

***20Fox in Mexican Criminal News: Necro-journalism and Symbolic
Violence in The Visual Representation of Femicides in
Mexican Nota Roja Newspapers***

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
Department of Sociology
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Date of Submission for examination: November 2025

Abstract

This thesis provides a critical analysis of the photographic representation of femicides or feminicides in the Mexican press known as *nota roja*. This is a journalistic genre that specialises in the sensationalist coverage of crimes, violence, and tragic events, distinguished by a visual and narrative style designed to emotionally shock the reader through striking headlines, the use of the colour red, and graphic photographs of violent scenes and victims. Employing a qualitative approach based on critical visual discourse analysis, the research examines how these images and journalistic narratives diminish the humanity of victims by exposing mutilated and sexualised bodies, thereby reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes, normalising gender-based violence, and reproducing social inequalities. The thesis is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates visual, cultural, communication, and feminist studies, applying semiotic tools and encoding/decoding models to unveil the multiple layers of meaning within the analysed photographs and texts. The sample comprises 743 press reports published between 2000 and 2018 in the Mexican newspapers *La Prensa* and *Metro*, complemented by 14 interviews with journalists, reporters, and other experts. The results demonstrate that the *nota roja* contributes to the symbolic re-victimisation of murdered women, perpetuates patriarchal discourses, and constrains the possibilities for the cultural and political transformation required to eradicate violence against women in Mexico. Finally, the thesis expands the field of media and gender-based violence studies and introduces the *nota roja* to Anglo-Saxon academic literature.

To my beloved daughter

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Eamonn Carrabine, for his guidance during the research and writing of this thesis. I consider him to have been an exemplary advisor, who understood my objectives and believed in this work. Above all, however, I wish to thank him for his patience and support during a challenging period for me.

I must acknowledge my parents' invaluable support. In particular, they undertook the care of my young daughter, thereby enabling me to pursue my studies in the United Kingdom, conduct my research, and complete the writing of my thesis.

I am also very grateful to the individuals interviewed for this research: Andrea Ahedo, *nota roja* reporter for *Grupo Reforma*; Melissa Amezcua Bernal, journalist for *El Universal*; Elena Azaola Garrido, Anthropologist at *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología (CIESAS)*; Jair Cabrera, press photographer for *El Gráfico* and *El Universal*; Sac Nicté Irais Caltengo González, Social Anthropologist from the *Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH)* in Mexico; Cirenía Celestino Ortega, Coordinator of Communication Strategies and the Media Observatory for the civil society organisation *Comunicación e Información de la Mujer (CIMAC)*; Luis Javier García Roiz, Scholar in the Department of Design at the *Universidad Iberoamericana*; Jaime Llera, *nota roja* photographer for *La Prensa*; Gustavo Marcos Cazarín, then editor for *Metro*; María Eugenia Martínez Ramos, reporter for *Pásala*; Fernanda Rojas, *nota roja* photographer for *El Gráfico*; María Salguero, Geophysicist and Data Scientist focusing on feminicides; Saúl Santana Hernández, reporter for *La Meta del Planeta*; and Will Straw, Professor of Urban

Media Studies at McGill University. I am indebted to all of them for their time, and for sharing the valuable information and critical insights that have informed this thesis. I must also thank Lilia Junes Martínez, actuary, for explaining to me how to obtain the samples I used in my research.

Finally, I also wish to extend my thanks to the staff of the *Hemeroteca Nacional de México* at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, particularly to Jorge Daniel Ciprés Ortega, Head of the Information Services Department, and to *Grupo Reforma*, especially Raúl Narváez, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *Metro*. Both provided me with their support in accessing press archives in Mexico.

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Introduction

'Lupita: I shall never again allow you to come near me—never, ever.
 Juan: Not even if I compel you?
 Lupita: Would you dare?
 Juan: Naturally. What could prevent me? I have the strength, and I have the right.
 Besides, you swore obedience to me before an altar'

Rosario Castellanos, *El eterno femenino*

1. Media coverage of femicides in Mexico

Just as I was conducting archival work in Mexico, on 10 February 2020, some media outlets reported on the femicide¹ of Ingrid Escamilla, aged 25, occurred the previous day in Mexico City. Her attacker stabbed her multiple times and then attempted to dispose of the evidence by dismembering her body and discarding it in the toilet of the household where the incident occurred (Alfaro, 2020; Alvarado, 2020; Hernández, 2020). This type of crime would correspond to what reporters and photographers covering such stories refer to as '20Fox' or '20F', the 'F' denoting a female victim, when alerting one another to incidents of this nature. From this terminology, the title of this thesis was derived.

Although Mexico is the second country in Latin America with the highest number of femicides, nearly 1.5 cases per 100,000 women daily (Statista, 2025), and despite the fact that femicides in the country are reported almost daily, this case captured society's attention because various newspapers, like *La Prensa* and *Metro*, included in my research, published graphic photographs of Ingrid's mutilated body, the interior of the room where she was found with traces of blood,

¹ Later in the Introduction I explain why I use the term 'femicide' and not the more common 'femicide'.

as well as the severely beaten face of her aggressor upon his arrest by the police (Alfaro, 2020; Alvarado, 2020; Hernández, 2020).

Due to the outrage and anger generated among a large segment of Mexican society over the revictimisation and lack of ethical standards in the handling of gender-based violence cases, it later emerged that the photographs had been leaked to the press by police officers present at the crime scene, though ultimately only one of them faced criminal prosecution (Vela, 2020). Mexican society began to protest initially in the social media as the photographs also started circulating on these platforms, leading to their exponential replication within a few hours (Gutiérrez Martínez & Figueroa Muñoz Ledo, 2024). Later, thousands of people organised public demonstrations in various cities across the country, including Mexico City, to demand justice in Ingrid's case, as well as in thousands of other cases involving women who were victims of extreme gender-based violence in the past (Lima, 2020; Velázquez, et al., 2020). Collectives of women constituted a major movement, protesting outside the headquarters of numerous media companies that had featured Ingrid's photographs. Caltengo González (2022), a Mexican social anthropologist and feminist activist who took part in those protests, in an interview for this research explained that these demonstrations sought to make violence visible and the manner in which it is presented in the press. Specifically, they were aimed to denounce the criminalisation and revictimisation of women, as well as the morbid sensationalism with which images of murdered women are disseminated without consent, as exemplified in Ingrid Escamilla's case.

Indeed, Mexico's National Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women² (CONAVIM, by its Spanish acronym) condemned the manner in which various media outlets reported Ingrid's femicide, as well as the dissemination of explicit imagery of violence (Alvarado, 2020) which, incidentally, had been leaked to the media by police officers from Mexico City (Lima, 2020). Although some newspapers later refrained from publishing such images, many of them symbolically revictimised her by questioning why she had not left her partner if she had previously reported him for gender-based violence (Gutiérrez Martínez & Figueroa Muñoz Ledo, 2024), essentially blaming her for her fate.

This case is situated within the global concern regarding the issue of violence against women. According to the United Nations, 35 percent of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). In particular, femicide constitutes a large-scale phenomenon of such magnitude, alongside gender-based violence against women and girls more broadly, that the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences of the United Nations has called upon 'all States and relevant stakeholders worldwide to take urgent steps to prevent the pandemic of femicide or gender-related killings of women, and gender-based violence against women [...]' (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2020). Specifically, in Latin America and the Caribbean, 4,091 women were victims of femicide across 26 countries (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021). More generally, violence against women in the region is acknowledged as an escalating problem in contemporary

² 'Comisión Nacional para Prevenir y Erradicar la Violencia contra las Mujeres', in Spanish.

society: it represents a violation of human rights, a social and public health crisis, and an obstacle to the economic development of nations (Bott et al., 2012).

In Mexico, Sánchez de los Monteros Arriaga (2020) examines violence against women and deems it a problem deeply rooted in patriarchal culture. Thus, she explains that women are placed in a subordinate role, considered inferior to men, with limited opportunities and rights. Furthermore, she contends that women are socially and culturally devalued, perceived as fragile, dependent beings, and as extensions of men. This perception would contribute to them being subjected to violence and discrimination in all spheres of life. Torres (2024) adds that the manifestation of violence against women in Mexico also varies across different population groups as gender intersects with other systems of inequality, intensifying experiences of violence among different sections of female population.

I must explain that, while in the 1990s Anglo-Saxon feminists introduced the theoretical paradigm of 'femicide', as in Radford & Russell (1992), in Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America both terms 'femicide' and 'feminicide' (*femicidio* and *feminicidio*, in Spanish, respectively) are employed, sometimes interchangeably (Sau, 1993; Carcedo & Sagot, 2000). In Spanish, the term 'femicide' is a word homologous to homicide and may only mean the homicide of a woman without necessarily considering the gender motives as in the English word. For that reason, in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, the term 'femicide' was reformulated by the Mexican anthropologist Lagarde y de los Ríos (2008) as 'feminicide' (*feminicidio*, in Spanish) to linguistically emphasise the female gender condition, social motives of this crime, its impunity, and systematic inaction of states to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women.

Lagarde y de los Ríos (2010) explains that femicide is one of the extreme forms of gender violence against women, consisting of a set of misogynistic acts that constitute a violation of women's rights, potentially jeopardising their safety and endangering their lives. Femicides occur in contexts where authorities are negligent or somehow complicit with aggressors, all of which contribute to their impunity. In that regard, she holds that the difference between the terms 'femicide' and 'feminicide' lies basically in the context and interpretation given to each one (Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2010). The term 'feminicide' is understood as a more complex phenomenon involving historical and social conditions that allow systematic violence against women. In fact, Corradi et al. (2016) comment on how the term 'femicide' was approached and socialised in social and academic women's movements in Mexico as 'feminicide' in order to be applied to a very specific socio-political context in the country. However, in this thesis, both terms 'femicide' and 'feminicide' are used interchangeably to ensure stylistic fluency and to avoid grammatical repetition.

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) discusses femicides in Mexico as the most extreme manifestation of systematic acts of violence against women. It especially highlights their brutality and the impunity in their investigation (ONU Mujeres, 2020). Moreover, the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI, by its original Spanish acronym) is an autonomous public body in Mexico responsible for generating, compiling, and disseminating the country's statistical and geographical information. By the time I began this research, it had released a document entitled 'Statistics on Occasion of the International Day for the

Elimination of Violence against Women'³ in which it estimated that between 2013 and 2014, seven women were killed daily in the country. Likewise, it found that: '... violence against women is a problem of great dimension and a widespread social practice throughout the country...'; '... killings of women are less subject to context or situational changes, ... it is more a structural phenomenon ... That is, murders of women stem from a cultural pattern...'; and 'women are more violently or cruelty killed, [through] means that produce greater pain and prolong it before their death' (INEGI, 2015: 3, 10, 16).

In addition, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a continental organ to supervise human rights in the Americas, in a report on the Situation of Human Rights in Mexico finds that in a vast majority of the cases, prior to being killed, women are usually tortured, mutilated, raped, or beaten; and that remarkably, these acts denote various sexual and gender-based characteristics of violence against women, i.e., damage to the genital areas and breasts, nudity and public exposure, among other harms (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2015). This issue not only reflects structural patterns of inequality and misogyny but is also exacerbated by the way in which the media portrays these crimes, as I explain in this thesis. More recently, INEGI (2023) acknowledges that extreme violence against women is not a recent phenomenon but a long-standing problem. The most recent statistics from INEGI (2024) indicate that in 2022, the national femicide rate was 1.5 victims per 100,000 women. Furthermore, between 2017 and 2022, the rate increased from 1.1 to 1.5 per 100,000 women, with a daily average of 2.6 femicides in 2021 and 2022.

³ 'Estadísticas a Propósito del Día Internacional de la Eliminación de la Violencia contra la Mujer (25 de Noviembre' (in Spanish).

As a structural issue, feminicides are daily news in the Mexican media. However, there is a different treatment in the way in which gender violence against women and men is reported. Analysing three case studies of gender-based violence in Mexico, as covered by two national Mexican newspapers, one of which is *Metro*, within the framework of my research, Castelli Olvera (2014) examines how the journalistic discourse frequently reproduces and perpetuates gender violence through a dissimilar treatment of men and women. This diverse treatment in press discourse refers to how the media inform and address cases of violence and criminality unequally, depending on the gender of victims and aggressors involved. This difference may manifest in various ways, such as the language used, the approach to the narrative, and the description of victims and perpetrators. Amezcua Bernal (2021), a Mexican feminist reporter, points out that the *nota roja* covers gender-based violence differently from violence against men because there is a special interest in the female body, although this produces ethical debates and re-victimisation. Moreover, Driver (2017) examines the journalistic representation of violence against women in Mexico, particularly in the context of femicide and disappearances of women, and concludes that victims and their families are often blamed, perpetuating sexist ideas that limit women's participation in public spaces. Therefore, there is a problem with the manner in which feminicides are reported in Mexico, as gender stereotypes, roles, prejudices, and stigmas may be perpetuated, even when visual imagery is used.

2. Situating the research

In particular, my research focuses on the photographic representation of femicide within the journalistic genre known as the '*nota roja*', an expression that has no direct equivalent in English. The existing Anglo-American academic literature analysing this genre is too scarce to establish a consistent English translation. However, Hallin (2000) renders the term '*nota roja*' as 'tabloid' news. Yet, as I elaborate in Chapter 1, while the *nota roja* shares certain characteristics with the broader 'tabloid' genre, they are not strictly analogous. Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando (2021) refer to the genre as the 'red chronicle' when discussing a broader genre of journalistic chronicle in Latin America which, in Mexico, is known specifically as the '*nota roja*'. In journalism, Curtis (2010) denotes it as 'red news', highlighting its 'sanguinary qualities', as I discuss later. Furthermore, O'Hagan (2012) describes the *nota roja* as 'bloody news' when commenting on the work of Enrique Metinides, one of the most renowned Mexican photographers in this journalistic genre, to whom I return later. In this thesis, to ensure fluency in the writing, in addition to the Spanish term *nota roja*, I employ the English expressions 'red news' or 'red chronicle'. I contend that these terms more accurately reflect the particular characteristics of this journalistic genre, as I describe below.

The *nota roja* is a genre that boomed with mass journalism of the twentieth century in Mexico (Tuñón, 2018). Today it is embedded in a distinctive national tradition within crime-oriented periodical publishing (Straw, 2011), and has a very particular style: 'headlines use wordplay, convey moral outrage, and synthesise crimes in brutally direct terms' (Piccato, 2017). Essentially, it is part of Mexican popular culture that reports tragic events such as accidents, catastrophes,

murders, robberies, massacres, lynchings, rapes, tortures, and, in general, incidents that disrupt daily life (Barajas, 2018). Typically, people featured in these stories are ordinary citizens. It is a vital and dynamic journalistic genre widely disseminated across the country. One defining trait of the *nota roja* is the use of images, particularly photographs, to illustrate tragic events, including violent crimes. The *nota roja* has undergone a historical evolution that demonstrates its increasing specialisation and, due to commercial competition, it always manages to find sensationalist ways to attract its readership's interest.

In the following chapter, I explain that the *nota roja* has characteristic features of tabloids, among others, the sensationalism with which it reports crime and tragedies, and its graphic nature. Straw (2014) argues that while tabloids have preserved a uniform style and uninterrupted output for decades, they nevertheless remain capable of startling the public with sensational and provocative material. The *nota roja* not only informs but also exploits the representations of violence, misery and certain disdain for life in current Mexico (Monsiváis, 2010). In particular, this journalistic genre focuses on bloody events and, in general, the most dramatic occurrences, such as the violent death of women, where victims are continuously a sort of passive performers of horror events (Lara Klahr & Barata, 2009). Photoshoots of dead people are the most coveted for the genre. Nevertheless, in the Mexican *nota roja*, a male domination and a masculine gaze on female bodies and corpses is patent. Due to the use of imagery, it has an emotional narrative with no parallel in any other journalistic genre in Mexico (Piccato, 2017). For Restrepo (2005), press photographs of this genre use and display social and cultural meanings, and have visual narratives that express a worldview, like patriarchy in Mexico

Although the red news is very popular, its origins may be traced to the pre-Hispanic era (Flores García, 2007). Today, in a neoliberal era, which began in Mexico around 1982, drug trafficking grew exponentially and became a significant economic activity, as I explain in Chapter 1. Monsiváis (2010), one of the most important Mexican essayists, suggests that it radically altered the meaning of the *nota roja* for the logic of the criminal economy brought bloodshed to the front pages of nearly every newspaper. For Canales (2011), photojournalists have captured horrifying images of violence that, nevertheless, become commonplace in Mexican society as they form part of daily life. Hence, due to its sensationalist style, the *nota roja* deviates from certain ethical codes on how to convey textual and, most importantly, visual news concerning violent death, among other brutal events. It is centred on blood, tragedies, and cruelty, and employs an eccentric style, both in writing and visually, to report on violent occurrences (Tuñón, 2018). For Barajas (2018), in contemporary Mexico lurid news has gained increasing prominence in the media, as drug trafficking operations have now become a cornerstone of the Mexican economy; this may explain why the Mexican public consumes the red chronicle.

This thesis analyses photographs of feminicides, the most severe form of gender-based violence. For Rojas Rajs (2014; 2024), media coverage often legitimises structural inequalities and reports on violence against women as a routine event, detached from deeper social causes. A key example is the Mexican *nota roja*, which frequently publishes grotesque and sexualised images of female victims, portraying them as vulnerable and commodified objects. In contrast, photographs of murdered men avoid focusing on their private parts or physical characteristics, and seldom use close-ups. Press photographs of feminicides in

this journalistic genre employ visual narratives that reinforce a patriarchal perspective, demonstrating a clear gendered difference in how victims' images are exploited.

Therefore, this research analyses the representation of women's death in contemporary culture, framing it within the concept of 'thanatological entertainment' (Foltyn, 2008; Penfold-Mounce, 2009). The study's core argument, drawing on Bronfen (1992), is that the death of women in cultural texts functions as both an aesthetic trope and a mechanism for constructing and controlling gender identities, thereby reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics. Conversely, it can also act as a form of resistance. I suggest that this framework is applicable to contemporary media. This view is supported by Boyle (2014), who connects feminist media analysis to issues of gender violence and patriarchy, and Whelehan (2014), who emphasises that the social and political context shapes female representation, making research on the press essential. The analysis of Mexican *nota roja* photography falls within this analytical framework because it exemplifies how the violent death of women is transformed into a spectacle for mass consumption. In this context, the visual representation of their bodies simultaneously functions as a morbid aesthetic trope and a powerful mechanism for reinforcing gender hierarchies and patriarchal control over the female body, all within a specific social context of gender-based violence against women.

The media exhibits a significant fascination with crime and death, shaping public understanding through compelling narratives (Carrabine, 2008; Kearl, 1989). Consequently, death is manufactured as an object of 'consumption, knowledge, and desire' (Hearsum, 2012: 184). Different media technologies and

genres treat death differently: while forensic dramas present it in a sexualised and fictionalised way (Penfold-Mounce, 2016), British tabloids often avoid explicit images. This caution stems from photography's power to present a shocking reality that contrasts with its normalised fictional portrayals (Hanusch, 2010; Penfold-Mounce, 2016). Ultimately, media must be analysed within their broader cultural contexts to understand their impact (Carrabine, 2008). Photographs in the *nota roja* materialise the media's fascination with death, transform it into a product for visual consumption, and may only be fully understood within the cultural context that produces and consumes them.

Academic perspectives highlight violence and death as major factors in news selection, despite a lack of consensus on the overall level of crime coverage (Moore, 2014; Jewkes, 2015). Death is a key feature of news narratives, with coverage of disasters, terrorism, and wars making the body a subject of public interest (Seaton, 2005; Foltyn, 2008). Such stories, though negative, have a high probability of being reported and often dominate the news due to their pivotal nature (Hanusch, 2010). However, the media is highly selective in its reporting. It focuses on certain types of crimes, criminals, and circumstances while marginalizing others (Carrabine, 2008; Greer, 2017). Therefore, deaths of public figures or ordinary citizens in public, violent, or extraordinary circumstances feature routinely (Walter et al., 1995), whereas crimes in the private sphere or those deemed lacking public interest remain largely invisible (Jewkes, 2015). Mexican *nota roja* makes violence and death central for selecting and organising news. In my view, this genre constitutes an extreme case study of academic concepts: it takes media selectivity to a level of specialisation, creating an entire journalistic genre that trades in, normalises, and spectacularises violent death,

following a market logic that prioritises sensational impact over public-interest information.

Moreover, visual evidence increases the newsworthiness of fatal events, creating a 'theatre of violence' (Griffin, 2010: 8). However, the power of such images may undermine their documentary role; while they provide evidence and bolster journalistic authority (Zelizer, 1995, 2005), their graphic nature may violate social taboos and alienate the audience (Walter, 1991), provoking important ethical debates for the media (Keith et al, 2006; Zelizer, 2010). Therefore, media images of death are often sanitised in Western societies, with editors instructing photojournalists to avoid directly documenting death (Hanusch, 2013: 498). In contrast, the *nota roja* exhibits and commercialises death. For this genre, it is the central raw material of its narrative, presented with a crudeness that openly challenges taboos governing media practice in other regions. This difference is not merely editorial, but rather reflects profound divergences in the cultural relationship with death, violence, and the social function attributed to the media. Thus, this thesis aims to contribute new insights to the literature on death, media, and graphic representation.

Despite its considerable analytical potential, for Straw (2014) Mexican literature on photography of violence often lacks a critical commitment to confronting the most horrific events that violent photography must address. It resists the opportunity to situate photographs of Mexican violence within the understandings of photography and their social meanings, which have been carefully developed over time elsewhere. To date, the only work on criminal photography in Mexico from visual and cultural perspectives is Lerner's *The shock of modernity* (2007), although it analyses images situated in post-

revolutionary Mexico, between the years 1920-1940, particularly within modern Mexico City. For this reason, given the invaluable data provided by contemporary press photographs of feminicides in Mexico, it is worthwhile to analyse the relationship between violence, power, and gender present in Mexican *nota roja*.

3. Methodological design

This research incorporates essential components of visual methods applied to criminology. Hayward (2009) establishes that visual criminology analyses how visual representations of crime and punishment influence public perception and cultural dynamics. He argues that in our modern 'mediascape' it is crucial to not only use images but to analyse their symbolic power and impact on social behaviour, including the role of visual technology in social control. Furthermore, visual criminology provides a framework to critically analyse the role of images in the culture of crime. Brown & Carrabine (2022) contend that images have the power to shape perceptions, reveal power relations, and challenge dominant crime narratives. By examining the production and circulation of these representations, visual criminology reveals how crime is socially framed. Wheeldon (2022) adds that images provide a distinct dimension for understanding criminological phenomena, capturing a complexity that words alone may not. However, Carrabine (2018) cautions that visual interpretations are multifaceted and may yield contradictory readings, and advocates for a critical approach to power dynamics inherent in these representations.

The analysis of femicide photographs in the *nota roja* requires a culturally situated understanding within the Mexican context. McRobbie (2005) establishes

that cultural studies are essential for comprehending the dynamics of power and resistance, revealing how cultural representations intertwine with issues of race, gender, and class. Building on this, Murdock (1997) highlights the intrinsic link between cultural production and economic structures. He argues that cultural commodities are not only economic goods but also systems of meaning that construct reality. This perspective shows how the economic organisation of cultural industries directly impacts the diversity of public discourses, emphasising culture's dual material and ideological dimensions. A gendered perspective further informs this analysis. As McRobbie (1991) argues, feminist scholarship appropriates sociological frameworks to centre the experiences of women and marginalised groups.

Despite the benefits of cultural visual analysis and increasing scholarly focus on femicide in Mexico, existing literature has two key shortcomings. First, it prioritises written language, neglecting the fundamentally visual nature of the *nota roja*, where photographs and design carry meanings as potent as the text itself. Second, while its sensationalism is noted, the specific visual strategies that articulate it remain unexamined. As outlined by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2015) and INEGI (2015), mentioned earlier, the characteristics of femicide are visually identifiable in *nota roja* photography. This genre tends to reduce victims to violated and mutilated bodies, fragments their humanity and transforms them into objects for visual consumption. It constructs a shock-value aesthetic through the graphic exposure of violence and suffering, thereby producing a form of morbid entertainment that distorts human tragedy.

The *nota roja*'s photographic imagery reinforces patriarchal notions of female vulnerability and male authority, thereby legitimising violence against

women. The coverage stigmatises victims from marginalised groups with lower social and economic capital, while rendering cases involving privileged women invisible, thus reproducing social inequalities. Furthermore, by presenting feminicides as isolated incidents and focusing on sensationalist details, the *nota roja* naturalises violence as an everyday phenomenon. The act of displaying victims without their consent constitutes a form of symbolic violence against the deceased, their families, and society. Ultimately, these representations sustain a social imaginary that legitimises patriarchal power and obstructs the necessary cultural and political transformation to eradicate gender-based violence, as analysed in Chapter 5.

Therefore, the study is grounded in the following overarching research question: what discursive mechanisms that legitimise or challenge gender violence exist in photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja*? The main objective is to critically analyse the visual representations of feminicides in Mexican *nota roja* through the identification of the discursive mechanisms that legitimise or challenge gender violence.

The analysis of photographic material on feminicides in Mexican *nota roja* is important because it offers insights into the centrality of the female body and its dehumanisation in the press. Accordingly, this research proceeds from the general hypothesis that the visual representation of victims in tabloid press through the exposure of mutilated, sexualised, eroticised, and/or violence-contextualised bodies reduces their humanity to objects of media consumption, reinforces patriarchal stereotypes, naturalises gender-based violence, and reproduces social inequalities, contributing to the perpetuation of female oppression.

Given the above, the analysis of photographs depicting feminicides in Mexican is significant for its insights into how the female body is objectified in journalism. Hence, the research employs the qualitative approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Wodak (2001) explains that CDA focuses on the study of discourse with the aim of understanding and revealing power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities that are manifested through language. This analysis not only examines language itself, but also how social structures and relations of domination are constructed and maintained through discourse. CDA investigates how texts and discursive practices are related to specific social, historical, and political contexts, and how they contribute to the reproduction or transformation of social structures.

Specifically, I use a critical visual discourse analysis to examine photographs of femicides in the *nota roja*. This type of CDA focuses on the interpretation and study of multimodal texts, that is, those which combine semiotic resources beyond verbal language, particularly the relationship between the verbal and visual modes of communication (Jancsay et al., 2016). Visual semiotics is especially relevant because images, by their character of making a 'truth claim', or presenting 'real' facts and figures (Jancsay et al., 2016: 193), may support their authors' assertions of truth and disguise structures of power and hegemony as objective representations. This approach is crucial as it moves beyond traditional analysis by placing the visual at the centre of meaning-making. In the thesis, it reveals how the *nota roja* naturalises gender violence through textual-visual strategies, such as sensationalist images paired with lurid headlines, and helps identify discursive absences like the lack of structural context for these crimes. Besides, Machin & Mayr's (2023) method of critical

discourse analysis of multimodal texts provides a foundation for unravelling how these media texts perpetuate power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities through both written language and imagery. Essentially, it provides a multidisciplinary methodology for making visible the, often hidden, ideological work these texts perform.

Moreover, particularly drawing on Barthes' (1997) concepts of denotation and connotation, anchorage and relay, and cultural connotators, I analyse visual signs and photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja* from a semiotic and critical perspective. It provides tools to read images between the lines, exposing how the genre imbues them with oppressive meanings, and how these become naturalised in Mexican media culture. On the other hand, I employ Hall's (2003 [1980]) analytical method to understand how messages are produced, circulated, consumed, and reproduced within a patriarchal context through processes of encoding/decoding. This allow me to comprehend how photographic representation of feminicides is not innocent, but rather an ideological field where meanings are contested, and gender hierarchies are perpetuated. Thus, Barthes (1997) provides the tools to analyse what is encoded and decoded (visual signs), while with Hall (2003 [1980]) I explain how encoding and decoding occur.

Together, these approaches facilitate a comprehensive critique of the media representation of feminicides in Mexico. In that regard, a representative sample of 497 photographs published between 2000 and 2018 in *La Prensa* and *Metro* is analysed, and texts of crime reports, supplemented by 14 interviews with Mexican journalists, reporters, photographers, editors, civil society workers, and scholars. This methodology combines feminist approaches to reveal how gender

is encoded and decoded in *nota roja* photographs, and how messages are produced, reproduced, and circulated among its readers.

I should note that the research process was complicated by three main factors. The first was the Covid-19 pandemic, which occurred while I was in Mexico conducting archival work. This hindered access to several newspaper issues, though, as I explain in Chapter 2, I managed to complete the consultation in a private archive. The pandemic also prevented me from easily returning to the United Kingdom due to implemented health policies. Consequently, I had to attend a compulsory seminar remotely, connecting at around 3 or 4 a.m., Mexico time. Later, I was only able to return intermittently. Given that the archival work was practically concluded, I later focused solely on conducting the remaining interviews and writing the thesis.

However, I also faced some health issues. In addition to the emotional impact of continuously observing explicit images of feminicides, for which I received professional support, at times I also experienced some consequences of long COVID, had to homeschool my little child, care for my parents, and, at the same time, strive to continue writing my thesis. Though I also had pleasant experiences. I wish to highlight the opportunity to interview crime journalists, reporters, and photographers that allowed me to explore that other side of journalism which many prefer to avoid due to its rawness reality. With some of them, I managed to establish a relationship of trust despite measures imposed by the pandemic. However, on one occasion I experienced sexual harassment, which I handled appropriately. In any case, this, coupled with the inherent difficulty of researching violent environments, made me reflect on how challenging it may be for women to conduct investigations of this nature.

Moreover, I was invited to accompany a reporter and two photographers to cover a murder. When we arrived to the site of the crime, the bloodied body, with wounds to the abdominal area, lay on the public thoroughfare, about to be removed by the forensic team. It appeared to be a homicide, or a 'Z1', as reporters and photographers call an incident in which a man has died or been killed. The scene allowed me to observe first-hand the interaction between onlookers, police officers, forensic doctors, photographers, and crime reporters, among others.

In general, this research contributes to the academic field by providing a theoretical-methodological perspective that integrates visual and cultural studies, criminology, communication, and feminism. Furthermore, it aims to develop a well-founded critique of media practices that re-victimise women with the purpose of promoting journalistic codes of ethics with a gender perspective. Finally, for public policy purposes, it provides empirical evidence to reformulate communication laws that regulate the treatment of information on violence against women.

4. Organisation of the thesis

Aside from the introduction, the thesis comprises five substantive chapters, a conclusions section, and an appendix. In Chapter 1, I develop certain basic cross-cutting concepts of the thesis based on a review of the relevant academic literature. This chapter addresses interdisciplinary perspectives on gender-based violence against women, with particular emphasis on feminicides, and how these are represented and treated in the Mexican media, specifically within the *nota roja*. It examines the social and cultural roots of gender-based violence, the social

construction of gender, intersectionality, and the relationship between power and violence in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, it offers a critical analysis of the media's role in shaping public perceptions of gender-based violence, highlighting how the press may trivialise or sensationalise femicides, thereby perpetuating stereotypes and victim-blaming narratives. Finally, the chapter delves into the specific nature of the *nota roja* as a journalistic genre characterised by sensationalism, graphic imagery, and commercial imperatives, exploring the ethical debates that arise from its representation of crime and violence. This theoretical framework establishes the foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis, connecting academic discourse with the realities of gender-based violence in Mexico and its media representation.

Chapter 2 situates the *nota roja* genre historically within the broader Mexican media tradition to provide a comprehensive understanding of its principal characteristics today. It traces the origins of the genre from its cultural and symbolic roots in pre-Hispanic and colonial Mexico, highlighting the significance of the colour red and its connections to rituals, moral judgment, and social control. The chapter explores the evolution of crime reporting from early broadsheets and official notices to the sensationalist and visually graphic style that defines contemporary *nota roja* journalism. It also examines how historical events, such as the Mexican Revolution and the rise of drug trafficking, have shaped the genre's focus on violence and tragedy, as well as its entanglement with political power and commercial interests. Additionally, the chapter addresses the challenges faced by crime journalism in Mexico today, including censorship, threats to journalists, and the normalisation of violence through sensationalist media coverage. This historical grounding is essential to understand why the *nota*

roja employs graphic imagery and sometimes superficial narratives, reflecting deep-rooted social dynamics and media practices embedded in Mexican culture.

In Chapter 3, the thesis characterises the *nota roja* journalistic genre through an in-depth analysis of two emblematic Mexican newspapers, *La Prensa* and *Metro*. It explores their distinct origins: *La Prensa* as a pioneering newspaper founded in 1928 during Mexico's post-revolutionary period, and *Metro* as a more contemporary publication established in 1997, and examines how each has developed within Mexico's evolving socio-political and media landscape. The chapter analyses their design strategies, including layout, typography, and use of colour, which work together to create a sensationalist, visually arresting style aimed at eliciting strong emotional responses. It also considers the newspapers' targeted readership, primarily working and lower-middle-class men with basic education, highlighting how these publications reflect and reinforce social and cultural dynamics through their content and presentation. This characterisation provides crucial context for understanding how the *nota roja* functions as a genre that not only reports crime but also shapes public perception of violence in Mexico.

In Chapter 4, I conduct a detailed visual analysis focused on the news reports and photographs that constitute the selected sample for this study. This chapter explores how the *nota roja*, as a journalistic genre, employs specific visual and narrative elements to represent feminicides. It examines the graphic design, image composition, the relationship between text and image, and the characteristic narrative style of these sensationalist newspapers. Through this analysis, the visual strategies that contribute to the construction and reinforcement of gender stereotypes, the dehumanisation of the victims, and the

normalisation of violence are identified. It demonstrates how the combination of explicit photographs with sensationalist headlines generates a powerful emotional impact on the reader, while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal discourses and limiting the potential for cultural and political transformation regarding violence against women in Mexico.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the visual analysis of photographs of feminicides published in Mexican *nota roja* newspapers, specifically in *La Prensa* and *Metro*. This chapter examines how these images reflect and reproduce structures of gender subordination inherent in patriarchal society. It highlights that the victims are typically women in socio-economically vulnerable situations, whose media representations lead to revictimisation through stereotypes, gender roles, and prejudices that dehumanise and stigmatise them. Through a critical and semiotic analysis, the discursive mechanisms that legitimise gender-based violence are revealed. The analysis demonstrates that the press does not merely report on these crimes but also acts as an agent that perpetuates patriarchal narratives and symbolic violence against victims of feminicide.

In the conclusions, I reflect on the gender-based violence and its representation in the Mexican press, specifically within the journalistic genre of *nota roja*. Based on the critical analysis undertaken, I highlight that violence against women, and feminicides in particular, are structural manifestations of unequal social relations rooted in patriarchy, where gender is understood as a social and performative construct. Although the *nota roja* brings these crimes to light and foster social awareness, it also contributes to the symbolic revictimisation of women by presenting their bodies in a dehumanising and sensationalist manner, thereby reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes. The research

underscores the importance of a methodological approach that combines critical discourse analysis with visual semiotics to unravel the multiple layers of meaning within images and texts, therefore, demonstrating how these representations reproduce dominant ideologies. Furthermore, I emphasise the necessity of transforming journalistic practices towards an ethical form of communication, one that respects the dignity of victims and contributes to the eradication of gender-based violence, while also acknowledging the commercial and cultural pressures that shape the content of the *nota roja*. Finally, this section also addresses the ethical implications of publishing violent images, proposing a balance between transparency and sensitivity towards readers and the affected families.

I caveat that, since this is a visual analysis, it is necessary to include material of this nature to support the arguments made throughout the thesis. To this end, a number of photographs are included in an annex immediately following the conclusions, rather than within the main body of the text. I have adopted this approach so that readers who prefer not to view such images may engage solely with the written content without encountering graphic images of gender violence. I understand that, although these kinds of images are powerful and necessary for comprehending our world, they may be difficult to look at. Yet, as Lindfield (2010) points out, when faced with such images, a critique that combines thought and emotion is required to respond to them appropriately. Additionally, all textual quotations originally in Spanish cited in the thesis have been translated into English by myself.

I would like to mention that each chapter opens with a relevant quotation from Mexican literature that reflects how violence and gender-based violence in the country is embedded in many spheres of social and cultural life. With this, I

intend to recall some literary phrases that came to my mind during the thesis writing process.

In general, by unravelling the visual mechanisms of the *nota roja*, this thesis not only exposes an oppressive discursive machinery but also invites us to reimagine a journalism that dignifies rather than exploits. Deconstructing images of feminicides is an act of resistance. Specifically, this research contributes to the critique of the role played by the Mexican red chronicle in the social construction of gender-based violence against women. Revealing how the media coverage of feminicides reproduces patriarchal and stigmatising discourses opens a space for reflection on the social responsibility of journalism and the need to transform communicative practices towards approaches that respect the dignity of victims, promote justice, and contribute to the eradication of violence. Moreover, the thesis establishes a framework for studying the media's role in gender-based violence and society. Therefore, it provides a robust foundation for multidisciplinary research into the complex interplay between media, gender-based violence, and society. Such research may foster a deeper academic understanding and drive positive change in journalism and public policy, ultimately contributing to the eradication of gender-based violence and the advancement of social justice.

Chapter 1. Literature review

'To shatter the petrified days, all that remained to me was the ineffectual mirage of violence, and cruelty was exercised with fury upon women, stray dogs, and the indigenous people'.

Elena Garro, *Los recuerdos del porvenir*

1. Introduction

This chapter synthesises interdisciplinary perspectives on gender violence against women, particularly femicides, and how these are represented and addressed in the Mexican media, specifically in the *nota roja*. It examines the social and cultural roots of gender violence, the social construction of gender, intersectionality, and the relationship between power and violence in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, it focuses on the influence of the media, the visual and narrative representation of femicides, and the ethical implications of this coverage on public perception and the normalisation of violence against women. It also analyses the red chronicle, its sensationalist characteristics, and its impact on Mexican society. Among the most relevant authors are Driver (2015, 2017) on the journalistic representation of violence against women in Mexico, Piccato (2017) on the characterisation of the *nota roja*, and Hallin (2000) on the definition of this journalistic genre.

The review of the literature begins by defining gender as a socially constructed system of power relations that perpetuates inequality and violence against women. Drawing on seminal works by influential scholars, it analyses how patriarchal structures normalise and sustain gender-based violence. The discussion then shifts to femicides/feminicides, tracing the evolution of these terms and their socio-political implications, particularly in Latin America. Other

key contributions highlight the role of state complicity and impunity in perpetuating these crimes.

Moreover, the chapter critically assesses the media's role in shaping public perceptions of gender violence. It interrogates how news outlets, particularly in Mexico, often trivialise or sensationalise femicides, reinforcing victim-blaming narratives and patriarchal stereotypes. I highlight how there is a media's tendency to individualise systemic issues, while others acknowledge its potential to mobilise social awareness. Finally, the review delves into the *nota roja* as a distinct journalistic genre characterised by sensationalism, graphic imagery, and commercial imperatives. It explores ethical concerns raised by its portrayal of crime, including the exploitation of victims' suffering and the normalisation of violence. Some works frame these debates questioning the genre's balance between public interest and moral responsibility.

In the chapter, I employ a qualitative approach based on the analysis of academic literature on gender violence, femicide/feminicide, media, and visual representation to understand key concepts such as gender, femicide/feminicide, intersectionality, and the role of the media, particularly of the *nota roja* as a journalistic genre in Mexico. Additionally, I examine media practices, especially in the photographic representation of feminicides, emphasising symbolic, cultural, and ethical aspects. Therefore, the chapter sets the theoretical foundation for subsequent empirical analysis, bridging academic discourse with the realities of gender-based violence in Mexico and its portrayal in the press.

2. Gender violence

To understand the severity of gender violence against women, particularly femicides or feminicides, it is necessary to explain, first of all, the definition of 'gender'. It implies social and cultural structures that define and describe differences between men and women, as well as expectations, and roles associated with each. Rather than being a fixed biological attribute, gender is something that is 'done' or 'performed' through social interaction. It suggests that people give form to their own gender identity in their everyday interactions. This process is known as 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender relations shape a system that organises social life and sets up hierarchies of power where generally there is a male domination over women. This includes personal interactions, but also cultural, economic, political, and symbolic representations that perpetuate gender inequality (Walby, 1990). For Connell (2000), gender relations are a way in which social practice is organised and manifested in various spheres of life. However, Butler (1999, 2011) argues that, as gender identity is performative and socially constructed, social norms may be challenged and reconfigured.

Gender also produces symbolic violence. Bourdieu (2001) analyses the domination between the sexes and how social, cultural and institutional structures perpetuate this inequality. He argues that relations between men and women are rooted in patriarchal structures present in areas such as the family, education, and the State. Despite certain advances in the social and political position of women, the structures of power and domination have remained relatively constant over time. For Bourdieu (1986), gender violence is not only physical, but

also symbolic because it is based on cultural meanings that reinforce inequality. This violence manifests itself in discourses, behaviours, and practices that naturalise gender stereotypes in the media, education, and the family.

Furthermore, gender constitutes a social order and a category that interacts with others such as class, ethnicity, race, age, and so forth. For Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality is the way in which different forms of identity and systems of oppression intersect and overlap, affecting people's experiences in unique ways. That is, factors such as race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and other social identities interact and contribute to specific experiences of discrimination or privilege. Based on this concept, Potter (2015) comments that gender violence cannot be comprehended without considering other intersectional factors. Intersectionality facilitates the understanding of how different women experience violence in diverse ways based on their identities.

Further, gender produces asymmetrical power relations. For Russell (1992), these relations make women and men perceive and experience the social world and gender violence differently. Radford (1992) explains that gender relations are power relations in patriarchal societies. Concerning the above, Connell (2000) examines how constructions of masculinity may be linked to violence against women, suggesting that cultural expectations about male behaviour may contribute to the perpetuation of gender violence. For Walby (1990), gender violence is a control mechanism that reinforces patriarchal structures. It serves as a way of maintaining male dominance over women, both in the private and public spheres. Therefore, for Jackman (2006), gender violence should be understood not only as an individual problem, but as a social phenomenon that requires changes in norms and structures that perpetuate

gender inequality. In that regard, Reddock (2008) comments that gender violence is a social problem that affects women of all social classes and cultures, in a number of forms. Gender violence is also a human rights problem. Silvestri & Crowther-Dowey (2016) argue that it is part of a broader context of structural inequality and unequal power relations between men and women. Violence against women is the result of social norms that perpetuate discrimination and the subordination of women in society.

In Mexico in particular, Gutmann (2007) comments that men dominate in financial, governmental, artistic, academic, and media spheres, reflecting a hegemonic control assumed as normal, despite a certain independence and autonomy acquired by women. In that regard, Domínguez Ruvalcaba (2013) suggests that in Mexico violence perpetrated by men may be interpreted as the urgency to recover a lost power. Violence, therefore, would be embedded in a discourse of domination. Moreover, he suggests that patriarchy produces violence as a strategy to maintain its hegemony, which includes the invisibility of murderers, the indolence of politicians, the complacency of the mass media, and the unbearable climate of terror. I discuss this issue of gender violence in Mexico throughout the thesis.

3. Feminicides/femicides

The most extreme form of gender violence is 'femicide', a term first used by Russell (2001) back in 1976 that stands for the murder perpetrated against women by men just for being women. Radford (1992) defines this form of violence as the misogynistic murder of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt,

pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women, embedded in a context of women's oppression in a patriarchal society. She explains that femicides are closely related to patriarchal societies that perpetuates male domination and female subjugation. It is situated within a continuum of gender violence, which includes sexual harassment, domestic violence, and abuse. In other words, femicide is not an isolated phenomenon, but is part of a broader culture of violence against women.

Hester (1992) examines that, historically, femicide, and gender violence against women in general, has been used as a tool of social control. Femicide is linked to the concept of gender for it is influenced by cultural, racial, and socioeconomic conditions. In other words, women's experiences may vary depending on their context, so femicides may be articulated in different ways along cultures (Radford, 1992). For Caputi & Russell (1992), this type of violence not only impacts victims, but also communities. Therefore, femicide occurs in patriarchal societies in which the social and political construction of the masculinity is active and aggressive, while the feminine is depicted as receptive and passive (Radford, 1992).

Nonetheless, it is also argued that femicides are not only a matter of men killing women for the sole reason of sex and/or gender, but also a social problem that needs to be dealt with a structural and systematic approach (Stout, 1991). For Caputi (1992: 205), femicides are 'a social expression of sexual politics, an institutionalized and ritual enactment of male domination, and a form of terror that functions to maintain the power of the patriarchal order.' Likewise, she comments further that it may also be experienced as pleasant and erotic by the men who carry it out or by those who represent and gaze it (Caputi, 1992). Here, there is a

link between violence and pleasure so that the analysis of sexuality is focused on men's desire for power, dominion, and control over women in a context of female oppression for the maintenance of a patriarchal society. In addition, it has effects on the social perception of violence against women. Femicides may produce environments of fear and control over women, limiting their freedom and autonomy.

However, the literature on the subject is vast and depends on different perspectives and disciplines, such as sociology, criminology, anthropology, psychology, and political theory, although some more general views point towards femicide as a structural and systemic problem of gender, power, and violence. In the literature there are various ways of referring to femicide. For instance, there are scholars who use the term generically to simply refer to the murder of women, as in Campbell et al. (2003) and Muftic & Baumann (2012). Other works focus on the 'intimate partner femicide' to refer to the most frequent situations in which women are murdered, at least in Europe and North America, for instance, Frye et al. (2008), Dixon et al. (2008), and Taylor & Jasinski (2011), although this type of femicide may also be considered as a more specific type of intimate partner homicide, as in Campbell et al. (2007), Weizmann-Henelius et al. (2012) and Corradi & Stöckl (2014). I also find the expression 'female homicide victimization' in academic writings, as in Pridemore & Freilich (2005), Titterington (2006) and Stamatel (2014). Some scholars refer to other varied expressions, some more specific as 'women homicide offending' (Deweese & Parker, 2003), 'women victims of lethal violence' (Dobash et al., 2007), 'lethal intimate partner violence' (Dobash & Dobash, 2011), or 'fatal intimate partner violence' (Pereira et al., 2013). However, today some definitions of the crime of femicide are now

broader to include any murder of women or girls (World Health Organization, 2012) although with the same critical standing of the patriarchal system.

In fact, in Latin America, academic research has established that violence against women is a consequence of gender inequality, social structures such as patriarchy, impunity, and institutional violence. Some scholars have laid the foundations for socio-feminist studies that analyse the phenomenon of violence against women from the perspective of gender (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2007; Monárrez, 2009; Vera, 2012). Trends in feminicides are examined in relation to various social circumstances (Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2008). Segato (2006) discusses the meaning of 'feminicide' and suggest that its categorisation draws a line between gender violence, misogynistic violence, and other forms of criminality that, perhaps not apparently, do not occur directly related to the patriarchal symbolic economy. In that regard, feminicides, as crimes of patriarchy, would have a double purpose, that is, the retention or maintenance, and the reproduction of power relations between genders. For Segato (2006) and Berlanga Gayón (2018), femicide or feminicide is also a state crime for its discrimination against women by state institutions, above all, for its impunity and the indifference of state authorities to prevent and punish them. In Mexico, Monárrez Fragoso (2000, 2002) suggests the term 'serial sexual femicide', later reformulating it as 'systemic sexual femicide' to highlight that in Mexico there are no serial murders, but rather a continuum of structural violence.

Therefore, in Latin America there is a strong tendency to claiming structural gender inequality and the impunity of the perpetrators in the justice system as the main cause of femicides or feminicides (Carcedo & Sagot, 2000; Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2008). In the region, feminist literature challenges the idea

that only individual factors, such as pathological behaviours of men, trigger femicides and violence against women (Carcedo & Sagot, 2000). In that regard, special attention is paid to the sociocultural and political dimensions according to which violence against women is the product of a structural system of oppression through which men have always tried to maintain power over society and women in general (Carcedo & Sagot, 2000). It may be regarded, as Collins (2008) points out, that it is more about violent situations than violent men.

Both terms 'femicide' and 'feminicide' are critical analytical tools for examining the gender-related murders of women, enabling the analysis of perpetrators' motives, forms of violence, and the complicit social structures, including impunity and tolerance from state officials, that conceal and encourage these crimes. By murdering women, targeted as especially vulnerable, men would seek to control them (Caputi, 1987). Violent acts that aggressors commit against women's bodies are wide-ranging: beatings, strangulation, wounds caused by a weapon or any object that may be used as such, mutilations, torture, rape, and incineration, among others (Monárrez Fragoso, 2000). Vachss (2017) suggests that gender violence also reveals and persists in direct proportion to the degree of tolerance of societies and its level of violence in general.

Being a problem of social relevance, femicides or feminicides are part of media agendas. However, its treatment may contribute to either making the problem visible, generating social awareness, influencing public policies, and challenging harmful narratives surrounding it or, instead, perpetuating the phenomenon, as I explain in the following section.

4. Gender violence and the media

The power of the media is evidenced in its capacity to define the public agenda, influence the perception of reality, and maintain or challenge social and political hierarchies. For McLuhan (1964: 7), 'the medium is the message', that is, the media not only inform and entertain people, they also affect beliefs, attitudes, and public opinions determining content and form of human relationships. Moreover, they may play an important role in the formation and maintenance of dominant ideologies. For Van Dijk (2008), there is a power elite composed of politicians, journalists, scholars, writers, among others, with special access to discourse, particularly when they own the media. In that regard, the media are instruments of symbolic power that not only control discourse, but may also reinforce or challenge existing power structures. The selection of which stories are covered, how they are informed, and whose voices are heard has a significant impact on the way social reality is constructed. However, Fairclough (1995) suggests that the media may also render complex events through simplified narratives that may manipulate public opinion. Besides, they contribute to the creation of a reality that is accepted as self-evident. For McNair (2006), corporate and political control over the media may limit access to alternative voices, which perpetuates inequalities in representation and public discourse.

In particular, Altheide (2002) argues that the media may produce and reproduce discourses of fear, particularly in the news, which not only replicate social anxieties, but also contribute to the way people perceive their environment and threats they face in everyday life. He goes on by commenting that this discourse has become more generalised and less specific when it moves from

focusing on isolated events of fear, such as crime, to broader perceptions that danger and risk are central features of daily life. Also, Altheide (2002) examines how certain social groups, such as children and women, are used as symbols in this narrative which intensifies fear and affects the way society responds to various social problems. In particular, he comments that women are part of this discourse of fear that is influenced by cultural norms and gender stereotypes.

For Gallagher (2014), despite advances in gender representation in the media in general, and transformations in the global media landscape, patterns of discrimination and stereotypes that limit women's lives persist. She suggests that gender representation in the media is intertwined with political and social ideologies, reflecting and reinforcing gender inequalities. However, in the selection of news agendas, the media tend to adhere to certain news values to report recent, close events, but also what is unusual or deviated from the norm (Sorenson et al., 1998; Taylor, 2009). Hence, competition between the media to cover events in a timely manner favours preference for stories about atypical and violent events (Sutherland et al., 2016). Likewise, for commercial reasons, such as attracting audiences' attention, media organisations may use certain design strategies to appeal to sensations and emphasise drama, violence, and conflict. In that regard, reporting on gender violence, as well as the representation of sexual violence, is something endemic in Western culture, but deeply rooted in patriarchy (Boyle, 2005; Carter & Weaver 2003).

Since the 1970s the academic literature has been concerned with analysing how certain perceptions and stereotypes about femininity such as passivity, appearance, and women's vulnerability justify and legitimise violent crimes against women, and how the media reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes

and values about femininity that may ridicule, minimise and/or nullify women. UNESCO (2019: 5) finds that 'women and girls continue to suffer from discrimination and violence, while media coverage of the issue does not reflect the reality and extent of this scourge'. Thus, the literature examines how the media often address issues of gender-based violence against women in ways that frequently perpetuate stereotypes and normalise violence. For instance, Barr (1977) analyses how the written media reinforce old stereotypes and values about femininity. Besides, there are some works that focus their attention on how gender-based violence against women is linked to the hierarchy of relations between men and women. In particular, they have examined how gender stereotypes, and social and cultural images of femininity and masculinity are often manipulated to validate offenses against women, as well as assumptions of causality and, therefore, blaming victims for violence against them (Soothill & Jack, 1975; Hay, Soothill & Walby, 1980; Walby, Hay & Soothill, 1983; Soothill, 1991; Soothill & Walby, 1991).

Benedict (1992) examines certain negative representations of women, i.e., clothing, physical attractiveness, sexual history, etc., which would shape the understanding of gender crimes and, in turn, reduce women to more superficial traits related to physical appearance. Meyers (1997) analyses distorted images of battered women and their abusers, and points out that the press reproduces masculine gazes that perpetuate certain stereotypes about women. For Mulvey (1989), the 'male gaze' refers to the way visual representations, particularly in cinema, are structured from a masculine and patriarchal perspective. This gaze depicts women as objects of sexual desire, passive and intended for the visual pleasure of the male spectator. The male gaze is not merely the presence of male

characters or masculine identification, but rather an ideological and aesthetic system that structures visual pleasure in film and other cultural forms, wherein women become the object of an active and dominant masculine gaze. In that regard, the concept allows for an understanding of how visual culture reproduces and reinforces patriarchal power relations. Other works explain how female victims are more likely to be captured in close-ups and to be sensationalised in news coverage (Carter & Weaver, 2003). Therefore, women may be the center of attention when certain stereotypes are used, in addition to the fact that their appearance, above all, attractiveness, is an attribute of special relevance in the news.

Academic literature reveals that female victims are frequently depicted as 'helpless' and 'weak', and are even ascribed blame for their own victimisation. For example, as forms of exculpation, male aggressors may be represented as 'monstrous' beings or with 'pathological obsessions', or as men who acted on irrepressible impulses (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Blaming on the part of the media and women's secondary victimisation are frequent, while male responsibility is somehow hidden by connoting violent men as monstrous or crazy, as well as certain aggressions as exceptional (Boyle, 2005; Hunnicutt, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Carter (1998), Cuklanz (2000), and Moorti (2002) examine how the discourse of the news limits voices of victims normalising extreme crimes, and blaming them despite legislation banning rape. In news, domestic violence is often rendered as an unusual problem (Berns, 2004; Richards et al., 2011; Comas-d'Argemir, 2015) that occurs as a result of victim's behaviour (Taylor, 2009; Richards et al., 2011), and not as a structural phenomenon. For Heeren & Messing (2009: 207), there is a tendency in the news to use a 'forensic journalism' approach based on

excessive reliance on official sources that, however, may simplify the complexity of domestic violence cases by focusing on the details of events rather than exploring the underlying causes or social conditions that contribute to gender violence. In general terms, Cuklanz (2014) suggests that mainstream media tend to reinforce blaming on individual perpetrators and victims, but lack a structural analysis and more social explanations of gender-based violence, using typical stereotypes on the alleged helplessness of victims and displaying certain cultural superiority when different ethnic groups or nations are involved. In a similar line, Hesford (2011) examines traditional gender limitations of media coverage of violence against women and discusses how there is a proclivity to focus on individuals rather than on structural causes of gender violence.

Likewise, sexual violence is newsworthy. Chibnall (1977) refers to the set of criteria that render an event, fact, or piece of information worthy of being considered news and, consequently, disseminated by the media. In other words, it is the relevance or significance of information in capturing public interest and justifying its publication or broadcast. These criteria typically encompass factors such as novelty, proximity, magnitude, impact, controversy, the prominence of the individuals involved, and human interest. Moreover, for Carrabine (2008), news content tends to be filtered through what reporters define as 'newsworthiness'; that is, according to the characteristics or values which render a story or event worthy of being considered news by journalists. Essentially, it is an event's capacity to capture media attention and be reported. These values or criteria are learned within the newsroom culture and function as norms that filter news content; examples include immediacy, dramatisation, personalisation, titillation, and the severity of events. Within the context of analysing crime

coverage in the British press, newsworthiness determines which crimes or crime-related events are selected for reporting and how they are framed to attract public attention (Chibnall, 1997). Specifically, Moore (2014) observes that sexual violence garners attention because it comprises two significant news values: sex and violence. However, the press has sexualised this problem impinging on its public understanding. Carrabine (2008) argues that the media tend to present cases of sexual and gender-based violence in a manner that emphasises and exploits their sexual facet, rather than addressing these events as a serious social problem. For instance, the popular press, particularly the tabloids, combine sexualised images of women, such as the famous 'Page Three girls' in *The Sun*, with news about sexual violence. This creates a mixture that trivialises the severity of violence and hinders the public's understanding of violence against women as a structural and social issue. Furthermore, Carrabine (2008) contends that this media treatment tends to portray cases of sexual violence as isolated, sensationalist incidents, or as the deeds of aberrant individuals, rather than depicting sexual violence as a widespread problem related to power relations and gender inequality in society. Moreover, Meyers (1997) also finds intersections between race, class, and gender in news coverage of sexual aggression against women. In other words, the manner in which the media reports on sexual violence against women varies according to the race and social class of both the victims and the perpetrators. Furthermore, this intersection also influences how blame or innocence is assigned to the victims. These categories do not operate in isolation; rather, they are intertwined to construct specific narratives in the coverage of sexual violence. Therefore, these narratives reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies of patriarchy, racism, and classism.

Another feature that is examined in the literature is the reproduction of official speeches or statements in news narratives of crime. For the police and public officials are considered the 'official' or institutional source of information on violent events, journalists and reporters are likely to reproduce accounts of these public sources. This is attested in the language of police officers and official press releases, selection of the information they disclose, communication of preconceptions on the event, and stereotypes about victims and perpetrators. Private sources, such as friends and victim's relatives, are cited less frequently affecting the narrative of the cases (Richards, et al., 2011). Stanko (2008) comments that media coverage may influence how women perceive their own risk of victimisation, often increasing their fear of crime, particularly in contexts of violence against women. In that regard, for Chancer (2014), despite feminist efforts to change representation of victims of violence, the media continues to perpetuate stereotypes that may lead to victim blaming.

Specifically regarding femicides, Meyers (1994) argues that the media treats violence against women as an individual or family pathology rather than as a social concern. Taylor (2009) examines various media narratives that directly and indirectly condemn victims and comments that the press tends to use narrative strategies that suggest that they are responsible for their own victimisation, such as highlighting their behaviour and personal decisions, not having reported previous violence or being in the company of other men at the time of their death. Likewise, Richards et al. (2011) explain that, frequently, the news suggest that victims did not take adequate measures to protect themselves, which perpetuates the idea that they are responsible for their own death. Richards et al. (2014) hold that, although femicide is a major public health issue, the media

often portrays it as an individual rather than a broader societal problem, and that this may influence public perceptions on violence against women, and policies and services targeting victims. Cuklanz (2023) points out that although media coverage of gender-based violence has improved by giving more voice and respect to victims, limitations still persist, such as racial bias, the focus on individual cases rather than cultural patterns, and the risk of sensationalism in journalism.

In Mexico, the media often address gender-based violence against women in a variety of ways, many of which contribute to the normalisation and trivialisation of gender-based violence. Some narratives focus on the most extreme attacks, presenting gender violence as personal and individual affairs isolated from patriarchal values in a dramatic style and with a language that provokes feelings or emotions instead of critical thought (Lara & Barata, 2009; Monárrez Fragoso, 2009). Vega Montiel (2013) discusses how the media impacts on the perpetuation of gender-based violence through representations that ignore the unequal power structure and conditions that enable violence against women. Likewise, Driver (2017) suggests that reporting of gender violence is often reduced to individual or personal problems, frequently without exploring underlying power dynamics or structural issues.

On the other hand, Fernández Díaz (2003) comments that crime is often associated with sexuality and, therefore, these sexualised elements are the ones that attract the attention of the press. In addition, Vega Montiel (2014) points out that the representation of women in conventional and more contemporary media still reproduce sexist stereotypes associated with traditional roles that represent women as sexual objects. Driver (2017) analyses how the media use sexist

arguments that disqualify women's value as human beings and, in some cases, blame victim's mothers for the violence suffered by their daughters, such as, for instance, for not having cared for them properly. Tiscareño-García & Miranda-Villanueva (2020) also examine the representation of aggressors and suggest that the media frequently present them in ways that minimise their culpability, alluding to factors such as alcohol or drug use, or mental health problems. They point out that this blurs the intentionality of the crime and tends to exonerate the perpetrator of his responsibility.

Regarding feminicides in particular, for Rosales (2013) the media tend to trivialise these crimes as isolated events nonetheless out of the structural violence and misogyny that perpetuates them. Furthermore, Alcocer Perulero (2014) suggests that the press produces a moral stigmatisation of victims within a sex/gender system and other social inequalities, such as social class, ethnicity and age, in a way similar to press fashion narratives that dehumanise and delegitimise women victims of feminicide. Women are not simply victims of violence, but their identity and social value are questioned and minimised due to their gender, occupation, race, or age. Thus, these accounts may suggest that women deserve what happens to them, reinforcing patriarchal norms and gender biases that perpetuate violence. Furthermore, Alcocer Perulero (2014) also suggests that in the journalistic narratives of crime reporting, sensationalist headlines are frequently employed, which reinforce negative stereotypes about women; for example, by emphasising certain transgressive behaviours based on a moralising tone that blames women for their own murder, suggesting that their actions justify the violence committed against them. Moreover, she identifies differences in how victims are represented depending on their social status, age, and occupation;

that is to say, some victims may receive compassion and attention, while others, who are stigmatised, are stripped of their humanity and worth.

However, I must mention that, given the magnitude of gender violence against women and, particularly, feminicides, the Mexican press has also played an important role in documenting, investigating, and reporting these crimes since at least the beginning of the 21st century. Some media outlets have contributed to making gender-based violence visible in Mexico: the paradigmatic case is the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, a border city in northern Mexico, since the 1990s. These crimes are characterised by their extreme violence and the impunity of criminal investigations, with many victims being young workers, often linked to *maquiladoras* or textile industries. Zermeño (2006) explains that most of women murdered in Ciudad Juárez were young people between 13 and 20 years old, dark-skinned, and poor; some of them were rape, strangled, mutilated, and incinerated. In general, in the official narrative the facts had been attributed groups of criminals that would operate in a coordinated manner or by themselves.

However, Lagarde (2008) argues that the media, including the press, have played a significant role in covering crimes against girls and women in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere. She observes, nevertheless, that the issue has been approached from diverse perspectives, ranging from sensationalism to more rigorous journalistic analysis aimed at uncovering the truth. Furthermore, she notes that over the years, civil society organisations and families of femicide victims have collaborated with the media to pressure judicial authorities, thereby exposing the pervasive impunity surrounding these crimes. Moreover, both Wright (2011) and Washington Valdez (2020) analyse how the media coverage of these cases has contributed to breaking the silence on feminicides, generating

growing interest in the national and international community and among human rights organisations. They hold that the press has been crucial in mobilising society and holding protests in memory of the victims. For instance, the press has denounced the impunity in criminal investigations and the lack of adequate response by the authorities. This suggests that the media are both a vehicle for the crime and an actor in the fight against impunity related to gender violence. In any case, feminicides must be understood as part of a social problem (Zermeño, 2006) that is not limited to those occurred in Ciudad Juárez. In fact, these crimes have reached almost every corner of Mexico (Olivera, 2011; Castañeda Salgado, 2016).

In this thesis I analyse a particular type of Mexican press: the *nota roja*. In general, this genre reports on news of violence in a sensational way and with very particular styles aimed at alarming readers while, at the same time, producing morbid curiosity, as I explain later in this chapter. I pay particular attention to this type of press because it also informs on feminicides, although commonly with an approach that exploits victim's image.

5. *Nota roja*

The *nota roja* is a narrative genre that boomed with mass journalism of the twentieth century in Mexico (Tuñón, 2018). It forms part of a distinctive national tradition within crime-oriented periodical publishing (Straw, 2011) that has a very particular style, 'headlines use wordplay, convey moral outrage, and synthesize crimes in brutally direct terms' (Piccato, 2017). Essentially, it belongs to the genre of crime journalism in Mexico that takes part of its popular culture. Pulido Llano

(2015) explains that this type of journalism is developed in various formats, such as police reports, photo reports, crime comics, photo essays, and cartoons. Regardless of the format, for Flores Gómez & Mendieta Ramírez (2012), the red press has traditionally narrated and given shape to events, generally criminal, that occur in defiance of social and legal norms, commonly carried out by socially marginalised common people. For instance, the *nota roja* reports tragic events like accidents, catastrophes, murders, robberies, massacres, lynchings, rapes, tortures and, in general, incidents that disturb daily life (Barajas, 2018).

I should mention that there is Latin American academic literature that demonstrate that it is a genre that evolves in similar ways in other countries, such as Argentina (Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando, 2021), Colombia (Ramírez Tobón, 2001; Arriaga Ornelas, 2002; Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando, 2021), Ecuador (Pontón Cevallos, 2008; Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando, 2021), El Salvador (García Dueñas, 2009), Guatemala (Bedoya, 2024); Nicaragua (Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando, 2021), Paraguay (Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando, 2021), Peru (Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando, 2021), and Venezuela (Hernández & Finol, 2010). This type of press may also be called '*sucesos*' (eventos) or '*crónica roja*' (red chronicle). Particularly in Mexico, newspapers usually include sections that may be known as '*Justicia*' (Justice), or '*Policía*' (Police) (Del Palacio Montiel, 2014). In the newspapers that I examine in my research, these sections may also be entitled '*Policía*' (Police) or '*República Policiaca*' (Police Republic), as in *La Prensa*, while in *Metro* it is regarded as '*Seguridad Pública*' (Public Safety) or simply '*Seguridad*' (Safety). Most importantly, red news dailies reserve a number of pages and entire sections to information on violence. However, exceptionally, in other sections they may report on a violent event that, due to its importance or significance, is more visible

or produces a special interest from the audience (Del Palacio Montiel, 2014). During my research, I only observed few cases of this type.

Arriaga Ornelas (2002) and Nadal Palazón (2024) argue that the most identifiable elements of the genre are shocking headlines and melodramatic styles for violent accounts. In that regard, Munguia Ibáñez (2024) criticises the *nota roja* for using sensationalist approaches that reproduce and reinforce certain narratives that normalise and trivialise crime and violence, presenting them as daily, almost inevitable, phenomenons in Mexican society. Nadal Palazón (2024) also comments that the *nota roja* commonly inform facts in isolation, without framing them in broader contexts that may allow readers to better understand complex situations. In addition, the *nota roja* frequently use stereotypical characters and action verbs that offer narratives of justice, even if superficially (Munguia Ibáñez (2024). For Arriaga Ornelas (2002), the use of raw images and vivid descriptions of events contributes to the sensationalist tone of the genre and makes readers somehow feel closer to the tragic occurrences being reported. Notwithstanding, he points out that the *nota roja* also stands out for the use of irony, black humour, and satire when informing the news.

The vitality of this kind of journalism coevolves with an intense competition between newspapers, in particular, in the coverage of tragic events that have the ability to interrupt everyday life with novel and outrageous matters (Straw, 2014). In Mexico, violence produces shocking and often grotesque images that serve as visual material for crime stories, as I explain in Chapter 3. This imagery, which commonly display damaged bodies, fatal accidents or crime scenes, play a fundamental role in the construction of the media narrative in general (Ham, 2016). In particular, *nota roja*'s informative priorities are some of the most violent,

dramatic events, such as violent deaths of women, where victims are frequently passive subjects (Lara Klahr & Barata, 2009).

The red news is even more popular in contemporary press, becoming an attractive and commercial format that fascinates large audiences keen on information about shocking events (Caloca Carrasco, 2003). Pizarro & Lugo-Ocando (2021) examine sensationalism and crime coverage in Latin America in general, finding that the red chronicle commonly appeals to working classes and communities, frequently ignored by serious media, by exposing their realities and concerns. In Latin American contexts of violence, this genre also gives voice to vulnerable people and victims of violence and crime in daily life. However, they warn that sensationalism may be used to divert attention from other political concerns and support conservative, authoritarian policies against crime. For instance, in the following chapter I explain how starting in 2006, due to the unleashed violence in the country, the Mexican government implemented drastic security policies that, among others, brought about negative consequences for human rights.

In particular, written red news dailies have some characteristics of the commonly known as 'tabloids'. Gripsrud (2008) warns that this term has been the source for various discussions and confusions in journalism. Originally, this term referred to a specific newspaper format, such as half a broadsheet. However, over time, it evolved to connote a type of journalism that emphasises short stories, large images, and sensational headlines. This has led to a connection between the format and a specific journalistic genre, where the term 'tabloid' is frequently associated with a lack of seriousness and quality in content. In this regard, Sparks (2000) compares tabloids in the United States, the United

Kingdom, Germany, and Norway observing some similarities and differences based largely in their physical structure, relationship with the serious press, circulation size, and social perception of their content and value. Similarities are concerned with the focus on entertainment, sports, and scandal topics, to the detriment of other serious topics such as politics and economics, among other social issues. On the other hand, tabloids are also distinguished by their attention to personal and private lives of certain people, such as celebrities, but also ordinary citizens in special situations. An important characteristic is sensationalism, i.e. where stories tend to be more striking and provocative, which can lead to less accuracy in information veracity. Furthermore, tabloids usually have a distinctive visual format, with an accentuated use of images of all kinds, and a design that seeks to capture readers' attention. Finally, compared to serious press, tabloids may have a wider circulation. However, the perception of tabloidisation varies according to cultural and media contexts of each country.

Bingham & Conboy (2015) find some distinctive features of British tabloids. Among others, their smaller format compared to traditional broadsheets that facilitate handling and reading, in addition to their concise, direct writing style, with texts that, generally, do not exceed 250 words, allowing readers to obtain information quickly. In that regard the layout of tabloids is also aimed at working and middle classes, frequently focusing on topics related to their own daily experiences. Likewise, Bingham & Conboy (2015) draw attention to their sensationalist content when focusing on scandal stories, celebrities, crime, and topics of human interest, seeking to capture readers' attention with eye-catching stories. Above all, they are characterised by the use of large headlines, attractive images, and visual designs. For this reason, the use of illustrations and

photographs is common. Similarly, Ornebring & Jonsson (2004) comment that some American tabloids have also embraced elements of the 'new journalism', such as information on human stories and investigative reports that address social problems. For Carrabine (2008), the 'new journalism' is a style of journalism that emerged in the 19th century, characterised by its focus on themes such as crime, sexual violence, and human-interest stories. This style sought to democratise information and make the press more accessible and relevant to people's daily lives, moving away from the dry, traditional political commentary that had previously predominated. Consequently, it incorporated narrative techniques from popular literature, emphasising sensationalist and human-interest elements in its accounts to attract a broader and more diverse readership. Ornebring & Jonsson (2004) argue that American tabloids also pursued new audiences by adopting this lighter focus and the dramatisation of news, particularly in relation to crime and to position themselves as an alternative to the more traditional and elitist press to serve audiences and topics that were overlooked by the mainstream. In general, Sparks (2000) suggests that, despite criticism, there is a debate as to whether tabloids may provide a form of resistance to dominant narratives and represent interests of the working classes or even give voice to citizens excluded from official discourses. Tabloids may democratise information by addressing topics of popular interest as they may also limit the understanding of broader social issues by focusing on the personal and sensational, more than structural and political concerns.

Taylor (2000) comments that, although stories in the tabloids are more focused on trivial events than in broadsheets, the whole industry is interested in gossip and scandals. Journalists, editors, and photographers look for new and

convincing forms of expressing correctly to the public (Seaton, 2005). Although with variants according to each publication and/or country, among the key features shared by the tabloid press are a near-total dependence on news-stand purchases; a front page designed to function as a poster, typically centred on a single story with a dominant photograph and bold headlines; and a significantly higher proportion of images within the editorial content compared to other sectors of the daily press (Becker, 2003). Taylor (2000) suggests that tabloid newspapers are well known for the predominance of sensational images, particularly, in their first pages. Young (2017) explains that tabloids have a historical tradition of using photographs in a way that attracts emotions and feelings rather than the values of photographs as evidence of the truth and objectivity. She adds that tabloids employ photographs in a distinctive manner, using cropped, spontaneous, and frequently sensationalist images that appeal more to the reader's emotions than to the objective presentation of facts. That is to say, these images are not presented merely as a faithful record of reality, but are instead carefully selected, edited, or even manipulated to evoke specific sentiments, such as fear, outrage, or sympathy. For these reasons, among others, it is the source of ethical debates that I address later in this chapter.

On the other hand, the red news shares a narrative style similar to the true crime genre, which has existed for centuries, but has gained a particular popularity and authenticity due to new technologies (Cecil, 2020). For Biressi (2001), true crime stories focus on real crimes of great public impact, such as homicides or kidnappings, exploring the experiences of victims and criminals, and contextualising such events and their consequences. These stories use dramatic and sensationalist narrative and visual techniques to reconfigure the events,

generating empathy towards victims and fascination with criminals. Its visual appeal, using stills, documents or illustrations, is key to reinforce the narrative and provide a sense of reality. Murley (2008) notes that true crime stories often feature graphic descriptions of violence and horror, provoking an intense emotional response in the audience and offering a complex experience. In addition, they address cultural and social concerns, such as fear of violence, gender dynamics and racial issues, which deepens the interpretation of the crimes.

The true crime genre has prompted important ethical criticism for its exploitative nature and potential for harm. Scholars argue that it often sensationalises personal tragedies for entertainment, trivialising suffering and violating the privacy of victims and families (Wiltenburg, 2004; Browder, 2006). A key criticism is its tendency to dehumanise victims and reinforce harmful stereotypes, portraying women as passive victims and men as aggressors (Browder, 2006). The genre is also accused of offering a superficial and punitive vision of justice. Stoneman & Packer (2020) contend it may cause retraumatisation and legitimise illegitimate punitive practices, while Kaplan & LaChance (2022) argue it promotes a voyeuristic gaze and implicates the audience in media complicity without fostering a transformative critique of the legal system. Furthermore, the narrative focus often marginalises victims' experiences in favour of judging the accused, as highlighted by Mellins & Moore (2021). Collectively, these critiques question the genre's ethical foundations and its impact on public understanding of crime and justice. However, for Wattis (2021), unlike earlier true crime productions, which focused on a sensationalist and voyeuristic approach, some recent documentaries adopt a stance more

committed to investigating truth, guilt, and flaws in police investigations and judicial processes. These new formats seek to question and expose errors within the justice system and invite the audience to reflect upon the veracity of convictions and the functioning of the police.

From the above, I suggest that, despite differences between countries, the *nota roja* shares common features with tabloid journalism and true crime stories. For instance, tabloids have evolved towards a journalistic style that prioritises sensationalism, with striking images, shocking headlines, accessible language, short narratives, and attractive visual design. This approach makes it popular among the working and middle classes, despite generating debates about its ethical standards compared to the serious press and its influence on public opinion. In that regard, the *nota roja* shares its melodramatic sensationalism, exaggerated headlines, and the use of crude images, although with a particular focus on tragedies, crime, and violence. Like tabloids, it emphasises the visual impact with explicit photographs and short stories that connect with marginalised sectors of society. Both forms of journalism reflect the concerns of neglected communities and appeal to popular audiences, using accessible narratives aimed primarily at the working class. Now, I have already mentioned that crime news can have different formats. One of them can be, precisely, the true crime stories type. Some Mexican crime news magazines that were popular in the last century, such as, for instance, '*Alarma*' or '*El Nuevo Alarma*', among others, used to edit entire issues, and even a series of them, to covering criminal events or other tragedies that generated a particular interest in society. In the next Chapter I make a brief reference to the magazine '*Alarma*' to discuss its distinctive style typical of the red chronicle. However, I must warn that in this thesis I analyse

newspapers that cover tragedies on a daily basis, but generally do not follow up on particular events.

The *nota roja*, like tabloids and true crime stories, in their different formats, has also been criticised for its impact on the social perception of violence and its alleged contribution to the normalisation of crime, the representation of violence, and gender stereotypes, among others. I refer to these issues in particular below.

6. Ethical debates

In an interview conducted during my research, Azaola Garrido (2021), a renowned Mexican anthropologist and emeritus researcher in the National System of Researchers in Mexico, whose academic work addresses topics such as power, democracy, violence, and gender, suggested that it is now far more common for news programmes to broadcast real images of violent events, such as aggressions against women, whereas in the past such events were only narrated. In that regard, although the *nota roja* is part of Mexican popular culture and, as such, is a journalistic genre that is well established, it has also given rise to criticism for its ethics or lack thereof. Del Palacio Montiel (2014) comments that, generally, information is reported out of context, which can lead to erroneous interpretations and misrepresentations of reality. Thus, for instance, Rodelo (2015) criticises the use of dramatic expressions and qualifying adjectives, as well as the inclusion of value judgments, commonly negative, about people which may distort facts and promote violence against certain social groups. She further suggests that it may contribute to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of certain social classes. For Blas Alvarado & Contreras Serratos (2012), black humour

when covering crimes may turn pain and tragedy into a spectacle in which both victims and perpetrators are ridiculed. Aubague (1987) explains that, by focusing on violence and death, the red news dehumanises the victims, presenting them as mere objects of consumption for the pleasure of the spectator. In that regard, Blas Alvarado & Contreras Serratos (2012) comment that the *nota roja* produces this type of content because it is what it sells, therefore, it privileges consumption and profitability.

The *nota roja* has also been the subject of discussion for its influence on the perception of public safety. Casas Pérez (2011) points out that excessive circulation of information on violence may contribute to social anxiety and uncertainty, and that some media exaggerate crimes to attract audiences. However, Flores Gómez & Mendieta Ramírez (2012) find that, although for some people this genre perpetuates violence and fear, others judge it as valid for reporting on social reality. However, Barata (2010) warns that the *nota roja* reflects a specific way of understanding security and insecurity, shaped by discursive elites with the power to define and communicate social realities, such as the media. Thus, media coverage of violence in Mexico has created narratives that may exaggerate or distort reality, focusing on violent events and their impact on the perception of safety, without considering other social factors that influence well-being. In a similar line Del Palacio Montiel (2015) suggests that there are symbolic constructions mediated by economic, political, business, legal, and personal factors, and that only by understanding these factors may the interactions of power in news content be identified. Furthermore, she holds that there is an important degree of state control over information on violence. In that regard, Rodelo (2015) criticises that journalists rely excessively on official

sources, which limits independent research and critical questioning of these narratives.

Jáquez Balderrama (2001) also argues that the *nota roja* commonly speculates on events of violence taking advantage of the lack of legal regulation to circulate certain content. I should mention that this has, in fact, traditionally been the case. However, as I explain in Chapter 3, in 2014 new legislation was passed which prohibits the disclosure of certain personal information and imposes obligations on public officials to safeguard such information, particularly when criminal investigations are underway. It is not relevant in this thesis to explain the effectiveness of said legislation. However, as may be observed throughout the following chapters, red news dailies have always had strategies to report on violent events without losing its traditional character. Indeed, Amezcua Bernal (2021) observes that, although the *nota roja* has changed over time, it has become increasingly explicit due to the widespread access to cameras, even by police officers and paramedics. This has resulted in many photographs being taken without regard for the image and being published without further investigation or visual ethics.

Particularly in relation to news about gender violence, ethical criticism focuses on how the media perpetuate stigmas, dehumanise victims, and minimise feminicides as a social phenomenon that demands an approach committed to gender equality. In this regard, Martínez Toledo (2020) observes that the media tend to represent women mainly as victims of violence, which reinforces gender stereotypes and minimises their agency. Furthermore, for Munguía Ibáñez (2024), the sensationalist style of the red chronicle contributes

to normalising gender violence and constructing a perception of reality that reflects and perpetuates the social and cultural dynamics in Mexico.

Regarding the photographic representation of gender-based violence against women, Deharbe (2020) discusses how images and stories in the media often focus on fear and physical violence against women. Thus, visual narratives frequently use high-impact stereotypes that emphasise only physical traces of violence, without addressing the complexities of victims' subjectivity. In other words, this type of images reduces women to simple victims, without recounting their stories of survival and resistance. In addition, she suggests that there is a tendency to ignore symbolic violence. An important point that Deharbe (2020) makes is that photographs objectify women and, to a large extent, exploit their image. This may legitimise the authoritative role of photographers or the media as controllers of such images, instead of offering a fair and empowering representation of victims of violence.

On images of feminicides in Mexico, particularly those in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Driver (2015) criticises the sensationalism and media exploitation of such crimes. Among others, she argues that this may be a sort of porno-misery according to which images of violence are used to attract viewers without adequate contexts. Thus, it dehumanises victims and their stories. She also analyses how the focus on physical violence is generally narrated without giving voice to victims, of course, and their families, reducing women to mere statistics or mutilated bodies, which, among others, prevents the understanding of social and economic complexities underlying these crimes. In a different piece, Driver (2017) also argues that the Mexican media reports on gender violence against women by means of sexist ideas that dismiss the value of women as human

beings, frequently without addressing the perpetrators of violence. Likewise, Driver (2017) holds that the media focuses on the alleged morality and intimate details of victims, delegitimising women's lives and suggesting that violence against them may be admissible.

In particular, the visual representation of feminicides in the press is problematic, above all, for its sensationalism, lack of context and exploitative practices of images of violence. This leads to a broader discussion on the visual representation of crime in press photography and the dilemmas surrounding the representation of reality, as I explain in the following section.

7. Photography and the representation of crime

The *nota roja* is essentially a journalistic genre that reports on violent events, including high-profile crimes, but in a sensationalist way. For that reason, it is useful to review some considerations on the use of photography to represent crime. As I explained before, the red chronicle is predominantly visual, then press reports frequently use stills of the aftermath of crimes when informing readers. Therefore, I focus on this topic below, since the objects of analysis in this thesis are photographs of feminicides in the Mexican *nota roja*.

Straw (2016) points out that images of corpses lying on the ground are the most prized crime photographs insofar they are typically closer to the criminal event itself. As Bright (2012) argues, the body is the central object at a crime scene and the source of much of the tension surrounding an image, yet it is also the reason for its power. In this sense, images of deceased people are highly sought after by the *nota roja* because they generate an immediate emotional

impact on readers. These images convey information in a sensationalist manner, which not only captures attention but also drives higher sales. However, for Becker (2003), what is considered 'sensational' is rather circumscribed to specific cultural, historical, and political practices that, in turn, settle ethical standards around different types of content. In the case of imagery, the sensational does not depend on the subject or object photographed in themselves, but also in the way in which images reproduce them which, besides, provokes emotions and, therefore, creates sensations.

Hence, the discussion is whether photography is capable of capturing 'reality' faithfully and, if so, under what terms. Ferrell & Van de Voorde (2010) note that people tend to believe that a photograph objectively represents reality, but this is mediated by technical decisions such as angles, aperture, distance, processing and cropping, which distances the photograph from being an objective reflection. Instead, they suggest that photography is a visual document that reflects the relationship between the photographer, subject and cultural meanings in specific contexts. Furthermore, Young (2017; citing Griffin, 1992) observes that visual images are often perceived as purer and more accurate representations of reality than other formats, reflected in the expression 'seeing is believing', which implies greater trust in visual evidence. However, for Carrabine (2017, 2017b), photography has a complex relationship with reality because photography is not simply an objective reproduction of reality, but a cultural and artistic act that can construct, manipulate, and aestheticise the image, which complicates its relationship with truth and reality. This tension between the artistic and the real is central to the photographic tradition and raises questions about photography's ability to represent reality objectively. For Carney

(2010), framing and focus may distort material or symbolic meanings. Even today, digital photography has increased scepticism about the authenticity of images for any visual content may be manipulated (Taylor, 2000; Linfield, 2010).

When it comes to images of violence, some events may hardly be represented. For that reason, it is sometimes challenging to fully capture the reality of a traumatic event, such as Auschwitz (Lyotard, 1988). For Linfield (2010), representing the unspeakable is an impossibility. Although photographs may depict violent events, they often fail to fully explain the complex realities from which they emerge. In journalism, believing that photographs provide images without mediation of real events overlooks intellectual processes that journalism practices (Becker, 2003). In this regard, the reality of what photographs capture and their guarantee of authenticity do not rest on the photographs themselves for accepting photojournalism as evidence is a convention rather than an absolute guarantee of truth. Even when photography is used in its more realistic styles it offers no absolute or substantial evidence (Taylor, 2000). Basically, for Carrabine (2014: 149) images are 'ontologically fallible and partial' because, like language, images cannot capture the whole of truth or reality. Each image is a representation that is subject to interpretations and specific contexts, which means that they cannot offer a complete understanding of the events or experiences they document.

Therefore, the interpretation of photographs requires a reading in light of their context (Becker, 1995). Photographs operate in particular social contexts and have particular cultural meanings (Ferrell & Van de Voorde, 2010). As Taylor (2000) notes, the authenticity of any document is not absolute; rather, it is constructed through a network of mutual validation involving multiple sources or

entities. Hence, the 'reality' that a photograph captures is that of '*shared cultural meanings* created between photographer and those photographed in a particular context' (italics in original; Ferrell & Van de Voorde, 2010: 41). In addition, photographs have no meaning independent of their relationship to words, graphic elements and other constituents that surround and penetrate them. Sometimes, photography illustrates the text, in others, the text illustrates the image and, in others, a balance is reached where text and photography inform each other (Becker, 2003).

Today, the main issue regarding the representation of crime lies in its claim to depict the 'reality of crime' (Young, 1996: 81). Nevertheless, she argues that the content of the image is never simply communicated and the form of the representation cannot always guarantee meaning. As spectators, whether forensic or aesthetic, a criminal scene is approached retrospectively, to narrate an event that existed but in the past. The image of a crime scene functions, then, as a register that depends on the viewer's deductive vision to explain its meaning (Young, 2005). However, crime scene photography only provides shorthand information (Bright, 2012).

Moreover, photographers are rarely present as witness to record or capture the criminal event which, as I noted, occurred in the past. Real criminal acts, unlike other events of journalistic significance, are rarely heralded in advance (Straw, 2010). The arrival of photojournalists at crime scenes is almost always late. This delay has shaped practices, conventions, and aesthetics of crime-oriented photojournalism (Straw, 2016). For this reason, crime photographers sometimes represent the criminal event through its side effects and its constituent parts, such as weapons, suspects, victims, locations,

accomplices, and crime sites, which are often photographed separately in different moments and spaces (Straw, 2010, Straw, 2016). Therefore, crime-oriented photojournalism is 'marked by high levels of fragmentation' (Straw, 2016: 139-140). In fact, crime-oriented photojournalism only focuses on the conclusive, settled consequences of criminal events (Straw, 2010). The visual representation of atrocious events underscores inherent contradictions in the nature of photography. While it seeks to document and portray reality objectively, capturing images of violence or suffering introduces tensions, such as the balance between informing the public and risking sensationalism, or the dual intent to denounce injustices while potentially desensitising audiences. Straw (2014) suggests that images of violence, tragedy or suffering are characteristic of the modern or late modern world, that is, they define contemporary reality. However, such images also bring out fundamental tensions in photography more clearly. Images of violence and suffering may overwhelm us, forcing us to take sides and witness terrible atrocities (Carrabine, 2014).

The theme of 'suffering' has been central in history and culture. Spivey (2001) explains that the art of depicting suffering has been a constant throughout history, from cave paintings to the works of Renaissance and Baroque masters, reflecting human experiences of pain and anguish in different cultural and temporal contexts. However, its representations and uses vary according to time, space, and media. Images may have different meanings depending on when and where they appear (McGonagle, 2014). Wilkinson (2005) argues that sociology has long been concerned with how experiences of suffering are linked to social and cultural conditions. Historically, suffering has been viewed not only as an inevitable to the human condition but also as a phenomenon capable of revealing

essential truths about our humanity. However, despite its longstanding role as a subject of reflection, there is a growing recognition of the need to reinterpret its meaning in the contemporary context, particularly in a world marked by violence and injustice. In this regard, Reinhardt & Edwards (2007) introduce the concept of 'traffic in pain', referring to the frequent circulation of images depicting suffering individuals and devastated landscapes in popular media as in contemporary art.

Some crime scene photographs from tabloids have evolved to be also part of art galleries, as O'Hagan (2012) puts it. In fact, images of violent death have been the object of aesthetic consideration and explored in contemporary art. Although the crime scene has its own value as an aesthetic object, the development of sensational journalism fuelled a public hunger for sensation linked to the entertainment culture (Bright, 2012). One of the best examples cited in academic literature is the photography of Arthur Fellig 'Weegee' (Carney, 2010; Carrabine, 2012; Bright, 2012; Carrabine, 2017). For instance, his book *Naked City* (2019 [1945]) is today regarded as a piece of art (Ferrell & Van de Voorde, 2010). In Mexico, Enrique Metinides and Nacho López are recalled as examples, whose works, with an emphasis on the documentation of urban crime and violence, have been exhibited in museums (Straw, 2011; Straw, 2014). A book that collects Metinides' photographs of *nota roja*, though considered today as artistic, is *101 Tragedies of Enrique Metinides* (Metinides, 2012). Therefore, within consumer culture, crime becomes an aesthetic, a style, and a fashion (Ferrell, et al., 2015). These artistic pictures move us to look at them and interpret them with rather an artistic eye. We may even think that they are old photographs that portray times and societies that are already part of history and, therefore, we may have different understandings. Yet, in the tabloid press, violence and

glamour have become intrinsic to all crime scenes, forging a complex visual relationship between fiction and forensic science (Bright, 2012). It may be argued that, in the modern world, crime has become conflated with its representation (Ferrell, et al., 2015), and it is here that tensions may emerge between representation, reality, crime, ethics, and politics. This is the case of contemporary newspaper crime photographs of the Mexican *nota roja*, particularly those produced and reproduced even on the same day, if not the next.

In particular, Bourdieu (1998 [1996]) suggests that newspapers, like television, often prioritise sensational content and stories of human interest, which may lead to a depoliticisation of information and simple representations of complex events. He also warns that newspapers are increasingly subject to market pressures and advertising demands, which affect information quality. This tends to a prioritisation of what is most commercially viable and not necessarily what is news-relevant. Therefore, the *nota roja* operates as a medium with clear informative agendas, prioritising the selection and hierarchisation of information to serve the commercial objectives of the companies that produce it. However, beyond merely informing, its photographs must also captivate readers, as these newspapers target specific audiences with meticulously designed content to appeal to them. As a medium that reports on 'real' events, the red chronicle conveys or retransmits discourses through images, such as photographs, which not only illustrate the news but may also provide critical details about criminal events. Consequently, when analysing photographs of feminicides, it is essential to recognise that these images do more than inform as they primarily aim to attract readers and drive sales.

For Van Dijk (1990), news may be approached primarily as a form of public discourse. For instance, in my research I observe that information on femicides in the red news is grounded in gender stereotypes and stigmas that re-victimise women, as explained earlier. The press draws on an 'ideal victim', in the sense that Christie (1986) describes it, and its social construction (Walklate, 2012). This 'ideal victim' is commodified by the media as a result of social demands for narratives about victimhood, risk, and safety, recalling Menis (2021). However, this commodification brands victims of gender violence. There is also a stigmatisation within a sex/gender system that intersects with other inequalities that confirms that victims displayed in the *nota roja* are generally precarious women in terms of identity, value, and social hierarchy. On the concept of 'precariousness', Butler (2003, 2009) suggests that, by definition, all lives are precarious, for there is always the risk of being harmed by external agents. Yet, there are different forms of vulnerability that make certain populations more exposed to violence. She further points out that this precariousness designates a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from a lack of social and economic support networks, resulting in differential experiences of harm, violence, and death.

Besides, there are ethical implications of mediated representations of suffering. For Sontag (2002), the large amount of misery that may be observed in the media decreases the power of images making the horrible seem more familiar. A lot of photojournalism exploits the other and reinforces differences between people. Carrabine (2012, 2014, 2017) holds that a common problem is that the camera has an important power to aestheticise everything it photographs and to beautify suffering. However, the aestheticisation of tragedies may mitigate

the feelings of people who witness suffering (Carrabine, 2012) and provoke an attitude of 'detached observation' (Brand & Pinchevski, 2013: 106).

Another ethical concern with photographs of suffering is their pornographic character. Sekula (1984) criticises the pornography of the direct representation of misery, a practice in which photographers and artists transform misery into an aesthetic object, presenting human suffering in superficial and sensationalist ways. This approach strips people of their dignity, reducing them to subjects of compassion or curiosity. Sekula argues that this representation is not only exploitative, but also minimises underlying political and social struggles by focusing on trivial human interest, without a critical analysis of the structural conditions that generate such suffering. Therefore, he proposes a more contextualised and critical understanding of the social realities that cause suffering. For Linfield (2010) the representation of helpless or vulnerable people is a delicate or complicated task because there is a risk that the representation becomes patronising. In trying to show the reality of these people, one may fall into an attitude of superiority or a paternalistic vision that reduces them to mere objects of compassion instead of subjects with dignity and their own agency.

However, despite its limited value as evidence, viewing these images may prompt viewers to reflect on their moral and ethical implications, evoking emotional or moral challenges (Taylor, 2000; Wilkinson, 2005). In that regard, Berger (2003) suggests that certain images produce indignation, and that demands action. Images of violence have certain causes and generate certain emotional responses in the viewer since violence and carefully managed portrayals of violence have been a significant component of politics of entertainment for many years (Seaton 2005). Valier and Lippens (2004) hold that

there is something in photographs that moves the viewer, the *punctum*, as Barthes (1981) calls it, that also raises questions of justice. Nonetheless, not all photographs move in the same way to the same people. The disturbance provoked by images of violence may produce immediacy and distance from critical events that sometimes cause the shocking nature of images to undermine their political effects (Carrabine, 2014). The camera is an instrument of considerable political power though for images may influence public perception and social narrative. By using photography in a critical and inventive way, it is possible to expand the political imagination and address essential issues of our time (Carrabine, 2017).

The objective of visual analysis must be the social and political explanation (Carrabine, 2012; Carrabine, 2017). Yet, today the trend in commercial news is to strip documentary photography of its once critical role, and now produces sensational images for entertainment (Taylor, 2000). This is true when talking about tabloid newspapers and the way they usually operate, particularly for using photography as a means to communicate a violent event. In the media, there is a strong relationship between discourse and power. Any intonation, pronoun, headline, metaphor, colour, or camera angle, among other semiotic properties of discourse, relates to power relations and may contribute to a discursive reproduction of power abuse and social inequality (Van Dijk, 2009). For Bourdieu (1992), language is also an instrument through which individuals exercise power to satisfy their interests. All linguistic interaction has a socially structured background that expresses and reproduces. Linguistic use varies according to considerations such as gender. In that regard, symbolic violence is 'a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part

through the purely symbolic channels of communication and recognition, (more precisely, misrecognition), cognition, or even feeling' (Bourdieu, 2001: 1-2). Therefore, violence signifies the subordination of persons and groups performed by differential power hierarchies. The media, in particular newspapers, may exert a symbolic power that reproduces the *status quo*, i.e. of gender violence and violence against women, as it is the case in the Mexican '*nota roja*', as I explain throughout this thesis.

8. Preliminary conclusions

In this chapter, I explored the social and cultural roots of gender-based violence, particularly femicides, and its representation in the Mexican media, with special emphasis on the journalistic genre of the *nota roja*. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, encompassing visual, cultural, and feminist studies, I evidenced how patriarchal structures and state impunity contribute to the normalisation and reproduction of sexist stereotypes in media coverage. Furthermore, I highlighted the ambivalent role of the media, which, on the one hand, gives visibility to these crimes, and on the other, through a sensationalist and decontextualised treatment, re-victimises women and minimises the severity of the problem.

This theoretical review lays the groundwork for the subsequent empirical analysis and underscores the necessity of a critical perspective that deconstructs patriarchal narratives and promotes ethical journalistic practices with a gender perspective. Thus, the chapter concludes with the idea that understanding the complex relationship between gender, violence, and the media is fundamental to

addressing the media representation of femicides in Mexico and its social implications.

Chapter 2. Methodology

'When it was revealed that the three corpses found were those of young women and that the place where they had been discovered had been a brothel, the news made the front page of every newspaper in the country'

Jorge Ibargüengoitia, *Las muertas*

1. Introduction

In this research, I analyse photographs of feminicides published in two crime newspapers entitled *La Prensa* and *Metro*. As previously explained, feminicides are gender-based crimes commonly reported by the media. Consequently, I examine the media treatment and the role it plays in the representation and interpretation of femicides. In general terms, media discourse holds significant influence and social power. The press functions as a filter through which information is transmitted in the form of news. Specifically, the coverage of feminicides in crime newspapers is grounded in gender stereotypes and stigmas that contribute to the re-victimisation of women. In this chapter, I follow the approaches from Machin & Mayr (2023) for multimodal critical discourse analysis, Jancsary et al. (2016) for visual and multimodal analysis, and semiotic concepts from Barthes (1977) and Hall (2003 [1980]) to interpret denotation, connotation, and the processes of message encoding and decoding. These theoretical frameworks enable an examination of how images and texts do not merely inform, but also reinforce structures of power and dominant narratives on gender violence, thereby situating the analysis within a specific Mexican cultural and patriarchal context.

In the literature review, I explained how, according to feminist theories, gender constitutes a social order and a category that interacts with others such as class, ethnicity, race, age, and so forth. This combination illustrates the experience of women's subordination and oppression in a world perceived through a male gaze, as I identified in the photographs that I analyse. Generally, before being murdered, many women were embedded in a context of continuous violence across different spheres: family, school, work, community, and so on. As a medium that reports 'real' events, the press is not exempt from transmitting or re-transmitting dominant gender discourses regarding the position of women in society. In particular, in the *nota roja* the visual representation of femicide victims is composed both of the objective data observable in the photographs themselves, such as the victim's clothing, occupation, the places where they have been found, body and nudity, age, injuries, among others, and of the particular social and cultural contexts of Mexico, due to the manner in which this type of crime news is handled. Thus, while the red news fulfils its function of informing, in doing so, it may stereotype and stigmatise victims, thereby affecting their dignity even after death.

The methodological approach explained in this chapter focuses on the critical analysis of discourse and visual representation within the context of gender-based violence in Mexico. The research strategy entails a detailed analysis of photographs and reports on feminicides in the media, taking into account both the objective data visible in the images and the cultural and ideological meanings derived from them. This allows for an understanding of how messages about gender-based violence are constructed and disseminated, as well as the social and political implications of such representation. To this end,

first, I refer to the environment in which the research was conducted, the research items, the sampling method, the data collection methods, the methodological strategy for data analysis, and some ethical concerns.

2. Research questions

The research has a general question: what are the discursive mechanisms that legitimise or challenge gender violence in photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja*? As specific questions, developed in each of the chapters, I propose the following:

- 1) In what way does the historical evolution of the *nota roja* reflect and contribute to power dynamics, representation of violence, and ethical challenges in Mexican journalism?
- 2) How is the journalistic genre of the *nota roja* in Mexico characterised and designed through its visual and narrative elements?
- 3) How do photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja* contribute to the construction of gender stereotypes and roles, stigmatising and dehumanising victims of gender-based violence against women in Mexico?

3. Objectives

The general objective of the research is to critically analyse the visual representations of feminicides in Mexican *nota roja* through the identification of the discursive mechanisms that legitimise or challenge gender violence. Therefore, the specific objectives are:

1) To examine the historical trajectory of the *nota roja* in Mexico from its cultural and symbolic roots, its development across different historical periods, and its impact on contemporary society, with particular attention to journalistic practices, the graphic representation of violence, and the conditions of censorship and security faced by journalists.

2) To examine the *nota roja* as a journalistic genre in Mexico based on its graphic design, narrative style, and use of images to identify how these characteristics contribute to the representation and social construction of violence, with a particular focus on the coverage of feminicides.

3) To analyse the visual representation of femicides in photographs published in Mexican *nota roja* to understand how these images reproduce gender stereotypes and roles, stigmatising and dehumanising victims of gender-based violence against women in Mexico.

4. Hypotheses

The general hypothesis is that the visual representation of victims in tabloid press through the exposure of mutilated, sexualised, or violence-contextualised bodies reduces their humanity to objects of media consumption, reinforces patriarchal stereotypes, naturalises gender-based violence, and reproduces social inequalities, contributing to the symbolic perpetuation of female oppression. Thus, the specific hypotheses are:

- 1) The historical evolution of the *nota roja* in Mexico reflects a normalisation of violence through sensationalist journalistic practices, where the graphic representation of violence has perpetuated power dynamics and faced selective censorship, limiting ethical and critical coverage.
- 2) The visual and narrative design of Mexican *nota roja*, characterised by the use of explicit images, alarmist headlines, and a focus on morbid details, contributes to the social construction of violence as spectacle, including in cases of femicide, where emotional shock is prioritised over structural analysis.
- 3) Photographs of femicides in the *nota roja* reproduce gender stereotypes by focusing on the passive victimisation of women, sexualisation and erotisation of female bodies and dehumanisation of victims, reinforcing narratives that justify and diminish patriarchal violence.

5. Research setting

Crano et al. (2024) explain that the research setting refers to the context or environment in which a research study is conducted. The choice of research setting may affect the internal and external validity of the study, as well as the nature of the data collected. In the context of social research, it is crucial that the research setting is appropriate for the research question and allows for the effective observation of the phenomenon of interest.

During the research, I conducted fieldwork at the archive of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) located in Mexico City, Mexico, given that the research items were photographs of femicides in the *nota roja*. This archive is very well known for its collection of newspapers, broadsheets, magazines, journals, etc. Due to the regularity with which I attended the archive, the archivists provided me with documents that had not yet been bound or catalogued. On one occasion, they even furnished me with a digital file containing material unavailable in printed form. However, when I had progressed just over halfway through my consultation of the archive, it had to close due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, I had to seek other available archives to complete the review of the newspaper *Metro*, which I was analysing when the archive closed. To this end, I contacted the editor of said newspaper, explained my situation, and kindly allowed me to consult the missing issues in the archive of *Reforma*, the publishing group to which *Metro* belongs.

As I explain later, I conducted 14 interviews, some in person and others remotely due to the pandemic. However, this did not in any way affect the data collected; on the contrary, it even facilitated communication with individuals who

do not reside in Mexico City, the location where I carried out my fieldwork. The interviews I conducted in person were carried out in the locations suggested by the interviewees themselves. Thus, these interviews took place in cafés or at the interviewees' workplaces. The latter scenario allowed me to gain first-hand insight into the dynamic work of crime reporters and photo reporters. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the photographers even invited me to accompany him, along with other female colleagues, to cover a homicide. There, at the crime scene, I was able to observe the interaction between reporters and photographers covering the crime beat, onlookers, as well as the police, forensic teams, and so forth. This provided me with a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges involved in reporting on violent incidents such as this one. In remote interviews, the challenge was to establish a relationship of trust with individuals who did not know me and who had kindly agreed to speak with me. Nevertheless, as the interviews progressed, they shared crucial data and information for my research.

6. Collection methods and study population

Document analysis constitutes a fundamental component of the research. To this end, I identified each of the femicide reports in both newspapers and took photographs of the full pages for my records. Simultaneously, I recorded key data in an Excel spreadsheet to identify the criminal reports and to discern relevant characteristics. The captured data corresponds to: year, month, date, day of the week, headline, reporter, photographer, section, picture captions, page number,

whether the photographs were in black and white or colour, and more specific observations related to the investigation.

Subsequently, I made cuts to the photographs of the pages to isolate the images of the feminicides and other related photographs, primarily those showing contextual elements. Therefore, I used Adobe Photoshop to make two types of cuts. As it has been uncomfortable to take the photographs due to the direction of the light and because the newspapers were bound in thick volumes, I used my hands or clips to hold them and took the photos at an unflattering angle, such that some photos are in poor perspective. For this reason, a first cut was made to remove my fingers or clips as much as possible and/or to attempt to recover the perspective of the photographs, and to make the full page as clean as possible. This cut allowed me to conduct the analysis of the full page: the interaction of the images with written texts, particularly headlines, fonts, colours, etc. A second cut corresponds only to the photographs of the feminicides. In this way, they were isolated from the rest of the page. These types of images enabled me to focus on another type of analysis, that is, of the image itself. However, in this thesis, I only include photographs of the full page as an Annex, as only in this manner may the detailed composition of the visual representation of feminicides in crime news be observed.

Due to the fact that the physical conditions for photographing the newspaper pages were not entirely adequate, owing to insufficient light, the projection of shadows, or because the issues were bound, which at times prevented the pages from being opened fully, the only manipulation I have performed on some photographs has been to adjust their brightness, contrast,

sharpness, and perspective, so that the photographs would be as clear as possible for analysis.

I conducted 14 interviews that delve into or elaborate upon certain characteristics of the *nota roja* and its coverage of feminicides and gender-based violence against women in general. I carried out semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions as this afforded me greater flexibility to interrogate my interviewees. The latter comprised journalists, reporters, photographers, editors, civil society workers, and academic experts on the subject. Some interviews were conducted remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst other in person. The transcription of the interviews enabled me to obtain valuable previously unknown information, to confirm other types of data and, in general, allowed me to complement and/or clarify concepts and practices regarding the visual representation of violence against women in the press.

According to Cox (2020), the study population refers to the entire group of individuals who meet certain criteria and are the focus of research in a study. This population is the one intended to be investigated, and from which a sample will be drawn to conduct the analysis. She also cautions that it is essential for the study population to be representative so that the findings can be generalised to a broader context.

This research encompasses press reports featuring photographs of femicides published between 2000 and 2018. I have selected a four-year sample spanning this period: 2000, as it marked the first time in Mexico that a different political party won a presidential election after nearly 70 years; 2006, a year in which violence began to escalate under the governance of that same party; and 2012 and 2018, ensuring coverage at six-year intervals. In each of these years,

distinct political parties succeeded in the presidential election while the rise in violence persisted despite promises of pacification in the country (Teiner, 2020).

Below, I present a table displaying the number of issues reviewed for each newspaper and each year. The unrevised issues were not published, as they corresponded to bank holidays in Mexico. On only seven occasions the issues were unavailable.

Table 1. Consulted copies of *La Prensa* and *Metro*

Year	<i>La Prensa</i>	<i>Metro</i>
2000	361	360
2006	364	365
2012	362	365
2018	357	365
	Total: 1444	Total: 1455

For *La Prensa*, I collected a total of 400 crime reports on feminicides that included images, whereas for *Metro*, I gathered 343 items. Given the substantial volume of items, specifically, 743, sampling was conducted. Cox (2020) explains that this process involves selecting a sample that is as representative as possible of the total population to maximise generalisability and minimise sampling error. In that regard, I used a programme for data analysis and documentation (Excel) to obtain a representative sample for each year and newspaper. Additionally, I employed an estimate of proportions, which, as Bordens & Abbott (2022) explain, is an estimation of the proportion of a characteristic or behaviour within a population, based on data obtained from a sample. This estimation is commonly used in statistics to make inferences about the general population from a smaller group. Within the context of inferential statistics, it is calculated from the observed proportion in the sample and may include a margin of error, providing a range

within which the true proportion in the population is expected to lie. However, my research is not quantitative but rather qualitative in nature. For this reason, I used a 95% confidence level, as it is commonly employed in the social sciences. Bordens & Abbott (2022) note that this percentage provides a range of values within which the population parameter is expected to be found in 95% of the random samples taken from that population. Thus, my sample consists of 292 items from *La Prensa*. For *Metro*, the sample comprises 256 items. The total sample included in the analysis consists of 548 items.

Table 2. Sample of *La Prensa*

Year	Sample	Total
2000	20	292
2006	47	
2012	87	
2018	138	

Table 3. Sample of *Metro*

Year	Sample	Total
2000	15	256
2006	56	
2012	49	
2018	136	

On the other hand, since I conducted only 14 interviews, there was no need to carry out any sampling. These interviews served solely to clarify certain concepts and practices within the journalistic field, among other aspects, as previously mentioned.

7. Methods

To analyse photographs of feminicides in the press, it is crucial to consider both what is observed objectively and the cultural and ideological meanings derived from them. However, examining the type of media in which these images are presented as information is also fundamental, as it allows for the incorporation of additional layers of analysis regarding the possible interpretations that may arise. This approach helps to unravel how these images not only inform but also reinforce power structures and dominant narratives surrounding gender-based violence in Mexico. Therefore, this thesis engages with some ideas proposed by Machin & Mayr (2023) on critical discourse analysis, and by Jancsary et al. (2016) on the critical analysis of visual and multimodal texts. On the other hand, it also draws upon certain contributions from Barthes (1977) and Hall (2003 [1980]), primarily those concerning the denotation and connotation of images, the role of visual texts, and the processes of encoding and decoding messages, respectively.

Machin & Mayr (2023) argue that critical discourse analysis is an approach that focuses on the study of how language and other modes of communication, such as the visual, are employed to construct and perpetuate power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities. In this sense, it serves to examine different types of texts in greater depth, revealing hidden meanings that may not be apparent to a casual observer. This type of discourse analysis is not limited to examining the text itself but also considers the social, historical, and cultural context in which the discourse is produced and consumed. This includes understanding who produces the text, who the audience is, and the social

conditions that influence communication. Consequently, critical discourse analysis enables an exploration of how language and other modes of communication are interconnected with power structures and social dynamics, seeking to denaturalise and challenge assumptions that are often taken for granted in everyday communication. This type of analysis involves, among others, selecting the text for examination; situating it within its social, cultural, and political framework, considering the social practices, ideologies, and power structures that surround it; analysing linguistic and semiotic choices, examining how identities, values, and actions are represented through language; identifying the discourses present in the text, revealing underlying ideologies that may not be explicit; and evaluating it, which entails analysing how the text contributes to the construction, maintenance, or challenge of power structures and inequality, while reflecting on the interests that benefit from these discourses.

On the other hand, Jancsary et al. (2016) suggest that the critical analysis of visual and multimodal texts allows one to move beyond the verbliness of texts by incorporating visual elements that enrich the comprehension of discourse in complex contexts. As a critical analysis, it facilitates the identification of power relations, interests, and domination within discourses, which is essential for understanding the social and cultural structures underlying them. To this end, they propose five fundamental stages for analysis: 1) the characterisation of the genre, identifying its rules, spatiotemporal and sociocultural context, producers, audience, purpose, institutionalisation, and multimodality, particularly the relationship between text and visual elements; 2) the identification of manifest content, analysing language, rhetorical techniques, and textual design; 3) the reconstruction of latent elements, examining deeper meaning structures and

significant omissions; 4) the identification of the effects of multimodal composition, exploring how verbal and visual elements interact and construct integrated messages; and, 5) the critical evaluation of the text, reflecting on issues of power, interests, and their impact on the social and institutional context.

Once the text for analysis has been characterised, that is, the *nota roja*, I analyse the photographs of feminicides within the context of this type of media. In this section, I employ several of Barthes' ideas as developed in his seminal work *Image Music Text* (1977), where he analyses photography as a complex medium of communication, underscoring its capacity to denote realities and connote deeper meanings within specific cultural and social contexts. He argues that 'the press photograph is a message' (Barthes, 1977: 15), composed of an emitter (the newspaper staff), a transmission channel (the newspaper itself), and a receiver (the public who reads the newspaper). However, photography possesses structural autonomy, functioning both as a product and as a message requiring distinct analysis. For this reason, Barthes distinguishes between denotation, that is, the literal message of the image, where the signifier and the signified share a nearly tautological relationship, and connotation, which adds cultural, historical, and ideological layers of meaning, shaped by elements such as composition, subject poses, or photographic effects. While denotation is objective, connotation is subjective, influenced by the viewer's cultural and personal context.

For Barthes (1977), while photography may appear purely denotative, it also contains subtle connotations that require analysis. For instance, accompanying text acts as a 'parasitic' message (Barthes, 1977: 30), amplifying or altering image's meaning. Connotation is a historical and cultural process,

whereby visual signs (objects, attitudes, colours) acquire constructed and evolving meanings within specific social contexts, shaped by shifting values, ideologies, and political dynamics. To analyse these connotations, Barthes proposes a conceptual framework on the relationship between signs, signifiers, and signifieds. The sign is a key concept in semiotics, composed of a 'signifier', like the form, such as a word or image, and a 'signified', the concept it represents. However, in photography, the sign can be more complex: the image functions as a sign that conveys a message directly and analogically, without requiring a structured code. Nevertheless, this message has a denoted, or literal, content and may also include 'connoted' or additional meanings, influenced by cultural and social contexts. Barthes also introduces two functions of the linguistic message: 'anchorage', where text guides the interpretation of the image, and 'relay', where text and image collaborate to construct a more complete narrative. Additionally, Barthes (1977: 32, 49) introduces 'connotators', elements of the image that carry cultural meanings, and the 'rhetoric of the image', which examines how connotators operate within a broader system of signification, employing rhetorical figures such as metonymy and metaphor. Thus, Barthes highlights denotation as the foundation that naturalises connotation, emphasising that the interpretation of an image is shaped by context and the viewer's cultural knowledge.

Barthes (1977) underscores the interdependence between the written word and the visual, arguing that while both can convey meaning, written language plays a crucial role in interpreting visual content. Although objects, images, and patterns of behaviour can signify, they do not do so autonomously. In visual systems, such as press photography, meaning is often reinforced or

clarified by accompanying linguistic messages, demonstrating that visual meaning cannot exist independently of language. Indeed, meaning may be redundant or absorbed by the linguistic system. Thus, the written word acts as a tool to reinforce or clarify the intended meaning of an image. To fully grasp the significance of visual content, one must rely on language, as there is no meaning that is not linguistically mediated. This underscores the inherent connection between visuality and verballity, highlighting that while both can signify, written language may be fundamental to interpreting the visual.

On the other hand, I also draw upon some of Hall's ideas developed in his essay on 'Encoding/Decoding' of messages (2003 [1980]), wherein he critiques the traditional linear model of communication, that is, the sender/message/receiver paradigm, for oversimplifying the process and neglecting the interactive and contextual factors that shape interpretation. He contends that, in reality, communication is seldom unidirectional; rather, it is more circular and reciprocal, moulded by cultural, social, and situational contexts that influence the production, distribution, and consumption of messages. In this regard, communication constitutes a complex and dynamic process entailing multiple moments and meanings. Consequently, the relationship between encoding and decoding messages is neither direct nor assured, as it hinges upon social and cultural practices that inform message interpretation. Hall conceives of communication as a multifaceted process shaped by various factors that may modify the comprehension and significance of messages. He maintains that the linear model fails to consider how production practices and social conditions influence both the creation and reception of messages. Each stage of communication possesses its own distinct characteristics, and whilst all stages

are integral to the process, none entirely ensures the next. This implies that the receiver's interpretation may diverge from the sender's intended meaning, resulting in different understandings. Thus, communication does not constitute a mere transfer of meaning but rather a process of negotiation and meaning construction that varies across audiences.

To address these complexities, Hall (2003 [1980]) develops a framework conceptualising communication as a structured process comprising four interconnected moments: production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. Each moment possesses distinct conditions, rendering the process non-linear and susceptible to interruption or transformation. A central tenet is that the meanings of messages are not fixed, giving rise to potential asymmetries between encoding and decoding. Producers and audiences may interpret messages divergently, thereby either reinforcing or contesting dominant ideologies. Hall identifies three decoding positions: 1) the dominant-hegemonic code, wherein the receiver aligns with the encoded dominant meanings; 2) the negotiated position, wherein the receiver modifies dominant meanings to accommodate their specific context; and 3) the oppositional code, wherein the receiver outright rejects dominant interpretations. Hall contends that codes and meanings are intrinsically linked to social ideologies, as language and systems of signs are moulded by power structures and social relations. Within media, visual and linguistic codes not only convey information but also reflect prevailing ideologies, whilst meanings arise dynamically through audiences' experiences, beliefs, and social contexts.

8. Data analysis

I primarily draw upon Machin & Mayr (2023) and Jancsary et al. (2016) to facilitate an exploration of what remains unstated within multimodal texts, enabling the identification of marginalised voices, significant discursive absences, and, crucially, the provision of alternative narratives and interpretations that contest dominant discourses. I apply in the following manner these approaches. First, I provide a characterisation of the *nota roja*, a journalistic genre that is virtually unknown in Anglo-Saxon academic literature. To this end, I conduct a critical analysis of a visual and multimodal nature to identify the principal features of this genre within the framework of its historical, social, and cultural contexts. This is addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. Analysing the type of newspaper in which images of femicides are published is crucial to understanding how messages about gender violence are constructed and transmitted. The medium influences the selection of images, the language, the narrative approach, and, primarily, the interpretation by readers, all of which carries social, cultural, and political implications. This analysis reveals whether the media raises awareness of or condemns misogynistic violence or, conversely, perpetuates narratives that justify or minimise it. For instance, sensationalist newspapers, such as those of the *nota roja* tradition, often emphasise morbid aspects through shocking headlines, discriminatory text, and explicit photographs, catering to their audience's expectations. The language employed may downplay the severity of femicides, while the visual treatment may generate morbid fascination, thereby influencing public perception. Consequently, I employ this approach because it

allows moving beyond verbal discourse by incorporating visual elements, while situating them within their position in Mexican popular culture.

Second, the verbal text in press reports is not the primary focus of analysis. The *nota roja* typically employs a highly popular narrative, which may present translation challenges, particularly due to its use of wordplay and specific Mexican slang. However, to identify the role of photography within the overall text, I examine issues such as the relationship and hierarchy between verbal and visual modes in the structure of the press report, and the dominance or emphasis of any mode within the text. All of this will be carried out in a rather general manner, given that the *nota roja* is visual by nature, in addition to the fact that a textual analysis would require a different kind of methodology. Nevertheless, I consider it useful to link the headlines of femicide press reports to this visuality because they also carry a significant meaning. They are highly identifiable within the genre and are generally a close reflection of what the photographs depict. This analysis is found in Chapter 4.

However, the process of interpretation is profoundly influenced by power structures within societies, wherein dominant ideologies determine which meanings are legitimised and which are marginalised. Codes and significations serve as vehicles of ideology, shaping not only how reality is understood but also how certain narratives are privileged over others. Consequently, media messages do not merely transmit information; they also play a pivotal role in either reinforcing or contesting the power structures and ideologies that permeate society. For this reason, the contributions of Barthes (1977) in semiotics, communication, and the relationship between text and image are particularly valuable. According to Van Leeuwen (2020), these contributions are fundamental

for understanding multimodal communication and the construction of meaning, retaining their relevance in media analysis and critical theory. Thus, when analysing photographs of feminicides in the press, a key concept from Barthes (1977) is the distinction between denotation and connotation. Furthermore, the accompanying text, such as headlines, may reflect or alter image's meaning, reinforcing patriarchal power. For Rose (2016), when analysing press images, it is essential to consider both what the image explicitly shows, and the implicit, culturally transmitted meanings, while also accounting for the various contexts in which the image is produced, circulated, and consumed.

In photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja*, signs are the complete units of meaning formed by the union of signifiers, or the visible/physical form, and signifieds, that is, the conceptual meaning. The signifiers that constitute the interpretative signs of femicide photographs in the *nota roja* are: the victims' bodies, injuries, clothing, nudity, colours, angles, and contextual objects. However, I also examine the textual signifiers, such as the headlines of crime reports, their written text, and the photographs' captions. The latter are used solely to determine whether they confirm or add information that aids in interpreting the photograph and, above all, to identify the anchorage. On the other hand, I identify a basic signified, namely, gender-based violence against women. Furthermore, the written text, its fonts and colour, as anchorage, serves to fix the interpretation of the images, often steering the viewer towards a specific meaning or signified. This anchorage may prevent multiple interpretations by imposing a dominant patriarchal reading. Finally, in the relay, the collaboration between text and image serves to construct a narrative. Here, a story is advanced by combining visual and textual messages that construct patriarchal narratives. In

this way, I analyse the following signs that reflect patriarchal discourses: victimhood, vulnerability, precarity, mortality, patriarchal power, necro-pornography, and sexual and eroticised violence. This kind of analysis is elaborated in Chapter 5.

Table 4. Interpretation of femicide photographs

Denotation	Connotation			
Signifier	Signified	Anchorage	Relay	Signs
Visual: - victims' bodies - injuries - clothing - nudity - colours - angles - contextual objects	gender-based violence against women	- written text	- visual messages	- victimhood
Textual: - headlines - written text - photographs' captions		- fonts	- textual messages	- vulnerability
		- typefaces colour		- precarity
				- mortality
				- patriarchal power
				- necro-pornography
				- sexual and eroticized violence

On the other hand, Hall (2003 [1980]) provides an additional perspective by emphasising that the interpretation of messages depends on processes of encoding and decoding. Essentially, the denotation of a text allows its interpretation in the same manner by anyone and in the way intended by its producer, whereas at the level of connotation, a text may yield different readings (Richardson, 2007). In particular, I employ Hall's analytical approach to deconstruct media practices, that is, to expose how production biases shape

encoding, and highlight power dynamics linking visual semiotics to broader structures of gender and class domination. In the case of feminicides, photographs depicting victims may be interpreted hegemonically, as a reflection of broader social issues, such as gender violence, and as a direct consequence of patriarchy and the discrimination against women. Therefore, this thesis challenges the assumption that media messages about feminicides are neutrally transmitted, instead highlighting how their encoding and decoding are shaped by: 1) cultural context: including patriarchal norms and gendered stereotypes that influence how feminicides are photographed and reported; 2) social and economic conditions: the lack of symbolic capital of victims that determines their hypervisibility in the press, reinforcing hierarchies of victimhood; and 3) power structures: the *nota roja*'s commercial motives and alignment with dominant ideologies, i.e., male gaze, victim-blaming, etc.

Table 5. Encoding and decoding of media messages on feminicides

Cultural context	Socio-economic conditions	Power structures
patriarchal norms	lack of symbolic capital	commercial motives
gendered stereotypes		patriarchal dominant ideologies

Besides, Hall's four moments of communication (production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction) are implicitly mapped onto the analysis. First, in the process of production, some encoding practices may be identified, like the crime news editorial choices, such as graphic imagery, sensationalist headlines, and selective focus on marginalised victims, that are shaped by commercial and ideological agendas. Moreover, visual codes, like camera angles, colours, and framing encode feminicides as spectacles of violence and

entertainment. Second, in the process of circulation or distribution, I analyse how the press disseminates images through a gendered lens, reinforcing stereotypes. In the third process, that is, consumption or decoding, it is difficult to identify the reaction of readers or consumers of newspapers because the present research did not have this as its objective, which would, moreover, require different research methods. However, for this stage, particularly based on relevant academic literature, I posit that there may exist three potential decoding positions: 1) dominant-hegemonic, in which readers uncritically accept the press's portrayal of victims; 2) negotiated, in which audiences question but still engage with the sensationalism of crime reports; and 3) oppositional, arising from some feminist critiques that reject dehumanisation and demand structural accountability. Lastly, in the moment of reproduction, the *nota roja*'s imagery may perpetuate cycles of symbolic violence by naturalising gendered brutality, influencing public perception and policy responses. This analysis is found in Chapter 5.

Table 6. Moments of media's communication on feminicides

Encoding		Decoding	
Production:	Circulation:	Consumption:	Reproduction:
- editorial choices - agendas	gendered lens	- dominant-hegemonic reaction - negotiated reaction - oppositional reaction	symbolic violence

I analyse pre-existing images produced by *nota roja* newspapers, which are publicly accessible. Thus, I seek to understand how these images represent

and construct meanings primarily concerning feminicide, but also victimhood, and how these images are embedded within society, in the sense outlined by Brown & Carrabine (2017) and McClanahan (2021).

9. Ethical considerations

My primary sources of data are press reports and photographs of feminicides published in newspapers. Therefore, the material is composed of publicly accessible and readily available information. In that regard, there were no ethical concerns in conducting this part of the research. Additionally, I carried out 14 interviews with various individuals, all of whom were adults acting in their professional capacity.

For the ethical approval from the University of Essex to conduct the research, I obtained the corresponding ethical approval prior to the commencement of the study, in accordance with the guidelines of the University and its Ethics Committee. For interviews with experts, journalists, and photographers I used a written informed consent form. This was accompanied by an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study and allowing participants to decide freely on their involvement. Furthermore, I ensured that all interviewees were professionals and that their anonymity was respected, where applicable. Data, including publicly available photographs and interview recordings, were stored securely in digital format with backup copies. Access was restricted solely to the me as a researcher and, where relevant, my supervisor. Potential risks, such as the security of journalists within a context of societal insecurity like in Mexico, were assessed and mitigated. This was achieved by only interviewing

those with a public profile to avoid endangering individuals. In that regard, no other significant ethical concerns were identified.

Any research involving images of dead bodies entails serious ethical issues, particularly when sensitive topics such as extreme violence, murder, death, or naked or nearly naked bodies are visually displayed. For Carrabine (2014), there are certain responsibilities 'when faced with intolerable images.' Thus, the researcher should also consider that engaging with violent images may provoke profound emotional experiences (Carrabine, 2012). This research examines disturbing photographs of incinerated, beaten, putrefied, or naked women. Therefore, I navigated the challenge of witnessing gender suffering by acknowledging the ethical considerations and responsibilities inherent in working with such sensitive material. I was prepared to confront the emotional impact of these images. I sought professional support, when necessary, primarily to maintain the objectivity of the research while simultaneously allowing myself to process my responses with empathy. This support was vital for managing the distress caused by exposure to such imagery. Consequently, I adhered strictly to a clear and rigorous methodology, which functioned as a coping mechanism by providing structure and focus.

I must mention that, since this is a visual analysis, it is necessary to include material of this nature to substantiate the arguments made throughout the thesis. To this end, the photographs comprising the aforementioned sample are included in an annex immediately following the Conclusions, rather than within the main body of the text, as I mentioned in the Introduction.

10. Preliminary conclusions

This chapter established a qualitative methodology grounded in critical visual discourse analysis, combining tools from semiotic analysis and encoding/decoding models to unravel the multiple layers of meaning within *nota roja* photographs and texts. The research questions, objectives, and hypotheses were defined, alongside the context and methods for data collection and analysis, which included a representative sample of 743 news reports and 14 expert interviews. Furthermore, fundamental ethical considerations for the research were addressed, ensuring respect for the victims and the confidentiality of the interviewees. In the thesis, this methodological approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of how visual representations contribute to the construction and reproduction of patriarchal discourses and symbolic violence in the Mexican press.

Chapter 3. Brief history of the *nota roja* in Mexico

'This is the book of death in Mexico. The book of blood that has reddened the earth, the squares, the rivers, the very stones of Mexico. The book of death that found no place in Posada's engravings nor Diego Rivera's murals, that settled not in sugar nor in the sweet, golden wheat of bread, but in brutality, in prison cells, in greed, in the human wretchedness that has descended upon Mexico. Within these pages is preserved the memory of how life has perished among us.'

Carlos Montemayor, 'Prólogo' in Vicente Riva Palacios & Manuel Payno's *El libro rojo*

1. Introduction

Mexico's *nota roja*, a journalistic genre specialising in crime, violence, and tragic events, has a rich and complex history that can be traced to the pre-Hispanic and colonial eras. Evolving from justice accounts in Mexica civilisation to the establishment of New Spain's earliest newspapers, this press tradition has developed over centuries, mirroring the nation's socio-political and cultural transformations. Among others, this chapter primarily draws upon the work of Tuñón (2018), who examines the rise of the *nota roja* genre alongside the mass journalism of the twentieth century in Mexico; Straw (2011), who studies the distinctive national tradition within crime-oriented periodical publishing; Piccato (2017), who characterises the particular style of the genre in terms of its headlines and representation of crime; and Hallin (2000), who defines and situates the *nota roja* within the context of popular journalism.

During pivotal conflicts such as the War of Independence and the Mexican Revolution, the *nota roja* solidified its role in chronicling violence, emerging as a media phenomenon that simultaneously satiates public fascination and provokes ethical debates regarding morality, justice, and the mediation of violence. In recent decades, organised crime and escalating violence have radically

reconfigured Mexican crime reporting. As drug trafficking proliferated, murders, disappearances, and torture became routine front-page content, normalising graphic depictions of violence and altering public perceptions of its newsworthiness. In this chapter I explain that, despite Mexico's legal frameworks safeguarding freedom of expression and human rights, pervasive impunity and systemic violence against journalists have fostered sensationalist coverage frequently devoid of rigour. Inadequate protections for reporters, many of whom withhold bylines for safety, exacerbate a climate of fear that undermines journalistic standards. Moreover, outlets increasingly adopt hyperbolic, explicit narratives to retain audiences, perpetuating a culture of lurid discourse. The visual dominance, reliant on arresting crime-scene photography, further entrenches a cyclical consumption of violent imagery.

Understanding the history of the *nota roja* in Mexico is essential to analyse why newspapers within this genre employ violent imagery and offer superficial coverage of violence. This importance arises from its cultural and symbolic roots, the evolution of journalism as a tool for control and moralisation, commercialisation and sensationalism, the discrimination and dehumanisation of certain social groups, and the current context of systemic violence and impunity. Furthermore, this historical account helps define the genre for Anglophone academic literature, where it remains largely unfamiliar. Thus, this chapter develops a framework for a historical examination of the *nota roja* by emphasising the relationship between discourse, power, and socio-political context. Additionally, it offers a historically grounded lens to dissect it not merely as a genre but as a cultural artefact that reflects and reinforces power dynamics over time. This approach connects textual analysis with macro-historical forces,

revealing how crime reporting has been weaponised, commodified, or resisted across different eras. Consequently, this chapter explores the *nota roja*'s historical trajectory, from its origins through key developmental phases to its contemporary societal impact, while addressing journalism's challenges amid violence and censorship. It does not aim to exhaustively chronicle Mexican press history but instead highlights pivotal events that shaped crime reporting's evolution and its lasting socio-cultural consequences. This has shaped its current format, which I examine in the following chapter.

2. First crime news reports

Carrabine (2008) explains that in the United Kingdom, from the early modern period, approximately 1500 to 1800, crime reporting evolved from oral and literary traditions, including ballads and popular tales about outlaws such as Robin Hood. Similarly, extensive accounts of crimes, public executions, and literature pertaining to justice and punishment were published, characterised by a distinctly moralising and sensationalist tone. Printed media, such as pamphlets and broadsheets, reported on crimes and executions in an immediate manner, employing dramatic details. Therefore, whereas England's tradition arose from popular folklore and early mass media, Mexico's *nota roja* was uniquely influenced by pre-colonial symbolism and colonial state power. Both, however, reveal how crime narratives serve moral, political, and commercial purposes.

Mesoamerica is a cultural region in the Americas, spanning central and southern Mexico and much of Central America, from at least the second millennium BC until the Spanish arrival in the 16th century. Indigenous

civilisations flourished there, such as the Mexica (Aztec), known for their complex social, political, and religious structures (León-Portilla, 1992). Red colour held cultural significance in this region. Sourced from plants and minerals, it symbolised blood, fire, and the sun, and was used in architecture, clothing, murals, ceramics, sculptures, codices, and body art. It functioned as part of a communication system, appearing in rituals and representing deities (INAH, 2018). For instance, *Texcatlipoca*, a principal Mexica god associated with the underworld (León-Portilla, 1963), was often depicted in red, embodying life-death duality.

For Zarauz López (2000), in pre-Hispanic cultures, red also symbolised mourning, aiding the deceased's passage to the underworld. Thus, red was culturally tied to mortality. Flores García (2007) notes that before Spanish colonisation, the Mexica Empire⁴ was a theocratic, authoritarian society. Judicial rulings by the *Tlacatecatl*, an Aztec military chief (UNAM, 2012), were announced by heralds called *Tecpoyotl* or *Tecpuyutl*⁵. These nobles may have been early precursors of Mexico's *nota roja*.

Ruiz Castañeda et al. (1974) argue that after the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1492, Mexican journalism possibly began with the '*hojas volantes*', single-page publications distributing news. These brief sheets emerged in sixteenth-century New Spain, mainly circulating local and international news in colonial capitals like modern-day Mexico City. Content was sourced from travellers or copied from European periodicals. A key feature was their emphasis

⁴ The Mexica Empire, commonly referred to as the Aztec Empire, was constituted through a Triple Alliance, initially a military pact between three city-states: Texcoco, Tlacopan, and Tenochtitlan. Each polity was governed by a *tlatoani*, who served as its supreme ruler and political authority (Navarrete, 1999).

⁵ It was a person who used to make public announcements.

on sensational events, such as violent crimes and executions, often illustrated with crude woodcuts. However, Ruiz Castañeda et al. (1974) note this interpretation of the *nota roja*'s origins remains debated.

An alternative argument suggests that the red chronicle's roots lies in the '*cabildos*'⁶ (town councils), led by members of the '*Ayuntamiento*' (municipal government). These officials disseminated pronouncements from the '*Consejo*' (Council) of what would later become Mexico City, primarily in public squares. For instance, in 1526, the *Cabildo* announced punishments for intoxicated rioters accused of defaming the Holy Inquisition, leading to 43 executions and over 35,000 corporal punishments (Ruiz Castañeda et al., 1974). Verdicts were often posted on church doors as edicts with red ecclesiastical seals. This may explain the term *nota roja*, derived from the Inquisition's red wax seals (Lara Klahr & Barata, 2009). Historically, 'red news' denoted grave matters. The Holy Inquisition (1517–1813) inadvertently popularised the term through its public notifications. Yet, while early *nota roja* involved judicial or violent events, it lacked the term's later conceptual depth (Ruiz Castañeda et al., 1974).

3. Development of the red news in the 18th and 19th centuries

In the United Kingdom during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the press evolved from narrative forms that blended fiction and reality to evade censorship,

⁶ The '*cabildo*' functioned as the institutional body of municipal governance, serving as the principal forum for municipal decision-making. It exercised three key jurisdictional competencies: (1) judicial authority, including adjudication of civil and criminal cases in the first instance; (2) legislative power, entailing the right to enact ordinances regulating communal life in matters such as public security, sanitation, provisions, and taxation; and (3) executive capacity, with the mandate to enforce legislation and penalise infractions against public morality (Domínguez-Guerrero & López-Villalba, 2018).

to a popular mass media that employed crime and violence as primary attractions to capture readership. This development played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and constructing social representations of criminality. Particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, the new journalism movement popularised the coverage of crimes, sexual violence, and stories of human interest, merging factual reporting with sensationalist entertainment to boost circulation and appeal to broader audiences. Furthermore, the press had already begun employing visual and narrative techniques to accentuate the dramatic and spectacular nature of criminal acts (Carrabine, 2008). Similarly, in Mexico crime press adopted a sensationalist and moralising style, making extensive use of photography to depict crimes and violence. It thus became both an informational medium and a vehicle for social and moral critique.

In the eighteenth century, the first '*gacetas*' (gazettes) circulated in New Spain. By 1772, these publications mainly included reports of natural phenomena or ominous events. However, such accounts were not classified as a distinct news category and usually appeared as supplementary inserts in daily publications. A notable case occurred between 1786 and 1787, when the *Gaceta de la Ciudad de México* (Gazette of Mexico City), one of New Spain's earliest newspapers, featured deaths and other tragic incidents on its front page alongside ordinary news (Henestrosa & Fernández de Castro, 1947). During this period, a high-profile crime drew colonial press attention: the murder of Joaquín Dongo, a wealthy Spanish merchant, and ten household members, including family and servants. Motivated by the theft of twenty thousand Mexican pesos, a considerable sum then, the alleged perpetrators were swiftly apprehended. The

Gaceta de la Ciudad de México extensively covered both the crime and investigation (Barajas, 2018).

During the Mexican War of Independence (1810–1821), the *nota roja* began recording military events. Throughout the 19th century, Mexico faced significant political, social, and economic turmoil (Henestrosa & Fernández de Castro, 1947), with crime reporting growing increasingly prominent. Barajas (2018) analyses two key cases. The first involves Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg's execution. In June 1867, after a swift court-martial, he was sentenced to death for crimes against the nation, order, and peace. His firing-squad execution five days later ended the French intervention and the Second Mexican Empire. The event caused international outrage, prompting extensive coverage, chronicles, and editorials. Controversially, François Aubert, Maximilian's court photographer, documented the scene: the firing squad, execution site, the emperor's corpse, his bloodied clothes, and the generals' bodies. His later photomontages gained notoriety. Widely circulated, even in Europe, these images became foundational in early Mexican crime press photojournalism (Barajas, 2018).

An alternative explanation attributes the term *nota roja* to an unconventional marketing strategy by *El Mercurio Occidental*, a newspaper based in Guadalajara City, Mexico, founded by Manuel Caballero, Mexico's first professional reporter. Lara Klahr & Barata (2009) note that in 1889, the editor instructed a press operator to imprint front pages with a red handprint, creating a striking visual to attract readers. López Peña (2011) argues that this, alongside the Holy Inquisition's red seals, shows how red served as a conceptual marker of

moral judgement for violent deaths, whether sanctioned by religious authorities or committed by criminals.

Corona Berkin (1997) analyses the discursive strategies of Mexico's nineteenth-century crime press, by then well-established. This study shows how these publications legitimised crime narratives aligning with contemporary political interests and power structures. Often, they invoked criminal 'madness' to obscure potential political or social motives behind crimes. Moreover, they relied on the moral authority of witnesses and official narrators, especially state authorities, to bolster their reports. Strategic language use also reinforced stereotypical portrayals of offenders and victims, shaping public perception. Thus, the police press acted not just informatively but as an active force in constructing narratives that supported or undermined political and social figures.

4. The rise of the *nota roja* in the 20th century

Carrabine (2008: 101) notes that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British press transformed with the rise of 'New Journalism', as I explain in Chapter 1. This movement emphasised crime, sexual violence, and sensational human-interest stories, shifting from political commentary to mass-appeal narratives, including literary techniques from fiction. The press spanned popular literature, like criminal biographies, execution broadsides, ballads, and posters, to detailed reports for literate audiences. He adds that early 20th-century British press featured mass-printing, photography, genre diversification, and media consolidation amid commercial competition. This reflects a crime-writing tradition with varied literacy levels. However, in contrast, the *nota roja* emerged as a hybrid

of pre-Hispanic, colonial, and revolutionary influences, serving as societal catharsis and political critique, preserving moral lessons while repurposing violent imagery and channelling dissent across classes.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, during the Mexican Revolution, commercial newspapers, including reputable ones, began reporting on crime, even creating dedicated sections (Barajas, 2018). Notable among these were *El Universal*, *El Excélsior*, and *La Prensa*. They reflected diverse social perspectives, serving not only elite and middle-class interests but also, due to affordability, wide distribution, and engaging style, reaching broader audiences. Technological advances enabled modern photography, shifting crime journalism from text or crude sketches to impactful imagery. Sensationalist headlines also emerged, alongside a rise in publications specialising in daily violence coverage (Núñez Cetina, 2018).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the crime press was inherently sensationalist while promoting a specific social morality (Pulido Llano, 2015). Addressing moral issues through chronicles or investigations, it delivered both condemnation and proposed solutions to societal problems. As Piccato (2014, 2017) notes, the *nota roja* had a moral dimension beyond its sensationalism. It fulfilled dual roles: first, as a medium shaping urban realities and fostering criminal literacy; second, despite its crime focus, as a platform for social critique that promoted civic engagement. Thus, the *nota roja* significantly influenced Mexican public discourse, shaping perceptions of justice and truth.

Monsiváis (2010) identifies two pivotal moments in the evolution of Mexico's *nota roja*. First, during the historical period known as *Porfiriato* (1876-1910), under Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship, crime reports conveyed moral lessons:

'The public saw the red news as an extension of the Catechism' (Monsiváis, 2010: 9). Often circulated as prints or *corridos*,⁷ the *nota roja* thrived when orality remained a key news dissemination method. Soon after, he explains, written journalism expanded, and the red chronicle underwent secularisation without fully abandoning its moral role.

Barajas (2018) cites notable examples of the *nota roja* in the post-revolutionary era dating from 1915, particularly when photography transformed it, as Monsiváis (2010) notes. First, the *Banda del Automóvil Gris* (Grey Automobile Gang). This criminal group entered wealthy homes using false search warrants to assault or kidnap victims, extorting jewellery and money for protection. Wearing army uniforms, they collaborated with high-ranking military officials who authorised the warrants. The gang was eventually sentenced to death. Notably, their portraits survived due to advances in photography, and their execution was filmed, later inspiring the classic Mexican film *La Banda del Automóvil Gris* (Barajas, 2018), directed by Enrique Rosas in 1919.

Another notable case is the murder of Álvaro Obregón, then Mexico's president-elect, on 17 July 1928 in a Mexico City restaurant. National newspapers extensively covered his assassination (Monsiváis, 2013), particularly as Obregón had been re-elected and enjoyed widespread support. Tabloids published numerous crime scene photos, images of the murderer and the trial, with the public closely following proceedings (Barajas, 2018). Years before his presidency, during the Mexican Revolution, Obregón, then a general, survived a

⁷ A '*corrido*' is a musical genre in Mexico that tells the 'true' story of a real and/or mythical character. They are a sort of epic musical compositions that narrate important moments of life to pay homage and show respect towards a person. These musical compositions have become very famous today because they narrate the life or crucial moments of important drug traffickers, among other important people in public life.

severe injury. In 1915, a bullet struck his elbow, disarticulating his forearm. Despite immediate hospital care, an above-elbow amputation left him with a skin-covered stump (Rodríguez-Paz, 2014). This incident fascinated audiences and was widely reported. After his death, his missing hand was preserved in formaldehyde and displayed at Mexico City's Monument to Álvaro Obregón until 1989, when it was cremated (Fajardo Tapia, 2020).

It is during this period that the launch of *La Prensa*, under analysis in my research, can be situated. Founded in 1928, Piccato (2017b) describes it as one of Mexico's most prominent and successful red news newspapers. From its inception, it distinguished itself through direct crime reporting and government criticism. By 1934, it became the most popular *nota roja* newspaper, largely due to its graphic crime scene photographs (Piccato, 2017). Its golden years spanned the 1930s-1960s, capturing a wide audience. Since its founding, *La Prensa* has been a pillar of red news in Mexico, shaping public interaction with crime narratives. Piccato (2017b) also notes that this newspaper innovated in photography and crime-focused reporting, minimising other news. Its first editor, José E. Campos, and later Miguel Ordorica, established a style blending sensationalism with political critique. Early on, it catered to 'voracious' readers, offering 'the vibrant and clandestine pulse of a nation in perpetual crisis, the unofficial story of an unequal society fuelled by hatreds, fears, and disappointments' (Sánchez, 2018: 6).

5. Impact of drug trafficking and organised crime in Mexican journalism

I commence this section by addressing specifically the issue of media censorship. This phenomenon arguably represents one of the most conspicuous manifestations of organised crime's influence in Mexico during the twentieth century, and more broadly reflects the particular manner in which violence is reported throughout the country. Censorship has existed virtually since the early modern period. As Carrabine (2008) observes regarding British media, it has evolved from early modern direct controls (e.g., the Stationers' Guild and Catholic Index) to indirect economic mechanisms while maintaining its restrictive functions. Forbidden texts circulated through evasion and oral transmission despite prohibitions. Eighteenth-century news adopted fictional disguises (i.e., Johnson's allegories), blurring fact-fiction boundaries. In the nineteenth-century press liberalisation introduced market censorship via advertiser pressures, while the twentieth-century combined legal, economic and moral controls targeting sexuality, politics and morality. Similarly, censorship in Mexican media has been a persistent phenomenon throughout the country's history, manifesting in various forms and with differing degrees of intensity depending on the political and social context. Censorship in Mexico has evolved from rigid and explicit control during the colonial and viceregal period, through political persecution and repression during the 19th and 20th centuries, to more subtle economic forms in the contemporary era. In all cases, censorship has been intrinsically linked to political control and the use of journalism as either an instrument of power or resistance (Cordero y Torres, 2002; Ruiz Castañeda, 2002, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d; Ruiz Torres, 2002; Reed Torres, 2002b). However, it was during the 20th and 21st

centuries that censorship became a defining factor shaping Mexico's media landscape, particularly within the print journalism sector. Indeed, certain media outlets more recently have engaged in self-censorship when reporting on incidents of violence across the country, as I elaborate below.

Freije (2018) examines how, from the early 20th century, Mexico's national newspaper industry flourished through various forms of government support. Periodical publications proliferated and benefited from state subsidies, including newsprint allocations, official advertising contracts, and government loans, as well as from close ties fostered between the press and the state through government-supervised labour unions and cooperatives. However, this dependence also led media directors and editors, particularly in Mexico City, to avoid openly criticising state officials or high-ranking politicians, especially those affiliated with the then ruling party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, (PRI), for fear of losing financial privileges. Consequently, a degree of self-censorship emerged. In this context, Piccato (2017) observes that during President Lázaro Cárdenas del Río's administration in 1936, the government argued that crime reporting undermined its moral development objectives. This prompted attempts to suppress sensationalist crime press. Additionally, congressional debates arose over banning such publications, though these efforts ultimately failed due to concerns over infringing freedom of expression and press liberties.

For several decades, the media formed part of an extensive corporatist structure that served the interests of the ruling party. As Freije (2018) observes, this dynamic persisted until approximately the 1960s, when a degree of democratic liberalisation occurred within the print media. Following the 1968 student massacre prior to the Olympic Games in Mexico, the government

permitted limited criticism to emerge. However, this concession was not extended uniformly across all media outlets. Certain publications, such as *Excélsior*, then one of the nation's most prominent daily newspapers, received particular privileges owing to the alliance between President Luis Echeverría and the paper's director, Julio Scherer García. It should be noted that *Excélsior* remained a traditionally conservative publication during this period. While some media began adopting a more critical stance towards government policies, this represented a strategy of selective tolerance rather than genuine acceptance of dissent, as I examine subsequently.

Barajas (2018) observes that not only newspapers covering crime stories through text and photographs, such as *La Prensa* and *Esto*, increased their circulation, but also magazines including *Detective*, *Manos Arriba*, *Revista de Policía*, *Magazine de Policía*, and notably *Alarma!* In fact, by the 1960s, the *nota roja* genre had evolved to combine sensationalist headlines with increasingly graphic imagery. Particular attention must be given to what Troconi (2018) identifies as Mexico's quintessential crime publication: *Alarma! Únicamente la verdad* (Alarm! Only The Truth!). This weekly periodical exemplified the distinctive characteristics of Mexican popular crime journalism. *Alarma!* expanded the traditional *nota roja* format by documenting a spectrum of events ranging from tragic misfortunes to contemporary social deviancy including pornography, prostitution, and queer violence. Martínez Levy (2013) highlights how the publication employed a distinctive black humour which, rather than mocking victims or perpetrators, reflected the ironic realities of marginalised communities across Mexico. The magazine was equally notorious for its disturbing and often brutal photographic content (Vargas Cervantes, 2014). As

one former editor remarked, while the images were unpleasant, they would pale in comparison to the harsh realities they depicted (Barragán, cited in García Roiz, 2016).

Alarma! launched its first issue in 1963 with an initial print run of merely three thousand copies. Its success stemmed partly from its extensive coverage of stories that would develop across multiple editions. Among these, the case of *Las Poquianchis* (an expression with no translation) generated significant public interest. This chronicle detailed three sisters operating a brothel in Guanajuato, Mexico, that concealed human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and murder. The scandal reverberated throughout Mexican society. *Alarma!*'s treatment of this story, both in narrative content and visual presentation, proved influential across Mexican cultural production. Notably, filmmaker Felipe Cazals (1976) adapted the events in *Las Poquianchis*, while writer Jorge Ibarguengoitia (1977) fictionalised the case in *Las muertas* (published in English as *The Dead Girls*, 1983). As recently as 2019, *La Prensa*, described the case as representing 'among the most aberrant chapters of Mexican criminal history' (*La Prensa*, 2019). The magazine's serialised coverage simultaneously captivated and scandalised the public. The publication faced government censorship, resulting in its temporary closure between 1986-1991 under President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado's administration. Official rationale cited pornographic, sensationalist content and privacy violations, though scholarly analysis suggests this constituted political retaliation for the magazine's government criticism (Rodríguez, in García Roiz, 2016). It later resumed as *¡El Nuevo Alarma!*, as mentioned before, maintaining its characteristic style until ceasing operations permanently in 2014.

One prominent characteristic examined in this analysis is the prominent use of the colour yellow in the publication's header. The title *Alarma!* appears as though finger-painted in black on a yellow background, a highly original design choice that contributed significantly to its notoriety. Indeed, Troconi (2018) argues that this was one of the publication's most successful editorial decisions, granting it a distinctive identity. However, Barragán (in García, 2016), a former editor of *Alarma!*, suggests that the use of these two colours was also motivated by pragmatic considerations, such as their low cost. Regardless, the stark contrast between the colours undoubtedly captured readers' attention. While the magazine covered a wide range of events, it maintained a unique editorial style. Its front pages were deliberately eye-catching, ensuring it stood out among competitors. Ironically, this very approach to news reporting inadvertently contributed to what Pulido Llano (2015: 28) describes as 'propaganda of fear', reinforcing anxieties about specific urban spaces and social groups. Straw (2021), Professor of Urban Media Studies at McGill University, comments that publications such as *Alarma!* were better designed and possessed a more artistic and meticulous approach in the presentation of crime news, in contrast to contemporary newspapers such as *La Prensa*, which display rawer and sensationalist images devoid of context or aesthetic consideration. Furthermore, it explains that contemporary tabloid newspapers face economic difficulties, which compel them to become increasingly sensationalist in order to sell, displaying explicit and violent images rapidly and without substantial additional information

During my research, I observed that although the crime press served to bring socially relevant issues, such as systemic violence into public discourse in

Mexico, it maintained its distinctive reporting style. Over time, the *nota roja* evolved into an almost codified form, resembling its contemporary iteration. I revisit this argument later in the thesis. However, I note here that crime-scene photographs grew increasingly prevalent, while the accompanying texts became more concise and direct, often functioning merely as supplementary captions.

6. Current challenges for crime journalism in Mexico

As I explained previously, Mexican journalism has historically operated within a semi-authoritarian political framework, wherein state financing played a pivotal role in media operations. As Gómez et al. (2024) argue, throughout much of the 20th century, media outlets' reliance on government funding substantially compromised their editorial independence. This dynamic became further complicated during Mexico's neoliberal transition in the 1980s, which converged with the exponential growth of drug trafficking as a significant economic sector. Rodríguez J. (2011) notes that organised crime emerged as the nation's largest employer, a situation that persists due to the sector's formidable financial capacity to acquire and replace both human and material resources (Reinserta, 2021). Safety consequences have been profound, manifesting in thousands of executions, disappearances, and kidnappings (Sosa & Mejía, 2011; La Razón, 2012; Díaz, 2012). Notably, the nationwide militarisation of policing has failed to significantly reduce either violence or human rights violations (Flores Macías & Zarkin, 2019). The 1990s witnessed significant media transformations, coinciding with Mexico's democratic transition when the political party PRI, after seven decades of uninterrupted rule, peacefully transferred power to the opposition

party *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN). This political shift dismantled previous government information controls, leading to two key developments: (1) news content became increasingly dramatised to maintain audience share; and (2) media outlets began incorporating more explicit depictions of violence (Casas Pérez, 2011)

On the escalation of violence in Mexico at the turn of the 21st Century, Monsiváis (2010) observes that the surge in drug-related violence in Mexico fundamentally transformed the role of the *nota roja*, elevating it to front-page prominence. The sheer frequency of brutal incidents, including murders, disappearances, and torture, resulting in countless victims, gradually rendered such events commonplace, thereby diminishing the shock value of graphic headlines and imagery. Despite significant investments in new technologies, the professionalisation of reporters, and nominal commitments to ethical guidelines, the demands of readership, market pressures, and the proliferation of crime news have perpetuated editorial practices reminiscent of 19th-century Mexican journalism. These include sensationalism, social discrimination, and mockery, which continue to dominate coverage.

On this point, it is pertinent to note that in 2007 the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence⁸ was enacted. This legislation stipulates that the Mexican State must ensure media outlets refrain from promoting violence against women, while actively supporting efforts to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence, thereby upholding women's human rights and dignity. While this legal instrument establishes state obligations to monitor media content, it also implicitly imposes responsibilities on media organisations

⁸ *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* (in Spanish).

regarding their portrayal of violence against women, specifically, prohibiting the dissemination of material that perpetuates such violence. Furthermore, the Mexican Constitution underwent significant reform in 2011.⁹ This amendment introduced substantial modifications to human rights provisions, reinforced the principles of equality and non-discrimination, and mandated the application of a gender perspective across all sectors of society. Subsequently, the 2014 National Code of Criminal Procedures¹⁰ introduced additional safeguards, including the right of defendants to prevent media disclosure of their image and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Martínez Ramos (2022), whom I interviewed in her capacity as both reporter and photographer for the crime news daily *¡Pásala!*, and one of the few women covering this type of news in Mexico, observes how these legislative reforms have fundamentally altered crime journalism practices. Notably, editorial policies now prohibit journalists from collecting or publishing victims' personal details, such as names, ages or occupations, as such information is legally protected. Additionally, media outlets routinely hide victims' facial features in photographs through pixelation or black bars to prevent identification.

As evidenced, there exist human rights obligations, particularly concerning the eradication of gender violence in Mexico, that must be fulfilled not solely by public officials but by all individuals and entities, including media organisations. However, as I subsequently discuss, certain newsroom practices, combined with commercial competition between media outlets, have resulted in minimal substantive change in how extreme violent incidents are reported. Martínez Ramos (2022), crime reporter and photographer for the newspaper *¡Pásala!*,

⁹ The reform was passed on 10 June 2011.

¹⁰ *Código Nacional de Procedimientos Penales* (in Spanish).

Llera (2022), nicknamed *El Verde* because of the green colour of his eyes, and a veteran *nota roja* crime photographer for *La Prensa*, and Rojas (2022) who, at the time I interviewed her, was not only a woman but also the youngest crime photographer in the *nota roja* in Mexico, observe that, notwithstanding these obligations, editors continue to demand graphic imagery. Barajas (2018) suggests that Mexico has developed a blood culture in an era of the narco-state, that is perpetuated through prolonged state tolerance (Valdés Castellanos, 2013). In that regard, Hernández Navarro (2010) notes that Mexico has been transformed into a red news country, wherein the criminal economy's logic has fundamentally reshaped journalistic practices.

For Canales (2011), drug cartels and organised crime networks frequently permit photojournalists to document extreme violence, normalising such imagery. Among these visuals, Barajas (2018: 155) identifies 'the most shocking, the most overwhelming, the creepiest of the set of press photographs printed in recent dates is the endless sequence of executed and crushed [people]', with particular emphasis on circulated images of feminicides representing, in his assessment, among Mexico's most grievous social phenomena. Further, Gibler (2011) analyses Mexico's drug war crisis, investigating its violent manifestations and societal consequences. He cites crime reporter Luz del Carmen Sosa's observation that violence against women has escalated alongside their increased involvement in criminal organisations. This perspective merits attention as Sosa suggests this apparent parity renders women equally vulnerable to extreme violence, including torture, decapitation, and immolation. Indeed, my research examined multiple crime reports whose photographic evidence and documented circumstances substantiate Sosa's claim: women subjected to brutal executions,

typically gunshots to the head, preceded by torture and sexual violence, frequently discovered nude or partially clothed in locations associated with organised crime. On this point, Azaola Garrido (2021) links gender-based violence against women in Mexico with an escalation of violence resulting from the war on drugs, which has brought about a disintegration of the social fabric and impunity.

Tuñón (2018) posits that contemporary crime journalism predominantly focuses on graphic depictions of bloodshed and brutality. The *nota roja* employs a markedly sensationalist style, both linguistically and visually, in its coverage of violent incidents. Its narrative adopts a quasi-judicial tone reminiscent of police reports, using formalised rhetorical devices characteristic of chronicle writing. However, this is combined with intensely visceral descriptions, for instance, references to pungent odours or objects that provoke revulsion, designed to stimulate sensory responses and emotional reactions rather than foster critical engagement with the underlying social dimensions of violence. Photographic content constitutes a defining element. As Marcos Cazarín (2020), one of the editors of *Metro* at the time when I interviewed him, emphasised in his interview for this research, the visual component is fundamental to the commercial format of such newspapers. These aspects are examined in greater depth in Chapter 4. However, it is precisely this combination of distinctive narrative style and graphic imagery that renders the *nota roja* not only immediately identifiable within the Mexican media landscape, but also accounts for its particular popularity among lower socioeconomic demographics.

Monsiváis (2013: 25) suggests that the graphic imagery favoured by the *nota roja* appears to cater to a distinctly Mexican 'morbid fascination', a cultural

predilection of sorts. This observation inevitably raises the question of causality: does the public gravitate towards sensationalist crime reporting because it reflects their preferred news consumption habits, or do media outlets deliberately employ such stylistic conventions in response to audience demand? This presents something of a chicken-and-egg dilemma. With regard to the press in Mexico City, García Silberman (2004) holds that there is no substantive evidence that media directly generates violent behaviour. However, she acknowledges its instrumental role in perpetuating value systems that reinforce social inequities and insecurity. At most, given its fundamentally instrumental nature, such media may serve to normalise consumption of violent content, while simultaneously entertaining audiences, instilling fear, and facilitating manipulation.

Santana Hernández (2020), a Mexican journalist who reported crime news for a long time, suggests that the *nota roja* represents a complex media phenomenon that is closely linked to social violence, culture, media economics, and ethical tensions concerning the dignity of the victims and the impact on society. In that regard, the potent visual rhetoric employed in crime journalism brings to mind Hirsch's (2012) contention that photographic representation of traumatic events offers profound insights into the cultural contexts of their production. While acknowledging the essentially commercial motivations underlying the reporting style of the *nota roja*, Barajas (2018), a famous Mexican political cartoonist, nevertheless recognises its capacity to reveal fundamental social truths, document cultural practices, and expose the normative values of particular historical moments. It is perhaps this dual cultural function, combined with its transgressive nature, that leads Tuñón (2018) to argue that the genre compels critical engagement with Mexican cultural norms and social anxieties.

She interrogates whether crime reporting ultimately serves to reinforce social order or, conversely, to facilitate certain forms of transgression. Despite being an evolving genre that continuously adapts to keep competitive within media markets, it remains stubbornly fixated on representing disturbing and abject phenomena. I expand upon these observations in Chapter 4.

In a critical perspective, Lara Klahr (2004) argues that the *nota roja* perpetuates power structures by stereotyping and demonising vulnerable groups, undermining justice and human rights. Through sensationalist crime reporting, media outlets foster biases against both criminals and innocents unjustly accused. Victims are disproportionately poor or from marginalised communities (e.g., LGBTTIQ+ people, homeless minors, Indigenous peoples), while coverage often reflects systemic partiality toward entrenched power interests. Security and justice reporting frequently reinforces discriminatory stereotypes. Lara Klahr (2004) further notes that tragic events are framed as red news through traditional chronicles, overly concise while heavily illustrated, which reductively present structurally complex issues as isolated, mundane occurrences. This framing enables authorities to evade accountability by dismissing systemic problems, e.g., feminicides and, in general, gendered violence, as random incidents rather than national crises, as further analysed in Chapter 4.

Gómez et al. (2024) observe that digitalisation brings dual implications for Mexican journalism: while enabling greater information access and investigative potential, it has undermined traditional revenue streams through advertising migration to online platforms. Casas Pérez (2011) notes this coincided with the early-2000s media saturation of crime reporting, where narcoviolence dominated headlines across print, broadcast, and digital outlets, a trend that drew

government alarm. It was within this climate that *Metro*, a newspaper under study in my research, emerged in 1997. Its rise in Mexico City occurred amidst social upheaval toppling Mexico's 70-year ruling party, compounded by an economic crisis that cut down press finances through advertising cuts, rising production costs, reduced circulations, and mass layoffs (Reed Torres, 2002).

A more recent governmental strategy involves accusing media outlets of glorifying crime or acting as conduits for organised crime. For instance, in August 2009, the Mexican government sanctioned *Proceso*, a prominent weekly political, social, and cultural affairs magazine, for featuring a cover photograph of *La Familia* drug cartel displaying weapons, drugs, cash, and personal items. Genaro García Luna, then Secretary of Public Security, later convicted of drug trafficking in the US in 2024, accused *Proceso* of acting as a platform for cartel propaganda, effectively endorsing crime. The magazine condemned this as intimidation against media reporting on Mexico's violence, particularly outlets critical of the government (Carrasco Araizaga, 2009).

Moreover, the government appears to have capitalised on rumours that Mexican journalists accepted cartel payments to publish coded messages about criminal activities. Padgett (2007) describes such reporters as 'well-paid publicists' who burnished drug lords' reputations or disparaged rivals. While this may occur sporadically, blanket accusations of media corruption risk providing authorities with a convenient pretext. Corcoran (2022) notes how murdered journalists are frequently blamed for their own deaths through a recurring narrative framing them as 'not real journalists' due to alleged corruption. Conversely, Priest (2015) observes that Mexican newspapers often face a fatal dilemma: 'defiance carries a high price... submitting to cartel demands is the only

way to survive'. Márquez Ramírez (2014) argues that Mexico's democratic transition failed to eradicate press corruption, with practices like *chayote* (journalistic bribery) remaining culturally entrenched due to the sector's historical ties to authoritarianism. However, indiscriminate allegations of journalist-cartel collusion are problematic given Mexico's 98% impunity rate for journalist murders (Díaz, 2023). Without proper investigations, such claims remain speculative. This climate prompts serious questions about the government's commitment to addressing the crisis in press freedom.

During the 2010s, a media-sceptical discourse emerged in Mexico, criticising outlets for disproportionately profiting from violent imagery. Television broadcasts and front pages remained saturated with graphic crime coverage, like murders, cartel clashes, lynchings, extrajudicial executions, and shootings, which intensified under the then President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's security strategy, colloquially termed the 'war on drugs' (Hernández López, 2022). Calderón Hinojosa himself publicly condemned this sensationalist reporting cycle. Indeed, academia and civil society initiated a dialogue on media violence in Mexico. Lara Klahr (2008) notes that the *Violencia y Medios* project (Violence and Media project), established in 2005 at the *Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia* (Institute for Security and Democracy), affiliated with the prominent NGO *Insyde*, aimed to promote democratic, professional, and human rights-centred journalism on security issues. Nevertheless, a key challenge lay in developing a critical yet constructive communication model involving journalists, civil society, institutional communicators, and academics diverging from an emerging 'mediaphobic' discourse in Mexico (Lara Klahr, 2008: 65).

Overall, the primary aim was to professionalise journalists reporting on public safety, criminal justice, and human rights. My interviews revealed that many reporters and photographers of the *nota roja* began their careers incidentally, even without journalism degrees. For instance, when interviewed, Llera commented that initially he studied Public Administration. However, after informal mentoring from media colleagues and short journalism courses, he transitioned into full-time crime photography (Llera, 2022). He notes this entry was common among his peers of the time. However, notably, younger reporters like Cabrera (2022) exemplify the 2000s push for formal qualifications. Cabrera, a Communications graduate who works as a press photographer for Mexican newspapers *El Gráfico* and *El Universal*, among others, gained recognition when *TIME* magazine featured his 2015 photo of a drug-related hanging in Mexico City (Grillo, 2015). His work now focuses on human rights, security, and migration. Similarly, Martínez Ramos (2022) and Rojas (2022) entered crime journalism through Communication degrees.

Simultaneously, this dialogue within civil society aimed to raise public awareness about news consumption, though Lara Klahr (2008) notes that a single civil initiative would not overhaul Mexico's violent media landscape. Notably, in January 2011, Mexico's foremost cartoonists, known as *moneros*, Rius, Helguera, Patricio, El Fisgón, and Hernández, whose work featured in *El Chamuco* magazine and other outlets, launched the *¡Basta de sangre!* (Enough blood!) campaign. They urged citizens to display that slogan publicly on cars, buildings, schools, etc., and demanded political accountability in the drug war. Despite its modesty, the campaign resonated widely, garnering support from artists, journalists, and media nationwide (Flores Marín et al., 2012). This

represents the closest precedent to subsequent media agreements on violence coverage, as discussed below.

In March 2011, President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa urged Mexican media to reduce coverage of extreme violence, arguing it promoted criminal agendas. On 24 March 2011, 715 media outlets, including national broadcasters *Televisa* and *TV Azteca*, and *La Prensa's* parent company *Organización Editorial Mexicana*, though notably excluding *Grupo Reforma* (*Metro's* owner), signed the *Acuerdo para la Cobertura Informativa de la Violencia* (Agreement for Information Coverage on Violence) (Hernández López, 2022). Local media from high-crime areas and prominent journalists also joined. Signatories acknowledged needing new strategies to operate amid Mexico's unprecedented organised crime violence, while stressing the state's obligation to address this crisis (Mexican Media, 2011). The agreement thus reflected societal concerns about both violence and media reporting practices.

The agreement's core objectives were: establishing shared editorial standards to prevent crime-related reporting from inciting public panic, ensuring media avoid unwittingly promoting organised crime propaganda, and upholding legality, anti-impunity measures, and civic engagement. It also instituted protections for journalists and victims' anonymity. Notably, the document included a ten-point editorial code requiring signatories to: condemn violence, verify information rigorously, avoid prejudging guilt, safeguard victims/minors, protect journalists, and foster public accountability mechanisms, among other actions. To monitor compliance, media outlets were tasked with developing internal oversight procedures, while an independent civil body, the *Observatorio de los Procesos de Comunicación Pública de la Violencia* (Observatory of Public

Communication Violence Proceedings) was established to evaluate adherence to these standards (Mexican Media, 2011).

Despite being operational for several years, the agreement's impact was limited for three primary reasons. First, journalists struggled to implement its violence-reporting guidelines. Martínez (2011) documents how signatory media reporters mocked the decalogue's provisions, particularly on journalist protection, factual accuracy, and language use: '[h]ow are we going to write it up now?, two beheaded people with mild violence? No, beheaded by unkind people. Better, those antisocial people scattered the limbs of the victim, who did not suffer. How about we better cover a police operation all together with the agreement in hand'. Second, Lozano Rendón (2016) argues it failed as a self-regulatory effort due to the (1) Observatory's reluctance to name non-compliant media or address public complaints; (2) the absence of an ethics committee to balance press freedom with censorship prevention; and (3) continued tolerance of sensationalised, decontextualised crime reporting. Moreover, Flores Marín et al. (2012) highlight credibility issues stemming from *Televisa* and *TV Azteca's* dominant role, both historically distrusted television broadcasters. The agreement lacked prior editorial scrutiny, appearing as a top-down initiative by televisual giants with questionable journalistic authority. Lozano Rendón (2016) adds that scholars and rival outlets, e.g., *Grupo Reforma*, owner of *Metro*, and *Proceso*, dismissed it as a presidential image-management exercise. While *El Universal*, publisher of the crime daily *El Gráfico*, joined, it simultaneously established an ethics advisory council, signalling scepticism by reinforcing its own crime-coverage standards.

As Hincapié & López (2018) note, the Mexican government maintained a double standard: publicly advocating press freedom while employing repressive

mechanisms against critical journalism. Prior to 2018, it allocated substantial advertising funds disproportionately to compliant media, a particularly problematic practice during economic crises when state advertising became vital for outlets' survival, especially print dailies, compromising journalistic independence. This pattern persisted under MORENA's left-wing government during the period 2018-2024, where discretionary allocation continued without transparency. Fundar (2021) documented that over 50% of state advertising benefited just ten pro-government or uncritical outlets. Hallin (2000) contextualises this within Mexican journalism's broader neoliberal commercialisation.

A critical obstacle for media covering crime and violence today is the frequent murder of journalists. In response, some outlets have adopted protective measures, such as omitting journalists' names and personal details from sensitive reports, thereby assuming full institutional responsibility for published content. As an example of some events that led to this type of measures, in 28 April 2012, Regina Martínez Pérez, a correspondent for *Proceso* in Veracruz Mexico, was murdered. She was known for exposing government-cartel collusion, corruption, and human rights abuses. Martínez Pérez had endured years of threats, censorship, and persecution prior to her murder. *Proceso* subsequently sought to participate in the criminal investigation to advance justice efforts (Propuesta Cívica, 2021).

Other media outlets, such as *Norte*, formerly one of northern Mexico's most relevant newspapers, announced in April 2017 that it would cease publication. The daily declared that killings, violence, and threats against journalists had rendered the profession untenable in Mexico, and crucially, that it

was unwilling to endanger its staff. This closure followed the murder of Miroslava Breach Velducea, a correspondent for both *Norte* and *La Jornada*, the latter one of Mexico's most prominent newspapers, who was shot eight times on 23 March 2017 while leaving her home to take her son to school (Mele & García, 2017). Further examples of fatal attacks on journalists include the murder of Luis Martín Sánchez Íñiguez, a *La Jornada* correspondent in Nayarit, a region particularly affected by organised crime, on 8 July 2023. His body was discovered with two attached messages, though their contents were not disclosed (Armstrong, 2023). However, such written messages constitute one method by which criminal organisations communicate, with corpses serving as vehicles for messages intended for both state institutions and the general public (Carton de Grammont, 2015). Likewise, *The Guardian* reported in 2022 that press attacks in Mexico had risen by 85% during MORENA's administration, cementing Mexico's status as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists (Lakhani, 2022).

Notwithstanding Mexico's *ad hoc* legislation safeguarding freedom of expression and press freedom, including legal instruments such as the *Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras y Periodistas* (Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists) and the *Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos cometidos contra de la Libertad de Expresión* (Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes against Freedom of Expression), the escalating murders of journalists, coupled with pervasive impunity, suggest the failure of such measures. Díaz (2023) highlights systemic shortcomings: inadequate funding for protection mechanisms, insufficient political will to implement timely interventions, and a disproportionate concentration of resources in Mexico City, despite higher-risk regions. Llera (2022) corroborates

this disparity noting that crime photographers in Mexico's interior face significantly greater threats, including murder and enforced disappearance, particularly when their work displeases criminal organisations. This aligns with earlier cited cases, which predominantly occurred in regions under the sway of organised crime.

Despite this dire landscape, the then President López Obrador's administration responded dismissively, framing journalist murders as political tools to undermine his government. Employing populist rhetoric, he deflected blame onto what he deemed a 'conservative mafia' of elites while paradoxically asserting universal protection for journalists, including critics as observed in his *mañaneras* or morning press conferences. However, these press conferences routinely targeted dissenting voices: journalists investigating corruption or administrative failures were publicly vilified, with names and images broadcast nationally. A dedicated segment, *¿Quién es quién en las mentiras de la semana?* (Who's Who in the Week's Lies), ostensibly countered 'libel' from opposition groups (Alonso Viña, 2022) but functioned as a platform to discredit independent media. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (2023) condemned this practice, urging its discontinuation due to its role in exacerbating violence. The Rapporteur warned that the segment mirrored state propaganda, weaponising public discourse to stigmatise the press and suppress criticism.

Moreover, the pervasive climate of insecurity facing journalists in Mexico has been further exacerbated by revelations that the Mexican military employed *Pegasus* spyware during the López Obrador administration to conduct unlawful surveillance of media personnel. This espionage operation, which sought to

extract and infiltrate sensitive information, has placed journalists at even greater risk (Díaz, 2023). A consortium comprising the civil society organization Article 19, alongside academic institutions and other organisations, including the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, conducted a comprehensive investigation titled 'Spy Army'. This study exposed new instances of state-sponsored surveillance targeting both journalists and human rights defenders during the previous administration, building upon numerous documented cases from Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency (Artículo 19, 2022).

The government of Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, a member of MORENA who assumed office on 1 October 2024, has inherited an alarming record of journalist murders, cementing Mexico's status as the most dangerous country for journalism in the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, impunity remains systemic in crimes against the press. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists' 2024 Global Impunity Index (2024), Mexico has consistently ranked among the top ten countries with the highest number of unresolved journalist killings since 1992. The Committee further reports that Mexico leads globally in cases of disappeared journalists, with no convictions secured to date. Beyond murders and disappearances, journalists routinely endure threats, harassment, and physical and psychological abuse perpetrated both by state actors and organised crime groups. Most attacks are linked to Mexico's ongoing conflict with violent criminal organisations, the militarisation of law enforcement, and the failure of authorities to fulfil their obligation to protect journalists.

Fundamentally, the contemporary landscape of Mexican journalism is characterised by systemic violence, institutional impunity, and widespread media self-censorship. These factors collectively shape the reporting of violent

incidents. Nevertheless, this environment also influences journalistic practices more broadly, as Mexico's endemic violence has generated particularly gross cases that certain media outlets, particularly the tabloid press, cover in a sensationalised manner. Moreover, these extreme occurrences have yielded profoundly distressing imagery which media organisations may deploy in graphic fashion, including depictions of female victims of femicide, a phenomenon examined in subsequent chapters.

7. Preliminary conclusions

These brief historical accounts of the *nota roja* reveal how its evolution, from pre-Hispanic rituals to neoliberal sensationalism, has perpetuated a form of journalism that may reduce violence to mere spectacle. This legacy explains why grotesque imagery is prioritised over rigorous analysis, as I explore in Chapters 4 and 5, for it stems from moral traditions, commercial pressures, threats to journalists, a virtually failed state, and a society habituated to consuming suffering. Without this historical perspective, the deeper roots of an issue that transcends the media sphere and reflects broader crises of justice and human rights in Mexico, such as feminicides, may remain obscured.

Chapter 4. The *nota roja* as a journalistic genre

'Perhaps because she was a woman, it became the great news story in the city:
"The tortured body of a young lady found in the same location as another
murder. It remains unknown whether there is a connection"'.
Liliana Blum, '*Una lady Macbeth cualquiera*', in *Un descuido cósmico*

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the history and impact of the *nota roja* in Mexico, focusing on its pre-Hispanic and colonial origins, its historical evolution, and its contemporary role within a context shaped by drug trafficking and organised crime. In this chapter, I argue that the red chronicle constitutes a genre that deliberately transforms news into something emotional, sensational, and visually arresting. Its graphic design is loaded with meaning and deeply human sensations, like pain, misfortune, evil, and tragedy, which form the core of its discursive power. To a significant extent, the news covers extreme violence, calamities, bloodshed, and sexual content. Descriptions of tragic events may be highly detailed, even when including personal data about victims or perpetrators. The most brutal crimes are sometimes softened through humorous language or expressions that mock misfortune or an unexpected tragic fate. Furthermore, facts are exaggerated when depicting bloody and catastrophic events, as well as deviations from societal norms. This amplification is achieved through imagery, particularly photographs, and the use of colloquial language, which serves both to highlight the vulnerability of victims and to underscore the cruelty of their aggressors, whether identified or not.

The main works used to inform the core ideas in this chapter include texts that address critical multimodal discourse analysis, visual semiotics, and the

sociocultural and media context of the *nota roja* in Mexico. Key references are, for instance: Machin & Mayr (2023) on CDA applied to multimodal texts such as press reports; Jancsary et al. (2016) on the critical analysis of visual and multimodal texts, which provides a methodology for examining the relationship between text and visuals on *nota roja* pages; Van Leeuwen (2006) concerning the semiology of typography and visual design in media; Kress (2010) on the interaction between text and image and their semiotic function; and Barthes (1977) for key semiotic concepts, such as denotation and connotation, relevant to the analysis of femicide photographs. Collectively, these texts underpin the critical analysis of the design, visual and textual narrative, and the construction of meaning within the *nota roja* as a journalistic genre.

The analysis of the most significant characteristics of the *nota roja* is conducted through an examination of two of Mexico's most emblematic newspapers within the genre: *La Prensa* and *Metro*. The *nota roja*, recognised for its emotive, sensationalist, and visually driven approach, employs a graphic design that elicits basic human reactions, covering themes such as criminal violence, tragedies, and the plight of victims. This chapter explores how these publications not only report news but also frame tragic events in a manner that amplifies their impact through the deliberate deployment of grotesque aesthetic elements, colloquial language, and distinctive visual narratives.

Therefore, I define the *nota roja* as a journalistic genre and outline its principal characteristics, drawing on the proposals of Machin & Mayr (2023) on CDA that include identifying the producers of such texts, their intended audience/readers, and the social conditions influencing this form of communication. Furthermore, I conduct a critical analysis of the genre as a

multimodal construct, in the sense elaborated by Jancsary et al. (2016). This analytical approach moves beyond textual verbalisation by incorporating visual elements that enhance discourse comprehension within complex contexts. Such an analysis is facilitated by the inherently visual nature of the *nota roja*, as previously noted. In that regard, first, I examine the origins and development of *La Prensa*, a newspaper founded in 1928 that pioneered the crime news genre in Mexico, and *Metro*, a more contemporary publication established in 1997 that employs an accessible, visually driven format. I analyse the layout and design of front, inside, and back pages in both newspapers, emphasising how visual and textual elements interact to engage readers and evoke an emotional response. The final section explores the narrative style characteristic of this press genre. It is argued that the *nota roja* does not merely report on violence in Mexico but may also shape its social construction and influence public perceptions of crime.

2. Socio-cultural context

The Mexican newspapers *La Prensa* and *Metro* have distinct origins. The first was established on 28 August 1928 under the motto '*Nosotros decimos lo que otros callan*' (We say what others are silent) (González Marín, 2006). At this time, the *nota roja* had not yet dominated national narratives (Castellanos, 2018). The newspaper emerged during Mexico's post-revolutionary period, as the country transitioned toward democratic stability following the civil war (1910-1920). This era also saw transformative political, economic, and social shifts, including urbanisation, population growth, and industrialisation (Aboites Aguilar, 2004; Garciadiego, 2004). *La Prensa*'s founding coincided with the industrialisation of

Mexican journalism, characterised by mechanical production, labour specialisation, and commercial profitability (Borrás, 1983).

In its early years, *La Prensa* stood out as a modern, dynamic, and audacious newspaper until political pressures forced the withdrawal of public subsidies (Reed Torres, 2002). Its tabloid format, sensationalist headlines, popular appeal, and focus on crime reporting secured a unique niche in Mexico City's media landscape (González Marín, 2006). Some even consider it 'the father of all *nota roja* newspapers', as González (2018: 25) argues, since because '[m]any of the most important pens on police chronicles wrote there, and many of them were the ones who trained many others, a new generation of chroniclers'. Now in its tenth decade, *La Prensa* remains a national benchmark for crime journalism, a genre evoking morbidity, anguish, anxiety, and even sorrow. As Castellanos (2018: 16) puts it, it 'brings [readers] closer to postcards from hell. It tastes like death and smells like tragedy'.

It should also be noted that it was in *La Prensa* that Enrique Metinides, a renowned Mexican crime photographer and one of the 'major proponents and antecedent to the *nota roja*', began and developed his career (Mendelsohn, 2007: 2). Metinides, known as '*El Niño*' (The Kid) and often compared to the American photographer Arthur Fellig, 'Weegee', (Yourgrau, 2020), became one of the most emblematic figures of *nota roja* photography in Mexico. Since the age of 9, he documented accidents, crimes, and homicides, a practice that earned him his nickname. He gained recognition for his arresting images of crime, violence, accidents, and human tragedy more broadly. Metinides was deeply influenced by Hollywood gangster films and secured privileged access to crime scenes through his father, who owned both a camera shop and a restaurant frequented by police

officers. His work has been exhibited internationally in cities such as New York, Paris, and London. Over nearly five decades in the *nota roja*, Metinides cultivated a distinctive photographic narrative of harrowing events, infusing daily tragedies with a profoundly human dimension (Ziff, 2012). Rivera Juárez (2021) draws parallels between Metinides and Weegee, particularly in their respective approaches to crime photography. This comparison highlights their visual storytelling techniques, voyeurism, engagement with themes of subversion and agency, and a shared aestheticisation of violence.

Rather, *Metro* is a more contemporary newspaper, founded on 5 December 1997 as a tabloid 'intended to satisfy a market that requires local information in a compact format' (Grupo Reforma, 2020). Distributed exclusively in Mexico City and its surroundings, with regional editions elsewhere in the country, its name reflects its metropolitan focus. It has no affiliation with *Metro UK*, though both share a tabloid style and physical design. Unlike its British counterpart, *Metro* is not free. While *Metro UK* pioneered free newspapers in Britain (Brook, 2009), the Mexican daily was created to serve an audience overlooked by traditional broadsheets (Marcos Cazarín, 2020). It prioritises uncensored reporting, often reflected in its stark front pages, which 'are crude because that is how reality is' (Camacho Velázquez & Hernández Sánchez, 2009). A prototypical tabloid, *Metro's* compact size ensures readability and portability. As former editor of *Metro*, Marcos Cazarín (2020) notes, it caters to readers drawn to sports, entertainment, and crime news, employing a highly visual approach with photographs, maps, and other graphics to convey information.

La Prensa and *Metro* now circulate in a context dominated by two key issues: gender relations and Mexico's violence crisis. As Nehring (2005) notes, patriarchal structures prevailed in gender relations until the mid-to-late 1970s. However, from the 1980s onward, women gained greater opportunities to pursue diverse life paths, gradually leaving the private sphere. This shift has had significant consequences. Zúñiga Elizalde (2014) argues that in contemporary Mexico, marked by pervasive violence, women's bodies are primary targets of invasion and aggression, a trend evident in crime news photographs analysed later.

Mexico's epidemic violence crisis intensified sharply after 2007 when, following two decades of declining homicide rates, a new era of criminal violence emerged. This was fuelled by expanding drug trafficking operations and President Felipe Calderón's security strategy that deployed military forces for public safety operations, as examined in Chapter 3. Notably, media coverage initially concentrated on documenting the consequences of violence (Martínez Solares & Aguilar Sánchez, 2016). During this period, violence in Ciudad Juárez, a northern border city, is particularly notable. Once infamous as the world's most violent city (Alarcón Gil, 2016), it also became emblematic of large-scale feminicides, drawing national and international attention (Castañeda Salgado, 2016). These crimes have since proliferated nationwide (Olivera, 2011; Castañeda Salgado, 2016). Hincapié (2019) links Mexico's dramatic rise in femicides to broader violence, noting their frequent occurrence in public spaces. She argues that both criminal organisations and security forces have intensified violence against women and children in general.

For years, the media paid little attention to violence against women. By the 1990s, the issue entered public debate and gained political traction. In the 2000s, coverage increased, albeit inconsistently (Lara Klahr & Barata, 2009). My research reveals a marked rise in femicide reporting: *La Prensa* documented 21 cases in 2000, 53 in 2006, 112 in 2012, and 214 in 2020. *Metro* followed a similar trend, with 15 cases in 2000, 65 in 2006, 55 in 2012, and 208 in 2020. These figures do not solely reflect an absolute increase in femicides, though Mexico did record over 3,000 murdered women in 2021, with a 4% rise during the previous government's tenure (Barragán, 2021), a trend that continued into 2023 (Barragán, 2023). Rather, they signal heightened media interest that may be driven by the commercial appeal of sensational narratives and imagery, which cater to audience demand, as explored further below.

For Sánchez-Parga (1997), the *nota roja* dictates news priorities. This genre has thus evolved into a media phenomenon exploiting violence and cruelty for profit. However, not all murders or violent incidents make the headlines, coverage often depends on the victim's status. Those with political or economic significance are more likely to feature on front pages or in national news sections. For instance, my sample includes only one case of a murdered female local mayor in Mexico, reported on the same day by *La Prensa* and *Metro* in 2012 (Figures 1-2). In this regard, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the narrative of the event does not include any details about the victim's appearance or clothing, perhaps precisely because its inclusion in the 'National' news lacks that particular focus, unlike sections with a crime news angle. I discuss the photographs of this event later in this chapter.

3. Producers and audience

La Prensa is part of *Organización Editorial Mexicana* (OEM), Mexico's largest publishing group. OEM owns 50 strategically distributed newspapers nationwide, alongside websites, radio stations, a local TV channel, and high-definition screens in key locations (OEM, 2020). *La Prensa* also maintains a news website, which reproduces its print content and features real-time updates, such as minute-by-minute reporting (OEM, 2020b).

According to the *Padrón Nacional de Medios Impresos* (National Print Media Registry) (PNMI), the official register of print media nationwide in Mexico under the purview of the Mexican Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB, by its Spanish acronym),¹¹ *La Prensa* is a locally edited tabloid with regional variations across Mexico, though headquartered in Mexico City. It carries paid advertising and operates without a formal code of ethics (SEGOB, 2024). Published daily nationwide, its content adapts slightly to local interests. As of 31 August 2023, its paid circulation reached 15,860,064 copies, reflecting broad national reach. Its readership consists predominantly of urban men aged 25–64, most with secondary education, employed or in petty trade, and from Mexico's lowest socioeconomic strata (SEGOB, 2024).

In contrast, *Metro Ciudad de México* belongs to *Grupo Reforma*, a leading Mexican media conglomerate. Though operating only nine dailies across four cities, including Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, it holds significant influence. Classified by the PNMI as a general-interest publication (SEGOB, 2024b), *Metro* adheres to some ethical guidelines that shape its coverage of

¹¹ In Spanish, '*Secretaría de Gobernación*'.

crime and tragedy, avoiding explicit imagery such as corpses with open eyes, nudity, or extreme violence. Marcos Cazarín (2020) notes that while *Metro* lacks a formal written code of ethics, it follows the same principles as *Reforma*, *Grupo Reforma*'s flagship conservative daily. These guidelines are displayed on signage throughout the shared editorial office, though Marcos Cazarín admits their exact wording is unclear. Ultimately, he argues *Metro* functions as *Reforma*'s tabloid counterpart, differing only in stylistic presentation rather than editorial standards.

Metro is a newspaper distributed primarily in Mexico City, with limited circulation in bordering areas (SEGOB, 2024b). As of 31 January 2024, its paid circulation amounted to 27,457,046 copies, reflecting a significant reach. Its readership consists predominantly of urban males aged 25–54, typically with secondary or technical education, slightly higher than *La Prensa*'s readers. Like the former, most *Metro* readers belong to lower socioeconomic strata and work as employees or small-scale traders (SEGOB, 2024b).

As noted earlier, *Metro* primarily targets low-income, less-educated men, typically young adults or street vendors, working in markets or thoroughfares. The newspaper is chiefly sold by street hawkers, in subway stations, and public markets, often circulating communally after purchase (Anonymous Interviewee, 2020). This contrasts sharply with *Reforma*'s broadsheet readership, which consists largely of professionals and private-sector employees with undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Despite this, *Reforma*'s sales are significantly lower, with 14,887,918 paid copies as of 31 January 2024 (SEGOB, 2024b), roughly half of *Metro*'s circulation for the same period. Unlike the latter, which remains print-exclusive, *Reforma* offers online subscriptions. An Anonymous Interviewee (2000) observed that *Metro*'s print-only model likely

boosts its sales advantage. Both newspapers frequently cover the same stories but employ distinct editorial treatments. Rojas (2022), crime photographer for *El Gráfico*, the tabloid version of the broadsheet *El Universal*, noted a parallel dynamic: broadsheet newspapers often depend financially on their tabloid counterparts.

This data underscores the significance of *La Prensa* and *Metro* as key publications within influential media consortiums that produce, control, and distribute nationwide content. Both newspapers target a distinct readership: predominantly working- and lower-middle-class men with basic education, often employed in clerical or small-scale trade roles, as I mentioned before.

4. Layout

Regarding Latin American tabloids, Sunkel (2001) argues that they embody key features of popular culture. These publications amplify specific themes, linguistic styles, and, above all, melodramatic aesthetics. As part of a mass-oriented press, they blend popular and mainstream elements, employing dramatic aesthetics even in formal topics. This is achieved through striking headlines, prioritised visual elements, and narratives often infused with bloody or macabre tones.

A key aspect of newspaper analysis is composition, like its layout, design, and typography, including size, colour, and imagery. As Van Leeuwen (2006) notes, language once served a cohesive role now largely fulfilled by design, colour, and typography. Similarly, Keeble & Reeves (2015) refer to the newspaper grid: a framework of invisible guidelines that structure page elements

like text and images. Grids serve editorial purposes, ensuring consistency and commercial aims by allocating space for advertisements.

One of the most distinctive features of the *nota roja* is its deliberate graphic design. Its intent is readily apparent. As Keeble & Reeves (2015) argue, news language is not a natural mode of writing but a distinct discourse with its own rhythms, tones, and phrasing. Newspapers fulfil multiple roles: they convey ideas, moods, and styles through both written and visual text. Yet Machin & Niblock (2008) note that the latter has received less scrutiny. Kress (2010) further emphasises that design is dynamic, responding to public demand. It transcends mere convention for it is prospective, transformative, and innovative.

The *nota roja* is distinguished by its visual codes, making the layout of its newspapers essential to understanding the genre. Their editorial format forms part of Mexico's popular graphic design tradition. Troconi (2018) notes that Mexican publishing design is diverse, encompassing varied styles, characteristics, and production methods, which attract both acclaim and criticism. Its creation demands skilled professionals in design and production. Galindo Flores et al. (2021) trace the evolution of Mexican graphic design within popular graphics, emphasising its ties to the nation's cultural identity. They argue that these visuals emerged from stylistic and political codes rooted in Mexico's post-Revolutionary context, with José Guadalupe Posada, a 19th-century engraver renowned for his satirical depictions of daily life and death, as a key figure. Posada's work, including the iconic '*La Catrina*', common in the annual Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico, epitomises this tradition. The early 20th century saw popular graphics influenced by Cubism, Expressionism, and other European art movements. Sagahón (2013) highlights that while early designers often lacked

formal training, the 1960s marked a turning point with the establishment of design schools, therefore professionalising the field and elevating its output. Indeed, García Roiz (2020), a graphic designer who has studied the *nota roja* in depth and a lecturer in the Graphic Design Department at the *Universidad Iberoamericana* in Mexico City, argues that the professionals working in the *nota roja*, such as photographers, editors, and directors, are often graphic designers. He therefore points out that they are not neutral agents, as they employ the same tools as commercial or advertising design, but with a different message that aligns with the purpose of this type of press.

Galindo Flores et al. (2021) highlight how Mexican popular graphic design is defined by its use of colour, lettering, illustration, and language, collectively forging a distinctive identity. Initially, engraving techniques restricted designs to one or two inks, yet this limitation heightened the dramatic effect of images. Over time, colour palettes grew bolder, dominated by saturated, bright hues that inject vitality into compositions while mirroring Mexico's cultural diversity and serving as markers of social identity. Typography, they argue, is equally central. Hand-drawn letters, often imprecise yet visually striking, abound in street food stalls, newsstands, and shopfronts. These typographies employ shadows and three-dimensionality to amplify dynamism and convey personality. Influences range from Gothic to other styles, enriching Mexico's visual aesthetic. Regarding illustration, Galindo Flores et al. (2021) also note the heterogeneity and emotional intensity of popular graphics. Dramatic, sometimes cartoonish, they prioritise visual narratives designed to elicit reactions. Detailed imagery and visual metaphors are frequent, often becoming compositional focal points that reflect everyday life and culture.

As an editorial product, the *nota roja* employs genre-specific visual conventions to accentuate news content, prioritising imagery over text. Checa Montúfar (2010) observes its reliance on iconographic displays, where photographs, infographics, and cartoons dominate written elements. This extends to bold headlines and stylised typefaces, with red prominently featured. Vilches (1987) further argues that such visual strategies, through size, contrast, and layout, direct readers' engagement and shape expectations and interpretations.

Colour is a primary visual element. Dondis (1975) argues that it carries strong emotional connotations, serving as a universal yet deeply personal visual experience. It influences cognitive processing and emotional responses in print media, proving more engaging than monochrome. In journalism, its evocative power shapes editorial decisions (Detenber & Winch, 2001), granting it discursive weight alongside form. Wegman & Said (2011) stress that colour elicits both physiological and culturally conditioned reactions. Physiologically, it is perceived via retinal cells, a fundamental aspect of human vision. Culturally, however, its symbolism varies. For instance, white signifies purity in Western weddings, while red denotes luck in Chinese matrimonial traditions. Such contexts dictate design applications, from emotional resonance, like red as passion or urgency, to functional domains like data visualisation, where misinterpretations hinder communication. Psychologically, Wright (2012) notes red's dual impact: it energises yet may agitate, contingent on deployment. This duality underscores its contextual potency.

As explained in Chapter 3, red colour is emblematic of the *nota roja*, though other striking hues like yellow also feature prominently. Haller (2019)

notes that yellow, alongside red and orange, carries natural connotations of danger, a symbolism intensified when combined with black. In Mexican crime journalism, red holds an emotional weight tied to bloodshed and tragedy, a connection the *nota roja* exploits through deliberate chromatic choices. By leveraging colour, alongside provocative design and photography, it seeks to elicit visceral reactions (García Roiz, 2016). Llera (2022) observes that red remains a powerful draw for readers, though he notes that while *La Prensa* now seldom requests explicitly gory images, such demands were once routine.

Typography is another key feature, serving as a newspaper's visual identity through typeface, weight, curvature, and scale (Machin & Niblock, 2008). Today, it functions as an independent communicative tool for it conveys actions, qualities, interactions, and attitudes (Van Leeuwen, 2006). Prominence is achieved through size, chromatic contrast, or dynamic elements that distinguish specific words or phrases. In the Mexican *nota roja*, typography diverges from broadsheet conventions, adopting a sensationalist, direct, and arresting tone. Bold, high-contrast fonts dominate, often manipulated to evoke urgency and drama. These are paired with vivid colours, predominantly red, which symbolises blood or danger, black, and yellow, the latter emblematic of sensationalism. Headlines frequently use capital letters for maximum impact, while font choices tend toward conventional serif or sans serif styles, aligned with each newspaper's branding. A strict visual hierarchy is maintained, reinforced by effects like shadows and thick borders to emphasise gravity. In general, the impact of the *nota roja* lies fundamentally in its visual construction, as noted by García Roiz (2020). He points out that perhaps, more than the text, it is the design that creates

a message and provokes an immediate reaction in the readers (García Roiz 2020).

In Mexican *nota roja*, design elements, including colour, typography, sizing, and hierarchies, are employed to depict violent events and their aftermath, particularly on victims and crime scenes. The following sections analyse the layout of *La Prensa* and *Metro*, focusing on their distinctive stylistic features. Both newspapers dedicate entire sections to crime reporting, using written and visual techniques to sensationalise news, notably feminicides.

4.1. Format

Format is perhaps the most distinctive feature of 'tabloids'. Their compact size contrasts with traditional 'broadsheets', reflecting Alfred Harmsworth's vision when he acquired the *New York World* in 1901. He halved the newspaper's dimensions and limited stories to 250 words (Bingham & Conboy, 2015). The term 'tabloid' itself emerged in the late 19th century from the fusion of 'tablet' and 'alkaloid'. Originally denoting compressed medicinal pills replacing powders, it later described simplified publications. This smaller format reduced costs and improved portability (Tulloch, 2000; Bingham & Conboy, 2015).

However, in contemporary discourse, the physical dimensions of newspapers are increasingly contested as a defining characteristic of the genre. Conboy (2007) and Keeble & Reeves (2015) contend that traditional broadsheets have adopted tabloid formats, thereby blurring the distinctions between these categories. Nevertheless, the tabloid format remains analytically significant as it intersects with other features that enhance accessibility for readers.

On this point, it should be noted that both *La Prensa* and *Metro* fall within the tabloid size range. *La Prensa* measures 15 x 11 inches, while *Metro* adopts a square format of 11 x 11 inches, therefore, both smaller than standard broadsheets. However, as Marcos Cazarín (2020) explains, *Metro's* format was deliberately chosen at its founding in 1997 for its handling and distribution.

4.2. Front page

Violence-related news frequently features on front pages due to its high impact and profitability for publishers. Indeed, the red chronicle guarantees sales success (Liñán Ávila, 1989). Both *La Prensa* and *Metro* were specifically conceived for this genre (Castro & Ruiz, 2013). As discussed in Chapter 3, *Metro* was established as the tabloid counterpart to *Reforma*, one of Mexico's most prominent newspapers, to cover sensationalist stories either ignored or treated differently by its parent publication. The covers of *La Prensa* and *Metro* employ distinctive colours, fonts and photographic images to attract buyers while reinforcing brand identity. As will be examined, both newspapers have evolved their visual strategies since their foundation, modifying their grid layouts, typographic hierarchy, and image usage patterns. These changes have manifested through varying lettering styles, increasingly explicit imagery, and diverse colour coding to emphasise text. Today, both publications employ more aggressive visual strategies, sometimes displaying explicit images.

The titlepiece, also termed 'masthead', 'nameplate', 'flag' or 'banner' (Keeble & Reeves, 2015) displays the newspaper's title on the front page, often including publication details, motto, and price (Sagendorf & Moore, 2006). Its

design carries significant semiotic weight. Newspapers like *La Prensa* and *Metro* employ genre-characteristic colour schemes, predominantly red and yellow, in their banners and logos. As the newspaper's most distinctive visual element, the titlepiece functions as its brand identity. Keeble & Reeves (2015: 23) comment that 'this is its brand, the most obvious point of differentiation from its competitors... [t]hat's one of the reasons why titlepieces are very rarely redesigned'.

La Prensa remains the most widely circulated *nota roja* daily. Its front pages typically feature prominent crime stories accompanied by large photographs and bold headlines, often rendered in red, black or yellow typefaces, or superimposed upon backgrounds of these colours (Figure 3). Its masthead is consistently positioned at the top of the front page. Throughout the examined samples, its logo has undergone minor variations, as detailed below. The design primarily consists of the newspaper's title centred on the page. Notable differences include a circular monochrome lion emblem and the logo of *Organización Editorial Mexicana* (OEM), its parent publishing group, referenced previously, which has appeared at various positions around the *La Prensa* name over time.

Typography is a key element in the *nota roja* that functions as a visual tool to convey messages through hierarchy, colour, and contrast (García Roiz, 2016). While uppercase letters emphasise content and lowercase enhance readability, Wheildon (1995) notes this practice is not universally consistent. *La Prensa's* typography has evolved minimally, indeed, its original mixed-case style gradually shifted to all capitals. The newspaper has consistently used serif typefaces, resembling Times New Roman, which combine thin and thick strokes for

elegance and legibility (Wheildon, 1995). This reflects *La Prensa*'s traditionalism, maintaining a classic typographic style since its 1928 foundation. Yet this conservative design contrasts with another element of its masthead: the stripe below, bearing the motto '*El periódico que dice lo que otros callan*' ('The newspaper that says what others are silent'), which conveys defiance (Figures 4-5). In early research samples, this stripe combined two colours: red on the far left, black on the far right. However, from September 2018 onwards, it became entirely red. In both versions, the colour contrast underscores the publication's sensationalist, red news identity. Although the masthead uses conventional black lettering, the red hue serves as a visual alert, aligning with tabloid conventions.

As previously noted, *Metro*, another widely circulated Mexican newspaper, frequently features violent imagery on its front pages, alongside sensual pin-up style photographs. Its headlines are not merely alarmist but often crudely mocking. This juxtaposition of eroticism and violence, a grotesque hallmark of Mexico's crime press, is examined further in my analysis. Buszek (2006) defines a 'pin-up girl' as an image, typically a photograph or illustration, of an attractive woman intended for display and visual consumption. The term gained prominence in 20th-century America, especially during WWII, when soldiers adorned barracks with such images. Pin-ups depict women in suggestive poses, embodying ideals of femininity and sexuality, yet their historical significance is more nuanced, reflecting both beauty standards and debates about female agency. These images have been reinterpreted across contexts, from popular culture to feminist art. McRobbie (2004) observes a contemporary trend of young women normalising overtly sexualised self-representation, including aspiring to feature in men's magazines akin to *The Sun*'s Page 3. In Mexico, Martínez

Ramos (2022), a crime reporter and photographer who documented Ingrid Escamilla's femicide mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, noted that aspiring models occasionally solicit newspapers to publish their photos to advance their careers. In my view, this phenomenon is part of a hypersexualised culture and suggests an acceptance of commercial forms of sexuality. However, these representations may be against past feminist struggles focused on the criticism of the objectification and exploitation of women.

In crime news, it is frequent to find contrasting images between female eroticisation and vulnerability. For instance, photographs of women who are generally white and naked or half-naked next to images of women victims of femicide. In this type of visual narrative, sexualised female bodies and vulnerable women victims of extreme violence are combined, suggesting an appeal to a male gaze that seem to normalise these representations. This feature is commonly found on front pages of crime newspapers in Mexico, such as *Metro*. Indeed, Rojas (2022), deems it as a formula that sells, that is, the picture of a victim of extreme violence next to the image of an openly sexualised woman. Photographs of women, typically white and either nude or semi-nude, are juxtaposed with images of female victims of femicide. This characteristic is found frequently on the front pages of Mexican crime newspapers, such as *Metro*. Therefore, Rojas (2022) identifies this as a commercial strategy (Figures 6-7). The use of nude or semi-nude women has long been a practice in Mexican newspapers to attract readers and boost sales. Llera (2022) argues that public curiosity drives such purchases, with cover images of naked women serving as a key sales tactic. He notes that some outlets, including *La Prensa*, previously dedicated entire pages to such imagery, though this practice has since declined,

a fact I personally verified, especially due to more recent feminist demands. Notably, he observed that murdered women were also depicted in ways designed to exploit morbid fascination, including photographs of nude or semi-nude femicide victims used to promote sales. Llera (2022) admitted to having taken such images himself, some of which later appeared on *La Prensa*'s front pages. In my view, this contrast between brutality and eroticism prioritises commercial appeal over responsible journalism and is, therefore, ethically questionable, as it objectifies women's bodies in ways that, albeit highly contrasting, equally exploit their image to sell copies.

On the other hand, unlike *La Prensa*, *Metro*'s masthead has undergone numerous modifications throughout the sample period, though its messaging remained consistently direct. By 2000, the titlepiece featured a yellow logo enclosed within a red box positioned in the upper-left corner of the front page. The logo employed a serif typeface without italics, with only the initial letter capitalised and the rest in lowercase. As previously noted, serif fonts convey formality, yet this effect is offset by the use of yellow against a red background, albeit subtly outlined in white. Notably, red and yellow are inherently attention-grabbing colours, making their combination in *Metro*'s masthead, a tabloid daily, entirely unsurprising. Centred beneath the masthead, a narrow, pointed box with a black background displayed the newspaper's motto in white text, rendered in a mix of uppercase and lowercase letters: '*Lectura de la Gran Ciudad*' (The Reading of the Great City) (Figure 8).

By 2006, the layout had evolved while retaining its striking style. The masthead remained in the upper-left corner, but the logo now appeared within a red box tapering sharply to the right, directing attention to one of the front-page

headlines embedded within the box. The design comprised two distinct blocks: the first, on the left, featured a red background with the logo in white, slightly slanted to convey dynamism, a fitting aesthetic for a publication named *Metro*, evoking metropolitan urbanity, as discussed earlier. The typeface was a bold sans serif, differing from the 2000 version, with entirely lowercase letters. This clean, unadorned typography, free of serifs, aligned with Wheildon's (1995: 56) assertion that such fonts appear 'clean, uncluttered and attractive'. The second block, extending from the tapered edge and framing a headline, had a yellow background. Together, the red and yellow blocks spanned the page horizontally, reaffirming *Metro's* provocative use of colour, a hallmark of its tabloid identity. Below the masthead, the motto appeared in white capitals on a thin black stripe, ensuring prominence (Figure 9).

For the year 2012, the titlepiece underwent two notable modifications: the yellow block was eliminated, appearing only sporadically thereafter, while the red block, retaining nearly identical features, including the rightward-pointing tip that occasionally directed attention to one of the cover headlines, remained in place. The masthead continued to occupy the upper-left position. Furthermore, this year saw the addition of the abbreviation '*todos los derechos reservados*' (all rights reserved) within a white-outlined circle, serving as a supplementary element to the logo (Figure 10).

Finally, for the year 2018, further variations are evident. The masthead remains largely unchanged; however, a small barcode is now incorporated. The logo is enclosed within a red box, outlined with a thick white border and rounded at the lower right corner. It combines serif and sans-serif typefaces in white, with a more pronounced rightward slant compared to previous years. Similarly, the

newspaper's slogan appears within the red box in yellow capital letters, featuring a tilt that mirrors the logo's inclination. This steeper angle once again aligns with the intended connotations of the name *Metro*, evoking a sense of dynamism reflective of urban daily life. Notably, the titlepiece no longer maintains a fixed position in the upper left corner; instead, its placement varies across the front page, appearing either horizontally or vertically depending on the cover's composition. In this regard, the design adopts an even more dynamic approach (Figure 11).

Vargas Cervantes (2014) argues that, unlike conventional true crime magazines, the Mexican *nota roja* exhibits a distinct fluidity, continuously reinventing itself. Indeed, throughout my sample, *La Prensa* and *Metro* have employed varying iterations of their layouts, including shifts in typographic hierarchy, such as the strategic combination of font sizes and styles to accentuate headlines, bold colour schemes, and the deliberate prioritisation of imagery. Fundamentally, these publications experiment with diverse front-page compositions, utilising an assortment of typefaces, additional graphical elements, particularly in the case of *Metro*, and varying colour intensities to enhance textual prominence.

4.2.1. Headlines and photos

It is argued that crafting headlines in the *nota roja* resembles an art form that requires both learning and mastery. According to Rodríguez (in Rodríguez Soto, 2012), former editor of Mexico's renowned crime magazine *Alarma!*, headlines must instantly captivate readers' attention. Front pages of *La Prensa* and *Metro*

distinguish themselves through concise headlines and abundant imagery, primarily photographs, eschewing the text columns typical of broadsheets which blend main headlines with article excerpts and supplementary visuals. Both newspapers employ headlines reporting violent, tragic, or macabre events, where graphic design plays a pivotal role. The principal headlines and photographs on their covers are emphasised through larger dimensions and bold colours, with red and yellow predominating in coverage of violent incidents. This approach establishes a distinct visual hierarchy that serves to report in a striking manner on tragic news of all kinds, including violent deaths, sometimes even with a humorous tone, as I elaborate below.

Adriaensen (2015: 62) argues that a 'playful approach to death and violence' is common among Mexicans. While not everyone jokes at a topic as morbid as death, in Mexico there is a deep-rooted culture of living with it teasingly. This is exemplified by the vibrant and joyous annual celebration of the well-known *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) (Ruiz, 2014). Zarauz López (2000) notes that this festivity holds profound cultural significance, stemming from the syncretism between pre-Hispanic pagan beliefs and Catholic traditions introduced by Spanish colonisers. Observed on 1st and 2nd November, the holiday serves to honour and commemorate deceased loved ones, with the belief that their souls return to reunite with their families during this time. Families prepare altars adorned with offerings, including the favourite foods of the departed, alongside symbolic decorations such as flowers and candles. Additional customs include cleaning and decorating graves, holding picnics in cemeteries, and preparing traditional foods like *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead).

In Chapter 3, I briefly referenced José Guadalupe Posada, a renowned Mexican cartoonist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, creator of the iconic '*Catrina*', one of the most emblematic characters and symbols of Mexican celebrations. This figure depicts a female skeleton adorned in an elegant 19th-century European-style hat, originally conceived as a critique of social classes that abandoned their indigenous heritage in pursuit of European aristocratic ideals. Reyes García (2018) clarifies that the initial version was named the '*Calavera Garbancera*' (Chickpea Skull), alluding to lower-class individuals who sought upward mobility by collecting chickpeas instead of corn, making Posada's illustration a satirical jab. The image was later reinterpreted by the famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera in his 1947 mural '*Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*' (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at Alameda Central Park), infusing it with new meaning that celebrated Mexico's historical and syncretic cultural richness, embodying traits of Mexican identities and mestizophilia. For Zarauz López (2000), the *calaveras*, or skulls, are not merely tied to the Day of the Dead for they are festive, allegorical figures depicting skeletons engaged in everyday activities, transcending social hierarchies. Far from being frightening, they are viewed as humorous and celebratory, encapsulating life and death in a culturally rich manner.

This irreverent attitude toward death and violence permeates *nota roja* headlines, where double entendres and dark humour are commonplace. Rodríguez (in Rodríguez Soto, 2012) notes that while some may deem this unethical, such techniques are deliberately employed to captivate audiences and boost sales. Lara Klahr & Barata (2009) suggest that while offensive to some, this approach may alleviate the grim weight of violent news. Moreover, it reflects a

longstanding Mexican tendency to mock even the direst circumstances, including death, in a context that renders *nota roja* headlines more comprehensible. However, entertaining the public in such a way is no simple feat, requiring broad cultural knowledge, linguistic skill, and creativity. The genre frequently employs neologisms and striking verbs designed to immediately engage, and often shock, readers (Rodríguez, in Rodríguez Soto, 2012). Indeed, I find it challenging to translate certain headlines into English, as there are simply no equivalent words or expressions, not only in a literal sense but, more significantly, on a conceptual level. Many of these phrases are even incomprehensible to other Spanish speakers, as they are composed of Mexican slang and, in some cases, terminology specific to Mexico City.

However, the significant escalation of violence in Mexico has resulted in front covers, headlines, or standalone photographs no longer eliciting the same impact on audiences as they once did. Reports on violent incidents, accompanied by graphic imagery, have inundated almost all Mexican media outlets. Daily violent crimes have become a routine subject for news broadcasts and newspapers (Casas Pérez, 2011). Morán (in Rodríguez Soto, 2012) observes that, whereas a striking photograph once sufficed to ensure high sales, over time, front covers grew increasingly repetitive, even indistinguishable, due to the sheer frequency of crimes linked to organised crime, as previously discussed in Chapter 3. Consequently, media outlets continually devise new strategies to present news in a more engaging manner by employing greater creativity in headlines, sometimes even adopting a humorous or unconventional tone, to recapture audience attention. Furthermore, an image, such as a photograph, must be complemented by an effective headline, and vice versa.

I recall the front page of an edition of *Metro* featuring the headline: '*Junta al Muerto*' ('Gather the dead [victim]'). The standfirst alludes to bloodied human remains discovered inside a black bag in Ecatepec, Mexico. The photograph is particularly arresting, depicting dismembered body parts strewn across the ground; positioned centrally to the right is the black bag, beneath which a close-up of the victim's face has been inset, encircled by a semicircular yellow border. Additionally, a dotted yellow outline traces the contours of the victim's remains, evoking the fragmented pieces of a jigsaw puzzle awaiting assembly. The macabre humour characteristic of Mexican tabloid journalism is evident in the headline itself, "Gather the dead (victim)", which evokes the playful logic of a children's puzzle (Figure 12).

Mexico pioneered the use of violent imagery in news reporting. As explained in Chapter 3, photographic documentation of crime in Mexico dates to the mid-19th century. Lerner (2007) notes that photography served as both forensic tool and surveillance mechanism since its introduction. Today, graphic crime photographs remain press staples. In an interview, Metinides (Ríos, 2020) observes contemporary front pages favour increasingly gory images in contrast to past journalistic conventions. The documentary *El hombre que vio demasiado* (The man who saw too much) (Ziff, 2015) records Metinides explaining that crimes in the past were less frequent and severe. There, he explains that he used to produce shots that included all contextual elements, victims, bystanders and settings, while maintaining dignity. He further comments (Ríos, 2020) that his approach avoided gratuitous macabre detail, sometimes retracting bloodstains or substituting victims' living portraits.

Though a genre often accused of morbidity and exploited by some media as a commercial hook, contemporary *nota roja* photography requires distinct skills and techniques. As Castellanos (2003) suggests, it demands its own aesthetic, prioritising documentation of the fact over the circumstances that precipitated it. Rodríguez Soto (2012) suggests this rationale underpins the adage 'an image is worth a thousand words' among editors of tabloid crime journalism. Images dominate these publications. While *La Prensa* not often employs this approach, *Metro's* front pages routinely feature tightly framed photographs to highlight crime scenes in visceral detail ensuring immediate reader engagement. In contrast, the same events may be depicted on interior pages with wider frames, contextualising the incident rather than focusing on its aftermath (Figures 13-14).

In addition to explicit violent imagery, *Metro* features sexualised and eroticised depictions of female victims on its covers. Typically, these include sensationalist photographs, national or international news, political, sports, or entertainment stories, as well as images of women in lingerie or semi-nude. These pin-up models may appear alongside photographs depicting the femicide of another woman, as previously mentioned. Historically, such images were confined to the back cover, equally striking, given that the back pages of *nota roja* newspapers are renowned for their visual content. However, by 2018, nude or semi-nude women in suggestive poses also began appearing on front pages. Marcos Cazarín (2020), one of *Metro's* editor, attributes this shift to reader demand and increased profitability. Similarly, Córdova (in Rodríguez Soto, 2012), information director of *El Gráfico*, another prominent Mexican red chronicle newspaper, argues that the combination of striking imagery, provocative

headlines, and nude women alongside sensationalist news forms a successful triad for readership engagement. In that regard, the red chronicle may be quasi-pornographic, as its sexualised content enhances its appeal (Figures 6, 7, 11).

Over the years, *Metro* has altered its front-page format. Marcos Cazarín (2020) elaborates that previously, minimal text was used, while photographs dominated. However, some years ago, a phrase or concept began featuring on the cover. This graphic-type cover emphasises a striking phrase or brief text rather than an image, aiming to intrigue readers with minimal wording. Additional techniques, such as typography and colour, are also now employed. For instance, headlines sometimes occupy nearly a third of the front page to enhance appeal. This shift allows coverage of any news, even red news lacking supporting imagery. Previously, if an event warranted front-page placement but had no photograph, it might have been omitted or relegated to a short headline. Marcos Cazarín (2020) further explains that, as this is primarily a 'product' format decision, *Metro* now prioritises 'commentable' news, that is, topics widely discussed, not necessarily red news on its front page. While this kind of news remains important, it no longer guarantees cover placement or top prominence. Essentially, *Metro's* information hierarchy has evolved, though striking imagery still plays a key role on covers. In any case, Celestino Ortega (2021), feminist journalist, women's human rights defender, and coordinator of communication strategies and the media observatory for the civil society organisation CIMAC, mentioned previously, noted in an interview that they have observed persistent sexualisation and objectification of women in the media, as well as frequent display of images of injured female bodies. In that regard, she further suggests

that the media tend to prefer stills of murdered women who are naked or subjected to extreme violence. These images circulate readily in the media.

4.3. Inside pages

In *La Prensa* and *Metro*, a significant facet is the visual discourse. The prominence and use of images are evident. When news is particularly sensational or its subjects hold national importance, photographic spreads may occupy nearly an entire page. Moreover, there is an interplay within the layout between headlines and photographs, particularly in *Metro*. Text boxes are often brief relative to the size of images (Figure 15). As previously noted, *La Prensa* and *Metro* employ images extensively, with photographs being the predominant visual feature. Stills are crucial, as tabloid press uses them to evoke sensations and elicit readers reactions. Often, photographs are more central to the narrative than the written text, serving as impactful visual tools. They not only document criminal acts but also construct their own narrative by focusing on violent events in an emotionally charged, candid manner.

4.3.1. Narrative style

My research centres on photographs of femicides in the *nota roja*, and thus, this chapter has emphasised such visual content. Nevertheless, in this section, I briefly address the text, specifically, the writing style characteristic of these newspapers. Although images are the primary means for engaging readers, in the *nota roja* the text also possesses distinctive qualities worth noting. For Kress

(2010), text and image are interconnected through their semiotic function, complementing one another to enhance communication. While text conveys information linearly and sequentially, images provide a simultaneous, visual representation that enables swift interpretation. Their interplay shapes message perception, with factors such as layout, design, and framing influencing interpretation. Together, they may yield a more effective and profound communicative experience. In this section, I place particular emphasis on femicide reports in crime news, while noting that the narrative style does not differ significantly in terms of the literary devices typically employed in this journalistic genre.

Images in the red news may cause discomfort. However, Tuñón (2018) argues that the written text may sometimes soften the news content and partially neutralise the visual narrative, although Lara Klahr (2004) contends that the *nota roja* is often poorly written, relies on dubious sources such as gossip, and depends heavily on official reports from police or forensic services. Nevertheless, while it lacks strict stylistic rules, it follows a distinct structure. Indeed, even if physical formats differ, as seen in *La Prensa* and *Metro*, the genre is immediately recognisable. Its key features remain consistent: large headlines, typically in black and/or red, occasionally yellow; prominent still images; concise, straightforward language; and brief articles. Some reports may be framed by thick mourning borders to draw attention. When recounting events, the text employs a highly descriptive narrative, detailing facts, actions, perpetrators, victims, and witnesses, addressing the core journalistic questions: what, who, how, when, and occasionally, why.

Generally, headlines may function as persuasive tools to capture readers' attention by emphasising the significance of the news with facts arranged in appealing and striking ways to generate interest. However, this strategy may be extreme in the tabloid press. Nadal Palazón (2024) notes that headlines may also attract readers by making news more appealing and shocking, thereby encouraging them to read the full story. For instance, key information is sometimes omitted, resulting in ambiguous headlines that employ an impersonal third person and tacit subject, among other linguistic devices. This creates an information deficit that may compel readers to examine the entire report to access excluded details. Furthermore, he observes that sensational headlines use various techniques to amplify the news' impact, including continuous capitalization of fonts, evaluative language, figurative expressions, and colloquial or humorous phrasing in exclamatory, interrogative, or interjectional statements. My analysis also revealed that, where known, the nicknames of aggressors and/or victims are used to refer to them, and that popular language may be overused, even resorting to dark humour, colloquialisms, and highly informal expressions that may appear comical despite referencing tragic events. The writing may even contain spelling and grammatical errors. In this regard, such an approach seems deliberately shocking, yet appealing to regular readers of this type of press (Figure 16).

I would like to focus specifically on the narrative style in news coverage of feminicides. Based on my analysis of *La Prensa* and *Metro*, I find the features I just mentioned in the last paragraphs. Moreover, several recurring patterns emerge in the reporting of these crimes. First, there is a tendency to minimise the significance of these cases, often reducing them to brief accounts that address

only the who, how, and when, while frequently omitting the why. Instead, the victim's image is used as an illustrative tool. Descriptions of female victims frequently include details of their clothing, footwear, and, if known, their occupation (Figure 17). Another recurring strategy is the trivialisation of violence, justified through various narratives such as mental illness, alcoholism, uncontrollable passion, or honour-based revenge of aggressors or, more broadly, the organised crime. Often, the reporting emphasises the violent, emotional, or dramatic nature of the events. In such cases, meticulous detail is given to the manner of the crime, the specific body parts injured, e.g., legs, abdomen, head, face, and the circumstances in which the victim was found (Figure 18).

In my research, I observe that the *nota roja* reports on feminicides frequently using data from state agents dealing directly with such incidents, such as police officers, forensic staff, and criminal investigators. Indeed, Llera (2022) notes that WhatsApp groups, including paramedics, media personnel, firefighters, police officers, and journalists, disseminate real-time information on murders, fires, accidents, and other tragic events. This allows reporters to access details, and sometimes even photos, before arriving at the scene. Through these channels or more institutional routes, they may also receive official police reports on daily incidents. He highlights that reporters often await these documents to construct their accounts, suggesting a police-influenced narrative style in crime reporting. However, this is not their sole source, as they supplement information with testimonies from victims' relatives, friends, neighbours, or acquaintances. Arriaga Ornelas (2002) argues that, in femicide cases, while institutional sources may legitimise information, they operate within highly masculinised systems controlling such data. This, I argue, may be reflected in certain narrative

traits of the *nota roja*, which often employs gender stereotypes, roles, and prejudices when describing criminal events, as previously discussed (Figure 17). I draw attention to the fact that photographs may be leaked by police officers themselves, forensic specialists, or paramedics; specifically, by the first responders who take those images before the media arrive. Indeed, whilst conducting the archival work, I observed that the authorship of several photographs was simply indicated as 'special'. Santana Hernández (2020) holds that, in these instances, the authorship of a photograph may be the police or other organisations with access to crime scenes. In this regard, he contends that this practice of leaking information is problematic because it may imply corruption amongst those who have access to such images.

Conversely, criticisms have been raised regarding the *nota roja*'s handling of personal information concerning both victims and aggressors. It is argued that this approach may violate human rights, particularly the dignity of victims and their families, as well as the presumption of innocence of alleged perpetrators. However, this view contrasts with an alternative perspective that considers such information particularly valuable. For instance, Ahedo (2022), a female crime reporter who works for *Reforma* and *Metro* in daily covering of vehicular accidents, fires, arrests, homicides, and feminicides in Mexico City and surrounding cities, in an interview during my research acknowledged that crime reporting often adheres to conventional styles, as I previously mentioned. Yet, rather than following rigid formats, she prefers concise narratives addressing the fundamental questions of who, how, when, and where. Notably, she advocates including personal details, such as the victim's name, age, occupation, and the circumstances of the incident, arguing that this humanises the subject. For Ahedo

(2022), crime journalism should recount the individual's story, dignifying them by acknowledging their significance to others. Indeed, she regards it as the most humane journalistic genre, given that the events reported involve people who could resemble herself or her family.

Moreover, Salguero (2021), a feminist activist, researcher, and data scientist specialising in femicides and armed violence against women in Mexico, gained prominence in 2016 for creating the first cartographic map of femicides based primarily on press reports (Salguero, 2020). Since then, she has collaborated with Mexican criminal investigation agencies to conduct contextual analyses of these crimes. Initially, I held the view that the narrative style of the *nota roja*, particularly its inclusion of victim details, was unethical. However, Salguero (2021) offers a reflective perspective on the role of such reporting in Mexico's current climate of violence. While some feminists criticise the approach of the *nota roja*, she argues that its descriptions of gender violence may aid criminal investigations and organisations supporting victims. In her experience, specific details, such as whether a victim was found naked or with particular injuries, may tell broader patterns of femicidal violence rather than just individual cases. She also critiques the suppression of certain victim information, such as involvement in sex work, as it may obscure crucial data on vulnerability and inequality. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3 regarding current Mexican journalism, she notes that the *nota roja* may reveal how women's bodies are weaponised to convey messages between criminal groups, adding complexity to gender violence (Figure 19).

However, Amezcua Bernal (2021) acknowledges that crime reporters and photographers work in precarious conditions, something that may limit the quality

of the professional standards. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Metinides (2012), when commenting on 'Mexico City, 1956', one of his photographs featured in Ziff (2012), which shows a close-up of an index finger and thumb holding a bullet cartridge that had been removed from a person's stomach, points out that this type of photograph was sometimes published to identify a deceased person. That is to say, even from that time, photographs in the *nota roja* may have served to provide information that aided in identifying victims of homicide and, perhaps, their relatives.

This thesis does not seek to answer this ethical dilemma. However, the issue warrants deeper examination not only in terms of media practices but also concerning ethics and human rights. For now, I deem this should be framed within Mexico's specific realities. Given institutional failures and high impunity rates in femicides, as outlined in Chapter 3, media-reported victim details may, in some cases, assist not only in their identification but also in uncovering broader insights into these crimes and gender violence nationwide.

When discussing journalistic coverage of femicides in Mexico, Rodelo (2019) argues that the narrative, whether written or visual, should emphasise that violence against women is a sociocultural issue rather than merely a private matter. Furthermore, she adds that it is crucial to include information that challenges the misconception of femicides as spontaneous acts, such as evidence of prior abuse, gendered power dynamics, and statistical data that frames femicides as a systemic phenomenon. Essentially, a gender perspective must extend beyond mere factual reporting, consistently contextualising gender-based violence and its root causes. However, as these are journalistic chronicles covering single-day news events, I argue that such reports are unlikely to

adequately explain the structural causes of gender-based violence against women in Mexico. The typical crime brief follows a fast, concise, and sensational format not designed for this purpose, especially if reporters or photographers lack the necessary training to apply a gender perspective. In that regard, Celestino Ortega (2021) explains how journalists may lack appropriate skills to report on gender-based violence against women. For instance, they may frame it simply as the homicide or murder of women, without classifying it as femicide or addressing its social and cultural implications. They are often unaware of specialised legislation on violence against women, omit details on access to justice in such cases, and failed to examine the structural nature of the issue beyond a mere tally of similar incidents. Indeed, she notes that journalists or reporters frequently misunderstand the meaning of 'gender-based violence' or 'violence against women', as well as the socio-cultural factors defining these forms of violence, hindering accurate reporting (Figure 20). Consequently, one key objective of the Media Observatory she coordinates, previously mentioned in this chapter, is to gradually train journalists and media professionals in specialised reporting on gender-based violence against women. Above all, reporters are instructed that they must not merely cover femicides using a crime news format, but rather, frame them within the broader structural context of gender-based violence in Mexico.

For instance, *La Prensa* sometimes publishes shocking images accompanied only by a brief caption summarising the event in a few lines, leaving the photograph to carry the full narrative weight (Figure 15). In *La Prensa*, the layout of the internal pages is notable for its sparse yet intensely violent imagery. In some cases, graphic photographs occupy nearly half a page. The narrative

adopts a genre-specific chronicle style, often resembling a police report. Indeed, Llera (2022) notes that journalists typically await an official police or investigative report to corroborate information gathered at the crime scene, thus minimising factual errors. Ahedo (2022) argues that when reporting on sensitive issues such as femicides, journalists must rely on official sources, as the public has a right to know what authorities disclose. Nevertheless, Llera (2022) emphasises the continued necessity of on-site investigation with neighbours, witnesses, and police officers to gather pertinent information in advance.

In my view, however, chronicle-style narratives still largely replicate more official discourse, for instance, when employing legal terminology to describe criminal conduct, those involved, and subsequent judicial procedures. Rodelo (2019) notes that journalists often reproduce public-source information without challenging official accounts, potentially reinforcing social stereotypes surrounding crimes. Victims may be blamed, perpetrators justified, or the issue downplayed. Similarly, reports may isolate incidents from broader social contexts, therefore, hindering a full comprehension of crime. This is frequently observed in femicides coverage, which tends to focus on immediate violence rather than examining deeper sociocultural causes. Fundamentally, crime news style replicates mechanisms identified in my research: dehumanisation, gender stereotypes, and sensationalism, which contribute to the normalisation of femicides. The lack of depth in addressing root causes, e.g., patriarchy, and impunity, and the treatment of the victim as a narrative device rather than a subject reflect coverage that prioritises morbid curiosity over justice. A detailed analysis follows in Chapter 5.

4.3.2. Photographs

Regarding stills as representations of criminal events, Straw (2010, 2016) observes that since such events are seldom announced beforehand, photographers typically arrive afterwards to document the aftermath. Crime photographers may depict the event through its peripheral elements, such as weapons, suspects, victims, locations, accomplices, and bloodstained scenes, often captured separately at different times and places. For Straw (2016: 139-140), crime-focused photojournalism is 'marked by high levels of fragmentation'. A comparable argument applies to *Metro's* coverage of gender-based violence against women. Around 2000, the outset of my sample, the newspaper featured few photographs, some graphic, accompanied by detailed textual accounts. Today, however, *Metro* often employs different stills to construct reports visually: panoramic shots for spatiotemporal context and close-ups to highlight specific details (Figures 21-22). Marcos Cazarín (2020) explains that *Metro* is highly visual, unsurprising for a tabloid, but that, following criticism from feminist groups opposed to the recurrent publication of images depicting female victims of lethal gender violence in Mexican print media, as well as protests outside the paper's headquarters, it now adopts a gender perspective in such reporting. For instance, he adds that *Metro* may avoid detailed descriptions of victims, opting instead for images of crime scenes, police interventions, bystanders, victims' belongings, and attending relatives, while refraining from displaying bodies or blood. Marcos Cazarín (2020) adds that they use contextual details to convey the event while protecting the identities of both victims and perpetrators. However, in publications subsequent to 2018, the last year analysed in this thesis, I found that *Metro*

continues to employ sensationalist strategies, albeit more moderately specifically for feminicides, though not for other types of crimes.

In *Metro*, a feminicide may even be reported using just a photograph of the victim with a brief caption, just as in *La Prensa*. However, I observe that the photograph may be highly striking, for instance, by displaying physical details of the location where the murdered woman's body was found, as well as her clothing, face, and overall appearance. Yet, with only a short caption, these elements may take on a generic and sexualised meaning. By including details about the victim's identity and occupation, the framing often justifies or explains the crime, frequently blaming the victim for her profession or attire (Figure 23). Nevertheless, the report may be illustrated with a single photograph containing substantial information, such as the who, how, where, etc., along with extensive contextual details, so that the image alone provides a complete, or nearly complete, depiction of the crime (Figure 24).

On the other hand, *La Prensa* typically does not feature as many photographs per page, often including only a few explicit and more detailed images. Frequently, the close-up or enlarged image from the front or back cover appears inside the publication, though with greater detail or a wider frame. Llera (2022) notes that, in this newspaper, photographs aim to capture the reader's attention, encouraging them to purchase and read the publication. This aligns with Rojas' (2022) observation that commercial interests in newspapers often take precedence, influencing the selection of images. However, she highlights a potential conflict with the ethical and responsible duty to inform. Amezcua Bernal (2021) also suggests that the publication of raw images has a commercial undertone, as the more explicit the material, the greater the morbid curiosity and,

consequently, the better it sells. She also stresses the importance of a careful and ethical approach in visual journalism given the context of violence in Mexico and how the explicit display of human bodies may contribute to social fear.

An example of how visual narratives are constructed differently in broadsheets and their tabloid versions was explained to me by Cabrera (2022) in an interview. He notes that he had previously worked as a photographer for the national broadsheet *El Universal*. However, following the departure of a photographer from its tabloid counterpart, *El Gráfico*, he was asked to cover that role as well. Consequently, editors required him to document the same event but taking different types of photographs. For *El Universal*, he had to avoid direct or detailed shots, instead capturing images with a more contextual narrative. In contrast, for *El Gráfico*, stills needed to be more explicit. Therefore, media outlets adapt visual strategies based on audience expectations, commercial pressures, and ethical debates. However, Mexican tabloids prioritise sensationalism, while broadsheets seem to lean toward contextual storytelling.

I would like to return to the example of the Mexican female politician who was a victim of femicide. As previously mentioned in this chapter, the incident was reported in the 'National' section of both *Metro* and *La Prensa*. In the latter, her photograph and story even featured on the front page (Figures 1-2). I argue that the attention may have stemmed not only from her being a woman in public office but also from the image displayed. It shows her body lying horizontally on dry grass and branches in a dirt path, wearing a short skirt, no stockings or shoes, and a half-buttoned blazer. The photograph reveals that the skirt was pulled up above her knees to expose scraped skin, leaving her legs and underwear visible. Some facial injuries are also discernible. I wish to draw attention to the fact that

the same image was published in the inner pages of both *La Prensa* and *Metro*, with both newspapers not crediting its author. This leads me to conclude that it may constitute a 'leaked' photograph, disseminated through channels accessible to reporters and police officers. However, regarding the nature of the news item itself, I suggest that this was a crime of sufficient sensational appeal which, solely because it involved a woman in public office, was excluded from *nota roja* coverage. Other cases, particularly feminicides of ordinary women, are frequently selected for crime news sections. I address this further in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, feminicides tend to feature in crime or policing news sections, as observed throughout my sample.

4.4. Back covers

To the best of my knowledge, no academic literature addresses the back pages of *nota roja* newspapers, despite their distinctive nature within this genre. The defining features of such publications are equally evident in these sections, both in design and content. While their logic does not significantly differ from that of front or interior pages, it is noteworthy that back covers consist solely of headlines, often in black or red, sometimes large, along with explicit photographs and brief captions or descriptions at the bottom. The back pages are crafted to instantly seize readers' attention. They typically feature photographs and captions covering tragic, criminal, or accident-related stories. Such images are often alarmist, depicting excessively violent scenes. These visuals are accompanied by headlines and captions employing sensationalist language, like expressions, phrases, or words designed to shock through dramatisation, exaggeration, or

explicit terminology. Multiple written and visual elements, such as headlines, photos, and text boxes, are frequently put together or superimposed, often leaving minimal blank space (Figure 25). Amezcua Bernal (2021) suggests that the back page goes hand in hand with the front page in *nota roja* newspapers. Its content, in addition to news of violence, may also feature semi-naked women and football, which sells because it represents a cultural interest in Mexico. That is to say, according to Amezcua (2021), it is a very straightforward formula oriented towards business, where rapid information and low costs enable this type of newspapers to continue to exist.

Furthermore, as previously noted in this chapter, certain crime-focused newspapers often feature images of semi-naked women alongside violent visuals. In the past this practice was frequent in *Metro*, as in my sample between 2000-2012 (Figure 26), though such photographs were later moved to the front page as a commercial tactic, a point already addressed in my analysis of such pages. Conversely, *La Prensa* typically avoids these images on either its front or back pages. However, inside the publication, one may encounter a full-page photograph of a nude or semi-nude model, akin to *The Sun's* Page 3, followed by one or two additional pages showcasing different images of the same woman. These sections may include a mock interview with the model, employing double entendres and darkly humorous or morbid language. However, such supplements are not part of the hard news section and thus bear no clear connection to it.

All these elements aim to create immediate interest in the reported news and may encourage readers to purchase a copy. It should be noted that *nota roja* newspapers are typically sold on the street. Vendors often display them on

vertical metal frames, resembling laundry drying racks, where they are hung so that passers-by, including children, may see both the front and back pages. Unlike some British tabloids, these newspapers are neither bagged nor include any form of censorship over explicit images. Thus, the back page should be equally striking to capture potential buyers' attention. In this regard, Rojas (2022) observes that in crime-focused publications like *El Gráfico*, where she works as a crime photographer, graphic back-cover images may serve as a reader-attraction strategy given public interest in violent and raw content. Such pages often feature both highly explicit crime scenes and pin-up models. Although this is no longer practised by *Metro*, as previously mentioned, it remains common in other crime tabloids, like in *El Gráfico*. Rojas (2022), photographer for the latter, suggests that this juxtaposition of violent imagery alongside sexualised depictions of women may be perceived as macabre and vulgar; nonetheless, commercial motives may outweigh ethical reporting considerations.

In relation to *La Prensa*, Llera (2022) notes that the back page is reserved for sensational crime stories, as readers often check it immediately after the front page before opening the newspaper. He argues that the back cover may hold greater significance than the front, as it may determine whether readers engage further with the publication. Therefore, it functions as a hook to draw them into the daily's content.

This analysis highlights key traits and functions of back covers typical of the *nota roja*. First, they follow the same sensationalist logic as front and interior pages, using bold headlines, explicit images, and concise captions to seize attention instantly. The layout is densely packed, with little blank space, intensifying the dramatic effect. Furthermore, they emphasise shock value

through graphic crime visuals, coupled with hyperbolic or dramatical language. The intentional use of violent imagery and provocative headlines elicits strong emotional responses, somehow securing reader engagement. Since the *nota roja* newspapers are openly sold on streets, the back page must be equally arresting to lure potential buyers. Its role as a kind of secondary hook is vital as some readers may purchase the issue based solely on its content. Thus, its design appears meticulously crafted to maximise curiosity and sales. Given that *nota roja* dailies are neither bagged nor edited to conceal graphic content, it seems that their reliance on shock value as a marketing strategy is further underscored.

5. Preliminary conclusions

This chapter characterised the *nota roja* as a distinctive journalistic genre within the Mexican media landscape, whose identity is constructed through an intentional, provocative graphic design, a sensationalist narrative style, and a predominant use of explicit imagery to capture the reader's attention. Through the analysis of two emblematic newspapers, *La Prensa* and *Metro*, I evidenced how the combination of alarmist headlines, graphic photographs, and colloquial language contributes to the construction of an emotional narrative that emphasises the vulnerability of the victims and the brutality of the events. This genre does not merely report on violence, it may also shape the social perception of crime by reproducing stereotypes and reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics. The *nota roja*, therefore, plays an ambivalent role: it brings violent events to public attention, yet simultaneously may normalise and aestheticise suffering and

transform it into spectacle, which poses ethical challenges for Mexican journalism.

Chapter 5. Visual representation of feminicides in the *nota roja*

'What I find in Requena is a typical Orestes complex. This is clearly reflected in his behaviour towards Diana: he killed her because, like his own mother, she was incapable of being faithful and self-sacrificing'

María Elvira Bermúdez, *Diferentes razones tiene la muerte*

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I examine photographs of feminicides published in *La Prensa* and *Metro* drawing upon the academic literature established in Chapter 1. Such crimes stem from structures of gendered subordination. The coverage of gender-based murders of women in crime journalism exhibits discernible patterns, enabling analysis of both media representation and its societal consequences. The press acts as a discursive filter, mediating news dissemination. Notably, crime reporting on feminicides relies on gendered stereotypes, roles, and prejudices that stigmatise women producing their re-victimisation. Among the main works on the most important ideas cited in this chapter are those by Segato (2013) and Monárrez Fragoso (2010), who argue that images of feminicides in Mexico frequently depict naked or sexualised bodies, signifying sexual violence. The work of Bourdieu (2001, 2007) is also central for he introduces the concept of symbolic violence as a subtle and imperceptible form of subordination enacted through symbolic channels such as language and social recognition. Furthermore, Mulvey (1989) elucidates how the 'male gaze' dominates the representation of women, reducing them to visual objects and signs within a patriarchal culture. The analysis is also informed by Mbembe (2019 [2016]) and his conceptualisation of 'necropolitics' as the politics of death, exercised to control the life and death of individuals or groups, thereby legitimising extreme violence

and social exclusion. Finally, Ohldieck & Selnes (2020) highlight the significance of an aesthetic analysis of violence to reveal dimensions of real violence that extend beyond social and political analysis.

Femicide victims in the *nota roja* are predominantly women in socioeconomically precarious positions. Reports often detail their age, residence, occupation, and where their bodies were found, revealing some patterns: many are young, female heads of household, or dependents of a male partner or father in marginalised areas. Their occupations typically involve informal work, like domestic labour, waitressing, sex work, street vending, or unemployment, with limited education or extreme vulnerability, e.g., children, and elderly women. Preceding femicide, sexual and physical violence are often present. The stills' contextual framing frequently displays marginal conditions: informal housing lacking basic services, peripheral urban areas with unpaved roads and poor lighting. Additionally, the *nota roja* employs stereotypes, referencing victims' attire, appearance, or profession, personal features that distort public perceptions and sometimes justify violence. The photographic analysis draws on gender normativity theories, illustrating how the graphic press depicts extreme gendered violence. As Chapter 1 outlines, gender operates as both a social order and an analytical category intersecting with class, ethnicity, race, and age. This intersectionality underscores women's lived subordination under patriarchy, evident in the photographs. Although a detailed description of crimes is a hallmark of the *nota roja*, as explained in the previous chapter and, in such regard, it is not exclusive to inform on feminicides, its use in reporting such crimes raises concerns regarding the representation of gender-based violence against women more broadly.

Consequently, this chapter begins by analysing the denotative content of femicide photographs in crime newspapers, focusing on the two aforementioned publications. For the second level, building on the previous, I examine various gendered elements with discriminatory and stereotypical meanings. This involves exploring notions of vulnerability and precarity among femicide victims in the crime press, as well as the ritualisation and hyper-ritualisation present in the production and publication of such photographs. These analytical stages engage with Barthes' (1977) concepts of signifiers and signifieds, as outlined in Chapter 2. Furthermore, this approach reveals how codes and meanings are linked to social ideologies, power structures, and relations, as developed by Hall (2003 [1980]). Therefore, first, I analyse the literal content of femicide pictures in the red news, specifically those from the two newspapers under examination: *La Prensa* and *Metro*. Here, I explore how colours, tones, and angles may be deliberate; how locations and subjects within the frame convey messages about women's disposability and precarity; how, despite depicting murdered women, the *nota roja* sexualises and eroticises their bodies, at times stigmatising them; and how it reinforces notions of female 'vulnerability', thereby normalising gender-based violence. The subsequent sections address connotation, that is, the identification and interpretation of the discourses underlying these photographs. I conclude with some reflections on gender violence and *nota roja* imagery, examining how female victims of such extreme violence are dehumanised and depersonalised; how the red press develops its own aesthetics of violence, reproducing socially constructed representations of masculinity and femininity through a hyper-ritualisation, while also perpetuating symbolic violence.

2. Content of photographs of murdered women

In this section, I examine what is literally visible in photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja*. Content constitutes the first observable feature, encompassing shapes, colours, objects, subjects, contexts, and other signifiers. While primarily descriptive or denotative, this section enables the identification of elements that, though immediately perceptible to any viewer, require some decoding, following Barthes (1977). This step is crucial for the subsequent analytical layer: the recognition of signifieds that lead to the connotation of feminicide imagery in Mexican crime news.

2.1. Bodies of murdered women

Foremost, the primary subjects of these images are the bodies of murdered women. Some corpses are fully displayed, while others are only partially visible. Victims' attire varies: some wear tank tops, long sleeves, trousers, shorts, or underwear; others are barefoot, in heels or boots; some are partially or fully undressed. There are bodies covered with sheets, bedspreads, or plastic, while others remain fully exposed. In certain photographs, victims are found 'bagged', 'suitcased', wrapped in blankets, or inside cardboard boxes¹² (Figures 27-29).

¹² A 'bagged' body refers to a corpse, whether intact or dismembered, typically belonging to a victim of drug trafficking. To conceal evidence, the body is placed inside a bag and abandoned, often in a remote location. This frequently constitutes an organised crime strategy for executing and disposing of victims (García Velázquez, 2018). Cases involving 'suitcased' corpses, those wrapped in blankets or placed in cardboard boxes, follow the same pattern.

Corpses are often placed horizontally, either face-up or face-down. Some images use high-angle shots, with the camera positioned above the body, while others employ tilted framing, therefore, presenting the body diagonally (Figure 30). Many corpses display severe mutilation, such as missing heads or limbs, or show signs of extreme violence, including burns or fatal beatings. Some are heavily decomposed, and nearly all exhibit visible bloodstains (Figure 31). Notably, camera angles and spatial arrangements frequently emphasise intimate body parts. Breasts and buttocks are often highlighted, regardless of clothing. In some cases, framing and focal points, or 'hot spots',¹³ obscure victims' faces, yet their gender remains identifiable due to prominent genitalia. This is common when victims are presumed sex workers (Figure 32).

When photographs depict graphic scenes, victim's corpses typically occupy half to three-quarters of the frame, particularly in cases involving severe bloodshed. A marked shift in visual representation has occurred over time: while black-and-white images dominated earlier reports, e.g., 2000. Later on, full-colour photographs had become standard (Figures 33-34). However, by 2000 feminicides were seldom reported though.

Overall, photographs centre on women's bodies, whether clothed, fully or partially, or unclothed, as well as the sites where feminicides took place or where the corpses were found. *Metro* frequently incorporates additional images showing the wider crime scene. Yet, the female body persists as the focal subject. In the

¹³ 'Hot spots' pertain to the rule of thirds, a fundamental principle in artistic and photographic composition. This rule 'allows a photographer to organize information in the frame around four points, or "hot spots", that are located away from the centre of the frame. This is a useful aid in composing reliably well-proportioned images where information placed on these hot spots is generally of equal weight, though it does not produce very "exciting" images' (Caple, 2013: 95). Some digital cameras even feature hot spots by displaying a grid to assist in framing compositions.

early 2000s, i.e., 2000-2004, black-and-white imagery remained dominant; however, by 2012 and 2018, all published pictures were in colour. This transition heightens detail visibility and strengthens the perceived authenticity of the documentation.

2.2. Colours and tones

In most analysed photographs in this research, tonal contrasts emphasise the photographer's focal subject: the lifeless bodies of femicide victims. For instance, many images use saturated yellow tones, particularly for corpses, set against sombre, muted backgrounds, e.g., dimly lit landscapes or urban settings. Notably, yellow's proximity to white and light, when framed by darker shades, creates a stark, near-monochromatic contrast. Conversely, other photographs depict the corpses in cold, dark tones, while the surrounding terrain adopts softer hues (Figures 35-36).

In images featuring blood, the luminosity and saturation of red prevail. This corresponds to the etymological logic of the *nota roja*, where red metonymically represents blood. Here, colour functions dualistically: as a means to capture the reader's gaze and as a mechanism for visceral disruption. This tendency is marked in *La Prensa* (Figure 37).

2.3. Angle and frame

In particular, when women's corpses lie on streets, photographs are taken from high angles, capturing victims from above. Moreover, victims often appear in

horizontal perspectives, thus, allowing their bodies to be observed in greater detail. This positioning may seem more logical and natural. Other victims are depicted using a tilted angle, commonly known as 'Dutch angle' to cause a sense of discomfort in the viewer.¹⁴ (Figures 38-39).

Another characteristic is that in several images, bodies occupy a significant portion of the frame, sometimes half or even a quarter. In that regard, women's bodies dominate the composition, shifting focus away from other contextual elements of the criminal event. In this regard, some stills I analyse display corpses in high detail, including their marks, scars, and wounds, which may leave the viewer unsettled (Figure 40).

2.4. Physical context

There are visual elements suggesting notions of waste or worthlessness, such as rubbish, grass, and sewage drains, particularly as many bodies were discovered in public spaces (for instance, Figures 1, 4, 9, 16, 20). In reports on so-called 'crimes of passion' and 'domestic feminicides,' household interiors, especially bedrooms where the alleged perpetrator was a partner, husband, or father, are often photographed (Figure 41). Such images typically accompany reports on feminicides motivated by perceived infidelity, 'flirtatious' behaviour, the end of a relationship, or a daughter defying paternal authority by leaving home.

¹⁴ 'When horizontal and vertical lines go askew it causes a sense of uneasiness and a slight disorientation in [the] audience. If this is done unintentionally, then you get people confused. Done on purpose and you have created what is called a Dutch angle, a Dutch tilt, a canted angle, or an oblique angle. When a character is sick or drugged or when a situation is "not quite right" you may choose to tilt the camera left or right and create this non-level horizon. The imbalance will make the viewer feel how unstable the character or environment really is -visuals underscore the story' (Thompson & Bowen, 2009: 59).

These narratives frequently portray the murder as a response to dishonour, disobedience, or jealousy (Figure 32).

Additional subjects occasionally appear in photographs, like forensic specialists, uniformed or plainclothes police officers, and bystanders, rarely the aggressors though. A striking observation is that forensic experts and police personnel are predominantly male (Figure 42). Geographic context also significantly influences femicide reporting. The locations where bodies are found, i.e., streets, vacant lots, drains, or sewage channels, often feature prominently, with elements such as dry grass, rubbish, or stray dogs. *La Prensa* tends to depict these scenes more explicitly, whereas *Metro* frequently uses a sequence of images: one of the victim, another of the crime scene, and further shots of forensic and police personnel, witnesses, and onlookers. Noteworthy, *Metro* emphasises locations to construct a detailed 'landscape' of the murder (Figures 43-44).

3. Visual representation of femicides in the *nota roja*

Tuñón (2018) argues that contemporary *nota roja* in Mexico aims to display bloodshed and cruelty. Moreover, García (2020) explains how the tabloid press employs typographic and chromatic language alongside shocking photography, as this constitutes its business model. Thus, the *nota roja* is fundamentally visual, with the corpse as its central focus (Marcos Cazarín, 2020). Barajas (2018) emphasises the exhibition of femicides and the brutality of women's executions in this genre, considering them among Mexico's most harrowing phenomena.

Hence, the red chronicle does not conceal or sanitise but rather exhibits violence as graphically as possible. Consequently, imagery assumes a leading role.

Images of feminicides in *La Prensa* and *Metro* are analysed within the framework of a patriarchal culture as a system of socio-cultural organisation. The female condition is bound to the control and subordination of women's lives and bodies, as well as their conception as beings for others (Lagarde, 1993). Patriarchy is rooted in power relations, with men asserting dominance over women, legitimising their superiority through violence and aggression. As Quilarque Quijada & González González (2016) note, few contexts exhibit such cruelty in power strategies, where violence targets the body while imbuing it with devastating or allegorical meaning. Photographs of feminicides in Mexican crime tabloids openly display and bear witness to this brutality, power, and bodily control. As explored later, nothing in these images appears gratuitous or accidental. Like any tabloid, *La Prensa* and *Metro* aim to seize readers' attention, provoke morbid fascination, and, above all, sell copies. Yet the press frequently stereotypes and stigmatises victims, violating their dignity. Thus, in this section, I examine social ideologies, power structures, and relations, as outlined by Hall (2003 [1980]).

3.1. Vulnerability

A primary element for understanding how certain notions of femicide victims' vulnerability are reflected stems from Bourdieu's (2001) concept of 'capital'. The latter determines social class belonging. Essentially, the distinctions between upper-class conditions of existence stem from the total volume of capital as a set

of usable resources and powers: economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010). Economic capital comprises income, assets, inherited wealth, and monetary resources, convertible into property rights (Bourdieu, 2001). Social capital pertains to the resources available to an individual or group through enduring, institutionalised networks of mutual recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Lastly, cultural capital is 'convertible, under certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised as educational qualifications' (Bourdieu, 1986: 16). From this perspective, I note that the tabloid press disproportionately exploits images of femicide victims with limited economic, social, and cultural capital, women from marginalised areas, enduring daily hostility, and gender violence in Mexico. Notably, these tabloids seldom report femicides involving women from more privileged classes. Indeed, Llera (2022) notes that in wealthier areas people and their property tend to be guarded by security personnel or access to residential zones is restricted, thereby limiting opportunities to photograph crime scenes. Consequently, I argue that it appears that the socio-economic environment influences the availability and selection of crime images that may be reported in the *nota roja*. For instance, regarding femicides in Guatemala, Fuentes (2020) observes that space and corporeality are key concepts disciplining representations of femicides, establishing hierarchies among victims in the realm of representation. Therefore, the vulnerability of some victims may enable criminal tabloids to commodify such news, as the most vulnerable lack the means to challenge their portrayal or alter their reality.

Furthermore, visual elements signify waste or worthlessness, such as rubbish, grass, and sewage channels, particularly as many bodies were

discovered in public spaces. Butler (1999, 2003) explores the connection between gender performativity and precarity, and how these concepts intersect within sexual politics and social exclusion. She argues that gender performativity, the notion that gender is a performance shaped by social norms, is linked to precarity, the state of vulnerability and risk faced by marginalised groups, including women, queer individuals, and undocumented migrants. Thus, gender performativity not only concerns identity performance but also dictates who is recognised as a subject, thereby influencing their capacity to claim rights and be deemed worthy of mourning and protection. In this sense, performativity and precarity are intertwined, as gender norms shape not only identity but also living conditions and the recognition of lives as deserving safeguarding. With this in mind, the *nota roja* not only informs but also functions as a mechanism of power that normalises exclusion. Thus, this media representation of feminicides reveals how economic precarity determines the visibility and value assigned to victims, perpetuating cycles of violence and impunity.

Moreover, precarious lives are disempowered lives. The condition of those deprived of basic needs determines their disadvantaged position. Butler (2003) approaches 'precariousness' from a policy perspective, referring to the material conditions sustaining life, such as shelter, employment, food, healthcare, and legal status. These elements are embedded in the political, economic, and social institutions where individuals exist and develop, yet they are also the contexts in which men and women die, whether naturally, accidentally, or violently. In the crime tabloid press, the absence of capital not only traps women in daily gendered violence but also reduces them to sensationalised news, even in death. Understandably, many victim characteristics, such as being sex workers,

housewives, or students, are not discernible in photographs. These details may appear in the written text, as explained in the previous chapter; however, images of femicide victims also construct a visual narrative that reinforces aspects of their vulnerability and precariousness. Straw (2021) suggests that the constant repetition of images of dead bodies, particularly those of women, contributes to generating a social perception that certain lives and bodies are devalued, and that this representation not only reflects but also expresses and reinforces that lack of value in society.

Discussing the reporting of femicides in Guatemala, a phenomenon akin to that in Mexico, Fuentes (2020) distinguishes 'public femicides' from 'private femicides', the latter referring to domestic violence-related murders. Fuentes (2020) contends that victims of 'public' femicides are delegitimised in media and socio-political discourses through socio-spatial logics. Moreover, she suggests that depictions of bodies found in public spaces reinforce gendered, racialised, and class-based stereotypes, associating victims with low social status and 'undesirable' circles, effectively framing them as societal 'waste'. This evokes parallels with the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a globally recognised crisis, as explained in Chapter 1. Washington Valdez (2006) explores the symbolism of bodies discarded as refuse in the region. Expanding on the idea of female 'disposability', Wright (2006) also examines the interplay of labour, gender, and globalisation in China and, notably, Mexico, focusing on the *maquiladoras* (factories) along the US-Mexico border, particularly in Ciudad Juárez. She argues that the global economy perpetuates the myth of Third World women as expendable, critiquing how global capitalism objectifies impoverished women in industries like textiles and migrant labour, exploiting them relentlessly.

Poor and developing-nation women, she observes, are depicted as depreciating in value until rendered disposable. Wright (2006) challenges stereotypes casting them as passive victims, overlooking their agency. She further suggests this myth extends beyond factories in high-femicide cities like Ciudad Juárez, where women and girls are murdered and callously discarded. In my view, this myth of disposability also serves to analyse how crime journalism reports on feminicides. Images of female victims are not only exploited but also replaceable. Given Mexico's severe gender violence context, such images are readily available almost daily, a fact exploited by crime journalism for daily profit. Thus, images of murdered women are reduced to easy objects of consumption. This is reinforced by the fact that the *nota roja* often fails to address structural causes of this type of violence and, instead, focuses on superficial details that swiftly generate simplistic social perceptions of feminicides on a daily basis.

Moreover, when analysing the sexual mutilation and torture of women whose bodies are dumped in wastelands and rubbish dumps, Segato (2013) notes that female victims in Ciudad Juárez appear as fragile bodies. I argue that, within crime tabloid journalism, exposing the undignified conditions in which victims of femicide are discarded creates a different form of violence, violating the dignity of the victims themselves, their bodies, and their families (Figure 45). Reflecting on how women's bodies may be dumped or abandoned in locations connoting notions of waste, I contend that the photographed context, along with angles, colours, and tones, serves to contrast their bodies with the discovery sites. Thus, this portrayal of brutally murdered women highlights the pervasive violence against women in Mexico.

In the so-called 'crimes of passion', where violence results from a jealous emotional state typically triggered by infidelity (Mullen, 1993), the intimate space not only contextualises the criminal act and its news coverage but also becomes a focal point that shapes perceptions of the victim and, potentially, excuses the aggressor. Women victims of such feminicides are frequently stigmatised as 'unfaithful' or 'flirtatious', not only by their partners but also by broader society. Typically, it is a man who perceives himself as aggrieved by his partner's behaviour. In my view, crimes of passion distort the criminal act by framing it as a justified response to jealousy, allegedly provoked by the woman's actions. In the visual representation of these cases, the only visible manifestation of the 'passionate' frenzy is the violence inflicted upon women's bodies. Yet this imagery is reinforced by headlines and text suggesting the aggressor acted in an emotional outburst. A more complete narrative emerges through the intrusion into the private sphere captured by photographers which reinforces the notion that such crimes are private, exceptional acts. Consequently, despite explicit and even grotesque violence, the aggressor is, to some extent, absolved of his brutality (Figures 46-47).

A different instance where the intimate domain plays a significant role is that of what is termed family femicide in Mexico, when the aggressor murders one or more family members, rooted in familial relationships between victims and perpetrators. Frequently in such cases, the perpetrator acts from a masculinised position of power over subordinate family members (Monárrez Fragoso, 2010). Victims are typically daughters, sisters, mothers, mothers-in-law, or nieces of aggressors. Here, the family room, or indeed any domestic space, becomes the setting of the photographic composition. These elements collectively invite the

reader into that private, intimate sphere. In such instances, the categorisation of victims does not frame them as 'bad women' who somehow 'deserved' their fate, nor does their alleged conduct diminish the gravity of their deaths. Rather, they are constructed as 'good women' subjected to violence by 'bad men'. These victims escape stigmatisation; yet, the intrusion into their intimate environment, which would otherwise remain hidden, compels reflection on their vulnerability and the stark reality that women are not safe from gender-based violence, even within their own homes (Figures 48-49).

When corpses are concealed in bags, suitcases, blankets, or cardboard boxes, they are typically discovered and photographed in public spaces, i.e. streets, highways, remote areas, or bus stations. This practice frequently functions as a visual language of drug trafficking, depersonalising and anonymising victims. Yet by adopting this imagery, the *nota roja* detaches femicides from the broader context of Mexican patriarchal violence, instead linking them to drug trafficking. Bagged women are thus framed as casualties of organised crime, rendering gender-based violence invisible and tacitly normalised within criminal structures. For Ramos Lira et al. (2016), such press portrayals may also dissuade families from seeking justice as victims are stigmatised through association with criminality. Goffman (1963) notes that stigma, historically signified by bodily marks (e.g., scars or burns), denoted moral disgrace marking individuals as slaves, criminals, or traitors. A stigma thus operates as a discrediting attribute, precluding full social acceptance and enabling discrimination. As Champagne (1999) argues, media constructs enduring social representations that, even when divorced from reality, reinforce preconceived interpretations and mobilise prejudices. Consequently, bagged

female bodies may be presumed to belong to criminal networks, perpetuating stigmatisation and implicitly legitimising violence against them (Figure 50).

Generally, the manner in which murderers discard women's bodies may demonstrate atrocity and its ritualisation, as Monárrez Fragoso (2006) argues. On the ritualisation of femininity in advertising, Goffman (1987) examines how gender stereotypes, particularly female ones, are staged in photography. He identifies a ritualistic language that conveys behaviours and implies narratives, depicting women in recurrent scenarios. Advertising engages consumers through a blend of repetition, which solidifies rituals, and novelty, left to the creator's ingenuity. Social positions are communicated via stereotyped figures to ensure immediate consumer comprehension. Thus, femininity is ritualised by replicating supposedly inherent behavioural patterns. Goffman (1987) further introduces 'hyper-ritualisation', the exaggerated simplification of socially recognised rites. According to it, advertising does not invent gendered expressions but exploits preconstructed ones to render acts legible. Extending this logic, I suggest that the *nota roja* similarly employs conventional gendered expressions to shape interpretations of feminicides, as elaborated below.

When examining feminicides and the valuation of women's bodies in contemporary Latin America, Berlanga Gayón (2015) comments that a hierarchy of bodies, replicated in criminal practices, may carry a theatrical dimension particularly evident when women's corpses, bearing marks of extreme violence, are publicly displayed. Segato (2013) interprets this as a ritualised message from perpetrators to their peers. Regarding the *nota roja*, I argue that this genre constructs and perpetuates a discourse on gendered violence by reinforcing stereotypes such as female weakness, passivity, and the need for protection.

Goffman (1987) observes in his analysis of gender in advertising that posing invariably entails gendered roles: female models perform femininity, and male models perform masculinity. Similarly, the red news employs gendered stereotypes in its visual representation of feminicides. For instance, in imagery of femicide women play a role as both characters (victims) and models (subjects of depiction). Unlike advertising, however, these 'models' are deceased. Moreover, Goffman (1987: 13) defines a 'candid' photograph as one '[f]eaturing models that have not been arrayed to serve as such, that is, to serve as something to photograph on [the] occasion...'. The *nota roja* presents such 'caught' images, yet they are staged differently: photographers exploit the inert female body, freely selecting angles, framing, and contextual elements to shape the narrative. Obviously, victims are unaware they are being photographed; their immobilisation allows them to be used as involuntary 'models', facilitating the photographer's intended representation. This dynamic is deeply problematic as femicide victims, simultaneously models and subjects, lack agency over their portrayal. Stripped of volition, their exposure is dictated entirely by the photographer's discretion, not personal choice.

Further, the *nota roja* appears to construct an 'ideal' gender-based violence victim. Christie (1986: 18) defines the 'ideal victim' as 'a person or a category of individuals who, when hit by crime, most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim'. Such victims are characterised by traits like weakness, innocence, and vulnerability (Green, 2011). Typically, women, children, and the elderly who fit these stereotypes are perceived as more deserving a victim status (Green, 2011). Media attention is closely tied to these identity-based attributes, i.e., appearance, status, and perceived vulnerability

(Greer, 2017). Applying this framework, I note that feminicide imagery in the tabloid press often depicts brutally murdered women from marginalised backgrounds, their postures at times sexualised or eroticised, reinforcing their powerlessness. The perpetrator is usually unnamed or unidentifiable, constructing an unchallenged narrative of victims subjected to patriarchal violence.

Moreover, the presence of justice officers, mostly men, in some stills illustrates a typical forensic scene. While this may suggest official concern, it may heighten the image's dramatic effect (Lara Klahr & Barata, 2009). It may also reinforce the notion that men are women's protectors, the ones who act when needed, reflecting the male-dominated nature of Mexico's justice system. Lozano Verduzco (2016) describes Mexico's justice structure as a product of a sex-gender system that endows masculine subjects with power, reproduced through daily actions. As Silvestri & Crowther-Dowey (2016: 244) note, '[t]he reality is that the administration and delivery of criminal justice remains firmly with the remit of (white) men', a dynamic equally evident in Mexico. This gendered framework shapes how men and women experience the justice system. In the *nota roja* photographs of feminicides, the predominance of men at crime scenes underscores male leadership. This aligns with Goffman's (1987) analysis of gender in advertising, where men and women are depicted in traditional hierarchical arrangements: women in subordinate or assisted roles, men in superior positions, whether through height, posture, or protective gestures. Similarly, in feminicide images, women invariably occupy spatially inferior positions, like prostrate, passive, their bodies scrutinised, while men stand upright, commanding the scene. Thus, male figures are portrayed as active

agents, reacting, protecting, while female victims are reduced to their injured bodies, clothing, or lack thereof, and other traits conforming to the male gaze. Women are displayed as passive, subordinated objects, perpetually available for visual consumption.

Therefore, the *nota roja* hyper-ritualises feminicides by capitalising on images of murdered women, deploying conventional gender stereotypes. While this differs from product advertising in Goffman's (1987) analysis, it must be noted that the press, beyond its informational role, operates as a business competing with other dailies. Thus, the *nota roja* employs gender stereotypes to market news through easily digestible imagery, targeting specific audiences for commercial gain. Similarly, Darío Buitrón (1997) contends that when information is treated as a commodity rather than a social good, the profit motive reduces news to abject products, where bloodshed becomes front-page spectacle. As he explains, this exploits morbid curiosity, increases sales and advertising revenue, presupposing Latin American advertisers willing to participate in such trade, indifferent to ethical concerns.

3.2. Mortality

The initial features analysed are colour and tone. As Kress & Van Leeuwen (2002) argue, colour operates as a culturally situated semiotic resource, multifunctional in meaning-making. In most photographs examined in my research, tonal contrasts emphasise the focal subject: feminicide victims' lifeless bodies. For example, many images use saturated yellow tones, particularly for corpses, set against sombre, muted backdrops, e.g., dimly lit urban or natural

settings. This contrast intensifies visual impact, as saturated hues convey heightened expressivity, while duller tones recede (Dondis, 1975). Crucially, yellow's proximity to white and light, framed by darker shades, creates a stark, near-monochromatic contrast. Conversely, other photographs depict corpses in cold, dark tones, while the surrounding terrain appears in softer hues. In Western contexts, including Mexico, black traditionally symbolises death and mourning (Edwards, 2004). Desaturated images evoke coolness, reinforcing associations with mortality. This effect intensifies in black-and-white photography, where light-shadow interplay heightens contrast. Thus, in numerous femicide photographs, the bodies' chromatic and tonal qualities explicitly signify death. Pallid tones suggest bloodless, lifeless flesh, while darkness enveloping the corpse reinforces this symbolism. Surrounding elements, through deliberate contrasts with the body's colour, compound these connotations (Figures 34-35).

In images featuring blood, the luminosity and saturation of red dominate. As Bleicher (2012: 65) notes, 'bright, supersaturated hues command attention yet repel prolonged viewing'. This colour corresponds to the etymological logic of the *nota roja*, or red news, where red metonymically represents blood. Colour thus functions dualistically: capturing the reader's gaze while inducing visceral disruption. This tendency is most evident in *La Prensa* (Figure 36).

Moreover, when women's corpses are depicted lying on streets, photographs are often taken from high angles. According to Lovelace (2010), such framing portrays subjects as powerless, as they are seldom represented vertically, thus emphasising their lifelessness. Consequently, in the *nota roja* coverage of feminicides, high-angle shots are frequently employed, potentially signifying a hierarchical relationship between victim and photographer. Kress and

Van Leeuwen (2006) argue that when a subject is viewed from a high angle, the image producer assumes a position of power over them. I contend that this may also occur in the viewer as the photograph displays precisely what its producer intended to show. Thus, photographing victims in this manner may convey inferiority or worthlessness to the audience. Similarly, the use of tilted angles, known as the 'Dutch angle', as I mentioned earlier, intensifies the dramatic effect of the crime scene. This technique, borrowed from cinema, deliberately evokes discomfort or disorientation in viewers (Figures 37-38).

Like high-angle shots, feminicide victims depicted horizontally also accentuate death and mortality. As Straw (2016) notes, images of corpses on streets or floors are highly valued in crime photography as they often capture proximity to the criminal act. While this perspective underscores victims' mortality, it simultaneously conveys vulnerability and powerlessness.

Another characteristic is that bodies often occupy a substantial portion of the frame, sometimes half or even a quarter of it. Thus, women's bodies dominate the image composition, shifting focus away from other contextual elements of the crime. For Bright (2012), the body as a central object at the crime scene is the impulse behind much of the conflict that surrounds the image, and also the reason for its power. In that regard, some photographs I analyse display corpses with high levels of detail, including marks, scars, and wounds, potentially overwhelming the viewer (Figure 39).

3.3. Sexualisation and eroticisation

Photographs of femicide victims persistently foreground the body, particularly clothing or its absence. Attention often fixates on intimate areas, even when clothed, and in some cases, images expose underwear. Such depictions frequently accompany sexually motivated feminicides, though not exclusively. Even in non-sexual crimes, women's bodies remain objectified. For instance, in hotspots of some photographs, body parts associated with femininity are frequently brought into focus (Figure 51).

In relation to feminicides in Mexico, Segato (2013), when examining images of feminicides in Mexico, observes that naked corpses typically signify sexual violence. Furthermore, Monárrez Fragoso (2010) terms this crime as a 'systemic sexual femicide', meaning murders with sexualised features that reduce victims to objects. Kidnapping, torture, mutilation, and bodily disposal exemplify this eroticised violence. The abandonment of victims in desolate spaces further suggests a patterned methodology. Analysing feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Segato (2013) contends that public displays of sexually violated corpses construct a necro-pornographic narrative. In that regard, the *nota roja* exacerbates it by framing bodies, with emphasised breasts, buttocks, or underwear, as spectacles for consumption. Thus, exposed corpses manifest patriarchal domination (Figures 52-53). Jewkes (2015) observes that sex is one of the most salient news values in tabloid journalism. She argues that it has the ability to capture public's attention and generate immediate interest. In that regard, newspapers tend to over-report crimes of a sexual nature, which distorts the general perception of crime in society and fuels amplified fears, particularly

among women, about falling victim to such offences. This focus on sex and violence in the news is closely related, as accounts of sexual assault are often intertwined with depictions of violence that may render these crimes more appealing to the reader.

Moreover, in my research, certain images highlight clothing, i.e., typically outfits accentuating legs, buttocks, breasts, or shoes, implying a prescribed dress code, especially for young women. When examining the Mexican press, Fernández Díaz (2003) observes that frequently young women are associated with physical exaltation, whether through attire or traditional beauty standards. Thus, the victim's age becomes a key visual element. Van Dijk (2003) frames this as reinforcing gender norms where female behaviour and appearance are dictated by moral standards aligned with male preferences (Figures 54-55). The *nota roja* exemplifies this when press reports suggest victims were sex workers, table dancers, or bar staff, occupations deemed socially disreputable for women. As Wattis (2015) notes, in representing gender violence against sex workers, gender intersects with marginality, stigma, and misogyny, producing degrading portrayals. Garaizabal (2007) analyses the stigmatisation of sex workers in Latin America, noting that people often view them as criminals fuelling urban insecurity, making them targets of police persecution and extortion (Figures 56-57).

Furthermore, associating women with the sex trade serves as a stigmatising mechanism, often extending to their families (Ramos Lira et al., 2016). Returning to Goffman's (1963) concept of 'stigma', prostitution exemplifies the very notion of immorality. Sex workers transgress patriarchal norms of hegemonic, idealised femininity. Sánchez González (2008) observes that in Latin American social imaginary, they embody promiscuity and sexual deviance,

inhabiting forbidden spaces. Thus, their occupation, socially condemned, heightens vulnerability to violence, even brutal murder. In Mexico, Monárrez Fragoso (2010) terms it as 'stigmatised occupation feminicide': the killing of women for work deemed 'unauthorised' for their gender, including bar waitresses, nightclub dancers, and similar roles. Such labour breaches 'feminine' norms, marking them as 'bad women' and thus more susceptible to murder. Consequently, the *nota roja* not only displays their corpses but also their clothing or the lack of, reinforcing stigmatisation and legitimising gender-based violence. The visual discourse disproportionately emphasises victims' occupations, particularly when they are young women.

Caputi (2004) critiques patriarchal narratives in popular culture, arguing that they function as a reservoir of mythological imagery perpetuating women's oppression. Popular stories often glorify violence and male domination. Analysing pornography, she contends that such imagery desensitises audiences to violence against women and reinforces their objectification. These representations, she argues, propagate harmful stereotypes by equating femininity with submission and masculinity with power. Similarly, Vega Montiel (2014) examines the media's role in normalising violence against women in Mexico and emphasises how media content reinforces sexist tropes, portraying men as dominant and women as vulnerable. In pictures of the *nota roja*, this dynamic mirrors the troubling juxtaposition of sexualised female imagery with scenes of extreme violence, rendering their association particularly problematic.

On the other hand, Berger (1972) critiques the European tradition of the female nude, arguing that its representation is not neutral but, rather, intrinsically linked to how women are seen and judged by a male 'surveyor'. He finds a direct

correlation between the poses of women in classical oil paintings and those in soft pornography, concluding that both kinds of media serve to satisfy a controlling male gaze. In this dynamic, the man is the active looker, while the woman is compelled to be perpetually aware of herself as a visual object. This argument is supported by Nead (1992), who explains that within patriarchal art and culture, the female body is presented as a passive object for contemplation, in direct contrast to the active, powerful male subject who controls the gaze. This dynamic reflects unequal power relations based on gender wherein the masculine gaze exerts dominion and the feminine is its object. This concept is extended to cinema by Mulvey (1989), who identifies a 'masculine gaze' where visual pleasure is split between active/male and passive/female. She argues that the female figure is stylised to fulfil erotic desire and functions as an erotic 'other' for the pleasure of the male spectator, thereby reinforcing male power within narrative structures. The core idea across these arguments is that women are consistently framed as 'passive spectacles', that is, as objects to be looked at and desired, while men are positioned as active subjects who control the gaze and wield power through the act of looking. This framework may be applied to the representation of crimes against women in the media and how it is turned into consumable spectacles that reinforce patriarchal domination. Femicide images in the *nota roja* do not merely document violence; they perpetuate symbolic violence through their representational logic by replicating visual structures of patriarchal control. Moreover, they contribute to the construction of gender identities and perpetuation of gender inequality in society.

These photographs also wield a symbolic power. For Bourdieu (1992), language is not merely communicative but an instrument of power that serves

individual interests. Every linguistic interaction reflects and perpetuates social structures, with usage shaped by factors such as gender. Therefore, symbolic violence is, fundamentally:

... a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and recognition, (more precisely, misrecognition), cognition, or even feeling (Bourdieu, 2001: 1-2).

It thus enacts subordination through unequal power hierarchies. Therefore, first, certain photographs render murdered women's bodies objects of visual pleasure, strategically framing breasts, buttocks, or genitalia, even when clothed. Others exhibit necro-pornographic displays of sexual violence or employ compositional techniques highlighting eroticised focal points. Additionally, some images echo classical cinema's gendered dynamics: female victims are frozen as passive spectacles, while male perpetrators or bystanders are framed as active gazing subjects, reducing women to narrative devices that may legitimise their victimisation through occupational stigma. The male gaze further operates via clothing as signifier, age as erotic capital, and spatial semiotics of 'transgressive' workplaces. The camera adopts a patriarchal lens, erasing victims' humanity through fetishised body parts and aestheticising sexual violence via compositional techniques. This produces a visual regime that naturalises gender violence, linking victimhood to moral transgression, framing certain professions as provocations, and reinforcing a cyclical dynamic between media spectacle and real-world violence.

The male gaze is also evident when the *nota roja* juxtaposes images of semi-nude women or pin-up girls with photographs of femicide victims, in

particular, in front pages, as I explained in Chapter 4. This visual narrative merges sexualised female bodies with vulnerable women subjected to extreme violence that may imply an appeal to the male gaze that appears to normalise such representations. This link between sex and violence stems from hegemonic male narratives employed by Mexico's *nota roja* that reflect genre-specific media patterns.

4. Femicides and necro-pornography in the *nota roja*

Mulvey (1989) argues that women's exclusion from cultural participation has led to the appropriation of their image and the exploitation of their bodies. This stems from their marginalisation in dominant artistic production, reducing them to mere signs within patriarchal culture. Hence, female representation becomes a political battleground, where women are constructed and manipulated to serve male fantasies rather than reflect authentic experiences. I contend that this applies equally to the *nota roja*. Most images examined are exceptionally graphic. Champagne (1999) asserts that the media collectively construct social representations which, though detached from reality, endure by reinforcing spontaneous interpretations and mobilising prejudices. In Mexican crime news, male domination and a masculine gaze upon female bodies are evident, crafting an emotional narrative unmatched by other journalistic genres (Piccato, 2017). The portrayal of femicides in this press reveals elements that facilitate analysis of media treatment and its role in what Van Dijk (2003) calls a dominant public discourse. Media discourse wields significant social power, with the press filtering and disseminating information as news. Restrepo (2005) maintains that

photographs in crime news employ socio-cultural meanings, projecting visual narratives that uphold a patriarchal worldview. Thus, I argue that pictures of the *nota roja* perpetuate a discourse that frames women as weak, docile, and vulnerable, while sensationalising their bodies to commodify gender violence.

I also observe that press reports on feminicides recount fatal stories from the everyday lives of ordinary women, typically in public spaces. These reports outline the basic what, how, when, and where of the crime. Given their informative format, the red news appears uninterested in the why. One feminicide is reported today, another tomorrow. Follow-up cases are rare, perhaps only those that go viral, such as Ingrid Escamilla's feminicide, mentioned in this thesis's introduction. Thus, it may be argued that the *nota roja* fixates on the misfortune of the 'other'. As Santana Hernández (2020), Mexican journalist, remarks: 'there is a kind of curiosity about what happens to the other, but hoping that doesn't [happen to oneself], that is like another level'. Indeed, he declares that 'not even red news reporters would like to see themselves there'. Similarly, Naylor (2001) notes that British print media report violence through gendered narratives, obsessing over 'someone else's danger', fostering the false impression that public spaces are perilous for women, while the domestic sphere offers safety. The Mexican *nota roja* likewise centres on the 'other', and crimes in public spaces may be easier to report due to the relative ease of photographing their aftermath. Yet, it risks reinforcing the notion that feminicides occur more frequently outdoors, implying women would be safer at home.

Regarding the visual representation of violence against women, certain strategies perpetuate the denigration of women within a patriarchal system founded on power and domination. For the renowned Mexican writer Carlos

Monsiváis (2010), feminicides in Mexico exemplify the most degraded and sordid patriarchal power against women. In such imagery, content, colour, tone, and angle reinforce stereotypes conventionally assigned to women, like inferiority, helplessness, weakness, mortality, vulnerability, precarity, and emotion. These representations further emphasise that feminicides are often preceded by severe violence, with death merely marking the culmination of overt domination and subjugation.

In most imagery, the bodies of victims are depicted passively, as inert objects that 'fell' due to violence, lying where they landed, devoid of agency or resistance. Death is framed as an inevitable, almost naturalised fate, as if violent death were a predictable outcome for women, reinforcing a dehumanising victimhood narrative. Yet these images depict death in a grotesque manner. While long-distance shots occur, many frames are close-ups of the victims and their injuries. There seems to be an eagerness to present the image in its rawest form without the embellishment seen in, for instance, female bodies in advertisements. Rather, these photos suggest an aesthetic of violence: they are abject images, provoking disturbance, horror, repugnance, and thus morbidity (Ovalle, 2010). Here, 'aesthetics' does not denote beauty but rather how photographs are produced and used in the red news. This aesthetic relates to 'the art of representing violence, and to the cultural systems enabling that art' (Appelbaum, 2013: 125). Prosser (2012) argues that the representation of violence and suffering often carries aesthetic dimensions. For instance, atrocity photographs can be formally 'beautiful' despite their horrific content, such as iconic images of atomic explosions or tragic deaths, thus creating a tension between visual appeal and brutality. Furthermore, aesthetics shape how violence

is perceived. However, Pollock (2012) observes that in Holocaust imagery, for example, depictions of female nudity introduce erotic undertones that may distract from the horror, making the confrontation with death more 'bearable'. This demonstrates that aesthetics is not merely decorative but fundamentally influence how violence is understood and mediated. Thus, I contend that aesthetics is an integral component in how violence is understood and represented.

Regarding aesthetics and its practices, Ohldieck & Selnes (2020: 12) note that violence depicted in literature, art, and other cultural expressions offers significant, though frequently overlooked, insights into key dimensions of 'real' violence that transcend what plain social and political analysis may reveal. In that regard, although femicide photographs in the *nota roja* expose fragments of gender violence in Mexico, they do so selectively, emphasising the subjective, particular effects on individual victims. The Mexican crime press frequently employs conventions in representing feminicides: severely injured, beaten, burned, or lacerated bodies, often with nudity and blood exposed. Angles, colours, tones, and framing are deliberate, designed to portray physical violence unflinchingly. As discussed in Chapter 4, the layout of such newspapers heightens sensationalism, catering to their audience. Therefore, the depiction of femicides in the *nota roja* photography is not merely documentary but deeply aesthetic, shaping how gender violence is perceived and consumed. Images often present victims as passive objects, reinforcing a narrative that may naturalise a brutality that strips them of agency. Graphic close-ups of wounds and abject staging of corpses provoke horror, reducing feminicides to entertainment. This aesthetic may be deliberate. As Appelbaum (2013) notes, it reflects a cultural

system that mediates violence through form, where the 'art' lies in the unflinching exposure of suffering. The tension Pollock (2012) identifies in Holocaust imagery recurs here: the eroticisation of female victims' nudity or the composition of grotesque scenes may paradoxically soften the horror, thus, making it tolerable for mass consumption. The raw brutality seems not framed to elicit empathy but to commodify tragedy, aligning with Ovalle's (2010) observation that such images trade in morbidity. Crucially, this aesthetic is selective. As García Roiz (2020) points out, the *nota roja* turns death into a show and hooks readers into a narrative of seeking ever more shocking news.

Additionally, the crime tabloid press exploits the feminicides of the most disadvantaged women, economically, educationally, and socially. For Swartz (1997: 6), cultural symbols 'embody interests and function to enhance social distinctions.' Therefore, drawing on Bourdieu's (2001) concept of capital, victims of femicide featured in the *nota roja* are stripped of the symbolic capital necessary to confer dignity upon their lives and deaths. Victims most frequently depicted are those whose marginalisation renders them hypervisible, women whose lack of economic and social capital leaves them unprotected not only in life but also in death. Their frequent portrayal as anonymous, violated bodies perpetuates a hierarchy of grief, wherein some deaths are deemed newsworthy precisely because they reaffirm societal expectations of who is 'vulnerable' and, consequently, a 'victim.' Thus, the aesthetics of femicide photography are not incidental; they may also constitute a form of symbolic violence. They dictate whose suffering is seen, how it is remembered, and, ultimately, how it is dismissed. As Ohldieck & Selnes (2020) argue, such representations reveal

dimensions of violence that sociological analysis alone cannot: the ways in which seeing and showing are themselves acts of power.

Regarding written press coverage of sexual violence in Mexico, Fernández Díaz (2003) notes that certain narrative devices, such as metonymy, accentuate specific attributes of women. One such device is the reduction of victims to anatomy, 'which results in a partial presentation of the woman that remains associated and linked to her anatomical reality, and loses her characterisation as a full human being' (Fernández Díaz, 2003: 146). This concept, I argue, extends to visual texts, particularly femicide imagery in crime tabloids. Victims' bodies become the focal point and, as outlined earlier, such outlets employ techniques to highlight nudity, injuries, clothing, and other elements that construct a fragmented image of these women at a glance. Goffman (1987) observes that photographs best capture practices rigidly codified in form and confined to the visual field of short-range cameras, that is, those routinely tied to specific social meanings. Yet gender violence, particularly femicides, is a structural problem that crime tabloids oversimplify. Butler (2005), when analysing racial violence and its representation, contends that the socio-cultural complexity of structural violence resists straightforward visual representation. On the contrary, Ohldieck & Selnes (2020) hold that subjective violence remains more depictable. By prioritising the latter, tabloids obscure broader realities, misleading audiences.

Todorov (1996) examines the concept of 'depersonalisation' in totalitarian regimes, notably the Nazis, under whom he suffered in concentration camps. Central to my analysis is his assertion that 'the human being is in fact taken to be a means; he is therefore no longer a genuine "person"'. Depersonalisation served as a mechanism to diminish individuals to mere instruments of a dehumanising

Nazi project, employing any means to strip them of humanity. Similarly, the *nota roja* transforms people into non-persons: victims become animate yet inhuman, their bodies fragmented or dismembered. Women's humanity is thus degraded reduced to violated corporeal fragments. Within a 'red news' project, such imagery functions as a marketable commodity, exploiting audience fascination. The body not only acquires an autonomous identity, divorced from the victim's personhood, but its dismembered parts also dominate the visual narrative. This is particularly evident in femicide photographs fixating on specific body parts, especially if bloodied, nude, or scantily clad. Frequently, headlines accentuate this framing, while images add or supply gruesome detail.

Another recurring feature reflecting the dehumanisation noted by Todorov (1996) is the persistent focus on the nature of feminicides. The *nota roja* often meticulously describes the murders. Besides, a striking aspect is the portrayal of victims' faces in visual narratives, frequently disfigured, destroyed, bloodied, or emaciated. While Fernández Díaz (2003: 147) discusses written press depictions, noting that a person's appearance is often limited to the face, traditionally deemed significant as 'the most visible, perhaps serving as a calling card, the most endowed with unique, non-transferable traits', this is equally evident in femicide photographs. Where angles permit, the battered, bloodied faces of women are displayed, often through close-ups for greater detail. Generally, dehumanisation is conveyed by reducing victims to their wounded, sometimes unrecognisable, bodies. Although faces may be omitted, photographs often depict other equally violated body parts. For instance, one striking still shows a femicide victim's body, or what the report claims to be her remains, cooked as '*pozole*', a traditional Mexican stew typically made with pork and corn.

The image includes contextual elements, such as a kitchen stove with a pot containing the victim's flesh prepared as the dish. The press report states that the murderer attempted to conceal the crime by cooking the body, unflinchingly illustrating the article with an actual image of the stew. Here, the victim is dehumanised, her body further degraded symbolically, while the photograph employs cannibalism for sensationalism. The result is sheer revulsion and shock.

Regarding feminicides in Mexico, Núñez (2012) observes that the violence inflicted on women's bodies not only aims to harm, humiliate, and mutilate them unto death but also conveys a range of meanings absent in male-on-male murders. Moreover, other actors, such as the press, exploit women's lives, and images, to reinforce a patriarchal discourse that legitimises these murders, framing them as kind of 'deserved punishment for transgressive behaviour' (Alcocer Perulero, 2012). Mexican feminicides are marked by escalating brutality, degradation, and public display of victims' bodies, driven by a distinctive malice that underscores the devaluation of women's lives (Bejarano Celaya, 2014).

Besides, lives deemed unworthy are exposed to violence stemming not only from gender but also from other discriminatory factors exacerbating their vulnerability. That is, discursively, certain lives are not recognised as such; they may be mere existences excluded from humanisation as they fall outside the dominant framework of the human. As Butler (2003) argues, their dehumanisation first occurs discursively, often culminating in lethal violence. Moreover, violence itself does not produce dehumanisation; rather, it is prefigured within discourse. Thus, dehumanising discourse, constituted by power relations, generates discursive behaviours, including torture and death (Butler, 2003), rendering the 'non-human' easily killable. Alternatively, such lives may be

violated, branded, or degraded. Consequently, crime tabloid press in Mexico almost boldly displays the extreme violence behind feminicides. Its discourse adheres to patriarchal norms, as a Goffman's (1987) hyper-ritualisation, framing women as inherently vulnerable and their violence as routine, particularly against those defying obedience and submission.

Thus, the gender discourse in femicide imagery within Mexican red news functions through gendered power dynamics. Felski (2000) asserts that all cultural depictions of women, whether negative or positive, are mediated by male perspectives prescribing 'femininity'. Patriarchy, she argues, governs narratives about women, relegating them to abstract metaphors rather than acknowledging their humanity. Whether vilified or idealised, such representations sustain male dominance, not female agency. Whether the victims were unfortunate housewives, naïve students, young women, or sex workers, women's humanity is confined to their bodies. The news exploits the brutality of these murders. Sensationalism trivialises such violence and portrays gendered power dynamics as isolated deeds rather than structural manifestations of patriarchal oppression.

Hernández & Finol (2010) argue that in the red chronicle, the body is an object of fascination and thus a pretext for media consumption. Consequently, it becomes central to news and entertainment narratives, trivialising content while being commodified to create spectacle. From my view, this also applies to the dead body. Straw (2021) maintains that while the *nota roja* may inform, it also possesses a strong entertainment component, and that it is difficult to separate the two aspects. Indeed, thanatological entertainment is part of contemporary popular culture. However, although death and its depictions are common in the media, in the newspapers their representations are not always so explicit or

obvious (Durkin, 2003). Real cadavers and death remain shocking and disturbing if compared to its treatment in other media of popular culture (Penfold-Mounce, 2016). While death is a key feature in the news (Seaton, 2005), there is concern from both the audience and the media about whether such news and their images should be openly display. Western literature suggests that the audience may feel vulnerable to gross or explicit images (Walter, Littlewood & Pickering 1995; Keith, Schwalbe & Silcock 2006). This leads editors and publishers to make careful decisions on the coverage of death, for example, on the use of visual material (Hanusch, 2013). However, I contend that in the *nota roja*, women's deaths and violence may also serve as entertainment, such that editorial decisions are made, rather, to cultivate the interest of the consumer-readers of this type of newspaper. These newsroom choices, rather than mitigating the impact of explicit representations of death, often intensify their graphic nature and sensationalism, contrary to what Western literature suggests regarding the media treatment of violence. Thus, this sensationalist press tends to display corpses, blood, and crime scenes in a highly visual manner. Unlike more conservative media outlets, where editorial approaches may moderate content to avoid grotesque imagery, the *nota roja* prioritises morbid curiosity as a commercial strategy. This not only normalises extreme violence but may also disregard the vulnerability of certain audiences to such representations, even as it appeals to another segment of readers. Although the dead body is a central element in news reporting, its treatment in the *nota roja* presents it as a form of thanatological entertainment. These newspapers assume, and perhaps cultivate, a demand for explicit content. Symbolic violence thus becomes an everyday consumer product.

On the other hand, as Martín-Barbero (2002) notes, images activate symbolic mechanisms and socio-cultural practices shaping phenomena's meaning. *Nota roja* photographs depict murderous violence using the female body as a visual symbol, conveying subjugation, weakness, and powerlessness. These reflect a patriarchal dominance and the press's role in producing and reproducing gender violence. Additionally, I identify traits of contemporary true crime (Wattis 2015, 2021), such as fetishising extreme violence, morbid details, centring the aggressor, and objectifying female victims, reinforcing gendered ideologies. Bal (2007: 95) refers to the 'pain of images' and the 'economic unfairness of an exchange where the subject is exposed', arguing that their display may inflict further suffering on victims by depriving them of subjectivity. Vulnerable individuals in pain have little agency over the circulation of their images, and viewing such suffering may constitute secondary exploitation. In the case of femicide photographs, victims cannot consent, though, as discussed earlier, their publication in the red news may harm families and perpetuate stigmas. The process of obtaining such images often precludes familial consent, particularly when relatives are unknown or when victims in public spaces remain unidentified. The *nota roja* operates swiftly for reporters must capture and submit photographs promptly for publication, as Cabrera (2022) notes.

Therefore, the red chronicle reinforces gender stereotypes, portraying women as inferior, vulnerable, and dependent on protection. Images of femicide victims function as visual language, exemplifying the press's symbolic power within a patriarchal framework that normalises cruelty towards women. Moreover, such photographs often aestheticise suffering, reducing victims to passive objects of spectacle while obscuring systemic culpability. By framing female

victims as inherently defenceless, the media perpetuates a misrecognition of gendered violence as inevitable rather than structurally enforced.

Finally, the photographic representations of feminicides in Mexican *nota roja* may be understood as a contemporary manifestation of necropolitics or necropower, an idea developed by Mbembe (2019 [2016]). Necropolitics is the politics of death exercised by a sovereign power, which manifests in the ability to decide over the life and death of individuals or groups, legitimising extreme violence and social exclusion. Thus, fundamentally, it is an exercise of power that manages death as a means to reproduce social inequalities, dehumanise victims, and perpetuate patriarchal control through the normalisation and commercialisation of extreme violence. In my opinion, this idea may be used to conclude the analysis in my thesis. Mbembe (2019 [2016]: 92) describes how certain powers exert control not only over life, as Foucault (2008 [2004]) previously proposed, but also over death, creating 'death-worlds' of the living dead in which large populations are subjected to living conditions equivalent to social death. He states that the concept of 'biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death' because it does not capture the dimension of death as a central and active instrument of power in current configurations where sovereignty is exercised through the capacity to decide who must die and who may live, transforming politics, precisely, into a politics of death. This concept is used by Mbembe to explain how, in contemporary times, politics may be oriented not only towards life and its management but also towards the production and administration of death and destruction, particularly in contexts of racism, exclusion, and systematic violence.

Mbembe (2019 [2016]) also notes that necropolitics entails an inversion between life and death, where death is trivialised and loses its tragic symbolism. Moreover, Mbembe links necropolitics to racist and exclusionary practices that determine which lives are valued and which are expendable. He discusses the spectacularisation of death and horror as strategies to exercise power and maintain control and argues that it manifests in the manner in which violence and death are displayed, whether through images, discourses, or political practices that produce horror and terror within society, with the aim of legitimising the use of force, justifying states of exception, and consolidating divisions among people. This strategy is observed in the construction of ontological enemies and in the normalisation of death of certain groups as part of a political order. Thus, he explains that this display not only dehumanises victims but also induces a habituation to loss and suffering, facilitating the perpetuation of violence and exclusion. Consequently, death loses its tragic and symbolic nature to become a functional instrument of power. Regarding these notions, Gržinić (2018) argues that necropolitics also possesses an aesthetic that entails a visual and symbolic dimension that produces an image that shields necropolitical projects by concealing underlying brutality and violence. Thus, necropolitics may generate, among others, a spectacle of the beauty of death, which normalises and naturalises violence and destruction.

Building on these ideas, I consider that the *nota roja* employs graphic and sensationalist images that not only inform but also function as a commercial product, exploiting public's morbid curiosity and transforming extreme violence into entertainment. This aesthetics of violence, which may follow the logic of the male gaze and the hyper-ritualisation of victims, contributes to normalising

images of violence and obscuring social and structural responsibility behind feminicides. Essentially, photographs of feminicides in the *nota roja* not only reflect the brutality upon women's bodies but are also an active part of a social construction of crime that may legitimise violence against women. In the *nota roja*, images of feminicides exhibit mutilated, tortured bodies in positions of extreme vulnerability, frequently sexualised and eroticised. This contributes to the dehumanisation of the victims, who are represented not as subjects with agency but as involuntary models exposed to the male gaze and morbid spectacularisation, reproducing patriarchal stereotypes that naturalise violence against women. Victims of femicide, mostly women in conditions of social and economic vulnerability, are visually represented as bodies stripped of humanity, reduced to anatomical fragments and objects of visual consumption. This practice may be read as a form of necropolitics, where death is displayed without respect or dignity, reinforcing the logic of exclusion and dispossession. The *nota roja* in Mexico frequently tends to represent women from marginalised sectors, with limited economic, social, and cultural capital, reflecting a symbolic hierarchy of victims and perpetuating the idea of 'disposable' women. Thus, the press contributes to the stigmatisation and erasure of the structural causes of gender-based violence, upholding the logic of necropolitical exclusion within the framework of the information industry.

Thus, there is a necropolitical aesthetic in the visual representation of femicide in which images operate on a dual register: on the one hand, they exhibit horror in a sensationalist manner, transforming suffering into spectacle; on the other, they conceal the systemic structures that perpetuate such violence, frequently reducing the crimes to isolated incidents or morbid events. In aesthetic

terms, these photographs often present a calculated composition that reinforces a narrative of ritualised destruction. The reiteration of such images in the media not only trivialises the deaths of women but also naturalises the idea that certain bodies are disposable. Thus, necropolitics manifests not only in the material act of murder but also in its visual representation, which contributes to an aesthetic of cruelty wherein feminicidal violence becomes, paradoxically, both invisible in its structural dimension and hypervisible in its spectacularisation. This dynamic reflects what Mbembe (2019 [2016]) identifies as sovereign power over death, where the image does not merely document but also disciplines, reminding women of their vulnerability. The necropolitical aesthetic in the *nota roja* is therefore not neutral: it glorifies death while erasing agency of victims, reducing them to mere objects within a landscape of normalised violence.

5. Preliminary conclusions

This chapter examined photographs of femicides published in the *La Prensa* and *Metro* newspapers, arguing that these crimes are framed within structures of gender subordination. Their representation follows patterns that allowed for an analysis of both the portrayal in the media and its social consequences. The press acts as a discursive filter that mediates the dissemination of this news; in particular, reports on femicides are based on gender stereotypes, roles, and prejudices that stigmatise women, thereby bringing about their re-victimisation. Consequently, victims are often women in precarious socioeconomic situations, frequently young, and in informal employment or conditions of extreme vulnerability. This is also reflected in the marginal contexts depicted in the

images, which reinforces discourses that justify or normalise gender-based violence.

Furthermore, the photographic analysis was conducted on two levels: a denotative level, which described the visible content of the images, and a connotative level, which interpreted the underlying discourses related to social ideologies, power structures, and inequalities. This approach enabled me to demonstrate how the visual representation in the *nota roja* reaffirms and reproduces gender stereotypes that dehumanise victims and legitimise patriarchal violence. Thus, such photographs do not merely inform but also function as discursive mechanisms that contribute to the social construction of gender-based violence.

General conclusions

'I have a seven-year-old daughter. What future awaits her in this land of feminicides?'

Bernardo Esquinca, *La región crepuscular*

The analysis on gender-based violence against women, particularly feminicides, and its representation in the Mexican press, especially in the journalistic genre known as *nota roja*, raised several reflections. In general, the thesis addressed both the structural roots of this social problem, and the effects and responsibilities of the media in constructing narratives that may perpetuate or challenge such violence.

First, in Chapter 1, in the literature review I explained that it is essential to understand that gender-based violence, and its most extreme form such as femicide or feminicide, is not isolated or merely individual phenomena, but rather an expression of unequal and structural social relations that establish and maintain power hierarchies based on patriarchy. Gender, understood not as a fixed biological category but as a social and performative construct that is enacted and reproduced in daily interaction, is the axis around these dynamics of male domination and female subordination. This violence manifests not only in physical aggression but also as symbolic violence that becomes naturalised in discourses, cultural practices, and social representations, perpetuating stereotypes that legitimise inequality. Intersectionality, as an analytical tool, allows for an understanding of the complexity of violence against women. Factors such as social class and age interact with gender to produce differentiated experiences of violence and discrimination. In that regard, not all women suffer violence in the same ways. Rather, their specific social conditions influence how they are victimised and the degree of impunity their aggressors face.

Furthermore, the evolution of the term 'femicide', from its origins in Anglo-Saxon feminism to its reformulation in some countries of Latin America, and particularly in Mexico, distinguishes between 'femicide' and 'feminicide'. However, the latter specifically emphasises the gender-based nature of its victims, the social and political motivations behind these crimes, as well as the impunity and institutional complicity surrounding them, framing feminicide not merely as an individual crime but also as a product of the indifference of States towards this extreme manifestation of patriarchal violence. As I argued in the thesis, both terms are used interchangeably in the Latin American region today, yet necessarily with an emphasis on societal responsibility in the commission of these crimes and, above all, on the accountability of States for the prevailing impunity regarding this type of offence. This structural and systemic approach to feminicide is particularly relevant in the Mexican context, where violence against women has reached alarming levels and has spread across almost the whole country.

On the other hand, the press, and specifically the *nota roja*, plays an ambivalent role in the social construction of gender violence and femicides. It may contribute to making these crimes visible, raising social awareness, and pressuring for justice. However, its sensationalist, stereotyped, and often decontextualised treatment may perpetuate stigmas, revictimise women, and trivialise the severity of the problem. The *nota roja*, as a journalistic genre characteristic of Mexican popular journalism, is distinguished by its emphasis on the spectacularisation of violence, the use of shocking headlines, melodramatic language, and explicit photographs that appeal to the reader's emotions and morbid curiosity. This press, which shares characteristics with tabloids and true

crime, primarily targets working-class and marginalised sectors and, in that sense, may give voice to realities ignored by more formal media. Nonetheless, its approach may reinforce narratives that simplify or distort the complexity of gender violence, presenting it as isolated incidents or individual pathologies, without structural analysis or a commitment to gender equality.

In particular, media representations of femicide victims in the Mexican red chronicle tend to focus on shocking features, such as the display of their mutilated bodies, naked corpses, or morbid details, frequently without providing a more structural context or highlighting underlying social and cultural causes. This practice contributes to a poverty porn, that is, the exploitation of misery and suffering to attract audiences, dehumanising the victims and reducing them to mere objects of informational consumption. Likewise, the press frequently reproduces gender stereotypes that reinforce women's vulnerability and passivity, directly or indirectly blaming them for the violence they have suffered, while downplaying or obscuring perpetrators' accountability. Violent men are often portrayed as 'monsters' or pathological individuals, which may divert attention from the social and structural causes that foster male violence.

The use of photographs in crime news is another critical element in the construction of these narratives. Images of lifeless bodies or scenes of violence possess an immediate emotional power that attracts the public, but they also raise significant ethical dilemmas. Photography, far from being an objective representation of reality, is mediated by technical, cultural, and contextual decisions that influence its meaning. In the case of gender-based violence, these images often objectify female victims, disregarding their subjectivity and

experiences, and fostering a relationship of voyeurism and emotional detachment in the viewer.

The exploitation of images in the *nota roja* may contribute to the depoliticisation of information, where human pain becomes spectacle, and structural causes may remain concealed by sensationalism and dramatisation. This phenomenon is particularly problematic in Mexico, in a context where violence against women constitutes a human rights issue and an urgent social matter requiring informed and responsible treatment. Although it is acknowledged that some press has played a significant role in denouncing and bringing visibility to feminicides in Mexico, as exemplified by the paradigmatic case of Ciudad Juárez, a northern city, where collaboration between the media, civil society, and victims' families has helped break the silence and push for justice in multiple feminicides that revealed patterns in the region, there are also ethical implications arising from the media's treatment of gender-based violence and femicides. In general, in this part of the thesis, I questioned the accountability of the media in reproducing discourses that revictimise women, perpetuate prejudices, and downplay the magnitude of the problem. Furthermore, I reflected on the limits of publicly exposing suffering and the dignity of victims, considering the risk of aestheticisation and the pornography of pain which may influence readers and hinder empathy and social action.

The second chapter explained that Mexican *nota roja* constitutes a complex journalistic, cultural, and social phenomenon that has evolved in parallel with the country's historical transformations. This genre, specialised in the coverage of crime, violence, and tragic events, transcends its informative function to also serve as a vehicle of entertainment. However, it also reflects certain power

structures. Crime dailies in Mexico are active agents in shaping discourses that may legitimise or challenge patriarchal power structures, as demonstrated in Chapter 5. Therefore, a critical and transformative perspective was essential to interrogate these representations. My research allowed me to reflect on the crucial role played by the media in the construction and reproduction, but also in the questioning, of social discourses on gender violence. Through a critical analysis of photographs, the thesis demonstrated that the press does not merely report on violent events but also acts as an agent that may perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce power structures, contribute to the revictimisation of women, and produce other forms of symbolic violence. For this reason, the methodological approach adopted a combined critical discourse analysis with visual semiotics, communication and cultural studies. The application of key concepts, such as Barthes' denotation and connotation, as well as Hall's encoding/decoding model, was fundamental in unravelling the multiple layers of meaning present in the images and texts of the *nota roja* when reporting on feminicides. This approach enabled me to move beyond oversimplified observations to understand how visual representations construct narratives that both reflect and reproduce the prevailing patriarchal ideologies in Mexican society.

The characterisation of the *nota roja* was a significant contribution of this research. As a journalistic genre, is mediated by commercial and cultural interests that prioritise sensationalism and morbidity, which affects the ethical and social quality of information regarding femicides. This type of press, with its distinctive sensationalist style and emphasis on graphic content, fulfils a specific social function that responds to cultural and commercial demands. However, this role

entails a series of ethical and political implications, particularly in the coverage of feminicides. The *nota roja* tends to portray female victims as objects of spectacle by emphasising their vulnerability, and constructing a necro-pornographic discourse that dehumanises murdered women, thereby rendering them to visual signs that reinforce negative and victim-blaming gender stereotypes. Consequently, the detailed analysis of visual signs presented in photographs, such as the victims' bodies, their wounds, clothing, nudity, colours, angles, and contextual objects, alongside textual data, like headlines, captions, and the graphic design of pages, revealed how specific meanings are constructed, anchoring public interpretation within dominant readings. In many cases, these signs reinforce the subordinate position of women in society and reproduce narratives that partially or entirely blame them for the violence they suffer, or that trivialise the severity of femicide by framing it within a sensationalism designed to attract attention without necessarily fostering critical reflection or effective social commitment to eradicate such violence.

Related to the foregoing, the research demonstrated that the relationship between image and text is crucial for comprehending the overall message conveyed by the press. The text functions as an anchor that fixes the meaning of the image, thereby, limiting the multiplicity of potential interpretations and guiding the reader towards an understanding that, frequently, aligns with patriarchal structures and commercial interests of newspapers. This interplay between visuality and verbiage reveals that media construction of feminicides is neither a neutral nor an objective process, but rather a choice mediated by editorial practices that respond to ideological and economic agendas. Thus, the relationship between image and text is pivotal in anchoring and constraining the

interpretation of photographs, steering the public towards dominant readings that may naturalise violence and reproduce gender stereotypes. Additionally, critical multimodal analysis, integrating visual semiotics and discourse analysis, was essential for understanding how these messages are produced and transmitted, and how they unveil underlying power relations and ideologies. From this perspective, I identified that the reception of these messages may vary, although the conditions of production and circulation tend to favour a dominant or hegemonic reading that reproduces patriarchal discourses. Nevertheless, the thesis also posited the potential existence of negotiated or oppositional positions among the audience. Thus, while differing decoding positions exist, the structure of production and circulation bolsters the hegemony of patriarchal discourses.

The research also highlighted the influence of the social, political, and economic context on the way feminicides are represented. These contexts underscore the persistence of violence and the structural inequalities that permeate Mexican society. The selection of key years (2000, 2006, 2012, and 2018) allowed for an examination of how, despite political changes and assurances of pacification in Mexico, violence against women persists or even intensifies, and how the media reflects this reality through a lens that does not always contribute to social awareness. From an ethical standpoint, this thesis addressed the issues posed by the use of violent and sensitive imagery, particularly that which depicts deceased bodies or events of extreme violence. The decision to include photographs solely in an annex rather than in the main body of the thesis sought to respect readers' sensitivity, while ensuring transparency and the visual evidence of the arguments presented. I consider this

ethical balance to have been fundamental to the research as it deals with delicate matters involving the dignity of deceased women and their families.

To understand today's crime news dailies and the power dynamics behind it, Chapter 3 explored its historical development from its pre-Hispanic roots to its contemporary manifestation. Thus, it examined its symbolic foundations, consolidation as a journalistic genre, period of splendor, the influence of drug trafficking, and the crisis of the Mexican state, as well as its contemporary challenges. In Mexico, crime news dailies drew upon pre-Hispanic symbolism, colonial control mechanisms, and the tensions of independent Mexico. This combination produced a genre that still oscillates between social critique and morbid sensationalism.

The study of the origins of the *nota roja* may be traced back to Mesoamerican civilisations, where colour red held a central place in the indigenous worldview. Used as a pigment, extracted from cochineal and other natural elements, it symbolised blood, solar fire, and the life-death cycle in cultures such as the Mexica. Depictions of pre-Hispanic deities, frequently tinged with red, evidence this connection between colour, sacred violence, and rituals of passage to the underworld. During the colonial period, this symbolism transformed but did not disappear. The Catholic Church and the viceregal authorities in Mexico adopted red as a mark of punishment, i.e., using seals of this colour to notify executions and inquisitorial sentences. Furthermore, the '*hojas volantes*', or single-page publications distributing news, are considered precursors to Mexican journalism as already included crime narratives with a markedly moralising tone. These publications established a rhetorical pattern that associated violence with moral lessons and warnings about social order.

Basically, this foundational stage demonstrates how the *nota roja* inherited a visual and discursive language that linked violence with social control. It was not merely about informing but also educating, disciplining, and reinforcing power hierarchies through the narration of crime.

The 18th century marked a turning point with the emergence of the first gazettes, which began to systematically include brief texts about criminal events. Some examples mentioned in the thesis illustrate how certain crimes captured the public imagination and generated extensive coverage. However, it was in the 19th century that the *nota roja* established its sensationalist characteristics that persist to this day. The first decades of the 20th century may be considered the golden age of this genre. During this period, it drew from the revolutionary tales in Mexico and began to influence cinema, literature, and popular culture at large. Throughout the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the post-revolutionary period, newspapers such as *La Prensa*, founded in 1928, refined the genre by incorporating crime scene photographs, melodramatic narratives, and veiled critiques of the established power. Some publications pushed sensationalism to new extremes, blending black humour, graphic violence, and social criticism. At this stage, it becomes evident that the *nota roja* already functioned as a barometer of social violence, a vehicle for collective catharsis, and an indirect mechanism of control.

Finally, in this chapter I noted that, nevertheless, drug trafficking and the escalating crisis of the Mexican state reconfigured the journalistic field in the country, particularly towards the end of the 20th century. During the 1980s and 1990s, a scenario emerged in which cartels began to influence editorial lines, the state used official advertising as a mechanism of control, and journalists

themselves became targets of violence. Thus, a certain culture developed in which violence was both consumed and reproduced through the media. It was within this context that *Metro* emerged in 1997. However, on the other hand, governmental attempts to censor certain print media outlets illustrate the complex relationship between the press, organised crime, and political power. Fundamentally, the aim was to silence uncomfortable criticism without necessarily altering the structural violence in the country.

Therefore, the Mexican *nota roja* represents a complex cultural, historical, and journalistic framework worthy of in-depth analysis. For this reason, in Chapter 4, I conducted a characterisation of the genre, particularly focusing on two well-established and widely circulated newspapers in Mexican society: *La Prensa* and *Metro*. In this chapter, I analysed seven key themes: the evolution of the genre; its design and visual strategies; gender-based violence; journalistic ethics; readership/audiences; and its political economy. This analysis allowed me to reflect on how the Mexican *nota roja* is a genre that reflects various contradictions arising daily in a society that coexists with violence while simultaneously attempting to understand, address, or simply ignore it. The red chronicle documents a violent reality that other media outlets choose not to cover or approach differently. Notwithstanding, by transforming suffering into entertainment, it may contribute to the normalisation of that very violence, thereby undermining its social responsibility.

The *nota roja* does not emerge in a vacuum, but rather is rooted in journalistic traditions that date back at least to the 19th century, as I explained in Chapter 3. From the early broadsheets that recounted crimes and executions to modern photojournalism, this genre has remained consistent in the features that

distinguish it. *La Prensa*, as a pioneering newspaper, inherited this tradition, but it also institutionalised it by establishing patterns that endure today, such as the systematic use of explicit photographs, sensationalist headlines, melodramatic narratives, and the combination of morbid curiosity and moral lessons. For its part, *Metro* represents the evolution of the genre within the neoliberal context of the late Mexican 20th century, adapting to new printing technologies, shifts in consumption habits, escalating violence associated with drug trafficking, and competition from digital media. While *La Prensa* mingles a more traditional format with sensationalism, *Metro* adopts a visually striking style, placing greater emphasis on graphic design than on textual content, reflecting the growing prominence of the visual in contemporary culture.

The analysis of the design of both newspapers revealed deliberate strategies to maximise emotional impact. In the *nota roja*, the layout is not merely decorative; rather, it constitutes a language in itself that may condition the reception and interpretation of content, such as the use of colour, particularly red, to symbolise blood, danger, and urgency. Yellow is also common, associated with sensationalism and alertness in this context, while black, though prevalent in general print journalism, may represent mourning and the gravity of certain events. These colours are not arbitrary but form a chromatic code that readers immediately recognise. Additionally, typography stands out due to its heavy, uppercase fonts conveying urgency, often combining serif and sans-serif typefaces to hierarchise information. Some visual effects, such as shadows or outlines, are employed to heighten drama. Regarding photographic composition, both newspapers tend to employ distinct strategies. *La Prensa* uses more static photographs that emphasise visible outcomes or consequences of violence,

whereas *Metro* more frequently employs visual sequences reconstructing crimes. Nevertheless, both utilise tight framing to display grotesque details and wide shots to provide context. In terms of page layout, front and back covers are typically designed as visual hooks by displaying explicit content. This style is also present in interior pages, where the dynamic combination of text and image further reinforces sensationalism when reporting violent events.

On the other hand, the narrative of sensational crime news operates through specific rhetorical mechanisms. Headlines are typically composed of wordplay and double meanings. Moreover, the use of colloquial language and localisms is also frequent, at times reinforced by rhetorical questions and exclamations to further capture readers' attention. In the structure of news reports, an abundance of qualifying adjectives is observed when referring to events, perpetrators, and/or victims. Furthermore, the repetition of keywords that generate shock or impression on readers, such as 'horror,' 'tragedy,' or 'blood', is also common. To convey a degree of veracity, such reports are often based on documents produced by justice authorities themselves, like police officers, investigators, and so on, in a way that official information is not commonly questioned. Furthermore, there is a limited use of testimonies from relatives or neighbours, perhaps because accessing such sources is difficult or they may refuse to provide any declaration. In general, although the *nota roja* may be a form of popular journalism, it frequently reproduces power discourses.

The commercial success of crime news may be explained by multiple factors. Among others, the consumer profile, most of them men, with a basic to intermediate level of education and informal jobs or owners of small businesses. Furthermore, marketing strategies include affordable prices, mass distribution in

public spaces, and eye-catching designs to compete on newsstands. I also observed that, although it primarily targets working-class sectors, it reinforces stereotypes about these very groups by predominantly portraying them as victims or perpetrators.

One of the most significant topics of analysis in this thesis was gender-based violence. The research revealed certain patterns in its coverage. First, the commodification of women's bodies, publication of images of murdered women alongside pin-ups, detailed descriptions of victims' clothing and appearance, and emphasis on stigmatised professions, such as bar waitresses, table dancers, sex workers, etc. This is combined with written narratives that employ stereotypes and gender roles to characterise victims and/or perpetrators. Moreover, the written text may present information in a manner that justifies or explains acts of gender-based violence, such as when crimes are framed in a way that blames victims, as in the case of 'crimes of passion,' or when the offence is explained by attributing it to the victim's carelessness or for placing themselves in a position or location that made them more vulnerable to such events.

Additionally, and perhaps due to the very format of crime news reporting, systemic violence is minimised. Coverage focuses on individual or specific events, making them appear as exceptional occurrences rather than as incidents that need to be understood within broader contexts of gender-based violence against women in Mexico. Consequently, the *nota roja* not only reports on gender-based violence but also represents it in a sensationalist manner for commercial profit within an increasingly challenging editorial landscape in the country. Although *La Prensa* and *Metro* have implemented certain measures in recent years, such as pixelating faces, reducing explicit images, and sometimes

with caution in language use, these changes respond more to social pressure, particularly from women's groups, than to internal reflections on journalistic ethics and its connection to gender-based violence in the country.

In Chapter 5, the analysis of femicide photographs in Mexican *nota roja* revealed how media power intertwines with patriarchal structures to construct visual discourses that reproduce and legitimise gender violence, shaping a scenario in which murdered women are doubly victimised: first by physical violence and, second, by the symbolic, media-driven violence that strips them of humanity and dignity. This analysis was structured on two levels. The first, of a denotative nature, examined the visible content within the photographs, including forms, colours, objects, subjects, contexts, and other signifiers, to identify perceptible elements requiring decoding. The second, connotative, drew upon the denotative analysis to interpret underlying discourses related to social ideologies, power structures, and relationships. Thus, I conducted a critical and semiotic analysis of images of femicides, combining detailed observation of visual elements with an interpretation grounded in some social and cultural theories, to unravel how this crime is represented and what meanings are constructed around gender violence in Mexican *nota roja*. This analysis also unveiled multiple dimensions concerning the media representation of gender violence in contexts marked by patriarchal subordination, socioeconomic precarity, and the stigmatisation of victims. Consequently, I observed that sensationalist press does not merely report but also reproduces and legitimises power structures and symbolic violence that may shape social perceptions of murdered women, their bodies, and their identities.

The analysis of the literal content of photographs revealed that the bodies of women victims of femicide are the focal point of the visual representation. They are depicted in various conditions: fully exposed, partially covered, or even concealed behind bags, suitcases, blankets, or cardboard boxes, elements that reflect not only the brutality of the crime but also specific practices of concealment and dehumanisation, sometimes associated with organised crime. The positioning of the bodies, predominantly horizontal and captured from elevated or tilted angles, emphasises the passivity, vulnerability, and mortality of victims, while simultaneously evoking a sense of discomfort in the viewer, thereby reinforcing the visual hierarchy between photographers, readers, and victims.

The deliberate use of colours and tones in these images stresses the symbolic weight of death and violence. The prevalence of saturated yellow tones of the bodies contrasts with dark or muted backgrounds, creating an almost monochromatic effect that accentuates the visualisation of dead flesh and suggests a proximity to the notion of death. Blood, with its intense saturated reds, functions as a fundamental metonymic sign within the *nota roja*, capturing the reader's attention and producing a disturbance that serves both a commercial and symbolic function simultaneously.

The context in which victims were frequently situated was also crucial for understanding the media and social representation of femicides. In the majority of cases, victims were found in peripheral public spaces, marginal areas associated with rubbish, dirt, abandonment, and waste, supporting the notion that these women are considered 'disposable' or of little value. This spatial framework reproduces socioeconomic and gender hierarchies where women in situations of vulnerability and economic precarity are typically not only the focal point of social

violence but of the media as well. In contrast, feminicides of women belonging to more privileged social classes tend to be less visible or even rendered invisible in these media outlets, suggesting a bias in the selection and representation of cases in tabloid press. By no means do I intend to imply that feminicides involving women of higher social standing should also be reported in the *nota roja*. I merely wish to emphasise that this journalistic genre exploits victims' precarious circumstances to publish their images in the press.

This visual representation, in addition to exhibiting physical, sexual, and symbolic violence against women, is imbued with stereotypes, roles, and gender prejudices that strengthen female subordination and dehumanise victims. These images tend to sexualise and eroticise female bodies, highlighting intimate areas such as breasts, buttocks, or genitals, and at times present victims partially nude or in suggestive clothing. This practice not only contributes to revictimisation but also creates a necropornographic discourse that transforms extreme violence into a spectacle for mass consumption, linking morbid fascination with the normalisation of patriarchal violence.

An analysis of the *nota roja* applying the notion of the 'male gaze' revealed how these images reproduce gendered power dynamics through visual representation. Murdered women are presented as passive objects for the male gaze, whilst men, typically represented by police officers or forensic experts, appear in positions of power, authority, and action, in a way that emphasises a patriarchal hierarchy within the scene of violence. This spatial and symbolic arrangement legitimises male domination and female dependence, and perpetuates the idea of women as vulnerable and in need of protection.

Moreover, Mexican *nota roja* also reproduces an 'ideal victim' for murdered women are portrayed as weak, innocent, and vulnerable, which may influence media attention and social empathy. However, this ideal is intersected by stigmatisation when victims are young, poor, or associated with occupations deemed socially reprehensible for women, such as sex work or employment in bars and nightclubs. These representations reinforce moral prejudices and, to some extent, justify violence, constructing narratives in which women who deviate from traditional gender roles are perceived as deserving of their fate, whereas women who conform to such roles are generally treated by the press in a more empathetic manner.

In the context of the aesthetics of violence, photographs of feminicides in crime tabloid press not only document brutality but also produce a particular appeal that seeks to shock, disturb, and attract readers through the spectacularisation of suffering and death. This aesthetic, far from humanising victims, contributes to their depersonalisation and fragmentation by reducing them to exposed body parts and images oscillating between the repulsive and the morbid. This dynamic operates as an integral component in the social mediation of violence which may trivialise human pain and transform tragedy into a consumable product. The *nota roja*, in its commercial function, exploits this aesthetic and the social vulnerability of its victims to deliver sensationalist content that attracts readers and boosts sales, regardless of the ethical cost or the harm it may cause to the image or memory of victims during their lifetime, their relatives, or society at large. The absence of familial consent and the rapid circulation of these images exacerbate the situation, constituting a form of symbolic violence

that perpetuates impunity, stigmatisation, and the invisibilisation of structural causes of gender-based violence.

Likewise, media representation of feminicides in the *nota roja* contributes to upholding a dominant public discourse that naturalises violence against women as an isolated issue and the product of individual circumstances, rather than recognising it as a structural manifestation of patriarchy and social inequality. This simplified, fragmented narrative may hinder a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the phenomenon, in addition to potentially limiting the social and political mobilisation required to prevent gender-based violence more effectively. Therefore, these media representations not only affect victims, but also have a profound impact on the social construction of gender, public perception of femicide, and legitimisation of unequal power relations between men and women. By exploiting gender roles and stereotypes, the *nota roja* contributes to the symbolic reproduction of patriarchy by reinforcing social norms that sustain gender-based violence and limit women's agency and rights.

Finally, the photographic representations of feminicides exemplify how necropolitics operate in the *nota roja*. These images dehumanise victims, often marginalised women, diminishing them to objects of a morbid spectacle that reinforces patriarchal and racist hierarchies. Thus, they not only document brutality but actively sustain a necropolitical order that renders certain lives, and women's images, disposable.

In general, the thesis raised reflections on the ethical and social responsibility of sensationalist news media in the coverage of violence against women, as well as on the need to develop new forms of representation that respect the dignity and humanity of victims and contribute to highlighting

structural causes of violence. This also entails a critique and revision of the role of the market and commercial pressures that influence the treatment of news, as well as a questioning of gender power relations underlying media production. The thesis establishes a solid foundation for developing multidisciplinary and multilateral studies that delve into the complex relationship between the media, gender-based violence, and society, through a critical, ethical, and transformative lens. This would facilitate not only a more robust academic understanding but also a positive impact on journalistic practices and public policies aimed at eradicating gender violence, in particular, femicides, and promoting social justice.

Although this thesis addresses intersectionality as an analytical framework for understanding the subordination of women in a patriarchal context, future research could broaden this perspective by investigating in greater detail how the experiences of women from specific ethnic groups, indigenous communities, the LGBTTIQ+ community, or those in diverse socioeconomic conditions are represented in the *nota roja*. This would reveal additional layers of discrimination and stigmatisation reflected in the press and how these intertwine with mechanisms of symbolic violence. Furthermore, while the thesis provides a brief historical analysis of the genre from its origins to the present, future studies could implement more detailed longitudinal analyses to trace how the representation of femicides evolves in relation to social, political, and technological changes, including the influence of contemporary social media and new digital communication platforms. Comparisons with other journalistic genres or international media, such as those in Latin America, could situate the *nota roja* within a broader context and offer perspectives on alternative media practices.

The thesis underscores the necessity of transforming journalistic practices towards an ethical communication that respects the dignity of victims and contributes to the eradication of gender-based violence. Subsequent research could design, implement, and evaluate specific protocols or ethical codes for the coverage of feminicides in Mexican media, exploring the impact of such practices on public perception, empathy towards victims, and the shaping of public policy. Collaboration between academics, journalists, and civil society organisations could be pivotal in this line of work.

Moreover, the methodological combination of critical visual discourse analysis and cultural studies employed in the thesis may be expanded. For instance, further academic research could incorporate quantitative tools to measure the prevalence and effects of certain types of images or narratives, as well as experimental studies on the reception of these images by different audiences. Other visual forms of gender-based violence in Mexico, such as representation in television, film, or social media, could be explored to enrich the theoretical framework and broaden the empirical field. While the thesis mentions the importance of the encoding/decoding model for understanding how different audiences interpret images of femicides, an area for future exploration is the empirical study of these audiences. This could be achieved through qualitative or quantitative research that examines the reactions, interpretations, and potential resistance or negotiation in response to these media messages. This would contribute to a better understanding of the social dynamics surrounding the reception of violence in the media and to designing more effective communication strategies for social awareness.

Given that the thesis provides empirical evidence on the impact of media representation on the normalisation of violence against women and the perpetuation of patriarchal stereotypes, future work could be oriented towards translating these findings into concrete recommendations for the regulation and oversight of media content, as well as for educational campaigns that promote a critical consumption of the press. This would enable academic work to directly influence the improvement of media practices and the protection of human rights, ensuring it does not remain solely a doctoral thesis.

Annex



Figure 1. La Prensa, Sunday, 18 November 2012, 'Matan a ex alcaldesa' (Ex-mayor murdered). The news article, at the top of the page, is about the murder of a female former mayor of Michoacán, Mexico. Previously, she had survived three prior attacks between 2009 and 2010, during one of which her husband died. The victim was reported missing some days before her body was found on a rural path. Forensic reports indicate that she died by a severe cranioencephalic trauma and had blunt force injuries to the head and abrasions on the knees.

Figure 2. Metro, Sunday, 18 November 2012. 'Retiran los escoltas y asesinan a ex Edil' (Withdrawal of security leads to murder of ex-mayor). This report is the same as the one appearing in Figure 1. In fact, it is observed that it is precisely the same photograph as in La Prensa, which is an indication that the image was disseminated to various media outlets. The photograph does not credit its author.



Figure 3. La Prensa, Tuesday, 2 January 2018. On the front-page the headline employs typography of large size and yellow hue. The headline consists solely of a single adverb: '¡Espantoso!' (Horrific!) with exclamation marks, amplifying its impact.

Figure 4. Masthead of *La Prensa*, Sunday, 19 August 2012. The lettering, akin to Times New Roman, is of a more traditional style, rendered in uppercase and black colour.



Figure 5. Masthead of *La Prensa*, Saturday, 26 May 2018. The banner has remained largely unchanged, with only minor adjustments to the logo and the lion on the left.

Figure 6. *Metro*, Saturday, 4 January 2018. On this cover, the masthead maintains its standard typography, white lettering on a red background, amplifying its visual prominence. It features a photograph of a woman's body murdered. The image is positioned in the upper left corner, displaying her bloodied face and part of her torso. Her eyes and mouth remain open. Alongside its distinctive headlines and graphic depictions of violence, it displays the partially nude body of a white woman with censored nipples. Below, the caption reads: '*Batalla de pelos*' (Hair battle), alluding to pubic hair.





Figure 7. *Metro*, Wednesday, 9 May 2018. The front-page reports two femicides in Mexico City: one woman beaten to death, the other shot. The photograph I wish to highlight is near the centre. It depicts a woman lying on a concrete floor, wearing a yellow sleeveless top and bloodstained orange underwear pulled up almost to her chest, partially exposing one breast. Her face displays bruising and swelling around the eyes, with streaks of blood from her nose and mouth covering much of her face and some strands of hair. What strikes me most, however, is that immediately to her left lies a pin-up photograph of a nude woman in semi-profile, revealing her legs, buttocks, and the outline of one breast. Her buttocks are pointed directly towards the image of the murdered woman just described. The pin-up photo bears the caption '*Lengua larga*' (Long tongue) in white letters against a pink background, with clear sexual innuendo.

Figure 8. *Metro*, Monday, 31 July 2000. On this first page, the yellow typography appears against a red background, colours characteristic of tabloid press, despite its more traditional serif typeface.



Figure 9. *Metro*, Tuesday, 27 June 2006. The newspaper's title on this cover appears in white lowercase letters on a red banner. Below, the headline reads '*Ejecutadas*' (Executed). The background photograph depicts the story of a mother and her daughter assassinated while going out to buy a phone card. The foreground shows a naked body lying face down on the ground. In the background, to the left, a body is covered by a blue blanket. Behind it stands a person wearing a badge, likely from the criminal investigation services.

Figure 10. *Metro*, Thursday, 29 November 2012. On the front page, only the newspaper's name appears in a red box, ending in a full stop on the far right. The central headline, 'Cachetada de plomo' (Lead Slap), is in white capital letters outlined in black. It refers to the murder of a woman shot in the right cheek in Mexico City. The headline employs wordplay, alluding to a slap delivered not by a hand but by a bullet. The background photograph depicts the crime, showing the body of a young woman lying horizontally in profile, her bloodied face turned toward the camera. The focal point is her breasts, which, due to the perspective, appear to point upward just below the headline.



Figure 11. *Metro*, Monday, 8 October 2018. In this edition, the red background banner on the cover bearing the newspaper's name is positioned vertically, from top to bottom, further enhancing the dynamism of the title itself, 'Metro'. In the upper right section, there is a photograph of the body of a murdered woman. She is wearing a black bra, a black top pulled down almost to her waist, and jeans. Due to the angle of the photograph, her breasts are prominently displayed, pointing upwards. Immediately adjacent to the red banner is a photograph of a semi-nude pin-up woman, with prominent breasts whose nipples are censored by two maple leaves, wearing tight black trousers. The caption reads 'Las hace grandes' (She makes them big), clearly alluding to the size of her breasts.

Figure 12. *Metro*, Wednesday, 25 July 2018. The main headline on the cover, 'Junta al Muerto' (Gather the Dead), features large yellow typography that starkly contrasts with the photograph's dark background. The standfirst mentions bloodied human remains discovered in a black bag in Ecatepec, Mexico. The striking image shows scattered body parts; on the right, the black bag is visible, while below it, a close-up of the victim's face appears highlighted by a yellow semicircular outline. The title's dark yet humorous tone, Gather the Dead, evoking a jigsaw puzzle, is reinforced by the dotted yellow outline around the remains, alluding to cut-out pieces forming a complete figure.





Figure 13. Metro, Friday, 4 May 2012. The headline on the front page reads 'Acribillada' (Riddled) in large, slightly right-leaning capital letters, white with black outlines. The photograph depicts a half-length close-up of a murdered woman lying on the floor. Her right arm covers her face, though blood is visible. She wears a sleeveless colourful top, exposing her bra. The angle of the shot also emphasises the victim's upwards-pointing breasts.

Figure 14. Metro, Friday, 4 May 2012. The inside page features three photographs, illustrating the cover story as in Figure 13, titled 'Matan a una chava de varios plomazos' (Girl killed by multiple gunshots). The headline uses the Spanish word 'plomazo', which is highly colloquial and only fully intelligible in Mexico. It does not have an exact equivalent in English. However, it literally refers to a gunshot or bullet impact, specifically those traditionally made with 'plomo' or lead. It is a crude and graphic way to refer to a gunshot, used in violent or criminal contexts and, as such, is very typical of the *nota roja*. The first and largest picture displays a lifeless body on the street, covered with a bloodstained white blanket—a typical forensic scene. This commonplace Mexican image includes a distinctive detail: candles placed beside the body by bystanders or local residents, a customary gesture when someone dies violently in public. The lower left photograph depicts a police vehicle and several officers, presumably responding to the crime. The third image, on the lower right, captures the victim's body before forensic covering, alongside what appears to be a forensic officer. Collectively, the page provides further insight into the incident, its context, and, crucially, its aftermath.



Figure 15. La Prensa, Saturday, 17 March 2018. A brief caption that reads 'Hallan muerta a fémica en Monterrey' (Dead female found in Monterrey), consists of a picture of the body of a woman shot dead at the head lying on the street, located at the lower right corner. No further text informs the crime.

Figure 16. *La Prensa*, 25 June 2012. '¡Fuchi!' (Yuck!). The report describes the discovery of a young woman's body, aged 28-30, victim of femicide in Ecatepec, Mexico, a region with one of the country's highest femicide rates. She was dressed in dark trousers and a black blouse pulled up to her waist and was found floating in a sewage canal. Her body bore severe facial trauma and possible burns, indicating torture before death. The report suggests she may have worked at a local nightclub. Regarding the headline, its composition warrants attention: a single bold yellow word in capitals with exclamation marks: '¡Fuchi!', a Mexican Spanish colloquialism expressing disgust at foul odours. Here, it references the crime's grotesque nature, possibly the stench from the victim's body in the sewage. The capital letters attract attention, while the yellow text, outlined in black, heightens sensationalism. The report features three photographs. The first, positioned left-centre, shows forensic experts lifting the body on a stretcher; the victim, covered in black sewage water, has one exposed breast. The adjacent right photograph, taken from a distance, displays her lying horizontally on muddy ground, her bloodied face, messy clothing, and exposed breasts visible. The third, bottom-left, provides another angle, repeating these details. Notably, this last one images' composition directs focus to her pubic area. Thus, the photographs highlight her injuries, the beaten and burned face, alongside her clothing and partial nudity. Coupled with speculation about her alleged nightclub employment, this framing sexualises her, potentially legitimising the crime in public perception. Further sensationalism arises from contextual elements, such as the polluted canal and forensic personnel conducting their examination.

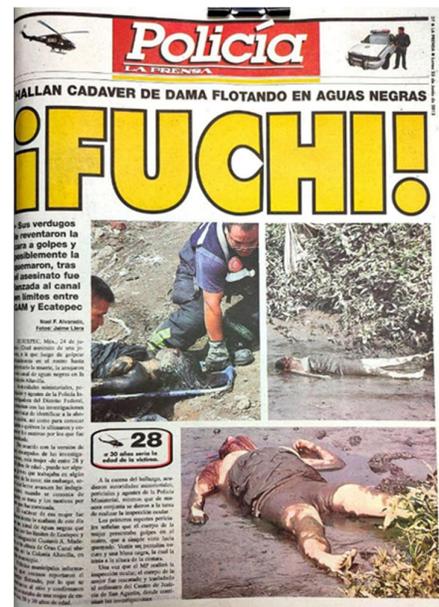


Figure 17. *La Prensa*, 27 April 2018. 'Fue identificada' (Identified). The report details the discovery and identification of a woman's body, a 30-year-old bar owner from Mexico City, an athlete, and mother of a two-year-old. Found at a pumping station in Ecatepec, near Mexico City, after being missing for six days, her body was severely decomposed, with injuries indicating torture, strangulation, and possible sexual assault. The report notes her sportswear and tattoos, which enabled relatives to identify her, contrasting with descriptions of her as a hardworking mother. The headline, 'Identified', reduces the case to a forensic detail, while the emphasis on decomposition and strangulation sensationalises the tragedy. Mentioning her profession as a bar owner risks reinforcing stereotypes that detract from the femicide's severity. The report also includes two small photographs that illustrate these stereotypes. The first, centred at the top, shows her body horizontally placed on a concrete slab, clad in brightly coloured sportswear, a black sleeveless top and green bra, accentuating her figure, though her face is obscured. The second, positioned to the right, displays her face with an athletic hairstyle (braids), red lipstick, eyeliner, and false lashes, as well as a red sleeveless top and black bra. The report relies on gender stereotypes and sensationalism, highlighting her profession, tattoos, and tight sportswear, linking her to sexual appeal, while juxtaposing this with her maternal role. These images further sexualise her through revealing athletic wear and makeup, objectifying her. By focusing on her appearance and occupation, the report may implicitly insinuate her lifestyle contributed to the crime. Although the first photograph obscures her face, the second provides symbolic identification, yet does so stereotypically, as previously noted. The same crime was covered by *Metro* that day, using the same image of her corpse alongside a living portrait: makeup, sunglasses, loose hair, and a low-cut top. This reaffirms that crime scene photographs frequently are leaked to the press for publication.



Figure 20. Metro, Wednesday, 7 March 2018. ‘Se suma una más al listado’ (Another one added to the list). The report details the discovery of a woman’s body, bearing signs of torture, in a vacant lot used as a rubbish dump in Mexico City. The victim was found partially inside a standard black rubbish bag. Notably, the headline frames this as a mere numerical addition to the list of femicide victims, echoing Celestino’s (2021) observation that such reporting normalises gender crimes in Mexico. The report outlines basic facts, the who, how, and where, yet includes gendered and sexualised details: the victim’s age (35-38), light brown dyed hair, a scar on her back, and her semi-naked state, wearing only underwear and a blouse. Three photographs accompany the text. The bottom image shows the victim almost entirely concealed by the black bag tied around her. The upper-left photograph displays facial injuries and blood, corroborating reported wounds, like burns, bruising, and a head injury. Most striking is the right-hand image, exposing her torso and legs, clearly revealing her blouse and underwear. While the lower photo suggests the scene as initially found, the right-hand image implies deliberate exposure and photographic permission.

Figure 21. Metro, Thursday, 1 March 2018. The headline reads ‘‘Olfatea’’ a muerta calcinada’ (‘Sniffs’ a charred female corpse). Although not explicitly stated, it suggests that a dog initially located the corpse by the side of a highway in Texcoco, Mexico. The visual arrangement consists of four photographs. The largest one depicts the victim’s charred remains in the lower right section; the framing also reveals that the image was taken during daylight, with the roadside predominantly covered in dry grass, alongside a police officer and two police vehicles. In a general sense, it pertains to the temporal and spatial context. The photograph in the lower left quadrant shows a dog sniffing the burned body, which gives meaning to the heading. The subsequent image captures the forensic intervention, while the final photograph features onlookers and public officials directing their gaze toward the location of the body, along with several police vehicles. The notable aspect of this composition lies in how multiple photographs are employed to depict the criminal incident. It constitutes a more fragmented composition, as Straw (2016) observes.



Figure 22. La Prensa, Saturday, 08 August 2006. On this back cover, the headline ‘¡Chacal!’ (‘Jackal!’) stands out, referring to a predatory animal. This alludes to a man, depicted in the photograph with his arms raised and hands open in front of him, who sexually assaulted his 14-year-old daughter and allegedly strangled her to prevent her from reporting the incident to the police. The headline is highly eye-catching, rendered in yellow lettering with exclamation marks enclosed in a red box. The combination of red and yellow, along with the exclamation marks, is characteristic of sensationalist news dailies. The aggressor’s facial expression appears to convey remorse for the crime committed against his own daughter, who is shown in the photograph lying to the side on some weeds in a semi-curling position, uncharacteristic of a living person.

Figure 23. Metro, Sunday, 22 January 2012. 'Localizan muerta en río del Edomex' (Woman Found Dead in State of Mexico River). The report describes the discovery of a decomposing woman, aged approximately 35, concealed among debris in a major river near Mexico City. Locals searching for another missing person made the discovery, prompting police and ambulance intervention. Authorities noted the difficulty of identifying victims due to river pollution, with at least three other bodies reportedly recovered in the area within the past month. The report outlines the basic facts: who, how, and where. However, the headline dehumanises the woman by referring to her merely as 'muerta' (dead), a feminine-gendered noun replacing 'mujer muerta' (dead woman), where 'muerta' in Spanish functions adjectivally, stripping her of personhood. Additionally, the report includes elements seemingly justifying the crime. Beneath a central photograph, a police statement reads: 'We have several reports of missing women, but many involve girls who leave for the weekend with their boyfriends.' This undermines the crime's severity, blames victims, and deflects perpetrator accountability. Though the report does not describe clothing, it mentions her age and marital status (single), a recurring pattern in such cases. However, a photograph shows the victim face-down in the river, wearing a knee-length skirt and short-sleeved blouse, all details that, alongside the text, construct a gendered portrayal. The report further sensationalises the discovery by highlighting the body was found 'among rubbish' and 'partially hidden', dramatising residents' reactions, e.g., 'shocked bystanders', and noting the area's poor lighting, framing the incident as something expected. Ultimately, this discourse reflects a sensationalist, victim-blaming, and stereotyped approach.



Figure 24. La Prensa, Tuesday, 30 January 2018. The headline reads '¡Crueldad!' ('Cruelty!'). This report explains that the body of a tortured woman was found in a bathroom in a household. The victim's legs were severed and her left arm amputated. The photograph depicts the victim lying on her back, possibly on what appear to be blankets or sheets, and wearing undergarments. The amputated legs are pixelated, yet darkened blood remains visible at the stumps. Her top may have been lifted to expose the tattoo on her stomach. I am struck by the angle of the still. It is a semi-high-angle shot in which the splayed legs and pubis, along with the tattoo, become the focal point according to the rule of thirds. It is undoubtedly a sexualised image of a woman tortured and murdered in an exceptionally violent manner. Undoubtedly, this is one of the images that most moved me.

Figure 25. *La Prensa*, Saturday 1 July 2006. This back cover refers to several events. The first headline, at the top, with the highest hierarchy in yellow lettering on a black background, states: '¡Espantoso!' (Horrifying!). The brief caption refers to the decapitation of two people in the city of Acapulco, Mexico. Their heads were left in front of a government office in that city. The photograph illustrating it requires little description due to its graphic and grotesque nature: it shows two heads likely belonging to men. Both have their eyes blindfolded, and one also has their mouth taped shut, possibly with packing tape. This practice is very common in organised crime in Mexico. It is perhaps unnecessary to mention that one of the heads shows a clean cut at the neck level with evident traces of blood. The following four photographs depict five incidents in which five individuals, including a woman, were decapitated over a period of three months in the country. These images are explicit. It seems to me that this cover is highly illustrative of the sensationalist and shocking design typical of journalism in the *nota roja*.



Figure 26. *Metro*, Wednesday, 15 August 2012. This back cover refers to two headlines. The one with the greatest visual, typographical, and chromatic hierarchy consists of the text 'Ardor fugaz' (Brief ardor), corresponding to a photograph of a fair-skinned, blonde, blue-eyed woman wearing a red thong and a white short-sleeved T-shirt with a red design at chest level. The woman is posed in an overtly provocative manner, partially turned away, displaying her buttocks while her left hand appears to part them, suggesting the opening of the vagina. Moreover, the woman gazes directly at the camera—and thus, the viewer—in a sexually defiant manner. The photograph includes a brief caption describing the woman as a former pornographic film actress who, after two years, wishes to become a 'better person'. The headline is presented in the typical sensationalist colours of crime tabloids—yellow, red, and black—easily capturing the reader's attention. The second headline reads 'A defender la casa' (Defending the Home), with a lower visual hierarchy in green and white, alluding to the colour of grass. Indeed, the smaller photograph depicts a player from the Mexican national football soccer team. The brief caption refers to the Mexican team's desire to defeat the US national team in Mexico to 'extend the winning streak'. What particularly draws my attention is the page design is, for instance, the arrangement of both the woman's photograph and that of the footballer, with the latter's gaze seemingly directed straight at the former's breast. And not only that: as an observer, when looking at the footballer's face, one's eyes almost inevitably shift towards the woman's breast. Thus, it seems to me that this is a calculated editorial design intended to attract readers' attention. Sports and sex is also a combination commonly observed in the *nota roja*.



Figure 27. La Prensa, Thursday, 8 November 2018, 'Encuentran a fémina encobijada en lote baldío en Texcoco' (Woman found wrapped in blanket in vacant lot in Texcoco). The report describes the discovery of a female corpse, wrapped in a blanket, in a vacant plot near a major Mexican university. The body exhibited blunt force trauma to multiple areas and showed signs of strangulation. In the accompanying photograph, at the lower left corner of the page, the body itself is not visible, though the report supplies these details. In Mexico, wrapping corpses in blankets constitutes a common practice when abandoning murder victims in public spaces.

Figure 28. Metro, Monday, 26 March 2018. 'Coladera: le dan 26 piquetes' (Like a strainer: receives 26 stab wounds). This report concerns a woman who was strangled and stabbed approximately 26 times, found inside a household. The headline mockingly describes the state of her body, comparing it to a 'strainer' in reference to the wounds' perforations. The lower photograph displays the victim's naked body in a near-foetal position, with the focal point directed at her buttocks. On the central-right edge of the frame, the bloody wounds on the victim's body are visible.



Figure 29. La Prensa, Monday, 26 March 2018. '¡Crueldad!' (Cruelty!) This is the same news story as in Figure 29 above. A woman was stabbed at least thirty times and strangled with an electrical cable. Her body was discovered in the living room. In the larger-scale photograph, the victim lies on her left side, with her back and buttocks facing the camera. The woman wears only a thong. Due to the framing, these features become the focal point of the image

Figure 30. *La Prensa*, Friday, 27 January 2012. ¡Pobre chava! (Poor girl!). The report details the discovery of an approximately 18-year-old woman's body with a gunshot wound to the head, found in roadside undergrowth. The photograph in the lower-left corner provides broader context, depicting the typical positioning of homicide victims: the body lies horizontally on the ground. The upper photograph is a close-up, offering greater detail of the woman's face, which is streaked with blood, now darkened by the head wound. The blood has also formed a rivulet of vivid red liquid across the floor, visible with striking clarity.



Figure 31. *La Prensa*, Monday, 17 July 2006, 'Arde mujer en Circuito Interior' (Woman burns on Circuito Interior). This is a double-page report about a murdered woman found ablaze by pedestrians on one of Mexico City's most prominent avenues. She was blindfolded, handcuffed, and gagged, with signs of strangulation. The report includes three photographs centred on the victim's body: one depicting her in flames, and two stills showing fire damage. These are three distinct angles of the same corpse. In the right-hand image, the charred body is more clearly visible, essentially, the aftermath. The victim's face is almost entirely unrecognisable.

Figure 32. *La Prensa*, Sunday, 25 March, 2012. This is the back cover of the issue with the title '¡Pasión fatal!' (Fatal Passion!). The inside pages report that a woman was murdered by her partner who, enraged by her refusal to reconcile, killed both her and his stepson. The near full-page image displays the woman's body lying on the floor. The camera angle deliberately emphasises her pelvic region, with legs splayed and visible bloodstains.





Figure 33. *La Prensa*, Saturday, 28 January 2012. ‘¡Se desangró!’ (Bled out!). This is the back cover of the issue, announcing the case of a woman who was brutally beaten before having her throat slit. The photograph, occupying nearly three-quarters of the page, consists of a close-up of the woman’s face and part of her torso, almost entirely obscured by dried blood. The vivid red contrasts sharply with the dark tones of her hair, cardigan, and the black-and-white stripes of her shirt. The red colour of the banner in *La Prensa*’s masthead, the large yellow lettering of the headline, and the red of the victim’s blood collectively create a highly striking and sensationalist effect.

Figure 34. *Metro*, Saturday, 28 January 2012. ‘Directo al cuello’ (Straight to the neck). This is the same event depicted in Figure 34, now featured on the front page of *Metro*. However, the photograph employs a different angle, a wider shot that, alongside other content, displays the murdered woman from her head in the foreground to her feet in the background. Despite this perspective, the blood remains distinctly visible on her torso, particularly on the breasts, which protrude prominently due to the angle, as well as on sections of her face.



Figure 35. *Metro*, Monday, 17 July 2006. ‘Hallan mujer en llamas’ (Woman found on fire). The article reports the discovery of a woman with a bandage and cord around her neck, still ablaze beneath a bridge over a major Mexico City avenue. The photograph depicts her body, rendered unidentifiable, with residual traces of flames. Her head and much of her face are severely burned, yet her pelvis and one leg, unharmed by the fire, remain visible at the frame’s lower edge. The monochrome palette’s interplay of light and shadow, in black and white, accentuates the contrast between charred and intact areas of the body.

Figure 36. La Prensa, Thursday, 3 May 2012. 'Ultrajada!' (Outraged!). This report details the discovery by a taxi driver of a naked female corpse, raped and suffocated to death, wrapped in a plastic bag. The photograph employs a closed angle yet reveals partial views of the woman's body, including her left arm and face. The fingers and nails occupy the central focal point, emphasised by their red manicure, though not vivid, which immediately signals femininity. This visual detail proves particularly significant given La Prensa's predominantly male readership. A striking contrast emerges between the woman's body and the plastic bag through interplay of light and dark tones. This news item was also featured on the newspaper's back cover with an equally striking image.



Figure 37. La Prensa, Saturday, 10 February 2018. '¡Triple ejecución!' (Triple execution!). The report details the execution of two women and one man in Ciudad Victoria, Mexico. Two photographs are displayed, corresponding to each of the murdered women, but not the man. In both, the red hue of the blood is strikingly prominent. However, the first image, positioned in the upper left corner, is particularly arresting. According to the report, the woman sustained a gunshot wound to the neck. Blood stained her face, arm and, most notably, her torso. The white T-shirt she wore accentuates the vividness and intensity of the red.

Figure 38. La Prensa, Tuesday, 25 July 2006. 'Cruel venganza' (Cruel revenge). A 14-year-old girl was reportedly beaten, raped, and murdered by her sister's partner in retaliation after her sister ended their romantic relationship following several months together. The photograph in the upper right corner, captured from both a high-angle and Dutch-angle perspective, shows the young woman lying outstretched inside her home, partially covered by what appears to be a duvet. The report states that she was completely naked; indeed, one of her breasts is visibly exposed. Another element in the composition further emphasises her vulnerability: not only her age, but also the presence of a teddy bear placed upon her body. It appears to present a significant ethical issue, as it involves a minor, yet the newspaper sexualises the crime.





Figure 39. Metro, Saturday, 1 July 2006. 'Asesina vigilante a novia de puñalada a la yugular' (Security guard stabs girlfriend to death, targeting the jugular). The report describes the murder of a woman stabbed in the jugular by her intimate partner, a security guard, following an argument. Among other details, the woman's body is shown already covered with a blanket, presumably by forensic personnel. Nevertheless, bloodstains around her head and on her trousers remain visible. The photograph is taken from a high-angle perspective, with the body positioned at a tilt, thereby accentuating the brutality of her murder.

Figure 40. La Prensa, Thursday 1 February 2018. '¡Muerte cruel!' (Cruel death!). The report details the discovery of a woman's body, raped, strangled, and ultimately killed by facial and head blows inflicted with a rock. Her remains were discarded in a desolate field. The photograph shows her corpse occupying nearly three-quarters of the frame, with the image itself spanning almost half a page. Despite partial pixelation, the wounds and blood remain strikingly visible in detail. Furthermore, the red hues stand out prominently on the page, readily drawing attention to the image. Perhaps due to the graphic nature of the images, this news story was also included on the newspaper's back cover.



Figure 41. La Prensa, Wednesday, 18 April 2018. 'Enloquecido atacó a cuchilladas a esposa e hijos e intentó matarse' (Madman attacked wife and children with knife and tried to kill himself). The report describes a man who, in an apparent schizophrenic episode, stabbed his wife and one of his children to death. Another child managed to escape, while the man attempted suicide unsuccessfully. In the accompanying image, at the lower right corner of the page, the interior of the crime scene is visible. At the upper centre lies the lifeless body of the woman, partially covered by what appears to be a bedsheet. To the left centre, the bloodied legs of the murdered son are discernible. Bloodstains are evident on the floor, doors, and the sheet covering the woman, among other surfaces. The domestic setting is identifiable through the furniture present in the photograph: a yellow hand-woven chair, an ornamental table with various objects, the doors, and what seems to be a bathroom in the background.



Enloquecido atacó a cuchilladas a esposa e hijos e intentó matarse

LA MUJER EN LA LUNA

MADRID, 17 de abril (EFE).- Un hombre de 40 años, que se declaró loco, atacó a su esposa y a sus hijos con un cuchillo y se intentó matar con un cuchillo. Los hechos ocurrieron en un apartamento de Madrid, donde se rescató al hombre tras intentar suicidarse.

El hombre, de 40 años, fue rescatado tras intentar suicidarse con un cuchillo. Los hechos ocurrieron en un apartamento de Madrid, donde se rescató al hombre tras intentar suicidarse.

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Figure 42. Metro, Saturday, 21 April 2012. 'Le dan tiro en la nuca' (Shot in the neck). The report details the murder of a woman walking along the pavement towards her workplace. An assailant approached her from behind, shot her in the neck, and fled. The photograph depicts a typical *nota roja* scene: the woman's corpse lying on the roadside, surrounded by police and forensic investigators.



Figure 43. Metro, Sunday, 22 April 2012. 'Flor de muerto'. (Flower of the dead). This is the newspaper's front page, featuring an image occupying almost three-quarters of its length, alluding to the *cempasúchil*, a traditional Mexican flower used to honour the deceased. The cover announces an inside report, accompanied by the same photograph at a reduced scale, detailing the discovery of a murdered woman's body: blindfolded, with bound hands, floating in a dark water canal amidst lilies. The photograph reveals only the back of the woman's head, apparently bandaged, along with her back, arms, and tied hands. Nevertheless, within the composition of the still image, the lilies play a significant role, as they mirror the title's floral reference to flowers and dead people.

Figure 44. La Prensa, Wednesday, 14 March 2012. 'Violada y muerta' (Raped and murdered). This reports the discovery of a half-naked 'young and beautiful woman's' body abandoned beside a sewage canal. The corpse showed signs of rape and strangulation. Among other elements, the photograph displays the victim lying on the ground, now covered with a white sheet, surrounded by dirt, rubble, stones, rubbish, and bushes, typical of deprived areas in Mexico.





Figure 45. Metro, Friday, 14 September 2018. 'Fria entre las rocas' (Cold among the rocks). This headline refers to a woman found deceased, hence 'cold', on the banks of a river in Mexico City, surrounded by rocks. The victim's head was covered with her shirt, exposing her black underwear. The photographic composition includes not only rocks but also rubble, garbage, and other forms of debris.

Figure 46. La Prensa, Thursday, 11 October 2012. '¡Pasional!' (Crime of passion!). The report informs on the corpse of a woman found with a shot to the forehead. Apparently, the woman would have been forced to kneel before being murdered. Her body is in the middle of weeds on a property next to a sewage canal. As part of the framing of the still, the setting where the woman's body was abandoned is observed. The body is found stretched out on the floor, with open legs, between plasters and other debris. Blood is seen on her face, already dry and dark.



Figure 47. La Prensa, Saturday, 13 May 2006. 'Asfixió a su esposa para luego ahorcarse' (He suffocated his wife before hanging himself). A man suffocated and murdered his wife in a hotel room after she refused to reconcile following their separation. Subsequently, he inflicted cuts on his wrists and neck before ultimately hanging himself. The report comprises two photographs. The first, positioned at the top, depicts the perpetrator's body in the bathroom. The lower photograph shows the woman's corpse, entirely unclothed. Indeed, what stands out in this image is not only the bloodstains on her body but, most strikingly, her complete nudity, displayed without any form of censorship. Although the photograph is in black and white, it succeeds in producing a shock upon viewing. Within the report, the photograph of the deceased husband holds particular significance, as it may evoke an impression of remorse for the crime perpetrated against his wife.



Figure 48. *La Prensa*, Sunday, 1 April 2012. ‘¡Nieto loco!’ (Mad grandson!). A man, ‘crazed’ by alcohol and drugs, murdered his 75-year-old grandmother because he recalled that, as a child, she had beaten him constantly and given him a ‘bad life’. She sustained ‘at least’ 46 stab wounds from a knife and an axe. The photograph depicts the woman’s corpse lying face down on the bedroom floor, her back drenched in blood, as is the flooring near her head. By labelling the grandson as ‘crazy’ or ‘mad’ and displaying the grandmother’s corpse, the headline constructs the notion of an undeserved death, framing her as merely ‘an elderly woman’, or just a ‘granny’. Perhaps due to the explicit nature of the images, this news story also appeared on the newspaper’s front page.



Figure 49. *La Prensa*, Tuesday, 9 January 2018. ¡Despiadado! (Merciless!). A former police officer stabbed his wife and two underage daughters, decapitated, dismembered them, and slit their abdomens. Once dead, he placed them on a bed inside the household and set them alight to conceal the crimes. At the bottom of the report is a photograph of the murderer, his eyes obscured by a black bar. He appears to have just been arrested. The upper photograph displays the bed with the lifeless bodies of the three victims. The fact that photographers were able to capture the interior of the household and the three victims draws my attention—particularly given that two of them were minors. Yet, this very detail may also underscore the girls’ vulnerability in the face of their father’s brutality.

Figure 50. *Metro*, Wednesday, 7 March 2018. ‘Se suma una más al listado’ (One more added to the list). The report documents the discovery of a woman’s body inside a plastic bag in a vacant lot used for waste disposal. The victim exhibited signs of torture and cranial trauma. Three photographic stills accompany the report. The lowest image shows nearly her entire body concealed within the black bag, with only an arm and hair visible, her face turned downward. Notably, the uppermost image suggests the corpse was repositioned to facilitate photographic documentation. One frame presents a close-up of her bloody face and distinctive reddish hair – a detail the written report underscores. Another depicts her body from the chest downwards, partially shrouded by the bag. Deliberately, the focus of attention, or hot spot, is the underwear. This news story also made the front page, featuring a nearly half-page photograph of the victim face down. This leads me to conclude that the victim was repositioned to be photographed both face up and face down.





Figure 51. La Prensa, Thursday, 2 August 2012. '¡Pobre chava!' (Poor girl!). A young woman, approximately 22 years old, was beaten to death with bricks to the head, allegedly by her half-brother. The photograph depicts her lifeless body in her room, shot from a high, slightly tilted angle, intensifying the report's dramatic effect. Beside her head, the bricks are visible, alongside a large dark bloodstain and splatters on her face, arms, and breasts. Despite the tragedy, the victim is photographed in her underwear inside her home.

Figure 52. Metro, Tuesday, 10 July 2012. 'Buscan a su acompañante' (Alleged friend wanted). This report concerns a Colombian singer in Mexico who allegedly fell from the seventh floor of a building. The apartment, located in an affluent area of Mexico City, belongs to a Mexican businessman who fled. Police were treating the case as a homicide. In the photograph, the victim's body, almost entirely nude, wearing only a blue thong, is visible in the far-right corner, lying face down with a stream of blood beneath her. The report has a stigmatising effect, referring to the victim as an 'companion', 'singer', and Colombian. In Mexico, many women from Colombia work in sex work, bars, or as escorts, often having been trafficked for sexual exploitation. The emphasis in the report on the victim being a Colombian singer reinforces a stigmatised portrayal.



Figure 53. La Prensa, Wednesday, 6 June 2018. 'Putrefacta' (Putrefied). The naked body of a woman was discovered on a northern Mexican highway, bearing burns and in an advanced state of decomposition. Passers-by found it due to the fetid odour. The photograph, at the upper near-central side of the page, shows the victim's corpse face-down among bushes, swollen from putrefaction. The focus centres on her buttocks, barely censored by pixelation.



Figure 54. *La Prensa*, Thursday, 19 January 2012. ‘¡Ya van 2!’ (Already 2!). A ‘young and beautiful woman’, aged approximately 22, was raped and strangled, her body abandoned on a dirt road where another woman’s remains had been found in similar circumstances nearly a month earlier. Reports note, among other details, that the victim’s trousers were pulled down to her thighs and her hands bound. The dominant photograph, occupying almost the full page, shows the woman lying on her left side, hands tied, with her jeans partially lowered and her shirt lifted to just below her bust.

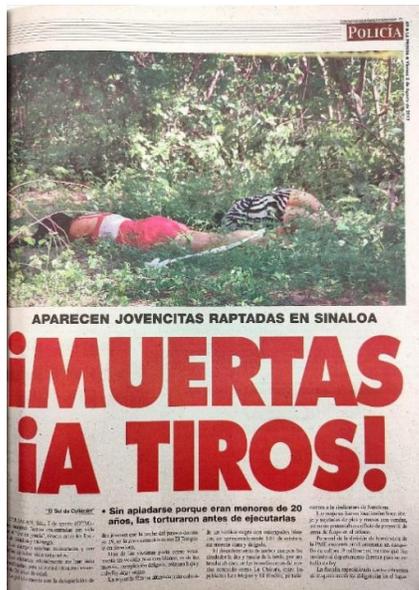


Figure 55. *La Prensa*, Friday, 3 August 2012. ‘¡Muertas a tiros!’ (Shot dead!). The report states that two women, aged under 20, were found dead at the border of two Mexican provinces, each with a *coup de grâce* to the head, their hands bound, and eyes covered. Though photographed from a distance, their clothing aligns with the report’s description: short dresses, one of them sleeveless, and the rear of one victim’s pink thong, her position drawing attention to her exposed lower body.

Figure 56. *Metro*, Thursday, 1 March 2018, ‘Asesinan a otra escort’ (Another escort murdered). The report details the discovery of a young Venezuelan woman’s body who advertised her services on a prominent Mexican sex-work website. She had been beaten and suffocated. In the accompanying photograph (lower right corner), the victim appears fully clothed, slim, wearing tight jeans, legs apart. Following the rule of thirds, the focal point is her pelvis, positioned centrally. A secondary visual strategy appears in a smaller inset image above the main photograph, marked by a double-ended yellow arrow. It shows the woman alive, taking a mirror selfie, dressed in leggings, boots, a leather jacket, and hair extensions, emphasising her pronounced bust and buttocks. As with some Colombian women arriving in Mexico, Venezuelan women also frequently enter the country to work in the sex industry. Many also fall victim to human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Consequently, this report’s use of language when referring to ‘another murdered escort’ perpetuates a stigmatised image of the victim.



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