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# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE DIGITAL AND POST-PANDEMIC ERA: NEW FORMS, NEW VULNERABILITIES

**Petronela Daniela FERARU**[1]

**Abstract:** The post-pandemic period has significantly transformed the dynamics of violence against women under the combined influence of digitalization and increasing social vulnerabilities. This paper provides a sociological analysis of how Romanian print media represents and interprets gender-based violence, with particular emphasis on the relationship between offline and online forms of abuse. The study is based on a qualitative content analysis of 120 articles published between January 2022 and June 2024 in national and regional Romanian newspapers. The analysis focused on dominant themes, discursive frames, representations of women, journalistic tone, and the extent to which digital violence and the post-pandemic context were integrated into media discourse. The findings reveal the predominance of emotional and sensationalist narratives in which women are mainly portrayed as victims of physical and domestic violence, while digital forms of abuse remain marginal and insufficiently problematized. The study also highlights the continuity between domestic and digital violence and shows that media coverage tends to privilege individual cases and dramatic events over structural explanations, prevention, and educational approaches. From an interdisciplinary sociological perspective, the article emphasizes the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of gender-based violence and argues for the development of gender-sensitive, analytically grounded, and prevention-oriented journalistic practices.

**Keywords:** digital violence; post-pandemic; women; cyber abuse; gender inequality; media representation; sociology

**Résumé :** La période post-pandémique a profondément transformé la dynamique de la violence à l'égard des femmes, sous l'effet combiné de la digitalisation et de l'accentuation des vulnérabilités sociales. Cet article propose une analyse sociologique de la manière dont la presse écrite roumaine représente et interprète la violence de genre, en mettant particulièrement l'accent sur la relation entre les formes d'abus hors ligne et en ligne. L'étude repose sur une analyse qualitative de contenu de 120 articles publiés entre janvier 2022 et juin 2024 dans la presse nationale et régionale roumaine. L'analyse a porté sur les thèmes dominants, les cadres discursifs, les représentations des femmes, le ton journalistique ainsi que sur la manière dont la violence numérique et le contexte post-pandémique sont intégrés dans le discours médiatique. Les résultats mettent en évidence la prédominance de récits émotionnels et sensationnalistes, dans lesquels les femmes sont

[1] PhD, Professor of Sociology, National College Iaşi, Romania, E-mail: daniela_feraru_p@yahoo.com

principalement présentées comme victimes de violences physiques et domestiques, tandis que les formes numériques d'abus restent marginales et insuffisamment problématisées. L'étude souligne également la continuité entre violence domestique et violence numérique et montre que la presse tend à privilégier les cas individuels et les événements dramatiques au détriment des explications structurelles, de la prévention et des approches éducatives. Dans une perspective sociologique interdisciplinaire, l'article met en évidence le rôle des médias dans la formation des perceptions publiques de la violence de genre et plaide en faveur de pratiques journalistiques sensibles au genre, fondées sur une analyse rigoureuse et orientées vers la prévention.

**Mots-clés :** violence numérique; post-pandémie; femmes; cyberviolence; inégalités de genre; représentations médiatiques; sociologie

**Rezumat:** Perioada post-pandemică a transformat semnificativ dinamica violenței asupra femeilor, sub influența combinată a digitalizării și a accentuării vulnerabilităților sociale. Lucrarea propune o analiză sociologică a modului în care presa scrisă din România reprezintă și interpretează violența de gen, cu accent deosebit pe relația dintre formele offline și online ale abuzului. Studiul se bazează pe o analiză calitativă de conținut a 120 de articole publicate între ianuarie 2022 și iunie 2024 în presa națională și regională din România. Analiza a urmărit temele dominante, cadrele discursive, reprezentările femeilor, tonul jurnalistic și măsura în care violența digitală și contextul post-pandemic sunt integrate în discursul mediatic. Rezultatele evidențiază predominanța unor narațiuni emoționale și senzaționaliste, în care femeile sunt prezentate în principal ca victime ale violenței fizice și domestice, în timp ce formele digitale de abuz rămân marginale și insuficient problematizate. Studiul subliniază, de asemenea, continuitatea dintre violența domestică și cea digitală și arată că presa tinde să privilegieze cazurile individuale și evenimentele dramatice în detrimentul explicațiilor structurale, al prevenirii și al abordărilor educaționale. Dintr-o perspectivă sociologică interdisciplinară, articolul evidențiază rolul mass-mediei în modelarea percepțiilor publice asupra violenței de gen și susține necesitatea dezvoltării unor practici jurnalistice sensibile la dimensiunea de gen, fundamentate analitic și orientate spre prevenire.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** violență digitală; post-pandemie; femei; abuz cibernetic; inegalitate de gen; reprezentare media; sociologie

## 1. Introduction

Violence against women has become one of the most pressing social issues of contemporary societies, gaining renewed visibility in the context of digital transformation and the post-pandemic reconfiguration of everyday life. Although gender-based violence has long been analysed within sociology, law, psychology, and social work, the recent expansion of digital communication technologies has altered both the forms through which violence is exercised and the contexts in which it is experienced, perceived, and reported. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in this evolution. Periods of lockdown, social distancing, remote work, and increased dependence on digital platforms reshaped interpersonal relations and intensified multiple forms of vulnerability. For many women, the home became not only a space of protection, but also a space of control, abuse, and

isolation. At the same time, the digital environment became a parallel field where harassment, surveillance, humiliation, and coercive practices could continue or even intensify.

These changes require a broader sociological understanding of violence against women, one that goes beyond the traditional distinction between public and private spheres. In the digital and post-pandemic era, violence must be analysed as a continuum that links domestic abuse, symbolic violence, institutional indifference, and technology-facilitated aggression. Media representations become especially relevant in this context because they contribute to shaping public understanding, moral evaluations, and policy responses.

This article examines how Romanian printed media represents violence against women in the digital and post-pandemic period. This article examines how Romanian news media represent violence against women in the digital and post-pandemic period. By focusing on media discourse, the study aims to identify not only dominant themes and frames, but also the silences, omissions, and limitations that affect the social visibility of new forms of violence. The paper argues that a gender-sensitive and analytically grounded press discourse is essential for prevention, awareness, and social change.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The sociological analysis of violence against women is grounded in the understanding that violence is not an isolated or accidental phenomenon, but one deeply rooted in structures of domination, unequal power relations, and gendered cultural norms. From a feminist perspective, violence functions as both an expression and a mechanism of patriarchal order, contributing to the maintenance of women's subordination in both private and public life (Bourdieu, 1998; Miroiu, 2021). This approach allows us to interpret violence not merely as deviant behaviour, but as a socially tolerated and symbolically reproduced reality.

In recent years, the concept of technology-facilitated violence has become increasingly important in understanding the transformation of abusive practices. Henry and Powell (2018) show that digital technologies do not create violence from nothing, but rather extend, amplify, and diversify existing forms of gender-based abuse. Online harassment, cyber-stalking, image-based abuse, coercive monitoring, and digital humiliation are all manifestations of a broader continuum of violence. These practices affect women's autonomy, psychological well-being, and participation in public life.

Research on digital feminist activism has also shown that women and girls increasingly use online spaces not only as environments of vulnerability, but also as arenas of resistance, solidarity, and public contestation of gender-based violence. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) emphasize that digital platforms can support collective responses to rape culture and create new opportunities for victims and survivors to make their experiences visible. At the same time, technology-facilitated coercive control may extend abusive relationships through surveillance,

monitoring, repeated messaging, and the regulation of women's digital interactions, thereby blurring the boundaries between physical and digital forms of violence (Vitis & Gilmour, 2022).

The post-pandemic context intensified this continuum. Increased digital dependence, emotional insecurity, and reduced access to institutional support mechanisms contributed to the invisibilisation of some forms of abuse while simultaneously multiplying their contexts of occurrence. Violence became more hybrid, moving across offline and online spaces. In this sense, the distinction between domestic violence and digital violence becomes analytically insufficient, because the two often overlap and reinforce each other.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is media framing. Media discourse does not simply reflect social reality, but actively participates in constructing it. Through selection, emphasis, vocabulary, and narrative structure, the press establishes interpretative frames that influence how audiences understand social problems. In the case of violence against women, media may contribute either to critical awareness or to symbolic simplification through sensationalism, victimisation, and moral panic. Therefore, analysing press representations is essential for understanding the symbolic dimension of gender violence in contemporary society.

## 3. Theme and research objectives

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have profoundly reshaped social structures, gender relations and communication practices, bringing new dynamics to the phenomenon of violence against women. In Romania, the post-pandemic period has been characterised by a paradoxical coexistence between growing digital connectedness and increased social vulnerability. Digitalisation, while facilitating access to information and public participation, has also expanded the spaces in which gender-based violence manifests—through online harassment, cyber-stalking and the dissemination of degrading content.

This study explores how the Romanian printed press has represented and interpreted violence against women during the post-pandemic period, focusing on the articulation between offline and online forms of abuse. This study explores how Romanian news media have represented and interpreted violence against women during the post-pandemic period, focusing on the articulation between offline and online forms of abuse. The main objectives are: to identify the dominant themes, discursive frames and representations of women in the media coverage of gender-based violence; to analyse the linguistic and narrative strategies through which the press constructs public understanding of the phenomenon; to examine to what extent the post-pandemic context and digital dimension are integrated in journalistic discourse; to evaluate the press's potential role in awareness-raising and prevention of violence against women.

By addressing these objectives, the paper aims to contribute to a sociological understanding of the relationship between media, gender and power,

and to highlight the responsibility of the press in shaping collective attitudes towards violence and equality.

## 4. Research methodology

The study employs a **qualitative content analysis** approach (Krippendorff, 2018), focusing on the interpretative examination of media texts rather than on quantitative frequency counts. The method was chosen for its capacity to uncover the meanings, frames and ideologies embedded in journalistic discourse concerning violence against women.

### 4.1. Corpus selection and period of analysis

The corpus includes **120 articles** published between **January 2022 and June 2024** in major Romanian national and regional newspapers: *Adevărul*, *Libertatea*, *HotNews*, *România Liberă*, and *Ziarul de Iași*. The period was chosen to reflect the post-pandemic context, during which the effects of social isolation, economic instability, and digital overexposure became more visible in media narratives.

To provide a clearer overview of the methodological framework, Table 1 summarises the main selection criteria and coding dimensions used in the qualitative analysis.

**Table 1.** Selection criteria and coding dimensions

| Criterion | Description |
|---|---|
| Type of publication | National / Regional newspapers |
| Period of analysis | January 2022 – June 2024 |
| Keywords used | violence, domestic abuse, harassment, cyberbullying, gender equality |
| Unit of analysis | Full press article |
| Coding dimensions | Type of violence, frame, actors, tone, educational content |

*Source: Author's own content analysis (2025).*

To visualise the composition of the corpus, Figure 1 and Table 2 illustrate the distribution of the analysed articles by publication type.

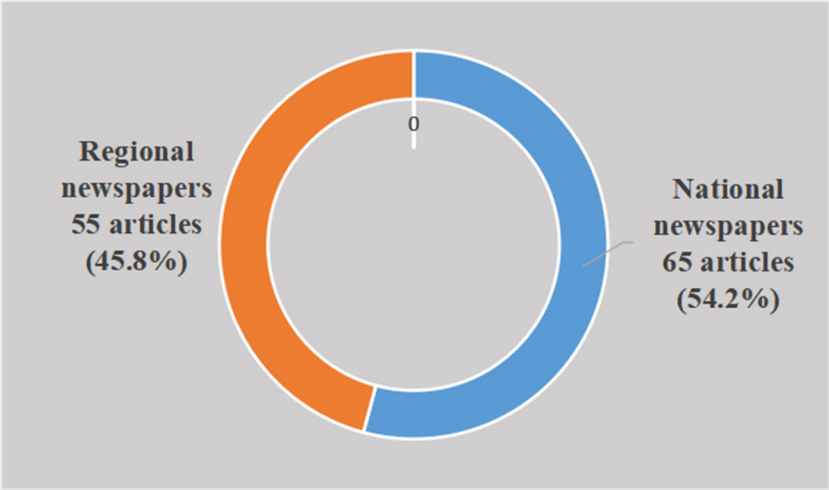



**Figure 1:** Distribution of analysed articles by publication type
*Source: Author's own synthesis, 2025*

**Table 2.** Distribution of analysed articles by publication type

| Publication | National | Regional | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adevărul | 25 | – | 25 |
| Libertatea | 20 | – | 20 |
| HotNews | 15 | – | 15 |
| România Liberă | 5 | – | 5 |
| Ziarul de Iaşi | – | 55 | 55 |
| **Total** | **65** | **55** | **120** |

*Source: Author's own analysis, 2025.*

## 4.2. Selection criteria

Articles were selected based on the presence of specific keywords such as *violence*, *domestic abuse*, *harassment*, *cyberbullying*, *gender equality*, and *protection of women*. Editorials, reports, interviews, and investigative pieces were included to ensure thematic and stylistic diversity. Duplicates and purely informative news items without interpretative or discursive content were excluded.

## 4.3. Unit of analysis and coding grid

The **unit of analysis** was the full article. Each text was examined using a thematic coding grid that included: type of violence described (physical,

psychological, digital); discursive framing (emotional, institutional, structural); representation of actors (victim, aggressor, authority, civil society); tone of the article (neutral, sensationalist, moralising); presence of educational or preventive messages.

### 4.4. Analytical procedure

All selected articles were read and coded manually. Recurring categories and emerging themes were grouped into analytical clusters, allowing for comparison across publications. To ensure interpretative reliability, the coding scheme was reviewed twice, and the results were cross-validated through triangulation with previous sociological research on media and gender-based violence (Bourdieu, 1998; Miroiu, 2021; UN Women, 2023).

## 5. Characteristics of the studied corpus

The empirical material analysed consists of **120 press articles** published in Romania between **January 2022 and June 2024**, reflecting the post-pandemic period marked by intensified public debate on social vulnerability, gender inequality and digital safety.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of the analysed corpus

| Category | Indicators | Values (N / %) |
|---|---|---|
| **Period covered** | January 2022 – June 2024 | – |
| **Total number of articles** | Corpus of analysed press materials | 120 (100%) |
| **Type of publication** | National newspapers (*Adevărul, Libertatea, HotNews, România Liberă*) | 65 (54.2%) |
| | Regional press (*Ziarul de Iași*, other local outlets) | 55 (45.8%) |
| **Journalistic genre** | News reports | 42% |
| | Editorials / Opinion pieces | 28% |
| | Interviews | 17% |
| | Investigative features | 13% |
| **Main topics identified** | Domestic violence, digital harassment, prevention, institutional response | – |
| **Dominant tone** | Emotional / moralising | 66.0% |
| **Analytical/preventive approach** | Sociological/educational | 34.0% |

*Source: Author's own content analysis (2025).*

The corpus includes **65 articles from national newspapers** (*Adevărul, Libertatea, HotNews, România Liberă*) and **55 from regional media**, primarily *Ziarul de Iași* and other local outlets. The selected articles encompass a wide range of journalistic genres — **news reports (42%)**, **editorials and opinion pieces (28%)**, **interviews (17%)**, and **investigative features (13%)**. This diversity

provides a balanced perspective on both factual and interpretative representations of gender-based violence.

From a thematic point of view, **domestic violence** remains the dominant subject, followed by **digital harassment** and **institutional responses to abuse**. However, while the national press tends to focus on spectacular or tragic cases, the regional press often highlights local initiatives, NGO involvement and educational campaigns, offering a more community-oriented perspective.

Regarding tone, approximately **two-thirds of the articles** adopt an emotional or moralising register, emphasising suffering, guilt or outrage, while only a minority employ a **sociological or analytical approach** aimed at contextual understanding. This confirms the persistence of a media culture driven by drama and emotional appeal rather than by critical reflection or preventive orientation.

The corpus thus reflects a **fragmented and uneven public discourse**, where violence against women is visible yet insufficiently problematised. It illustrates both the media's potential for social awareness and its limitations in addressing violence as a structural issue within Romanian society

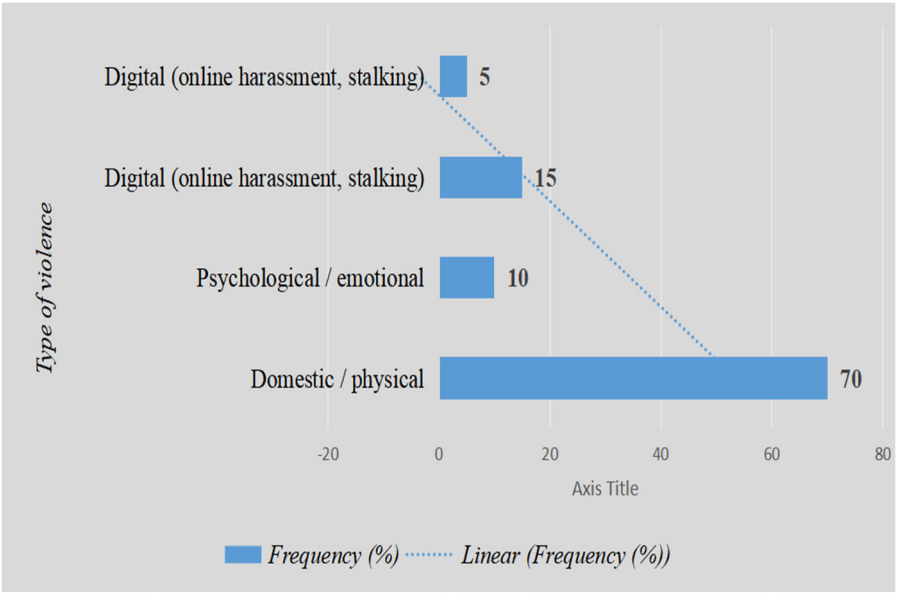
## 6. Results and interpretations

### 6.1. Dominant themes and representations

The analysis reveals that the dominant narrative in Romanian printed media continues to portray women primarily as *victims of physical or domestic violence*, often emphasising vulnerability and tragedy. Approximately **70 percent** of the articles focus on acts of physical aggression, femicide or family abuse, while only a limited number address psychological or economic violence. The post-pandemic context is rarely explicitly mentioned, though elements of isolation, financial dependency and emotional instability appear implicitly in the discourse.

### 6.2. The visibility of digital violence

References to digital forms of violence — such as online harassment, non-consensual image sharing, and cyber-stalking — appear in roughly **15 percent** of the corpus. Such articles are usually published in the context of public scandals or individual cases, rather than as part of a systematic analysis of digital gender inequality. The press tends to treat cyber-violence as an extension of interpersonal conflict, neglecting its sociological roots in the broader culture of online misogyny and lack of digital literacy.



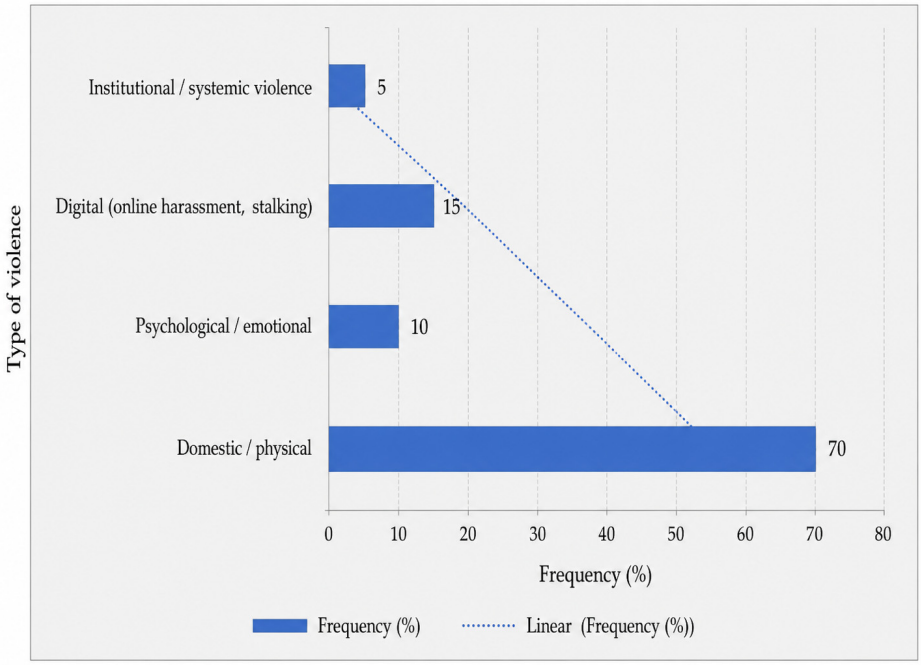




**Figure 2:** Thematic frequency of violence types in media coverage
*Source: Author's own content analysis (2025)*

The thematic analysis revealed significant variations in how different forms of violence are represented in the Romanian press. As shown in Figure 2, **domestic and physical violence** remains the most frequently covered topic,

followed by **digital harassment** and **psychological abuse**, which appear more sporadically and are often treated as secondary issues. **Institutional or systemic forms of violence**, such as discrimination or lack of protection mechanisms, receive minimal media attention. This imbalance suggests that journalistic narratives continue to prioritise visible, dramatic cases over structural or preventive dimensions of gender-based violence.

## 6.3. Framing strategies and discursive tone

Media framing predominantly follows two rhetorical models: the *emotional frame*, centred on suffering and moral outrage, and the *criminal-judicial frame*, emphasising law enforcement, penalties, and institutional inefficiency. Few articles adopt an *educational* or *preventive* frame that connects violence with structural inequality or gender norms. Sensational headlines, emotionally charged vocabulary ("horror", „nightmare", „shocking tragedy") and moral judgments dominate, which reinforces a culture of pity and blame rather than understanding and transformation.

The qualitative analysis also identified several dominant **discursive frames** through which the press constructs narratives about violence against women. As illustrated in Figure 3, the **emotional frame** prevails, focusing on the suffering of victims and the sensational aspects of the events. The **judicial frame** is present mainly in articles reporting on court cases or police investigations, often reducing violence to a legal or criminal matter. By contrast, the **educational and preventive frames** remain marginal, reflecting limited journalistic engagement with awareness and social responsibility.

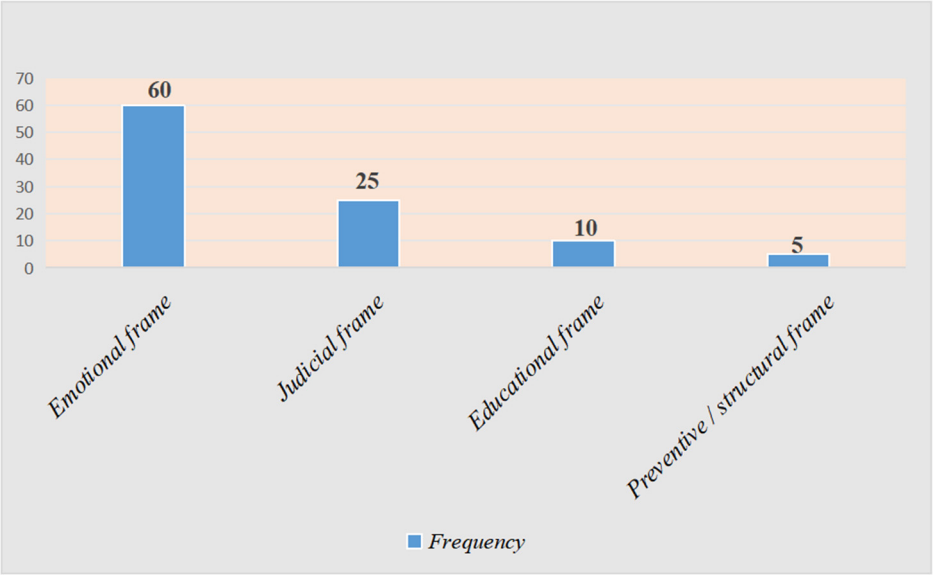



**Figure 3**: Discursive frames in analysed articles
*Source: Author's own content analysis (2025).*

This distribution of discursive orientations confirms that media discourse still tends to dramatise rather than contextualise gender-based violence, prioritising emotional impact over sociological understanding.

### 6.4. Institutional and social responsibility

While some national outlets — notably *Libertatea* and *HotNews* — have introduced journalistic projects in partnership with NGOs or experts, such examples remain isolated. The absence of sustained, evidence-based reporting on gender-based violence reveals the weak integration of sociological expertise in the Romanian media field. Moreover, the lack of follow-up on cases and the underrepresentation of survivors' voices limit the educational potential of journalism.

### 6.5. Interpretative synthesis

Overall, the findings suggest that Romanian post-pandemic print media still struggles to balance emotional storytelling with analytical depth. The coverage reflects social empathy but lacks structural critique. By privileging individual tragedies over systemic explanations, the press contributes to the symbolic reproduction of gender hierarchies. A shift towards *constructive journalism*, informed by gender-sensitive ethics and digital awareness, would enhance the role of media as a social educator and agent of prevention.

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the Romanian printed press continues to operate within a limited interpretative framework when addressing violence against women. The findings of this study suggest that Romanian news media continue to operate within a limited interpretative framework when addressing violence against women. Although the topic is visible and often emotionally charged, the dominant discursive patterns remain centred on exceptional cases, dramatic narratives, and immediate emotional impact. This confirms that journalistic discourse still privileges the event over the structure, the individual case over the broader social explanation.

One of the most important findings is the relatively weak visibility of digital violence. Although technology-mediated abuse has become increasingly relevant in contemporary gender relations, it is still marginal in media discourse. This suggests a discrepancy between the transformations occurring in social reality and the frameworks through which the press chooses to represent them. In many cases, cyber abuse is treated as secondary, anecdotal, or merely complementary to physical aggression, rather than as a serious form of violence with distinct psychosocial effects.

The study also highlights the persistence of a victim-centred representation, in which women are portrayed mainly through vulnerability, suffering, and passivity. While such portrayals may generate empathy, they also

risk reproducing symbolic asymmetries by underrepresenting women's agency, resistance, and access to support networks. Likewise, the weak presence of educational and preventive frames limits the press's potential to contribute to long-term social change.

From a sociological perspective, these findings confirm the need for a stronger integration of gender-sensitive analysis in journalism. Responsible reporting on violence against women should include structural context, expert voices, references to prevention, and a more nuanced treatment of digital violence. Such an approach would strengthen the media's role not only as an informer, but also as an actor in social education and democratic accountability.

## 8. Conclusions and implications

The post-pandemic Romanian printed press remains a key arena for constructing social meanings of violence against women. Post-pandemic Romanian news media remain a key arena for constructing social meanings of violence against women. The qualitative content analysis revealed a predominance of emotional and sensational discourse, in which women are mainly portrayed as passive victims rather than as active social agents. This pattern contributes to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the normalisation of violence as an individual or domestic issue rather than as a structural social problem.

Despite its limitations, the press also shows potential to act as a mediator of social awareness. The few examples of articles incorporating expert opinions, NGO perspectives, or references to preventive education demonstrate that journalism can serve as an instrument of civic education and gender equality. However, such approaches remain sporadic and lack institutional continuity.

The findings underline the necessity of developing **gender-sensitive media ethics**, encouraging journalists to frame violence within broader social and cultural contexts rather than focusing solely on drama and pathology. Media literacy education should be integrated into both school curricula and professional training programmes for journalists, promoting critical reading, digital responsibility and empathy in public communication.

From a sociological standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of sustained interdisciplinary collaboration among media professionals, educators, researchers, public institutions, and civil society organizations. Such cooperation is necessary to promote gender-sensitive reporting, strengthen preventive education, and develop public communication practices that address violence against women as a structural social problem rather than as a succession of isolated incidents.

Future research should extend the analysis to other media formats, including television, online news platforms, and social media, and should examine how audiences interpret and respond to different forms of media framing. Comparative and longitudinal studies could also provide a deeper understanding

of changes in the public representation of gender-based violence and of the relationship between media discourse, social attitudes, and institutional responses.

From a sociological standpoint, the article highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between media professionals, educators, and researchers to redefine the public narrative on violence against women. Building a digital culture based on respect, equality, and non-violence requires not only institutional policies but also sustained cultural change supported by responsible media discourse.

In addition, the findings suggest that future research should expand towards comparative studies involving other media formats, especially television, online news platforms, and social media. It would also be useful to analyse audience reception in order to understand how media framing influences attitudes toward victims, aggressors, and institutional responses. In the long term, preventing violence against women requires not only legal measures and support services, but also sustained cultural transformation supported by education, media responsibility, and interdisciplinary cooperation.

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