online platform dedicated to archiving information, files, and documents related to the Meredith Kercher case. While this platform provides a structured and accessible repository, its role as an advocacy site raises potential concerns about bias in the selection and presentation of materials. To mitigate this, a systematic process of data verification was employed to ensure the headlines used were authentic and representative of *The Daily Mail's* coverage during the specified period.

From an initial pool of 38 headlines, 27 were selected for analysis based on the predefined criteria. The exclusion of 11 headlines was primarily due to their lack of direct relevance or their failure to mention the suspects explicitly or implicitly. This selection process underscores the need for transparency in data curation, as choices made at this stage can influence the study's findings.

1.4. Thematic Analysis Approach

The analysis followed an inductive approach to thematic analysis, utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its capacity to uncover latent patterns within the data. The following steps were undertaken :

1. Familiarization with Data : Headlines were read repeatedly to identify initial ideas.
2. Generating Initial Codes : Data-driven codes were manually created for each headline at a latent level, focusing on implicit meanings rather than surface-level content.
3. Searching for Themes : Codes were grouped into broader categories, representing recurring patterns across the data.
4. Reviewing Themes : Themes were refined and reorganized, with some being merged, dropped, or divided into sub-themes.
5. Defining and Naming Themes : Each theme was clearly defined to capture its essence.

6. Producing the Report : Final themes were interpreted in the context of the research objectives.

1.4.1. Data Classification and Coding

The data were classified into four distinct groups, corresponding to the four suspects :

- Group A : Amanda Knox.
- Group B : Raffaele Sollecito.
- Group C : Patrick Lumumba.
- Group D : Rudy Guede.

Within each group, codes were manually generated to capture the nuances of media representation. Headlines could be assigned to multiple codes or, in some cases, none if they lacked sufficient content for thematic relevance. The categorization process prioritized transparency and reproducibility, although the manual coding approach introduces potential subjective bias, which was mitigated through iterative reviews and cross-checking.

1.4.2. Methodological Limitations

While the chosen methodology offers depth and flexibility, it is not without limitations :

- The focus on The Daily Mail excludes other media outlets that might provide differing perspectives, limiting the generalizability of findings.
- The use of an advocacy-based archive as the primary data source introduces potential biases in the selection and presentation of headlines.
- The manual coding process, while systematic, is inherently subjective, emphasizing the need for reflexivity in interpreting results.

Despite these limitations, the study's rigorous application of Braun and Clarke's framework and its transparent data selection process contribute to its reliability and validity. By examining how the suspects were portrayed during a critical period, this research aims to shed light on the construction of media narratives in high-profile criminal cases.

2. Study Results

2.1. Results, Interpretation, and Methodological Insights

2.1.1. Results Presentation

Table 1. Number of News Headlines for Each Suspect

The Suspects	Number of News Headlines
Amanda Knox	21
Raffaele Sollecito	3
Patrick Lumumba	2
Rudy Guede	1
Total	27

Table 1 presents the number of news headlines mentioning each suspect in the Meredith Kercher case, as published by *The Daily Mail* between November 7, 2007, and December 3, 2007.

The results demonstrate a significant disparity in media coverage among the suspects. Amanda Knox dominated the headlines with 21 mentions, accounting for the vast majority of the total 27 headlines. In comparison, Raffaele Sollecito was mentioned in only three headlines, Patrick Lumumba in two, and Rudy Guede in just one headline.

2.1.2. Interpretation and Discussion

The predominance of Amanda Knox in the headlines highlights her centrality in the media narrative during the initial phase of the case. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that female suspects in high-profile cases tend to attract disproportionate media attention (Jewkes, 2015). This heightened focus on Knox challenges traditional gender stereotypes by portraying women not merely as passive figures but as active participants in criminal activities. At the same time, it underscores a potential bias in media framing, wherein female suspects are sensationalized to enhance the perceived drama and intrigue of crime stories.

Conversely, the limited coverage of male suspects—Raffaele Sollecito, Patrick Lumumba, and Rudy Guede—suggests a neglect of their roles in the case. This imbalance may reflect an implicit prioritization of narratives that align with societal expectations or media profitability, particularly those that cast women in non-conforming roles (Clifford, 2014 ; DiBennardo, 2018).

2.1.3. Critical Evaluation of Results

The observed focus on Knox raises questions about the criteria used by *The Daily Mail* to determine the newsworthiness of suspects. While Amanda Knox's identity as a young, attractive, and foreign female suspect may have played a role, it is crucial to consider whether other factors, such as cultural biases or editorial strategies, contributed to her prominence.

Similarly, the near absence of Rudy Guede in the headlines warrants scrutiny. As the individual ultimately convicted of the murder, Guede's marginalization in early coverage may reflect racial or cultural biases in the media's representation of suspects (Heim, 2016). The stark contrast in the attention given to Knox and Guede suggests an intersection of gender, race, and nationality influencing media priorities, which merits further investigation.

2.1.4. Limitations and Methodological Reflections

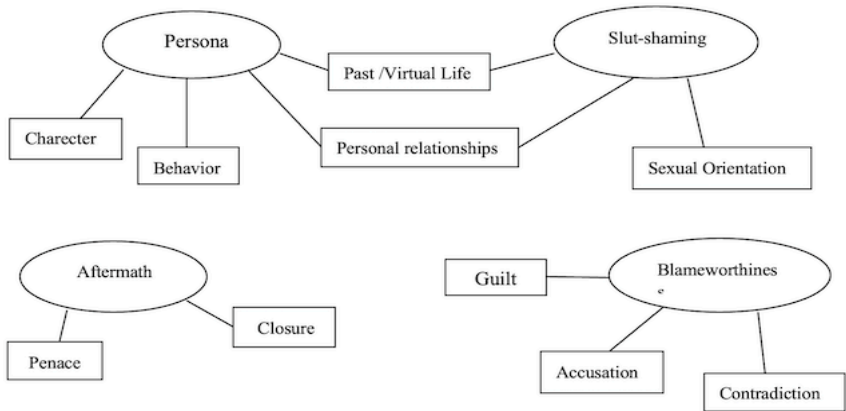
While the results provide valuable insights into media framing, several limitations should be noted :

- **Sample Size** : The analysis is based on a relatively small number of headlines (27), which may not fully capture the broader trends in media coverage of the case.
- **Temporal Scope** : By focusing on the first month of coverage, the study does not account for shifts in media narratives over time.
- **Source Bias** : As *The Daily Mail* is a single publication, its editorial policies and audience preferences may have influenced the results, limiting the generalizability of findings to other media outlets.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights important patterns in media representation, particularly concerning gender bias and the construction of criminal narratives. Further research could expand the scope by including additional publications and longer time frames to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping media coverage in high-profile criminal cases.

2.2. Thematic Analysis of Amanda Knox’s Portrayal

Figure N° 1. Thematic Map for the themes related to the Portrayal of Amanda Knox



The first thematic map, as shown in Figure 1, presents the themes and subthemes related to Amanda Knox’s portrayal in *The Daily Mail’s* news headlines. This map was constructed using data from 21 out of the 27 headlines published between November 7, 2007, and December 3, 2007.

The thematic map identifies four overarching themes—persona, slut-shaming, aftermath, and blameworthiness—alongside ten interrelated subthemes : character, behavior, past/virtual life, personal relationships, sexual orientations, penance, closure, guilt, accusation, and contradiction. These themes and subthemes often overlap, revealing the complex narrative strategies used in the coverage of Knox.

2.2.1. Key Findings and Thematic Interpretations

1. Persona and Slut-Shaming: The themes of persona and slut-shaming were dominant, with several subthemes—character, behavior, past/virtual life, personal relationships, and sexual orientations—providing a deeper understanding of Knox’s constructed public image. The media coverage largely emphasized negative aspects of Knox’s personality and actions, which were designed to align with a sensationalized narrative. These portrayals relied on judgmental attitudes and derogatory language, often veering into explicit shaming of Knox’s perceived deviation from societal norms surrounding sexuality and appropriate

behavior. For instance, the subthemes past/virtual life and personal relationships acted as narrative threads interwoven across both themes, suggesting a deliberate effort to paint Knox as morally flawed and socially deviant. This focus, while highly salacious, raises ethical concerns about the role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes and enforcing gendered expectations of behavior.

2. **Blameworthiness and Aftermath :** The themes of blameworthiness and aftermath focused on portraying Knox as culpable not only for the crime but also for the media frenzy surrounding her case. Subthemes such as penance, closure, guilt, accusation, and contradiction framed Knox as someone who should accept responsibility, despite her status as an initial suspect alongside others. The headlines suggested a guilt-inducing narrative, urging Knox to take actions such as confessing or providing closure that conformed to the media's predetermined storyline. This framing not only sought to influence public perception but also encouraged a punitive view of Knox's role in the case, conflating her alleged involvement in the crime with her behavior under scrutiny.

2.2.2. Critical Evaluation

The thematic map highlights how media framing can exploit gendered narratives to construct public perceptions. Knox's portrayal as a morally deviant figure aligns with the concept of "oversaturation of the extraordinary" (Jewkes, 2015), where atypical representations of women as perpetrators of crime are exaggerated for sensationalism.

This thematic emphasis raises several critical concerns :

- **Media Bias :** The focus on Knox's persona and private life, often through derogatory and sexist lenses, reflects a bias that prioritizes salacious details over balanced reporting.
- **Ethical Concerns :** The use of slut-shaming and the emphasis on Knox's sexuality to degrade her character highlight how media narratives can reinforce harmful stereotypes about women, especially in high-profile criminal cases.
- **Neglect of Context :** The subthemes fail to situate Knox's behavior or persona within broader social or psychological contexts, instead opting for reductive characterizations that serve the media's narrative goals.

2.2.3. Methodological Reflections and Limitations

While the thematic map offers valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged :

- Selection Bias : The headlines were sourced exclusively from The Daily Mail, a publication known for its sensationalist tendencies, which may have skewed the results toward a more biased portrayal.
- Contextual Gaps : The analysis does not account for the editorial processes or societal pressures that may have shaped the publication’s coverage.
- Temporal Scope : The data is limited to one month, potentially excluding themes that emerged later in the coverage.
- Overlapping Subthemes : The overlap between subthemes such as guilt and accusation or past/virtual life and personal relationship complicates the interpretation of distinct narratives.

The thematic map underscores the significant role of media in shaping public perceptions of suspects in high-profile cases. Amanda Knox’s portrayal in The Daily Mail reflects a broader tendency to sensationalize crime reporting, particularly through gendered and moralistic narratives. Future research could expand the scope by analyzing multiple publications and longitudinal trends to better understand the systemic biases at play.

2.3. Thematic Analysis of Raffaele Sollecito’s Portrayal

Figure N° 2. Thematic Map for the themes related to the Portrayal of Raffaele Sollecito

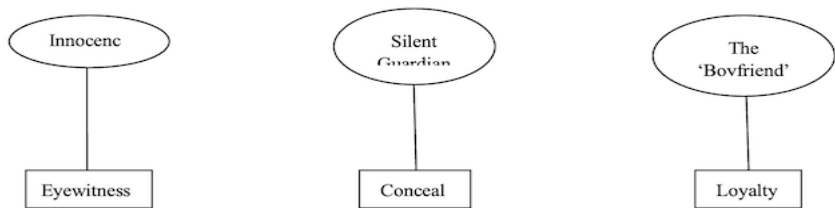


Figure 2 highlights the themes and subthemes surrounding Raffaele Sollecito’s portrayal in The Daily Mail’s news headlines. This analysis is based on data from 3 out of 27 headlines published between November 7, 2007, and December 3, 2007. The thematic map identifies three main themes—innocence, silent guardian, and the ‘boyfriend’—alongside three subthemes : eyewitness, concealment, and loyalty.

Key Findings and Thematic Interpretations

1. **Innocence and Silent Guardian** : The themes of innocence and silent guardian suggest that the media actively distanced Sollecito from Amanda Knox's alleged guilt. Headlines emphasized his role as a witness or even a victim, rather than a perpetrator, casting him as an observer to the events rather than an active participant. This framing reinforced his moral detachment from the crime, presenting him as a passive character caught in circumstances beyond his control. The silent guardian theme further aligns with this depiction by portraying Sollecito as a protective yet reserved figure, whose demeanor was interpreted as calm and composed during the investigation. This narrative effectively separates Sollecito from any direct association with the crime, positioning him as a foil to Knox's more heavily scrutinized persona.
2. **The 'Boyfriend'** : The theme of the 'boyfriend' highlighted Sollecito's loyalty and dedication to his romantic relationship. Subthemes such as loyalty and concealment illustrate how his commitment to Knox was framed as both an act of love and a potential liability. The media constructed a narrative where Sollecito's actions were driven by his romantic involvement, simultaneously evoking admiration for his devotion and suspicion about his motives. This portrayal combined elements of love, morality, and legal ambiguity, culminating in the image of "the perfect boyfriend for the wrong girlfriend." This narrative strategy reinforced traditional gender dynamics by focusing on Sollecito's role as a loyal partner while downplaying his agency in the legal context.

2.3.1. Critical Evaluation

The thematic analysis of Sollecito's portrayal reveals key insights into the media's gendered framing of suspects :

- **Gender Bias** : The focus on Sollecito's innocence and loyalty contrasts sharply with the more critical and sensationalized portrayal of Knox. This disparity highlights how male suspects may benefit from narratives that emphasize their morality and emotional restraint, perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes.
- **Selective Narratives** : The media's framing appears to strategically omit aspects that might complicate Sollecito's image as the "silent guardian." This selective reporting risks oversimplifying his role and diminishing public scrutiny of his involvement.

- Emotional Appeal : By emphasizing themes of love and loyalty, the media created an emotionally resonant narrative that diverted attention from legal complexities and the broader context of the case.

2.3.2. Methodological Reflections and Limitations

Although the thematic map provides valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations :

- Data Imbalance : The analysis relies on only three headlines, which may not fully capture the nuances of Sollecito’s portrayal across other media outlets.
- Source Bias : As with Amanda Knox’s portrayal, the exclusive reliance on The Daily Mail introduces a potential bias due to the publication’s tendency toward sensationalism.
- Gender Dynamics : The analysis does not include a comparative exploration of other male suspects’ portrayals (e.g., Patrick Lumumba or Rudy Guede), which might offer a more comprehensive understanding of gendered media narratives.
- Temporal Scope : Limiting the analysis to headlines from a single month risks missing shifts in narrative over time as the case evolved.

The portrayal of Raffaele Sollecito in The Daily Mail reflects a deliberate effort to construct a gendered and emotionally compelling narrative. By emphasizing themes of innocence, guardianship, and loyalty, the media crafted an image that downplayed Sollecito’s potential culpability while reinforcing traditional gender roles. Future studies could benefit from broader comparative analyses and the inclusion of diverse sources to better understand how gender and narrative framing intersect in media coverage of criminal cases.

2.4. Thematic Analysis of Patrick Lumumba and Rudy Guede’s Portrayals

Figure N° 3. Thematic Map for the themes related to the Portrayal of Patrick Lumumba



2.4.1. Thematic Map : Patrick Lumumba

The third thematic map (Figure 3) outlines two primary themes—**falsely accused** and **kindheartedness**—and four subthemes : **injustice, defamation, benevolence,** and **generosity**. This analysis is based on two headlines out of 27 published between November 7, 2007, and December 3, 2007.

The themes highlight Patrick Lumumba's portrayal as a cheerful and kind-hearted individual who became another victim of Amanda Knox's actions. Media narratives depicted him as unjustly accused, emphasizing the **injustice** and **defamation** he suffered due to his arrest based on false allegations. Subthemes like **benevolence** and **generosity** reinforced a positive image of Lumumba, framing him as a character undeserving of the legal and social repercussions he endured. This dichotomy between his virtuous personality and the harsh treatment he faced underscores the media's attempt to evoke public sympathy.

2.4.2. Thematic Map : Rudy Guede

The thematic analysis of Rudy Guede's portrayal, based on one headline out of 27, identified two primary themes : rushed judgment and unnamed suspect. The rushed judgment theme reflects the media's tendency to present Guede as guilty before a fair trial was conducted, while the unnamed suspect theme underscores the media's reluctance to delve into his background compared to the other suspects.

This portrayal suggests that public opinion and media narratives had prematurely determined guilt, which raises concerns about the fairness and objectivity of the judicial process. The lack of detailed framing around Guede highlights a disparity in how different suspects were depicted, with less emphasis on his individuality or circumstances compared to Amanda Knox or Patrick Lumumba.

2.4.3. Comparative Framing and Media Bias

Through the thematic analysis, it became evident that Amanda Knox was the central focus of *The Daily Mail's* coverage. While Patrick Lumumba was portrayed sympathetically and Rudy Guede was relatively neglected, Knox's portrayal was overwhelmingly negative. Headlines about Knox consistently depicted her persona, relationships, and spiritual experiences in ways that aligned with themes of guilt, promiscuity, and moral failings.

This stark contrast in framing highlights significant gender and racial biases in the media :

- Gender Bias : The media’s disproportionate focus on Knox, coupled with sensationalized themes, reflects a tendency to scrutinize female suspects more harshly, especially when they challenge societal norms around behavior and sexuality.
- Racial Bias : Lumumba’s sympathetic portrayal as a victim contrasts with the limited and negative framing of Guede, suggesting a racialized dimension to the media’s narrative strategies.

2.4.4. Critical Evaluation and Methodological Reflections

1. Selective Framing : The selective focus on certain suspects while neglecting others indicates a deliberate editorial choice that prioritizes narratives with high emotional or sensational appeal. This approach may distort public perceptions and undermine the principles of fair and unbiased reporting.
2. Data Imbalance : The limited number of headlines for Lumumba (2) and Guede (1) compared to Knox (21) raises concerns about the representativeness of the analysis. A broader dataset across multiple media outlets would provide a more comprehensive view of how these suspects were framed.
3. Contextual Gaps : The absence of contextual details about Guede, such as his background or role in the case, weakens the analysis of his portrayal. Similarly, the portrayal of Lumumba as a benevolent figure lacks critical engagement with how and why the media constructed this narrative.
4. Sensationalism and Ethical Implications : The media’s sensational framing, particularly of Knox, reflects broader ethical issues in crime reporting. The emphasis on salacious details over factual analysis risks prejudicing public opinion and undermining the suspects’ right to a fair trial.

The thematic analysis reveals significant disparities in the portrayal of the suspects in *The Daily Mail’s* headlines. Patrick Lumumba’s framing as a falsely accused, kind-hearted individual stands in stark contrast to Rudy Guede’s limited and prejudiced depiction. Amanda Knox’s portrayal, characterized by overwhelmingly negative themes, underscores the media’s tendency to sensationalize female suspects.

Future research should expand the dataset to include other media outlets and explore the intersectionality of gender, race, and sensationalism in crime reporting. Additionally, a longitudinal analysis of how these portrayals evolved over time could provide deeper insights into the media's role in shaping public perceptions of criminal cases.

3. Results Discussion

Analyzing the portrayal of the four main suspects (Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito, Patrick Lumumba, and Rudy Guede) in *Daily Mail's* news headlines published between November 7, 2007, and December 3, 2007, provided an opportunity to identify the dominant themes and narratives, as well as to identify the different framings and portrayals of the suspects based on their gender. Interestingly, from a quantitative viewpoint, the number of news headlines that referenced Knox is 21, out of a total of 27 (see Table 1). This frequency of coverage reflects a high level of attention given to Knox as the only female suspect. Berrington & Honkatukia (2002) highlighted that media coverage of female perpetrators is significantly more newsworthy than others and receives more attention from the media due to their statistical occurrences (Naylor, 2001).

Themes related to the portrayal of Knox are persona, slut-shaming, aftermath, and blameworthiness (see Figure 1). These themes are negative narratives as they shape her character, behavior, personal relationships, and penance, with a specific focus on her intimate and romantic past and present relationships, while referring to the entire murder case as a 'sex game gone wrong,' as Nick Pisa's 2008 article described the case (Brodsky, 2016). These results align with Jewkes's (2011) study, which indicates that media tend to portray women committing murders in two ways : sexually promiscuous or frigid. Moreover, Collins (2014) suggests that women who tend to murder non-family members are often seen as sexual deviants. However, this imagery is generally associated with women who have been convicted of murder and not suspects, which portrays Knox as a potential perpetrator, even though her status remains that of a suspect.

Alternatively, themes related to the male suspects were positive and guilt-shifting. First, Raffaele Sollecito's imagery (see Figure 2) presumed his innocence as a suspect but positioned him as a witness to the murder, emphasizing his unwavering conduct as a boyfriend and his readiness to protect his partner from blame. Second, themes related to the portrayal of Patrick Lumumba (see Figure 3) emphasize his kindheartedness and

benevolence, underscoring his false accusations concerning the murder. Finally, Rudy Guede, the unnamed suspect, was hastily arrested and barely mentioned. Traditionally, media tend to stereotypically portray men who commit murder crimes as violent “monsters,” “insane,” and “ancestral” criminals, associating their behavior with masculine identity (Surette et al., 2011). However, crimes committed by violent men are common (Van Der Heijden & Pluskota, 2018) ; therefore, they are not considered as newsworthy unless they are high-profile cases (O’Donnell, 2016).

When comparing the thematic analysis of the portrayal and framing of the suspects, it became evident that there was a difference not between individual suspects but rather between different genders. Knox’s portrayal was marked by the sexualization of her image as a suspect, along with scrutiny of her past and virtual life and her relationships with others. Unlike the portrayals of Sollecito, Lumumba, and Guede, which refrained from sexualizing them and did not reference their personal lives and relationships. Jewkes (2011) proposed that women who do not align with gendered social stereotypes tend to be ‘treated worse’ in the media than those who conform to such norms.

Conclusion

This article presents a comparative thematic analysis of the media coverage of the Meredith Kercher murder case, focusing on the main suspects: Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito, Patrick Lumumba, and Rudy Guede, as represented in The Daily Mail headlines between November 7, 2007, and December 3, 2007. The study highlights the dominant themes and narratives employed by the media in portraying these suspects, particularly in relation to their gender. The findings reveal that themes associated with Knox are predominantly negative, including personification, sexual stigmatization, aftermath, and guilt. In contrast, the thematic representations of the other suspects—Sollecito (innocent, silent guardian, and «boyfriend»), Lumumba (wrongfully accused and benevolent), and Guede (hasty judgment and unnamed suspect)—are marked by more positive imagery.

Through a gender lens, the coverage of male suspects notably lacks references to their personal lives and relationships, and there is no sexualization of their image. Conversely, Knox’s portrayal is characterized by the sexualization of her image as a suspect, with intense scrutiny of her past, virtual life, and relationships with others. This differentiated treatment underscores a media tendency to sexually objectify women, particularly

when they are accused of serious crimes, as illustrated by the comparison with male suspects.

The study also sheds light on how gender stereotypes influence the media's construction of suspects. Knox is perceived as an anomaly within societal gender norms, a factor that appears to explain the more punitive and sexualized media coverage she received. By contrast, male suspects are rarely associated with such constructions, reinforcing the notion that women who deviate from gender norms face harsher media scrutiny, as highlighted in Jewkes' (2011) work.

Finally, while the themes associated with Knox are dominated by negative imagery, it is important to note that this analysis is limited to the study of a single media outlet over a specific time frame. Future research could expand this framework by including comparisons with other media outlets and exploring the deeper effects of these media portrayals on public opinion and the judicial system.

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and compares the themes related to the portrayal of the four suspects in the Meredith Kercher murder case during the first month following their arrest in the headlines of *The Daily Mail*. The analysis reveals a gender bias in the representation of the suspects, with a focus on the sole female suspect while neglecting the male suspects. Notably, the themes surrounding the female suspect are depicted negatively, whereas the portrayal of the male suspects includes positive themes that shift the blame away from them.

Keywords

Meredith Kercher Case, Murder Suspects, Thematic Analysis, Media Representation, Gender Bias

مستخلص

يتناول هذا المقال تحليلاً ومقارنة لتغطية وسائل الإعلام البريطانية للمشتبه بهم في قضية قتل ميريديث كيرتشر خلال الشهر الأول من الاعتقال، وخاصة في عناوين أخبار صحيفة ديلي ميل. يشير التحليل إلى وجود انحياز جنسي في تصوير المشتبه بهم، حيث تم التركيز على المشتبه بها الأنثى الوحيدة مقارنة بالمشتبه بهم الذكور، مع تصويرها بشكل سلبي، في حين تم تصوير المشتبه بهم الذكور بشكل إيجابي وتبرئتهم من اللوم.

كلمات مفتاحية

قضية ميريديث كيرتشر، المشتبه بهم في جريمة القتل، التصوير الإعلامي، التحليل الموضوعي، التحيز الجنسي

Résumé

Cet article analyse et compare les thèmes liés à la représentation des quatre suspects dans l'affaire du meurtre de Meredith Kercher, au cours du premier mois suivant leur arrestation dans les titres du *Daily Mail*. L'analyse révèle un biais de genre dans la représentation des suspects, mettant l'accent sur la seule suspecte féminine et négligeant les suspects masculins. Les thèmes associés à la suspecte féminine sont dépeints de manière négative, tandis que la représentation des suspects masculins présente des thèmes positifs qui les exonèrent de toute culpabilité.

Mots-clés

Affaire Meredith Kercher, Suspects de meurtre, Analyse thématique, Représentation médiatique, Biais de genre