The Influence of Linguistic Framing on the Perception of Femicide

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Bachelor's Thesis

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24 June, 2025

Abstract

This research investigates the effect of linguistic framing in news articles on the perception of femicide. According to multiple theories, such as framing theory, language can have a significant influence on the cognition of individuals, changing how information is processed. It was hypothesized that trivializing language in news reporting would predict lower blame attribution toward the perpetrator, lower perceived crime severity, and lower recognition of femicide as part of a larger pattern of gender-based violence. This study adopted a between-subjects experimental design, randomly assigning a total of 152 participants to one of the framing conditions covering the same event in a news article (trivializing vs. explicit framing of femicide). A questionnaire was created to measure perceived crime severity, blame attribution, and recognition of the systemic pattern behind femicides, along with hostile sexism as a potential predictor. The results point out the significance of language, as the explicit framing condition increased the recognition of femicide as a structural issue and increased ratings of crime severity. No significant framing effect was found for blame attribution. Additionally, hostile sexism negatively affected all three main outcomes. The effect of framing persisted even after controlling for hostile sexism, revealing the strength of the effect, regardless of pre-existing sexist attitudes. The results emphasize how language choice can reinforce societal attitudes and cognitive patterns in the context of gender-based violence, calling on media and policymakers to use language as a tool to raise awareness and foster prevention.

Keywords. Femicide, linguistic framing, gender-based violence, hostile sexism

The Influence of Linguistic Framing on the Perception of Femicide

Words can shape reality. Language is capable of far more than only serving for communication, because it not only influences cognition but also constructs memory and perception (Marcelino, 2024). This formative power of words cannot only be applied to individual thinking but also extends to the social level, as people categorize and process information based on linguistic frameworks, influencing how complex social problems are perceived (Flusberg et al., 2024). Especially in the media, this shaping effect becomes significant, as it has the power to frame information as urgent or marginal. A case where the role of media has been explicitly highlighted in the past few years is the reporting of gender-based violence. In the last five years, the number of reported femicide victims has risen by 17,5% and even reached its highest level since the beginning of records in 2023 (UN Women, 2023). However, the fact that these offences are not merely referred to as homicides, but explicitly as femicides, has only developed over the last few years and is receiving increasing attention due to pressure from feminist movements and the public (Sherovska, 2023).

Femicide

Femicide is defined as the killing of a woman or a girl because of her sex (UN Women, 2023). Femicides are the most severe form of gender-based violence (GBV) and essentially differ from a homicide in that the act is based on patriarchal motives, such as claims of possession and principles of “honour”. Not every killing of a woman is therefore a femicide, but only those that are caused by unequal gender relations, where power imbalances, patriarchal norms, and systemic discrimination contribute to violence against women. For example, most femicides occur as a result of separation situations, such as during a breakup or a divorce (Smith, 2019). These situations often raise the risk of violence, as they challenge the perpetrator’s perceived control over the victim. This means that women in hierarchical relationships and after separations are particularly at risk. Almost every day in

2023, a woman or girl was killed in Germany because of their gender. 84.6% of completed or attempted femicides were committed by men, in most cases by (ex-)partners or other family members (Statista, 2024).

In many cases, femicide victims have already suffered from prolonged non-fatal GBV (e.g., violence and oppression) during the relationship, but according to the German Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Lisa Paus, this stays unreported to the police in two-thirds of all cases, which is why they assume the number of unreported cases of GBV to be significantly higher than the existing case numbers (Bundeskriminalamt [BKA], n.d.). This underreporting of non-fatal GBV that often precedes femicide puts women at an even greater risk and highlights the need to raise public awareness and develop measures to protect victims and facilitate access to help.

A relevant key factor in shaping public perceptions is the media, which potentially contributes to the persistent underreporting of GBV. The perception of social problems, such as femicide, is strongly shaped by the news media (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). It cannot only influence how drastically an issue is portrayed but also play it down using language as a tool, which consequently could influence the victim's perception of their situation and impede the decision to file a report. Framing Theory suggests that news media consciously place information in a certain frame to influence how it is perceived by the audience (Entman, 1993). Hence, news media construct specific linguistic frames that impact social cognition and perception of the reported events. Based on these main components, this study will aim to answer the following research question:

"How does the linguistic framing of femicide in news articles influence the public perception of gender-based violence?"

Theoretical Framework

Psycholinguistics and Media Influence

Psycholinguistics can be defined as a discipline that explores the way in which language and cognition are inevitably intertwined, revealing the mental processes involved in conscious and unconscious perception (Marcelino, 2024). Language is the result of cognitive processes and has a profound impact on social cognition. Whorf (1956) hypothesizes that the structure of language used influences the understanding of one's environment, meaning that individual perception of reality depends on the language that constructs it.

Language plays a crucial role in shaping perception, as linguistic structures influence how individuals process and categorize reality. The categorization and prototype theory by Lloyd and Rosch (1978) argues that words are processed in flexible, experience-based ways rather than dictionary-defined ways, therefore being susceptible to reinforcement of certain perceptual biases. This means that people give definition to words themselves, depending on how they are encountered. On a neurological level, the meaning of language as learned associations is built through repeated exposure and context, which strengthen neural networks (Kuhl, 2010). These insights illustrate the power of language as a tool that not only shapes perception but also interacts with individual cognitive processes.

This is also reflected in the Cognitive Load and Schema Theory (Bartlett, 1932; Sweller, 1994), which states that the way information is processed depends on mental shortcuts people use to reduce cognitive effort. The categorization and recall of events, therefore depend on the schemas which individuals build on language. Frazer and Miller (2008) found that passive wording in the description of domestic violence affects how readers assign responsibility to perpetrators and reduces blame attribution. Namely, phrasing the crime as something that happened to the victim rather than using an active verb to put a focus on the perpetrator's offence. This passive framing can shift the focus away from accountability and undermine the role of the offender, potentially influencing public perception by diminishing the severity of the act and reducing the blame of the perpetrator

(Bohner, 2001). Given this theoretical background, language cannot only activate and reinforce cognitive schemas about gender-based violence at an individual level but also shape collective societal narratives that might manifest in the way crimes like femicide are interpreted.

In the particular case of the femicide news, countless examples of framing have attracted a lot of attention as societal awareness has grown. “Domestic Drama” or “Crime of Passion” are very typical, trivialising expressions in the media that not only relativise the crime itself, but also ignore the broader patriarchal structures behind it, that enable gender-based violence in the first place (Schnepf & Christmann, 2023). Activists and official institutions have repeatedly criticized such formulations for downplaying the severity of femicide and shifting the focus away from social responsibility. This critique gained increasing public attention in recent years and led to broader linguistic shifts in the media, such as the explicit usage of the word femicide (Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023).

However, the language used in news reporting still contributes to the perception of femicides as isolated cases rather than as a structural issue, potentially resulting in a lower sense of urgency for policy interventions (Rovenţa-Frumuşani & Stoica, 2023). This perception is created by emotionally charged frames that emphasize the crime as a tragic outcome of interpersonal dynamics. Conversely, explicit terminology and the underlying link to structural causes could increase awareness of the urgency of governmental responses. Considering the role of the government in this debate, there is still ongoing controversy in Germany about the fact that femicide in the context of a separation homicide is in most cases ‘only’ classified as a general homicide offence instead of murder, as it is not considered a criminal offence in its own right (Bayer et al., 2024). This is because the motives for the offence, for example jealousy, are predominantly classified as base motives and are based on a separation originating from the victim themselves (Heinrich, 2022). This problematic lack

of differentiation reinforces patriarchal claims of ownership. Bayer et al. (2024) highlight that to date, no gender-specific motives for murder have been mentioned in the German criminal law system, which overlooks the specific systemic patriarchal motivations for the offence. Therefore, Germany represents a particularly illustrative example of a country in which femicide remains legally and discursively underacknowledged, even though Germany has international obligations through the Istanbul Convention, which requires the state to protect women against all forms of violence and develop laws and policies against them (Council of Europe, 2011). The absence of legal classification might additionally reinforce implicit societal norms that relativize the severity of femicide and could indirectly legitimize trivializing media framings.

The reason why certain social norms and understandings are so established in society can be explained by internalisation theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Language plays a key role in this process, as repeated exposure to certain linguistic patterns can ensure that they become deeply embedded in the perception of reality and the personality. In the case of femicide, this theory therefore plays an essential role, as it can explain how the normalisation of certain frames could shape the view of femicide. Through trivialising terms, readers can therefore subconsciously internalise views that relativize the severity of femicides. This could lead to the labelling of such cases as private conflicts, rather than systemic issues.

Study Purpose and Hypotheses

Existing research on news coverage concerning GBV focuses mainly on intimate partner violence, based on methodologically comparing existing news articles, and is exploratory by nature. A study by Richards et al. (2011) focused specifically on the news coverage of femicide cases within six years and examined both the language and the context in which the cases are presented (individual or structural). It was found that while blaming the victims decreased compared to older reports, the categorisation in a structural context of

intimate partner violence tended to show a low percentage. Content analysis across many different studies has revealed that news media tend to portray femicide cases as individual crimes, without placing them in the context of patriarchy (Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023). Another more recent study by Taccini and Mannarini (2024) systematically reviewed media framing of intimate partner violence (IPV) victims across multiple articles, revealing several framing techniques such as presenting IPV as isolated events, victim blaming, and downplaying the severity of violence. Most of the articles left out important contextual details and used trivializing language, which contributed to their conclusion that linguistic framing can lead to higher victim blaming, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and disregard the structural nature of the crime. Their results reinforce the idea that news language influences the perception and cognitive processing of the audience by showing the role of trivializing language specifically in victim blaming.

While existing research has already highlighted the role of news media language on the perception of IPV, research remains limited regarding the effect of linguistic framing on the public perception of femicide. Most of the existing studies are based on content analysis of news articles and explore the framing of IPV or femicide, but it remains unknown how different linguistic framings influence the perception of the audience in a controlled environment. It is important to investigate the extent to which certain linguistic choices influence the perception of femicide, as social reality is created through language. (Whorf, 1956). In combination with knowledge about the socially guiding influence of the media, closing this knowledge gap can contribute to a better understanding of how public perceptions are shaped and potentially contribute to legal and social debates about the explicit differentiation of femicide. This literature review leads to the central guiding hypotheses of this study:

H1: Trivializing language in news reports leads to lower perceived crime severity of femicides.

H2: Trivializing language in news reports leads to lower blame attribution toward the perpetrator.

H3: Trivializing language in news reports leads to lower recognition of femicide as part of a larger pattern of gender-based violence.

Methods

Design

This experimental study employed a between-subjects design with two conditions to which the participants were randomly assigned. The independent variable for this study was the linguistic framing of femicide, with one condition adopting a trivializing frame, while the other condition used an explicit frame. The dependent variables include perceived seriousness of the crime, recognition of femicide as part of a larger pattern of gender-based violence and perpetrator blame. To control for the prior exposure to media coverage about femicide, an assessment of the level of exposure was conducted afterwards.

Participants

After this study was provided with ethical approval (250629) by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente, it was added to the online platform SONA to recruit participants. The recruitment platform provides students at the University of Twente with the opportunity to collect points to complete their mandatory test subject hours. Additionally, social media platforms and snowball sampling recruited the convenience sample of participants. It was required to be at least 18 years old and have a proficient level of either English or German to participate in this study.

To estimate, how many participants are required for the main hypothesized effects, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). The analysis has shown that a minimum sample size of 68 participants would be required to achieve power of .80., based on the assumption of a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of $\alpha = .05$. This requirement was fulfilled to a sufficient extent. Overall, 182 participants started the survey, from which 152 completed the main survey, including 2 participants in the explicit condition who did not fill out the demographic questions at the end, and were excluded from the demographic breakdown but kept in the data analysis. The demographic data refers to 150 participants, of whom 68.67% identified as female ($n = 103$), 30.67% as male ($n = 46$), and 0.67% as diverse ($n = 1$). 90.67% of the participants were German ($n = 136$), followed by 2.00% French ($n = 3$) and 7.33% from other nationalities ($n = 11$) including Dutch, Belgian, Finnish, Kazakh, Mexican, Portuguese, Serbian, Turkish and Swiss. Regarding education, participants were distributed across several levels, with the majority of 32.00% reporting a high school degree ($n = 48$), 26.67% a bachelor's degree ($n = 40$), 22.67% obtained intermediate secondary education ($n = 34$), 16.00% had a master's degree or higher ($n = 24$) and 2.67% completed lower secondary education ($n = 4$). The participants in the sample had a mean age of 22.9 years (SD=3.4), a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 86.

Individual analyses were conducted to check for equal distribution of gender, nationality, age and educational background among the two conditions. All tests supported successful random assignment. To examine whether gender distribution differed across the two conditions, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The results were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 150) = 1.30$, $p = .52$, suggesting equal distribution of gender. The result of a chi-square test of independence for education level also indicates no significant difference between the two framing conditions, $\chi^2(4, N = 150) = 4.51$, $p = .34$. To test whether nationality (German vs. Other) differed between the two conditions, the same

test was conducted and showed statistically non-significant results, $\chi^2(1, N = 150) = 0.05$, $p = .82$, suggesting equal distribution across conditions. Lastly, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to check for equal distribution of participant age between the two conditions and indicates similarly distributed age, $F(1, 148) = 0.45$, $p = .50$.

Materials

The survey was administered in English and German and consisted of four main areas of interest, each measuring a different construct based on previous research and questionnaires. The constructs measured were: Hostile Sexism, Perceived Crime Severity, Blame Attribution and Societal Pattern Recognition (Appendix B).

Participants were presented with one of two framing versions of a short news article, based on a real-life media article. Both versions covered the same situation of a woman who was killed by her ex-partner but described the crime with different linguistic means depending on the experimental condition. The news articles had similar length and provided the same details about the victim and the offender, except for one additional sentence that emphasizes systemic blame in the explicit condition and one sentence that emphasizes situational blame in the trivializing condition (Appendix C).

In the trivializing framing condition, the article resorted to words that framed the crime as an isolated event and tragic result of a failed relationship. Already the headline sets the scene as emotionally driven, by referring to it as “Crime of Passion”. Other specific terminology that framed the event as a tragic turn were “uncontrollable rage” and the break-up was specifically framed to be the reason “which led him to be devastated about losing the woman he loved”. This emotionally charged language was supposed to create an isolated narrative that distracts from the deeper lying motives. The wording reflects previously found patterns from media content analyses which have shown to increase victim blaming and reduced recognition of structural context (Taccini & Mannarini, 2024).

The explicit framing condition clarified the crime already in the headline “Femicide in Berlin: Woman Killed by Ex-Partner in Gender-Based Attack”. The crime was labelled with accurate terminology, emphasizing the structural and patriarchal motivation behind the crime. The article referred to “possessiveness and control”, “power imbalances” and “patriarchal norms”, highlighting the structural nature of femicides and giving broader societal context. This terminology was used in line with the findings of Louis and the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (2021), according to which the referencing of power dynamics and control reveals the structural roots and shifts the focus to systemic oppression in cases of GBV.

Hostile Sexism

To examine how pre-existing attitudes toward women may influence the perception of femicide, the Hostile Sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory was administered at the beginning of the questionnaire. The inventory originally developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) measures sexist attitudes toward women, along the subscales hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism (Rollero et al., 2014). The subscale measures overtly negative attitudes toward women, specifically those who reject traditional gender roles and challenge patriarchal narratives. It consists of 11 items, originally measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree”, with a score of 1, to “strongly agree”, with a score of 5. To enhance uniformity within the survey, this scale was measured on a 5-point Likert scale. A higher score represents a higher endorsement of hostile sexist beliefs. For this study, only the Hostile Sexism subscale seemed relevant to include for the purpose of investigating sexist attitudes of participants. Benevolent Sexism was not included because the items measure constructs, such as heterosexual intimacy, that were not directly related to the research aim. Overall, the Hostile Sexism subscale shows good internal reliability ($\alpha = .84$).

Perceived Crime Severity

While there are existing questionnaires that measure the perception of crime severity, often referred to as crime seriousness (Zebel et al., 2017), the extreme nature of a crime such as femicide would have probably led to ceiling effects and the items were therefore considered to be unsuitable for this study. Hence, to capture the perception of the crime severity (PCS) in the specific context of gender-based violence, a custom scale was developed by the researcher, which indirectly measures crime severity. The scale consisted of six items, including statements such as “Reading about this crime makes me anxious”, “I feel upset when I learn about these crimes happening” and “Reading about this crime influences how cautious I am in daily activities.” Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree”, with a score of 1, to “strongly agree”, with a score of 5. A higher score indicates that the crime has been perceived as more severe. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to validate the scales. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was acceptable (KMO = .77), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. All six items loaded strongly on a single factor (all factor loadings > .46) with an eigenvalue of 2.19, explaining 36.5% of variance. The internal reliability of the scale was evaluated in the data analysis and shown to be acceptable ($\alpha = .76$).

Blame Attribution

To assess the blame attributed to the offender, another self-constructed scale was developed by the researcher since no standardized questionnaire was found to measure the context specific perception. The items capture both internal and external attributions, putting a focus on intent, control and justification through situational influence, which are key aspects that have been discussed in theories on blame attribution (Kelley, 1973). The six statements include for example: “The actions of the offender were justified”, “The offender is entirely responsible for the incident” and “The offender’s actions are understandable given

the circumstances." Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree", with a score of 1, to "strongly agree", with a score of 5. A higher score indicates that higher blame was attributed to the offender in the scenario. The scale also showed one-dimensionality, with factor loadings ranging from .40 to .74 and an eigenvalue of 1.86, explaining 31.0% of the variance. The internal reliability was acceptable but lower than other scales ($\alpha = .60$). However, when BA1 ("The offender had control over his actions") and BA2 ("The offender acted intentionally") were excluded, the internal reliability improved significantly ($\alpha = .73$) and factor loadings of the reduced scale ranged from .37 to .81, with an eigenvalue of 1.76, explaining 44.1% of variance. Although BA1 and BA2 both focus on intention and may even indirectly question the offender's rationality, the items only displayed a moderate inter-item correlation ($r = .36$), suggesting insufficient coherence to be combined into a separate subscale. Consequently, it was decided not to include them as a separate construct. Since the reduced 4-item scale showed improved psychometric quality and seems to measure the construct more efficiently, only the remaining scale items (BA3 - BA6) were incorporated in the analyses. Therefore, when referring to the scale as BA, only the reduced scale is considered.

Recognition of the Systemic Pattern

Since femicides occur within a larger systemic pattern of gender-based violence, the intent was to measure whether participants perceived the crime described as part of a broader social issue. A custom scale was developed, due to the lack of an existing standardized questionnaire. The eight items were specifically designed to assess whether participants recognized the structural dimensions, such as patriarchal norms and systemic inequality behind the framing of the crime. The items were formulated either general or article related. For example: "The article suggests that this crime is part of a larger social trend", "The crime is part of a larger social trend", and "The gender of the victim contributed to the motive of the

crime." Higher scores indicate stronger recognition of the crime as part of the broader gender-based violence pattern. The EFA indicated a robust one-factor solution, with an eigenvalue of 3.04, accounting for 38.0% of variance, with factor loadings above .63, except for one item (SPR1:" The crime described in the article is an exceptional case") loading moderately (FL = .37). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Cronbach's alpha for the scale indicated good internal consistency (α = .81).

Control Questions

To check for individual differences in prior knowledge, two questions were asked about the familiarity with and prior exposure to femicide. The first item ("How familiar are you with the term femicide?") measured self-reported familiarity on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Not familiar at all") to 5 ("Extremely Familiar"). The second item ("How often do you encounter news coverage about femicide?") aimed to assess prior media exposure to the topic and was measures on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 ("Never") to 6 ("Very frequently"). These questions were not part of the main construct but were treated as additional control variables and further examined in the exploratory analyses.

Procedure

Before completing the survey on the Qualtrics website, the participants were informed about the procedure of the study as well as the confidential and anonymous processing of their data. The participants were told that it was about the effect media coverage of crime has on perception. It was explicitly omitted that the focus would be on the perception of femicides to prevent influencing the responses on the survey. However, a disclaimer was added to the opening statement, warning about possibly disturbing content that discusses an extreme case of violence. Additionally, they were informed about the entirely voluntary participation of the study that could be terminated without penalty at any time. After

consenting, they first completed the items measuring hostile sexism. Before the next part, another disclaimer informed about the news article presented on the next side to which the participants got randomly allocated to. The article presented the same case of a femicide, either using legitimate terminology and a short explanation or trivializing language, that frames the crime as an isolated, emotionally driven event. Following that, both groups were asked to respond to the items measuring perceived severity of the crime, blame attribution, and the recognition of femicide as part of a larger pattern of gender-based violence. To control for prior media exposure, two control questions about femicide familiarity were asked after that. At the end, participants were asked demographic questions, namely their exact age, gender, nationality and highest level of education. In the end statement, the participants were fully debriefed of the nature of the study and provided with German and Dutch sources of support against gender-based violence.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted in RStudio (R version 4.2.3), using the packages psych (Revelle, 2024), car (Fox & Weisberg, 2019), ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016), dplyr (Wickham et al., 2023), lmtest (Zeileis & Hothorn, 2002), effectsize (Ben-Shachar et al., 2020) and REdaS (Friedrich & Konietschke, 2023). Before any analysis, the dataset was reviewed and cleaned to ensure accuracy and consistency. To evaluate the internal consistency and validity of the self-constructed scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed, and exploratory factor analyses were conducted. The suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Descriptive Statistics were calculated to summarize the demographics and the variables of interest: Hostile Sexism (HS), Perceived Crime Severity (PCS), Blame Attribution (BA), and Systemic Pattern Recognition (SPR). A bivariate Pearson correlation matrix was used to assess the relationship between the dependent variables and the predictor

variable (hostile sexism). For the main hypothesis testing, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to assess whether scores on PCS, BA, and SPR differed between the two experimental groups (trivializing vs. explicit framing), while controlling for hostile sexism. This method was chosen to achieve greater precision than with independent t-tests. Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated to assess the magnitude of these differences. Next, multiple linear regression analyses were performed to evaluate the influence of experimental condition and the predictor variable hostile sexism. At last, assumptions were tested to ensure the validity of the models. The normality of residuals was evaluated using Shapiro-Wilk tests and QQ plots. Multicollinearity was checked using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics were computed for each scale across the full sample and each condition separately. In total, 152 participants were included in the analysis, with 74 participants assigned to the trivializing condition, and 78 participants in the explicit condition. The four key variables were Hostile Sexism, Perceived Crime Severity, Blame Attribution and Systemic Pattern Recognition. As shown in Table 1, hostile sexism levels were overall low, indicating that participants in both groups expressed low sexist attitudes. The differences in means are evident for the contrast between the two conditions, with the explicit group displaying notably higher scores than the trivializing group, supporting the hypothesized effect of linguistic framing for PCS and SPR. However, the mean scores for BA were relatively high and similar across both conditions.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Variables by Condition

Variable	Condition	*M*	*SD*
Hostile Sexism	Explicit	2.20	0.74

	Trivializing	2.16	0.67
PCS	Explicit	4.24	0.63
	Trivializing	3.96	0.66
BA	Explicit	4.58	0.45
	Trivializing	4.61	0.52
SPR	Explicit	3.86	0.69
	Trivializing	3.44	0.79

Note. PCS = Perceived Crime Severity; BA = Blame Attribution; SPR = Systemic Pattern Recognition.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation matrix for the overall sample was computed to examine the relationship between the main variables and the predictor variable hostile sexism. As shown in Table 2, hostile sexism was significantly negatively correlated with PCS, BA and SPR. All correlations between the dependent variables were moderate and positive, indicating shared underlying perception patterns. Additionally, correlation analyses were conducted individually for each framing condition. The results displayed correlations very similar to the total sample, without any outstanding differences between the two conditions.

Table 2
Pearson Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Key Variables (Total Sample, N = 152)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1.HS	2.17	0.71	–			
2.PCS	4.10	0.65	-.38**	–		
3.BA	4.60	0.49	-.36**	.27**	–	
4.SPR	3.65	0.77	-.42**	.50**	.30**	–

*Note. All correlations are Pearson r coefficients rounded to two decimals. **p < .01.*

Hypothesis Testing

Before testing the hypotheses, assumption tests were conducted for each dependent variable. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the residuals, which showed that the assumption of normality was accepted for SPR (p = .332) but violated for PCS (p = .0004) and BA (p = <.001). Furthermore, homoscedasticity was tested using the Breusch-Pagan test, revealing that the assumption was met for PCS (p = .94), but violated for BA (p = .033) and SPR (p = .048). Due to these violations, multiple regression analyses were performed instead of t-tests, as they are more robust to minor violations of these assumptions. Additionally, the sample size was sufficiently large to consider the analysis appropriate, nonetheless. To examine the effect of the different conditions on the perception on femicide, multiple regression analyses were conducted for each dependent variable with the trivializing group (Group_Dummy = 0) as the reference category. Participants in the trivializing condition were compared to those in the explicit condition.

Multiple Regression Analyses

Three multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine to what extent hostile sexism and linguistic framing predicted each dependent variable. Hostile Sexism has been included in this analysis to evaluate whether it serves as an individual predictor variable of the perceptions measured. Furthermore, it served to gain a deeper understanding of which factors play a role in shaping the responses. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that hostile sexism proved to be a significantly negative predictor for each dependent variable, meaning that participants who scored high on hostile sexism rated the crime as less severe, attributed less blame to the perpetrator and were less likely to recognize the systemic pattern behind the crime. Even when controlling for hostile sexism, the framing condition significantly predicted higher scores for PCS (B = 0.27, SE = 0.10, p = .005) and SPR (B = 0.42, SE = 0.11, p < .001). While the initial analysis for the entire BA scale with all six items

showed to be marginally significant (B = 0.16, SE = 0.08, p = .035), this effect disappeared with the reduced 4-item scale and showed no significant effect of framing on BA (B = -0.03, SE = 0.07, p = .725). These results suggest that PCS and SPR scores in the explicit group are significantly higher than in the trivializing group, while the effect of linguistic framing on BA scores was found to be non-significant. These findings demonstrate the hypothesized effects of linguistic framing on the perception of crime severity and recognition of the systemic pattern, even when controlling for hostile sexism, but not for blame attribution.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analyses

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
		PCS			
Condition*	0.27	0.10	0.08	0.47	.005
Hostile Sexism	-0.35	0.07	-0.49	-0.21	*<.001*
		BA			
Condition	-0.03	0.07	-0.17	0.12	.725
Hostile Sexism	-0.25	0.05	-0.35	-0.14	*<.001*
		SPR			
Condition	0.42	0.11	0.20	0.65	*<.001*
Hostile Sexism	-0.45	0.08	-0.61	-0.29	*<.001*

Note. * Trivializing group is the reference group (0); *CI = Confidence Interval; PCS = Perceived Crime Severity; BA = Blame Attribution; SPR = Systemic Pattern Recognition.*

Exploratory Analyses

Femicide familiarity and prior exposure to the topic have both been added as control questions to the survey. To test, whether it influenced the outcome variables, correlation analyses were conducted, and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. The results in Table 4 show that both familiarity and prior exposure were positively correlated with PCS

and SPR, while for BA only familiarity showed significant correlation. Prior exposure was not significantly correlated with BA (r = .15).

This indicated that participants with a higher score on those two control questions tended to perceive the crime as more severe and better recognized the structural pattern of the crime. Participants with a higher femicide familiarity attributed higher blame toward the perpetrator, while prior exposure had no significant effect on blame attribution.

To ensure that participants in both conditions did not significantly differ in prior knowledge, it was examined whether there were group differences on the control variables. Independent samples t-tests were conducted and showed no significant difference for familiarity (M = 3.84 for both groups, $t(148.96) = -0.04$, $p = .974$). Similarly, no significant difference was found for prior exposure, $t(148.95) = -0.22$, $p = .823$, with comparable means for the trivializing (M = 3.80) and the explicit condition (M = 3.84).

Additional analysis was conducted to test for interaction effects, to explore whether femicide familiarity or prior exposure moderated the group effect. Separate regression analyses were performed with the interaction terms between group and either femicide familiarity or exposure for each of the main outcome variables. None of these models showed significant interaction effects, suggesting that despite positive correlations with some of the outcome variables, they did not significantly interact with the main hypothesized relationships between the framing condition and the outcome variables.[1]

To examine whether hostile sexism could have been a potential moderator, additional regression models were performed including the interaction effects between group and hostile sexism. The results showed to be like the other interaction models, as none of the effects were significant, indicating that hostile sexism does not influence the effect of the framing condition itself.

[1] See Appendix D for results of exploratory interaction effects

Furthermore, correlation analysis was conducted for age to test whether it affected the outcome variables but showed no meaningful correlation. However, age was negatively correlated with femicide familiarity (r =-.42) and femicide exposure (r = -.27), indicating that older participants were less familiar with the term and less exposed to the topic than younger participants. This suggests a generational difference in awareness.

Lastly, in each of the main regression models, gender was examined as an independent predictor to see whether gender influenced how participants perceived the crime. There was no significant effect of gender on the outcome variables PCS (B = 0.09, SE = 0.11, p = .421), BA (B = -0.09, SE = 0.08, p = .270) and SPR (B = 0.15, SE = 0.12, p = .209), indicating that the framing effect occurred independently of gender identity.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations Between Femicide Familiarity/Exposure, Age and Outcome Variables

Variable	PCS	BA	SPR
Femicide Familiarity	.25**	.23**	.29**
Femicide Exposure	.28**	.15	.37**
Age	-.03	-.05	-.09

Note. PCS = Perceived Crime Severity; BA = Blame Attribution; SPR = Systemic Pattern Recognition; **p < .01.

Discussion

This study investigated the effect of linguistic framing in news articles about femicide on public perception. It was hypothesized that trivializing language would lead to lower perceived crime severity, less blame attributed to the perpetrator and lower recognition of femicides as part of a larger systemic pattern of gender-based violence, compared to explicit language. To explore a potential effect of sexist attitudes and whether it played a role in shaping the responses, hostile sexism was included for a correlation analysis and as an

individual predictor variable. Additionally, it was investigated whether prior exposure to femicide news and the familiarity with the term, gender and age affected the outcomes.

The findings revealed significant effects of linguistic framing and hostile sexism as a predictor variable. Hostile sexism was a strong negative predictor for all outcome variables. Perceived crime severity and recognition of the systemic pattern were both significantly influenced by the framing condition, even when controlling for sexist attitudes. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 3 are accepted. The effect of framing on blame attribution showed to be insignificant, hence hypothesis 2 was rejected. Additional exploratory analysis found the control questions regarding familiarity with the term ‘femicide’ to be positively correlated with all outcome variables, while prior exposure was only correlated with perceived crime severity and systemic pattern recognition. Age was not correlated with the main dependent variables but showed a negative correlation with femicide exposure and familiarity. No significant effect has been found for gender.

Interpretation

The findings strongly support the idea of linguistics that language strongly shapes cognitive processes and perception (Rosch & Lloyd, 1978; Whorf, 1965). It can be seen in the results that the mere choice of words for the same crime has a strong effect on the reader's perception. The different framings of the news article had a shaping effect on the interpretation of the case. The finding that the explicit mentioning of femicide leads to a greater perception of the severity of the crime is consistent with framing theory (Entman, 1993), which states that framing can shape the interpretation and the importance of events. This research illustrates how language can either activate or suppress certain cognitive schemas, which is particularly alarming in the context of a socially structural problem such as femicide. According to Schema Theory (Bartlett, 1932), this would mean that the categorization of the crime depends on the schemas which individuals have built of language.

This would explain why trivializing terminology leads to a different, diminishing categorization of the crime while explicit framing reinforces a cognitive schema, that directly connects the femicide to broader patterns of gender-based violence. Explicit language makes it easier to process the event with the intended importance, which is reflected in the results. With repeated exposure to trivializing language, a diminishing categorization of GBV can manifest through internalization and construct the reality of the reader (Vygotsky, 1978).

As prior literature has already established the crucial effect of media in shaping societal attitudes, it is particularly relevant to reshape the media landscape in reporting crime with explicit terminology. A positive example for repeated exposure creating cognitive schemas, is the result of the exploratory analysis of prior femicide exposure and familiarity. The results show that participants with prior explicit media exposure and greater familiarity with the term, perceived the crime as more severe and more likely recognized the structural background. This suggests that internalized knowledge strongly shapes how readers interpret such crimes, regardless of the linguistic framing of the article.

The results are an example of how internalization theory (Vygotsky, 1978) creates strong cognitive schemas that can recognize the systemic issue even behind the framing condition. Based on this, it is evident that explicit terminology and education have strong effects on perception. This could be an inspirational starting point for interventions and awareness-raising, highlighting the effectiveness of creating educational media landscapes that draw on linguistic theories.

Further adding to the idea of cognitive schemas, the effect of sexist attitudes on the interpretation of GBV as proposed by Glick and Fiske (1996) was confirmed by the strong negative correlation of hostile sexism with all outcome variables. Participants with greater sexist beliefs about women, tended to see the crime as less severe, attributed less blame to the perpetrator and were less likely to recognize the systemic pattern of patriarchal structures

behind the crime. This highlights that not only the language of the media landscape is relevant for potential change in perception but also internalized sexist attitudes. Even when confronted with explicit language, people high in hostile sexism were still less likely to show more awareness in their responses. Formal interaction effects between framing effect and hostile sexism were tested but none of the effects were significant. This finding and the consistent negative correlations in both groups suggest that sexist attitudes may be relatively resistant to linguistic framing. The results imply the necessity of addressing underlying sexist attitudes next to combatting framing effects.

Since there was no significant framing effect on blame attribution, it could be assumed that this construct is more resistant to linguistic effects in this specific case description. Due to the highly violent nature of a femicide, blame attribution as a dependent variable might have been more influenced by moral judgement rather than linguistic framing of the article. While Taccini and Mannarini (2024) have found an effect of media language on victim blaming, the difference in the results could lie in the nature of the research, as their study mainly dealt with cases violence rather than explicit killing. Additionally, their study focused on victim blaming, while the current study measured blame attribution toward the perpetrator, potentially encompassing different perceptual processes.

Limitations

While the results for hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 3 are statistically relevant within the scope of this study, it needs to be acknowledged that there are several factors limiting the generalizability of this research. The majority of participants was German and, with at least a high school degree, indicating a mainly western educated sample. Additionally, the mean age was relatively young, which also could have had an effect since most of the participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network, which mainly reflects a liberal and educated framework. This lack of variation most likely contributed to the overall outcomes

and lower levels of hostile sexism. A more diverse sample could have led to different results, particularly for hostile sexism. Older generations tend to endorse more conservative and traditional gender roles, typically for times in which male dominance determined the social hierarchical structures (Swim et al., 1995). A study by Cuadrado-Gordillo and Martín-Mora-Parra (2022) found hostile sexism to be more present in traditional cultures, which indicates that the outcomes would have differed if the sample had more varying nationalities and non-western cultural background. If the sample in this study would have included more people with higher sexist attitudes, it is possible that the framing condition would have had less effect on the measured perceptions because the participants would likely already endorse sexist beliefs and be predisposed to minimize GBV.

Furthermore, it is notable that the measurements are based on self-reporting, which tends to be subject to a social-desirability bias (Krumpal, 2011). It is possible that participants were more likely to give socially desirable answers, especially on topics such as hostile sexism and gender-based violence. This bias may have distorted underlying sexist attitudes as well as the responses to the perceptual measures.

As the data collection for perceived crime severity, blame attribution and systemic pattern recognition uses new, self-developed scales, caution must be taken when interpreting the results. Despite the scale validity and reliability in this research, there are potential errors due to the lack of prior validation of the psychometric properties. For example, assumption testing resulted in violations against normality and homoscedasticity of residuals for blame attribution and perceived crime severity. According to Osbourne and Waters (2002), regression analyses tend to be relatively stable despite minor violations of assumptions such as normality and homoscedasticity, but might still be affected in accuracy. At the same time, the development of the instruments offers a specifically tailored measurement of the concepts. The scales are context-sensitive, embedding the measurements indirectly by asking

questions about the article, which may have been a methodological advantage. A study by Fisher (1993) compared the effects of indirect questions and direct questions on social desirability bias and found that indirect questioning reduced the bias in responding. However, this method is not suitable for all topics, which is why the actual effect of the indirect questioning for this study remains uncertain. Overall, it is recommended to consider the results in the context of these limitations which may restrict generalizability in a broader scope.

Future Research

It is recommended to conduct further research across a more diverse sample, to strengthen the conclusions of this paper. Future research could address these limitations by referring to a larger sample with more variations in nationality, gender and educational background as well as by modifying the scales with weaker psychometric properties and advanced research design. These steps would be crucial for building a strong theoretical framework to understand the framing effects in the specific context of femicide. Another proposal for future research, would be further exploration within the case description. For example, testing the effect of victim-perpetrator relationship to see whether closeness influences the perception of the crime. Persson and Dhingra (2020) found that victim blame levels for rape were higher if they knew the perpetrator than if they did not, indicating that relationship could be a potential factor influencing blame attribution. Another area for future research may also explore the punitiveness of the participants as outcome variable. For example, asking the participants how severely the perpetrator should be punished for the crime. This could provide additional insight into the effect of linguistic framing on moral judgement, as well as retributive inclinations, meaning the desire for punishment of the offender, proportionate to the severity of the crime (Schein & Gray, 2017). Lastly, since the framing condition showed no significant effect on blame attribution, it could be insightful, to

exchange the femicide for ‘less severe’ gender-based violence (e.g. physical abuse). As reported by Witte et al. (2006), blame attribution is often dependent on the severity of harm and sensitive to context. Therefore, covering a ‘lower’ severity case of GBV may lead to more insightful measurements for the effect of linguistic framing on blame attribution than femicide.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, the results of this research contribute to the field of linguistic influences on human perception. The results clearly indicate that language, even for a formally educated and low sexist sample, is an important carrier of meaning in shaping human perception. The results serve as an advice to the media landscape and policy makers, as well as for further academic research in the field of linguistic effects. It shows how relevant explicit and accurate description and use of context-sensitive language is when reporting on femicide and gender-based violence. The media serves not only as journalistic tool, but as a catalyst in social change (Rogers, 2003). A conscious integration of social theory and research-based studies in the public media can help to create social awareness and ensure that the systemic background to femicide is understood. The widespread misconception that femicides are individual offences may be corrected, and social attitudes can be shaped in a conscious, informed direction. In this context, policy makers are also called upon to draw clear boundaries between femicides and generalised homicides and thus draw attention to the structural problem. Further research and a change in media and policy making are crucial to ensure that femicides and gender-based violence are given the urgent social status they need to collectively take further steps. During this research, countless other women fell victim to femicide, reminding of the importance of fighting power structures. Language is not only a medium for communication but creates realities and reflects society. This makes it even more

important to use it as a relevant tool for social change by clearly naming injustices and laying the foundations for a just society.

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Appendix A

AI Usage Statement

During the preparation of this work, AI tools were used to support the phrasing of survey items, guidance on statistical analysis in R-Studio, citation generation and grammar refinement. After using these tools, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.

Appendix B

Scales

Ambivalent Sexism Scale (Hostile Sexism)

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Women exaggerate problems they have at work	○	○	○	○	○
Women are too easily offended	○	○	○	○	○
Most women interpret innocent remarks as being sexist	○	○	○	○	○
When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against	○	○	○	○	○
Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality"	○	○	○	○	○
Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men	○	○	○	○	○
Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men	○	○	○	○	○
Women seek power by getting control over men	○	○	○	○	○
There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances	○	○	○	○	○
Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash	○	○	○	○	○
Most women fail to appreciate all that men do for them	○	○	○	○	○

Perceived Crime Severity

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Reading about this crime makes me anxious	○	○	○	○	○
Reading about this crime makes me uncomfortable	○	○	○	○	○
I feel upset when I learn about these crimes happening	○	○	○	○	○
The kinds of crime negatively impact a community	○	○	○	○	○
Reading about this crime influences how cautious I am in daily activities.	○	○	○	○	○
Authorities should use more resources to combat these kinds of crimes	○	○	○	○	○

Blame Attribution

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The offender had control over his actions	○	○	○	○	○
The offender acted intentionally	○	○	○	○	○
The actions of the offender were justified	○	○	○	○	○
The offender is entirely responsible for the incident	○	○	○	○	○
The incident was primarily caused by situational factors	○	○	○	○	○
The offender's actions are understandable given the circumstances	○	○	○	○	○

Systemic Pattern Recognition

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The crime described in the article is an exceptional case	○	○	○	○	○
Societal factors played a significant role in this crime	○	○	○	○	○
The article suggests that this crime is part of a larger social trend	○	○	○	○	○
The description of the crime makes is clear that it is part of a deeper societal issue	○	○	○	○	○
The victim was specifically targeted because of her gender	○	○	○	○	○
The article suggests that the gender of the victim contributed to the motive of the crime	○	○	○	○	○
The crime is part of a broader pattern of violence against women	○	○	○	○	○
The article describes the crime as clearly liked to broader gender structures in society	○	○	○	○	○

Control Questions

	Not familiar at all	Slightly familiar	Moderately familiar	Very familiar	Extreme familia
How familiar are you with the term "femicide"?	○	○	○	○	○

	Never	Very Rarely	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
How often do you encounter news coverage about femicide?	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix C

News Articles

Condition 1

Femicide in Berlin: Woman Killed by Ex-Partner in Gender-Based Attack

Berlin - What began as a loving relationship turned into a devastating act of femicide when an emotional dispute led to the tragic death of a young mother of four children. She had recently broken up with the 50-year-old offender, which left him losing the woman he felt entitled to.

On August 28, 2024, in Berlin-Zehlendorf, unwilling to accept the accept the separation, he waited for the 36-year-old woman outside of her apartment. The situation escalated when she rejected his attempt at reconciliation, which led him to lose control. After punching and kicking the woman, he stabbed her, one stab hitting her heart.

His actions were driven by a sense of possessiveness and control, a common feature in cases of femicide, where power imbalances and patriarchal norms play a key role. The offender is now in custody, while the police are investigating the details of the case. This event is a clear example of how gender-based violence and the control over women’s autonomy can lead to fatal consequences.

Condition 2

Crime of Passion in Berlin – Woman Killed by Ex-Partner

Berlin - What began as a loving relationship took a devastating turn, when an emotional dispute ended in the death of a young mother of four children. She had recently broken up with the 50-year-old offender, which led him to be devastated about losing the woman he loved.

On August 28, 2024, in Berlin-Zehlendorf, he was unable to contain his emotions any longer, waited for the 36-year-old woman outside of her apartment. The situation escalated when she told him off, which led him to lose control. After punching and kicking the woman driven by his anger, he stabbed her, one stab hitting her heart. He reportedly visited his ex-girlfriend's apartment hoping for reconciliation, however when his expectations weren't met, he had a moment of uncontrollable rage that resulted in the tragic bloodbath. The offender is now in custody, while the police are investigating the details of the case.

Appendix D

Table 5

Interaction Effects Between Framing Conditions and Moderators

Interaction Term	*B*	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
		PCS			
Group × Familiarity	-0.04	0.08	-0.21	0.13	.644
Group × Exposure	-0.08	0.08	-0.24	0.07	.285
Group × Hostile Sexism	0.14	0.12	-0.10	0.37	2.53
		BA			
Group × Familiarity	0.05	0.06	-0.08	0.17	.466
Group × Exposure	0.01	0.06	-0.11	0.13	.871
Group × Hostile Sexism	-0.00	0.09	-0.19	0.18	.964
		SPR			
Group × Familiarity	0.01	0.10	-0.18	0.20	.911
Group × Exposure	-0.08	0.09	-0.25	0.10	.376
Group × Hostile Sexism	-0.17	0.14	-0.44	0.10	.244

Note. Group was dummy coded (0 = trivializing); *CI = Confidence Interval; PCS = Perceived Crime Severity; BA = Blame Attribution; SPR = Systemic Pattern Recognition.*