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## **Intimate Partner Femicide in the Serbian Mainstream Media: Maintaining the Patriarchal Narrative through Online Newspaper Readers' Comments**

By Jovana Čvorić<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Femicide represents the most extreme form of male violence against women (MVAW) and a growing problem in contemporary Serbian society. Despite the long-term struggle of the feminist movement to turn (lethal) MVAW into a political issue, it has remained in a private domain, out of the public eye. Due to the lack of official statistics on cases of femicide, news reports are the only source of information on this phenomenon. However, media reporting on this topic is problematic. From a feminist standpoint, this paper seeks to show how the maintenance of the patriarchal narrative about MVAW in the Serbian media impacts the audience perceptions of intimate partner femicide (IPF). The study uses critical discourse analysis to explore online readers' comments on articles relating to IPF published in four Serbian daily newspaper web portals in 2013 (when the highest number of IPFs was recorded).

*Keywords:* Intimate Partner Femicide (IPF), Male Violence against Women (MVAW), Serbian Media on Femicide, Critical Discourse Analysis.

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## Introduction

Femicide presents an increasing social problem in contemporary Serbian society. Among the population of seven million people, on average, every year at least 33 women are killed by men in the context of domestic violence (Mreža Žene Protiv Nasilja, n.d). These murders are committed, most commonly, in the family home by present or former male partners (ibid.). In spite of the fact that male violence against women (MVAW) is a public and political problem regulated by several international and national laws, it is still regarded as an exclusively female problem that should be kept far away from the public eye (Mršević, 2014b).

Although domestic violence has been a central issue among Serbian feminist activists and scholars for the last three decades, femicide has still not been adequately theoretical or empirically analysed. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to make this phenomenon as visible as possible in order not only to raise public awareness, but also to enable more in-depth research on this particular issue. Due to the lack of empirical research and government records on femicides, the only source of information is the daily (crime) news. In this respect, the Serbian mainstream mass media plays an essential role in uncovering and mapping femicide (Mršević, 2017). On the other hand, these reports are mostly gender-biased and stereotypical, which reflects that the mainstream media tend to refuse to acknowledge the social matrix in which MVAW occurs and is perpetuated. Trivial and sensational reports persistently blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator of the femicide (ibid.), drawing attention far from the root cause of the problem: structural male control over women (Radford & Russell, 1992).

Concealing the structural causes of MVAW (that I refer to in my analysis as ‘concealment mechanisms’), the mainstream media plays enormous influence over public opinion. Consequently, I consider an investigation into how regular readers react to news coverage of intimate partner femicide (IPF) to be important, and in that way to determine the impact that mass media have on audience awareness of this problem. This investigation may also prove useful in exploring the broader picture of mainstream media effects on the patriarchal narrative maintained in the Serbian historic public discourse.

Therefore, the main aims of my essay are – to examine the impact of media reporting on readers’ perception of IPF as a form of gender-based violence; and to analyse the role of the specific socio-cultural context in perpetuating patriarchal narratives about MVAW and IPF within Serbian public discourse. To do this, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the most suitable approach for analysing textual discussion (i.e. readers’ comments on articles). Specifically, I examine three main research questions:

RQ1: How do readers’ comments articulate IPF and how does that differ depending on the sex of the reader?

RQ2: Do the readers’ comments on articles about IPF reflect the ‘concealment mechanism’ of MVAW that media articles practice? If so, in what way?

RQ3: How do the readers’ comments on articles about IPF relate to the socio-cultural practice of perpetuating a patriarchal narrative of MVAW?

The main body of this essay is structured in three parts. Firstly, I pay attention to the most significant literature on the subject matter. Then, I introduce my methodology approach, as well as some research limitations. Finally, I bring together the presentation and analysis of my findings.

## Literature Review

In dealing with gender problems in the field, feminists were the first to explore the cases of women murdered by their husbands, conceptualising the phenomenon as gender-based violence and an urgent social and political problem (Radford & Russell, 1992). Sociologist and expert in MVAW, Diana Russell, was the first to define and use the term ‘femicide’ in her public lectures, emphasising the gender factor in homicide cases. For her, femicide symbolises ‘the killing of one or more females by one or more males *because* they are female’ (Russell, 2012). Investigating femicide, Radford and Russell (1992) describe a wide range of femicide: racist femicide, homophobic femicide (lesbicide), marital femicide, serial femicide, femicide committed by a stranger, and mass femicide (Radford, 1992). Over time, as the number of studies has increased, different authors have revealed yet more forms of femicide: dowry-related femicide, honour-related femicide, armed conflict-related femicide, female infanticide and genital mutilation-related femicide (Etherington & Baker, 2015, p. 3-5). Hence, femicide represents any form of male-murder of a female (of any age) in any relationship as long as it is gender-motivated. However, this paper focuses solely on the killing of women committed in the context of intimate (heterosexual) relationships.

A review of the literature shows that feminists’ endeavours to politicise the ‘personal’, by revealing (women’s) private issues as public matters, have been a critical step in the highlighting and understanding of MVAW. Specifically, feminist theory explains MVAW as an inevitable consequence of the patriarchal structure of unequally distributed political, economic, social (and even emotional) power between men and women (Cockburn, 2004). Men’s power in the family (at micro level) stems from an extensive patriarchal system (at macro level) which socialises women to endure violence. According to Taylor and Jasinski (2011), violence against women is an outcome of the subordinate position that women hold within the social structure, whereby that subordination is embedded in the traditional institution such as family. In that sense, the patriarchy’s ideal - the nuclear family, for some feminists represents ‘a prison for millions of girls and women’ (Caputi & Russell, 1992, p. 19), as it has the greatest potential for femicide. In that private and patriarchal environment, men use violence ‘to keep women under their control’ (Corradi et al., 2016, p. 979).

Therefore, feminism, as a significant ‘eye-opener’, tries to reveal all the pitfalls of patriarchal rule and how to resist them, primarily through a deconstruction of MVAW (including femicide). One of the confronting and deconstructing techniques implies insisting on the use of the term ‘femicide’ instead of other gender-neutral names for women killings (such as homicide or family murder). A careful literature review has shown that the notion ‘femicide’ (in all its forms) is still not being used frequently outside the feminist framework. However, the authors referenced in this study show how momentous it is to call the problem by its real name and not obfuscate by using euphemisms or neutral terminology. Feminists, such as Sarah Ahmed (2015), argue that the only way to reveal and fight specific social issues is through naming them, no matter how uncomfortable the subject matter. In that regard, the neologism ‘femicide’ is that revolutionary word that more than any other challenges researchers (but also all others) to continually question the social reality within the broader political and gender context.

### *Previous Research on Media Reports on IPF in Serbia*

Although Serbian social researchers have widely researched domestic violence and patriarchal culture which divide and shape gender roles, contemporary sociological literature shows that IPF is still an empirically under-explored topic (Mršević, 2017). However, thanks to

the women's NGOs that have shone the spotlight on femicide in Serbia, there are some indications of the extent of this phenomenon today. Still, all the data informing these statistics comes from mass media coverage of domestic violence with fatal outcomes and, therefore, cannot be considered reliable enough nor truly 'official'. In other words, the audience is not informed every time femicide occurs because the media editors choose which fatality cases are the most newsworthy to publish (Bullock, 2007). As Leon Sigal (cited in Bullock, 2007, p. 38) reminds us, 'news is not reality, but a sampling of reality', which is why it is imperative to observe the interaction between the media and the broader social structure in studying this topic (ibid.).

In the scholarly discourse, one of the first feminists who has started to investigate, monitor, and deeply analyse the Serbian mainstream media reporting on femicide is Zorica Mršević (2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Her long-term study provides a feminist critique of the tight relationship between the Serbian mainstream media and the patriarchal social structure. Referring to Barbara Perry's theory of hegemonic masculinity, Mršević (2013b, 2014a) shows that the media represent one of the modern institutions in which MVAW and femicide are often relativised and excused. This author demonstrates in her study how the Serbian mainstream mass media portray victims and perpetrators inadequately. At the same time, the media refuse to reveal structural causes of male violence, namely, male entitlement and coercive control (Mršević, 2017).

Mršević discovers some (repeating) patterns of how the media conceal the real causes of MVAW. Firstly, they tend to present femicide (especially IPF) as an isolated and individual (psychological) incident that is a tragedy and the problem of a particular family (Mršević, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Secondly, the media often trivialise the cases of femicide, giving stereotypical explanations such as, on the one hand, the wife's infidelity or disobedience, and on the other, the husband's (sexual) possessiveness, loss of control, pathological jealousy, alcoholism or some other mental health problem (ibid.). The media can also promote (male) experts who use biased and misogynist explanations of femicide, based on widespread gender prejudice and stereotypes (ibid.). Moreover, when they do not have other explanations, the media describe femicide as some mysterious and strange thing that remains a grim part of a family's history, utterly incomprehensible to the public. Additionally, Mršević (ibid.) remarks that journalists and news editors break professional codex and ethic norms by revealing victims' identities and violating the privacy of their family members, as well as using the passive voice, and victim blaming in reporting the cases of femicide.

Mršević investigates different forms of MVAW and IPF, but she does not explore the connection between the media coverage of femicide and the audience. Although she notices that readers' comments have value and relevance as 'the voice of the people' (Mršević, 2017, p. 13), she does not incorporate them in her analysis. Given that there is no other significant analysis of media coverage of IPF nor of analysis of the link between the media and audience, I consider this to present an opportunity for new research on the topic. In this sense, the present paper contributes to the literature, revealing insight into the mass media role in maintaining the traditional patriarchal narrative. Using a feminist framework, it analyses the online readers' comments as a part of public discourse on this topic.

## **Methodology**

The current study uses a qualitative methodology approach to answer the raised research questions. More precisely, I use CDA as a specific type of discourse analysis that enters on language analysis in-depth; it goes beyond expressed (written or spoken) text by questioning

semantics and syntactics (as sources of power), the practice of intertextuality, but also a socio-political context in which the text occurs (Bryman, 2008). Thus, CDA digs for a concealed relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1992). I consider CDA to be a suitable method for my study not only because it perceives a discourse as shaping people's interactions, but also as resulting from the 'production of knowledge' of our social reality (Fairclough, 2013). For my study, both aspects are equally important.

Exploring discourse as a social practice, Norman Fairclough (1992) establishes a logical tri-dimensional framework that includes divided forms of analysis, one inside the other: text, discursive practice and social practice. Gathering these three different but necessary analytical traditions, he further designs three steps of critical analysis which correspond to each of these dimensions: description (which implies textual/linguistic analysis), interpretation (which implies the link between the original text and its production, distribution and consumption background), explanation (which implies a broader societal environment that has an impact on both text and its production).

Relying on Fairclough's model as my methodological framework, I analyse readers' comments (as an original text) embedded within the context of online newspaper articles about IPF (as a discursive practice), which are both shaped by broader social and political (patriarchal) structure (as a socio-cultural context). By interpreting the use of the (readers' and newspapers') language as an ideological instrument, the study reveals correlations between these three dimensions. Following the methodology of Fairclough, I split my analysis into three phases, each of which answers the posed research question: description responds to RQ1, interpretation responds to RQ2, explanation responds to RQ3.

### **Data Collection and Sample**

I collected material directly from the Serbian mainstream newspapers (articles on IPF and readers' commentaries below articles). More accurately, I obtained data from the online versions of four daily mainstream newspapers: two tabloids (*Kurir* and *Blic*), one semi-tabloid (*Večernje Novosti*), and one non-tabloid (*Politika*), all released in 2013. I took into account the three newspapers portals (*Kurir*, *Blic*, and *Večernje Novosti*) out of ten most visited (estimated not just by the number of article reviews but also the number of comments posted per article), and one portal (*Politika*) without many website visitors, but as the oldest and most influential newspaper in Serbia with a large print circulation (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, n.d.). Finally, I chose to study 2013 because it was the year in which the highest rate of femicide in Serbia was recorded since the cases of femicide started to be counted (27 IPFs, 43 overall).

Collecting comments online using the Google Search Engine, I searched for IPF articles using several codewords (in Serbian), such as: Femicide, Husband killed/shot his wife, Man killed his ex-wife, Woman killed in domestic violence, Lethal domestic violence. The search resulted in a large number of articles, but for my own analysis, I have included only those related to IPF and which have reader comments (632 comments from 50 articles in total). I used the reader's comment as a unit of my analysis.

### **Research Limitations**

This study faced several limitations during the process of sampling and analysing the material. Namely, all the data were found with the help of the Google Search Engine, which is not

a totally reliable way of collecting data because it does not provide the researcher with a guarantee that (s)he has collected all the articles that exist on the required topic. For example, some newspaper articles on IPF from 2013 may have expired over time, which often happens with online content.

Another considerable constraint of the data collection was the vagueness of readers' identities and their intentions in writing and reacting to comments. The Serbian newspapers' websites and social media display the increasingly widespread phenomenon of social bots (trolls). The sites strategically post positive or negative comments, as well as provide positive or negative reviews of existing comments ('likes' or 'dislikes'), depending on the content of the news. This is in order to promote certain (political) ideas as desirable or undesirable, that is, supported or unsupported by 'ordinary people' (Reljanović, 2014). In this regard, it is hard to measure the extent to which comments demonstrate audiences' 'real' thoughts and attitudes. However, given the size of the sample, my study does not tend to present findings as final, broad truths, but presents one possible perspective on the topic at hand.

## **Presentation and Analysis of Findings**

A careful reading of rich sample enabled identification of the most important issues raised in online readers' comments. I have clustered them into four themes based on the attribution of responsibility: Misogynist and victim-blaming comments, Perpetrator-defending comments, Comments blaming the society and institutions, and Perpetrator-condemning comments. Further, I analysed these themes using Fairclough's tri-dimensional model of critical analysis (description, interpretation, and explanation).

### *Description phase (linguistic features)*

In terms of linguistic features, comments in each theme show a high level of similarity. It is easy to see that readers write in the spirit of informal verbal communication, giving the impression that the whole corpus of data is a live and interactive dialogue attached to the news (Strandberg & Berg, 2013). Thanks to the use of male and female grammatical gender in the Serbian language, it is easy to see how comments differ in terms of the readers' gender.

### *Misogynist and victim-blaming comments*

A simple, rough reading of the sample tells us that the vast majority of comments on IPF harbour a loud misogynist and victim-blaming voice. However, analysis shows that male readers are more inclined to judge and blame victims and women in general. This can be seen through their vocabulary while commenting on different IPF cases. For example, a male reader stated: '*The public' is full of lazy women who do nothing all day except play with their phones, flirt and neglect their kids. They're obsessed with their looks. [...] I have a lot of male friends who are secretly seeing at least 2 or 3 married women in various hotels! And then we wonder why all these tragedies happen'* (Kurir, 2013b).

By frequently using negative attributes for women (e.g. lazy, stupid, cheating), male readers show a significant level of gender stereotyping and sexism, which has deep roots in the Serbian language. Serbian traditional and androcentric culture has developed a symbolically intensely violent language against women, using it as an underlying mechanism of patriarchy reproduction (Miletić-Stepanović, 2006). The Serbian language uses a lot of words and idioms that describe a woman as the one who talks a lot and does not think, which is why she must be kept

under the man's control (ibid.). In that sense, it is considered a man's 'duty' to discipline a woman, both verbally and physically (Ignjatović, 2011). Therefore, by overt verbal degradation of the woman as a subject, these male readers (consciously and unconsciously) tend to maintain the subordinate status of women.

However, the analysis of nicknames and use of the feminine gender reveal that not only men condemn the victims of IPF. By using antagonistic, guilt-laden terms about women who were killed by their partners, female readers also show a degree of (internalised) misogyny. For example, commenting on the case of the cruel killing of a woman by her intimate partner and his molesting of her children from a previous marriage, one female reader says: '*Why the hell did she live with him, why didn't she leave him? I don't feel sorry for her, because she brought it on herself [...]. I feel sorry for the poor children, they must be traumatised, all thanks to their own mother*' (Kurir, 2013c).

Serbian sociologist and feminist Marina Blagojević (2002), argues that women in Serbia have passively embraced their traditional gender roles and have consequently developed a level of 'self-hatred' and hatred of other women (ibid., 48). Unable to attain the mythical standard of 'ideal woman', they denigrate themselves and all other women (ibid.), openly projecting sexist ideas even onto victims of lethal male violence. This unconsciously developed mechanism only contributes to strengthening the dominant patriarchal value system.

#### *Perpetrator-defending comments*

Closely connected to the previous theme are readers' comments that justify or show empathy for the killer. Some of them express sorrow for the victim, but at the same time find an excuse for the perpetrator. For example, one reader said: '*I feel sorry for the model [female victim, deceased], but he is just 26 years old and I also feel sorry for him, if he had known what would happen, he would never have acted like that*' (Blic, 2013c).

The analysis also shows that some male readers tend to write about IPF as a conflict between a man and a woman, and not as male violence against women. For instance, one male reader claimed that women are equally as violent as men: '*[T]he fact [is] that both men and women could be psychopaths and that guns are men's toys while women use axes to kill men while they sleep*' (Politika, 2013c). In this way, readers suggest that it is mutual aggression between actors with equal social power and position and, thus, equal responsibilities.

They also tend to deny the femicide, equating it with an accident or carelessness. One of many readers said: '*A sad story. His recklessness and a careless moment led to tragedy*' (Blic, 2013a). The choice of words in comments like this one indicates that readers do not see 'femicide as a form of punishment or social control of women by men' (Radford & Russell, 1992, p. 26). In fact, the word femicide is hardly used in comments. By calling it 'a tragedy' or 'a sad story', readers show an inability to understand and verbalise femicide as the most extreme form of MVAW.

#### *Comments blaming the society and institutions*

Careful syntax analysis reveals that readers (both male and female) use sarcasm to underline their condemnation, particularly when they direct it at society and state institutions. Sarcastic statements, as a form of figurative language, tend to shock and break the pattern of other readers' expectations (Ghosh et al., 2018), but also alleviate social anger and grief (Bohm, 1987). As a result, many readers recognise and approve the sarcastic comments by responding positively to them (liking them) in large numbers. Some comments received only positive responses to their



ironic definitions of IPF, such as: ‘*The traditional Serbian marriage dispute*’ – 84% like, 0% dislike (Blic, 2013b) or: ‘*Famous Serbian family values*’ – 100% like, 0% dislike (ibid.). However, readers’ sarcastic remarks appear more as a fatalistic justification for male violence than as a tool to thoughtfully critique the gender hierarchy within the social structure (Drucker et al., 2014). In particular, they assume that male violence is culturally legitimate and that the causes of femicide are more deeply rooted in the (Serbian) culture, but do not indicate what the causes might be. Regarding an article about a man who killed his intimate partner using a bomb, one reader put his opinion very simply: ‘*It’s a reflection of the society we live in*’ (Kurir, 2013e). Comments like this present readers’ perception of IPF causes and consequences, but only superficially, without problematising hegemonic masculinity as a leading cause of MVAW or the practice of male socialisation within Serbian culture in general.

#### *Perpetrator-condemning comments*

The negative tone in readers’ comments is easy to spot because they tend to use swear words a lot. Even though the web portals ban any insulting or degrading language, readers find a way to directly condemn killers by using words such as: ‘*slimeball*’ (Blic, 2013a), ‘*lunatics*’ (Kurir, 2013d) and so forth. The sample shows male readers vilifying perpetrators more than female readers. On the other hand, they are less able to recognise male privileges and dominance over women. By condemning perpetrators, female readers show a more feminist standpoint and verbally frame IPF as a matter of unequally distributed power among genders (Cockburn, 2004). As for instance, a one woman said: ‘*This violence [against women] is not sporadic, like, the guy was crazy, so he killed. It is part of a cultural pattern where many men think they own a partner and can do what they want without being punished*’ (Politika, 2013a).

Taking into consideration the whole description phase, I conclude (and answer RQ1) that the online readers use accusatory language to comment IPF. Their focus is mainly on blaming rather than understanding and explaining IPF as a phenomenon. Both male and female readers show a high level of subjectivity and emotional reaction to IPF articles within all analysed themes. Male readers tend to blame victims (and women in general) more and show less understanding of IPF as gender-based violence than female readers. However, a number of comments reveal the existence of internalised misogyny among female readers as well.

#### *Interpretation phase (discursive practice)*

As Fairclough (1992) suggests, intertextuality is a significant element of every CDA since it indicates how new discourses are created and interpreted. Therefore, in this phase, I interpret readers’ comments as new textual and discursive constructions created under the influence of narratives promoted within the articles on IPF.

Unlike print newspapers, web portals allow readers to react quickly and directly to news creating modern-day forums in which, provoked by articles, they design or direct public discourses on specific topics (Loke, 2012). Following the introduction of commentary as a companion section to articles, the balance of power between the media and an audience has changed. By posting comments, readers became ‘participatory journalists’ who contribute ‘public discussion rather than just consuming information’ (Brossoie et al., 2012, p. 794). They appropriate some of the media power to shape and change the attitudes and behaviour of the broader audience, ‘especially among persons less inclined to analyse and contemplate issues’ (ibid.).

However, my analysis shows that in the context of Serbian coverage of IPF, the mainstream media still hold much of the influence over readers in how they think about this social issue. Firstly,

these portals establish the specific rules and conditions under which readers can post comments. Although they allow each reader to post their opinion on the article anonymously, portal administrators carefully monitor all comments, retaining the right to censor those comments that do not comply with established portal policies. In this way, newspapers technically participate in comments' production, distribution, and consumption. Secondly, the way in which newspaper articles write about IPF substantially affects discourses on IPF among readers. This tends to confirm the theory that the media's role is not just to give us information but also to tell us how to interpret that information (McCombs, 2005).

The current analysis shows that readers' comments tend to mirror the newspapers' practice of concealing structural causes of MVAW. All four dominant themes discovered among readers' comments correlate with some 'concealment mechanisms' that the articles use in reporting on lethal MVAW. Regarding IPF in particular, most articles tend to diminish the severity of male violence by using words and phrases that imply the mutual responsibility of the offender and the victim. Titles usually allege that the victim somehow provoked a partner into violence. For example, tabloid newspaper *Kurir* (2013b) covered the case of IPF with the title: '*HE KILLED HER WITH A TROPHY CUP: She was insulting me, I couldn't stand it anymore!*' Although it quotes the perpetrator's words, such a title still provides (in an indirect way) the explanation that violence was justified, shifting part of the responsibility onto the woman. Articles like this were very stimulating for some readers who take up the victim-blaming discourse in their comments.

Another concealment mechanism that is transposed from the articles into the comments (as the perpetrator-defending discourse) concerns stereotypical explanations of male violence. Many reports mention male jealousy, mental health problems, or use of alcohol as the main causes of the violence and killings. For instance, tabloid newspaper portal *Blic* (2013a) reporting on an IPF case noted that '*there were no major problems during the seven-year relationship, until a year ago when he began drinking*'. Also, they often point out that the abuser was a '*quiet, hardworking, family man*' (*Večernje Novosti*, 2013), which increases readers' understanding and empathy for the perpetrator.

At the same time, many newspapers, seeking to attract as large an audience as possible, release sensational titles and articles that often demonise the killer. This portrayal is a concealing mechanism of MVAW because it treats IPF as a random, isolated incident that is not common and it can be committed only by '*a cold-blooded killer*' (*Blic*, 2013b) or '*a monster*' (*Kurir*, 2013a) who has lost his common sense or humanity. Such articles impose all the blame on the individual man and his personal (psychological) traits, completely obscuring the 'sexual politics of femicide' (Radford, 1992, p. 4) and hegemonic masculinity as the fundamental cause of (any kind of) gender-based violence (Mršević, 2017). Following this media discourse, as has been stated, some readers tend to direct their condemnation solely at the individual perpetrator.

Finally, although most articles report on increasing domestic violence, they rarely contextualise it as an issue of the male-dominated culture. For example, tabloids analysed in this study do not have any analytical articles on the topic of femicide. Moreover, in reporting cases of IPF, they do not use the word femicide at all. On the other hand, the semi-tabloid and non-tabloid newspapers provide some expert opinions on the IPF. However, more often than not they give stereotypical interpretations seen through the eyes of individual criminologists who deny femicide as a gender-based crime. These quasi-experts assert that femicide is the same as homicide because it '*is always just a crime against a human being, regardless of sex or age*' (*Politika*, 2013b). Admittedly, only the non-tabloid newspaper provides some space for expert views on femicide as a socially and institutionally tolerated practice of male domination over women. Nevertheless,

considering the number of comments below such articles (less than ten), it seems that the pro-feminist view on femicide has not reached the greater portion of the online audience.

Newspapers' practise of hiding the real causes of MVAW in their articles on IPF not only impacts on writing comments (text production) but also reading and responding to them by other readers (text distribution and consumption). Sensationalist coverage attracts far more attention and heated reaction among readers than analytical coverage. Therefore, tabloids have not just a greater production of comments but also those comments' distribution and consumption. To illustrate, analytical articles on IPF in the web portal *Politika* carry only a small number of comments and no 'likes' or 'dislikes'. On the other hand, trivial articles in *Kurir*, *Blic* and *Večernje Novosti* web portals encourage readers to interact with each other by using 'like' and 'dislike' comments options in large number. This is a quite important segment of discursive practice because it shows that even readers who do not produce comments are still involved in their consumption, nonverbally supporting certain discourses on IPF.

By looking at the broader picture, this phase of analysis answers my RQ2. Placing the previous level of study within the context of IPF articles on newspaper web portals, one can see that readers' comments to a large extent reflect the media practice of concealing structural causes of MVAW and IPF. The influence of intertextuality in the creation of (new) comments and discourses shows the scope of the (hidden) power that the Serbian media have on readers.

#### *Explanation phase (socio-cultural practice)*

As Fairclough (1995) remarks, the explanation phase focuses on different aspects of socio-cultural practice: economic, political and cultural. It discusses the phenomenon in relation to ideology and power, forces that (covertly) permeate the social environment and profoundly impact the way people see the world around them (Foucault, 1972). Therefore, the patriarchal narrative is analysed here as a powerful socio-cultural backdrop that affects IPF discourses, both in the Serbian media (newspapers) and among readers.

In Serbia, in the 1990s, under the influence of nationalism and Milošević's politics of war, violence and aggression began to be normalised, both within public (political) and private (gender) relations (Vujadinović & Stanimirović, 2017). This kind of socio-cultural environment evoked the subculture of honour, as a significant form of traditional Serbian culture, in order to preserve the concept of male domination and status in society (Pavićević et al., 2016). In the private domain, this subculture of honour has manifested itself as domestic violence; male aggression is directed (mostly) towards a woman as a practice in the preservation of masculine principle (of honour) and authority (ibid.).

Paradoxically, the retrograde subculture of homophobia, misogyny, and MVAW continued to occur even after democratic changes (Vujadinović & Stanimirović, 2017). Namely, right-wing cliques have become close allies of almost every government established after 2000 (Drezgić, 2010). They openly promoted the values of the 'traditional Serbian family' and, by extension, the traditionally subordinate position of women (ibid.). Turning a blind eye to the escalating IPF phenomenon, political elites have contextualised MVAW as an individual and private matter. Moreover, the Serbian Orthodox Church, a religious organisation hugely influential among the population, also played an important symbolic part in interrupting emancipatory processes within the sphere of gender relations (Vujadinović & Stanimirović, 2017). By promoting the stereotype about a woman as 'guardian of the Serbian genus', whose natural and essential role is to be a good mother and an obedient wife (Peščanik, 2007), the religious elite has upheld the heteronormative and patriarchal social order. By 'othering' feminism and feminists as enemies of Serbian tradition

and culture, they have negatively influenced public attitudes towards ideas of gender equality. As Blagojević (2002) argues, antifeminism was perceived as patriotic resistance necessary for the survival of the Serbian nation.

Furthermore, this conservative public discourse was synchronised with the privatisation of the media, which in turn was intimately bound up with the political context. Instead of total independence from the State and political influence, private media owners become close associates of government (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, n.d.). Caught between neoliberal globalisation and conservative (local) political culture, the media have become a space for the (re)production of (new) patriarchy (Vujadinović & Stanimirović, 2017). Women have become degraded through tabloid porn displays of their sexuality and at the same time have been ghettoised in the sphere of traditional gender roles (ibid.).

However, democratic changes and transitional processes have (normatively) brought some forms of gender equality, through pressure from international organisations such as the UN or the EU (ibid.). By 2013, the Serbian government had adopted several laws and national strategies for the promotion of gender equality (e.g. The Law on Gender Equality, 2009; The National Strategy for Improving the Position of Women and Promoting Gender Equality 2009–2015). But, the State did not show full determination and willingness to enact the said policy through implementation of the laws. In 2013 the social reality remained unfavourable for women. For example, even though women have exercised their right to work and have entered the labour market in large numbers, their employment rate was lower than in almost all EU countries, while female unemployment rates were among the highest (Babović, 2016).

This weak economic position for women was also accompanied by disregard for gender equality in the private domain. Women have borne a double burden because, besides being in full-time employment, they were still performing the childcare and household chores alone (Bobić, 2003). All the symmetry of the (premarital) relationship disappears when the couple gets married and has children (ibid.). From that point, the woman falls back into the traditional role; her skills, capacities and goodwill are exploited. Men's dominance, on the other hand, has remained strong. Although no longer the sole breadwinners in the family, they have retained authority and economic power (Vujadinović and Stanimirović, 2017).

In many ways, the whole societal construct can be understood as a new form of patriarchy which combines some emancipatory elements with old patterns of male hegemony (ibid.). This mixture of a modern and traditional arrangement of gender roles is evident in my research as well. Readers show acceptance of female emancipation by recognising woman's right to study and work but, on the other hand, they still believe that men are naturally superior. By hiding behind quasi-equality, views like that keep the concept of male supremacy and strong hierarchical power structure alive both within a family and public life.

This final phase answers my RQ3 and shows that, by reinforcing the nationalist and antifeminist discourses, the major pillars of the patriarchal system (political, religious and media establishments) support the old hierarchical structure and all the male privileges within it. They understand gender equality as the main threat to Serbian tradition and 'family values', which has consequently influenced the public perception of MVAW. By integrating the previous stages of analysis within the socio-cultural context, one can see that online readers' comments to IPF articles correspond to the societal practice of maintaining the patriarchal narrative (about MVAW) among the Serbian public.

## **Conclusion**

The integration of the various stages of analysis yielded a broader picture of how the IPF phenomenon is presented in media and understood among readers, and why the patriarchal narrative frames it continuously. In this study, I highlighted the issue of IPF in Serbian society from a different and yet unexplored angle – the online (newspaper) readers' perspective. Considering online comments on news stories as a relevant form of readers' participation in public discourse, I examined the media's power and influence in maintaining the patriarchal narrative about MVAW and IPF. Since the media play an essential role not only in informing but also in educating the public about (acceptable) gender identities and roles, their ability to understand and present IPF as the most extreme form of MVAW is crucial. The media should ideally play the role of a socially responsible actor that criticises negative social phenomena and hence helps raise public awareness about them. To that end, I hope my study might encourage recognition of the importance of how the media frames coverage of IPF, and particularly to challenge their patriarchal narration of such crimes. In future research projects, it could be interesting to investigate what, if anything has changed in the perception of internet audiences regarding IPF after 2013 and to extend research sampling to newspaper pages on increasingly popular social networks such as Twitter and Facebook.

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