Beyond the Crime:

True Crime Podcasts as Spaces for Community-Building among Young Italian Women

Student Name: Clara Pedullà
Student Number: 701336

Supervisor: Linda Kopitz

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Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, true crime podcasts have emerged as a globally popular audio genre, blending entertainment with intimate and emotionally charged storytelling. In Italy, this genre has recently gained substantial traction, yet scholarly attention remains limited, particularly with regard to gendered listening practices. While research in Anglo-American contexts has examined women's emotional engagement with true crime media, little is known about how these dynamics play out among Italian audiences. This thesis addresses this gap by investigating how young Italian women engage with true crime podcasts, and how such engagement fosters community, emotional empowerment, and civic reflection in a context marked by high rates of femicide and institutional distrust.

The central research question guiding this study is: *"How do Italian true crime podcasts foster a sense of community and belonging among young women?"*. In order to answer this question, the thesis employs a qualitative, multi-method approach that combines eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with a qualitative content analysis of approximately 300 user-generated YouTube comments from the popular podcast *Elisa True Crime* (De Marco, 2020-). Drawing on feminist media studies, affect theory, and theories of digital participation, the study explores how podcast listening becomes a socially and emotionally meaningful practice that goes beyond entertainment to support preparedness, critical engagement, and ethical solidarity.

The findings reveal that podcast listeners experience a heightened sense of vulnerability that paradoxically leads to empowerment. Through emotionally resonant narratives, listeners rehearse risk scenarios, develop strategies for interpreting danger, and reflect on systemic injustices. The study demonstrates that podcast-based parasocial interaction plays a significant role in fostering a sense of community and promoting social change.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that true crime podcasts function not only as sources of emotional coping and knowledge-building, but as informal sites of ethical education, community formation, and civic participation. By amplifying women's voices and mapping the interpretive labour they perform, the study highlights the potential of podcasting to generate quiet yet persistent forms of social critique and feminist belonging in the Italian context.

KEYWORDS: *true crime podcasts, community-building, women empowerment, audience engagement*

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, true crime podcasts have become one of the most popular and culturally significant audio genres worldwide, particularly among women (Boling & Hull, 2018, p. 92; McGregor, 2022, p. 10; Pâquet, 2023, p. 4; Vicary & Fraley, 2010, pp. 82-84). Often framed as entertainment, these serialised audio narratives investigate real-life criminal cases, captivating audiences through suspense, intimacy, and emotional storytelling. In Italy, the genre is now experiencing a rapid rise in popularity, with shows like *Indagini* (Nazzi, 2022-present), *Demoni Urbani* (Ciaravella, 2020-present), and *Elisa True Crime* (De Marco, 2021-present) consistently leading the podcast charts.

This study argues that true crime podcasts have become a space in which young Italian women negotiate emotions, reflect on injustice, and cultivate relational forms of resistance and belonging. It suggests that podcast listening is not merely a solitary leisure activity, but a layered social and affective practice that helps listeners process fear, resist dominant narratives, and create informal ethical communities. Drawing on in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis (QCA), the study explores how listening to stories of gender-based violence gives rise to emotional reflection, moral critique, and shared acts of remembrance. In doing so, it shows that podcast audiences should not be viewed as passive consumers, but as active participants who engage with media in deeply affective, interpretive and political ways.

While the global success of true crime has already prompted considerable scholarship, particularly in the Anglo-American context (Boling & Hull, 2018; Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Slakoff, 2023), far less attention has been given to its development and meaning within other national settings, particularly in terms of how listeners engage with these narratives in their own cultural contexts. Even more absent is a focused inquiry into the gendered dynamics of such engagement, despite the fact that the genre's primary audience is overwhelmingly female across countries (Boling & Hull, 2018, p. 92; McGregor, 2022, p. 10; Pâquet, 2023, p. 4; Vicary & Fraley, 2010, pp. 82-84). Therefore, this study investigates how young Italian women engage with true crime podcasts, and what this engagement means beyond entertainment. The social and political relevance of this inquiry is anchored in Italy's ongoing femicide crisis and the media narratives that surround it. Indeed, despite decades of advocacy, gender-based violence is still all too often framed in public discourse as the product of individual pathology, jealousy, or uncontrollable rage (Busso et al., 2020, p. 94). In particular, Italian news outlets frequently use euphemisms like "raptus" or "delitto passionale", which obscure structural dynamics and depoliticise violence

(Capecchi & Gius, 2023, pp. 34-36). By contrast, true crime podcasts arguably offer a slower, more attentive form of storytelling, allowing women to emotionally engage with cases that feel both distant and deeply familiar. Therefore, this study shows how listening to these narratives becomes a means for women to reflect on institutional failure, recognise systemic injustice, and reimagine solidarity.

From an academic perspective, this research lies at the intersection of feminist media studies, affect theory, and digital cultural analysis. Central to the thesis is the idea that emotions are not merely private feelings, but relational and political forces. Drawing on Ahmed's (2004) theory of *affective orientation*, the study conceptualises emotions as a way of "turning towards" others, towards pain, injustice, or care, and of shaping how individuals come to interpret their place in the world (pp. 6-8). In the context of true crime podcasting, affect is considered to be the mechanism through which listeners reflect, connect, and act. Similarly, Zembylas's (2007) concept of *affective communities* offers a framework for understanding how listeners forge connections through shared grief, remembrance, and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, these communities emerge through collective emotional responses to trauma, and are marked by their refusal to disengage or look away (pp. 178-179). Furthermore, this study builds on Gorton's (2007) feminist account of *emotional epistemologies*, which treats emotion as a valid mode of knowledge production that is embodied, situated, and relational (pp. 333-339). This perspective is essential for understanding how listeners learn from and through stories of violence and how these emotional encounters can provide insight and encourage reflection and resistance. Building on this, Papacharissi's (2015) concept of *affective publics* is then employed to explore the collective dimension of podcast listening. These publics are loosely networked formations that coalesce around shared affective investments in mediated narratives. They are not formal movements, but rather communities of feeling that are politically meaningful (p. 6). Together, these conceptual tools inform an interpretation of podcast listening as a layered practice of ethical engagement, where emotion, critique and care intersect.

In order to answer the research question - *"How do Italian true crime podcasts foster a sense of community and belonging among young women?"* - the study employs a qualitative, multi-methods research design. The first layer of the analysis is based on eight semi-structured interviews with Italian women aged 24-35 who regularly listen to true crime podcasts. The interviews sought to explore how participants relate to, interpret and reflect on the stories they hear, and how these reflections circulate within their personal relationships and social contexts. The second layer consists of a qualitative content analysis of

approximately 300 comments on YouTube from four selected podcast episodes, each of which focuses on a case of femicide. This material reveals how emotional responses become visible in digital public spheres and how comment sections can serve as spaces for emotional recognition, solidarity and critique. To analyse this material, a thematic coding process was conducted using four guiding analytical categories: *vulnerability*, *empowerment*, *resistance*, and *community*. These categories were developed through the operationalisation of key concepts drawn from the theoretical framework. For example, *vulnerability* was examined not as weakness, but as an emotionally charged awareness of shared risk and structural exposure. *Empowerment*, in turn, was identified in instances where listeners described emotional preparedness, heightened vigilance, or a deepened sense of responsibility. *Resistance* was captured in the ways participants challenged dominant narratives, educated others, or expressed outrage at institutional failures. Lastly, *community* was conceptualised as an emotional relationship that emerges through acts of remembrance, recognition, and shared attention.

The analysis of the collected data produced the empirical findings of this research. These findings reflect the four key dimensions and conceptual lenses introduced in the theoretical framework, which are explored in the following structure. The first chapter of the final analysis explores *Preparedness as Empowerment*, how listeners process the emotional intensity of true crime podcasts, particularly by recognising vulnerability as a shared and systemic condition. The second chapter, *Femicide as Collective Responsibility*, traces how this vulnerability transforms into a sense of preparedness, moral clarity, and feminist critique. It demonstrates how participants come to identify patterns of institutional neglect and cultural complicity, and how these insights shape their responses. Moving forward, the chapter *Participation as Everyday Resistance* focuses on small yet significant acts of resistance, such as confronting victim-blaming, reposting cases, or speaking out in personal relationships. While informal and dispersed, these acts constitute meaningful forms of civic engagement. Finally, the fourth chapter examines *Relating as Community-Building,* demonstrating how these affective practices culminate in a diffuse but powerful sense of community. It demonstrates how listeners connect with each other through comment sections, shared memories, and parasocial relationships with podcast hosts. These communities are not held together by formal structures, but by shared emotions.

By bringing together these threads, this thesis presents an analysis of podcast listening as an emotionally charged and socially significant practice, positing how the seemingly private act of listening can become relational and political, fostering

attentiveness, mobilising critique and cultivating a sense of belonging. Ultimately, the thesis calls for a rethinking of true crime podcast audiences, viewing them not as passive or merely entertained, but as emotionally engaged, ethically responsive, and socially situated. By doing so, the thesis aims to contribute to broader conversations about feminist media practices, digital solidarity, and the politics of storytelling.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the key theoretical approaches and concepts relevant to the study of young Italian women's engagement with true crime podcasts. These concepts include community-building, empowerment, justice-seeking, parasocial relationships, and collective identity formation. Together, these concepts provide a framework for exploring how true crime podcasts function as digital spaces where listeners can navigate fear, engage critically with justice narratives, and foster emotional and social connections with others. These narratives not only provide structured opportunities for meaning-making and reflection, but also promote participatory engagement, emotional coping, and informal advocacy around gender-based violence and justice.

The first section explores theoretical perspectives on emotion and empowerment, focusing on how media engagement allows individuals, especially women, to confront issues of vulnerability, fear, and personal safety. This section maps existing scholarship on how crime-related media can act as emotionally charged yet structured spaces for meaning-making. Drawing on *empowerment theory* (Kabeer, 1999) and *media-based emotional coping* (Nabi et al., 2021), it examines how audiences use mediated narratives to process anxiety, rehearse responses to risk, and build emotional resilience. Further research into female media consumption further highlights that crime stories can help listeners to confront social fears and transform them into tools for preparedness and personal control (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Boling & Hull, 2018; Pâquet, 2020; Pâquet & Williamson, 2024).

The second section focuses on participatory engagement, examining how listeners move beyond emotional responses to critical interaction with justice narratives and institutional authority. In this context, the concept of *jurification* (Pâquet, 2020) is key to understanding how podcast audiences informally adopt the role of jurors, evaluating cases, assessing responsibility and voicing scepticism towards legal systems. This participatory dynamic reflects broader trends in digital citizenship, where listeners engage in advocacy and information-seeking, ultimately participating in informal justice practices (Arda & Akdemir, 2021; Dahlgren & Hill, 2022; Livingstone, 2013). These forms of engagement position audiences not only as media consumers, but as active contributors to public discourse around justice and gender-based violence.

Finally, the third section shifts the focus to community and collective identity, examining how seemingly individual podcast listening experiences can lead to a sense of shared emotional, social and political belonging. Parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) are central to this process, allowing listeners to form emotional bonds with podcast

hosts and guests, and creating a sense of relational intimacy and trust. Through repeated engagement and shared emotional responses, audiences develop a sense of belonging to an imagined community of listeners. This aligns with theories of *networked publics* and *affective communities* (Benkler, 2013; Zembylas, 2007), which demonstrate how digital platforms can bring fragmented individuals together around shared concerns, identities and values, particularly with regard to issues of justice and gender.

By integrating these perspectives, this chapter provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how true crime podcasts shape young Italian women's experiences, fostering a space for engagement, empowerment, and digital justice-seeking.

2.1 Podcasts, Emotion and Empowerment

Media engagement is rarely just about consumption; it is also about how we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. Podcasting has evolved into one of the most widely consumed digital formats of the 21st century, with the true crime emerging as a particularly popular genre (McGregor, 2022, p.1; Pâquet, 2023, p. 2). Following the breakthrough success of Serial in 2014, the genre exploded in popularity, catalysing a wave of investigative and narrative audio productions focused on real-life crimes (Boling & Hull, 2019, pp. 92-93). Among these listeners, women constitute a clear majority, with 73% of true crime podcast listeners being women. This gendered engagement is not incidental, but is instead based on stronger emotional and social reasons (Boling & Hull, 2018, p. 95). McGregor (2022) confirms this demographic trend, highlighting how the intimacy, portability and low barrier to entry of podcasting have made it particularly appealing to women and marginalised communities (p. 8). She attributes the increase in the number of women listening to true crime podcasts to the aesthetic intimacy of the medium and the emotional and cognitive functions it fulfils, particularly its ability to process fears and make sense of vulnerability (p. 9). This engagement is shaped by two interrelated conceptual processes: emotional coping and empowerment.

Women's engagement with true crime media, particularly podcasting, has been consistently marked by a paradox: although these stories often contain graphic, distressing accounts of gender-based violence, such as rape, abduction and murder, female audiences report finding them not only captivating, but emotionally valuable (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 82; Boling & Hull, 2018, pp. 98-99). To understand this phenomenon, it is important to consider the emotional engagement behind it. Ahmed (2004) provides a valuable perspective into fear as a relational and spatial force that circulates between bodies, shaping boundaries

and identities, rather than being an internal feeling. According to her analysis, fear does not reside inside individuals; rather, it is produced through encounters with others, and is projected onto bodies that are racialised, gendered, or otherwise socially marginalised (p. 63). Thus, fear becomes a spatial organiser, dictating where we can and cannot go, how we should move, and whom we should avoid. For women especially, this manifests in everyday acts of bodily regulation and spatial negotiation. Ahmed (2004) emphasises that fear "works to align bodily and social space", thereby reinforcing boundaries between the self and the other, safety and danger, and belonging and threat (p. 70). Building on this, Gorton (2007) argues that emotion in the media is deeply political and epistemological, as well as expressive. According to her, affect is a mode of knowing that shapes how individuals, especially women, experience subjectivity and respond to the social world, not only through cognition, but also through feeling and embodiment (p. 344). Crucially, both Ahmed and Gorton challenge the idea that emotions are apolitical or private. Instead, they show that emotional experiences such as fear, shame, and anxiety are intertwined with social hierarchies and systems of power. Therefore, when the media becomes a means of transmitting emotional knowledge, it enables women to understand systemic inequalities in more intimate and emotional terms (Gorton, 2007, p. 344). For instance, Vicary and Fraley (2010) discovered that women are significantly more attracted to true crime stories than men, particularly those concerning female victims and information about how they survived or failed to escape (p. 82). This phenomenon can be partly explained by evolutionary psychology: learning about violent crimes may serve as a means of acquiring fitness-relevant information, i.e. knowledge that could improve one's survival outcomes in a threatening environment (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 83). Indeed, true crime podcasts appeal to female audiences not only because of their content, but also because of their emotional impact. According to Nabi et al. (2021), media consumption can serve as a powerful tool for emotional regulation, enabling users to process negative feelings such as anxiety and fear in a controlled environment. They describe this as *media-based emotional coping*, whereby individuals choose distressing content not to heighten their discomfort; rather, to gain emotional mastery over it, thereby preparing themselves psychologically for similar real-world threats (pp. 90-91). Consequently, within the emotionally charged narratives of true crime, women often find opportunities to reflect on their own vulnerabilities, to imagine worst-case scenarios, and to rehearse potential responses. In this way, true crime podcasts arguably serve as both sources of emotional identification and as tools for navigating social risk, encouraging listeners to consider fear not merely as an emotion, but as a culturally and

politically constructed state that shapes movement, vulnerability, and moral judgement.

The emotional labour involved in listening to true crime podcasts is not an end in itself, but often functions as a gateway to empowerment, particularly by providing practical knowledge. As mentioned above, Vicary and Fraley's experimental studies found that women consistently chose stories containing defence tactics, psychological insights into the perpetrator, and female victims. This preference was not for violence per se, but for the opportunity to learn from it (p. 82). Participants indicated that they were motivated to consume true crime content in order to learn how to avoid becoming victims themselves (p. 83). This survival-based engagement with media represents a form of what Nabi et al. (2021) describe as structured narrative exposure, which is used to regulate emotions, prepare for possible threats, and transform anxiety into preparedness (p. 92). For female listeners, these narratives serve as simulated rehearsal and psychological processing spaces. Repeated exposure to narrative risk can help audiences forecast and mentally prepare for potential threats by analysing the decisions made by victims or perpetrators, and by integrating those lessons into their cognitive maps of danger and response (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 83; Pâquet, 2023, p. 4; Nabi et al., 2020, pp. 85-87).

These motivations suggest that listening to true crime is not only a private emotional experience, but also a socially embedded and epistemic practice. As Boling and Hull (2018, pp. 98–99) observe, many women engage with the genre for reasons beyond entertainment; for example, to seek emotional validation, make moral evaluations and form social connections. This supports Gorton's (2007) argument that emotions are not only expressive but also political and knowledge-producing, shaping how individuals interpret personal experiences and broader structures of power. By providing detailed scenarios of threat and survival, podcasts allow female listeners to convert abstract anxieties into tangible self-protection measures, thereby reinforcing their sense of agency. Rather than inducing passivity or despair, these narratives often produce feelings of readiness, confidence, and awareness, psychological states that many theorists consider to be core components of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999, pp. 438-439). They teach women to recognise unsafe situations and warning signs, and provide them with scripts for interpreting personal and social experiences of threat. Podcasts may also serve as sites of discursive possibility, or what Kabeer describes as the expansion of what is imaginable or sayable (p. 440). For example, through repeated engagement with survivor stories or systemic injustices, listeners may come to recognise patterns of abuse, as well as possibilities for resistance, intervention, or solidarity. In this way, listening to podcasts aligns with what Boling and Hull (2018)

describe as socially motivated genre engagement, whereby female listeners use media to fuel conversations, critique structures and form interpretive communities (p. 106). In this sense, emotional engagement with true crime podcasts can be seen as a prelude to civic or collective participation, laying the affective and cognitive groundwork for practices of critique, conversation, and solidarity that extend beyond the act of listening.

2.2 Podcasts as Participation

While true crime podcasts offer an emotionally resonant space in which to process fear and cultivate preparedness, their impact often extends well beyond internal reflection. Listening to particularly emotionally charged and ethically complex narratives can encourage critical engagement, interpretive participation, and justice-oriented action. In other words, for many women, consuming true crime content does not end with coping with emotions; it also generates a sense of moral responsibility and interpretive agency that compels them to reflect, question, investigate, and speak out (McGregor, 2022, pp. 5-6; Brown, 2015, pp. 260-263; Livingstone, 2013, p. 23).

This participatory engagement is shaped by the intimate nature of the podcast medium. Despite being consumed privately, podcasts often foster what McGregor (2022) and others describe as *parasocial intimacy*: a perceived closeness with podcast hosts that encourages listeners to trust them, invest emotionally, and follow calls to action (p. 5). Through repeated exposure to detailed cases of injustice, listeners often form strong attachments not only to the hosts, but also to the victims, their families, and the social contexts behind the crimes. These emotional connections often lead to shared rituals of grief, anger, fear, and learning, which listeners experience as active members of interpretive communities. As Boling and Hull (2018) argue, women engage with true crime podcasts not only for entertainment, but to form emotional bonds, foster conversations, and critique systems of power (p. 106). Similarly, Gorton (2007) emphasises that media emotions are both epistemic and political, shaping how women understand themselves and their social world (p. 344). As Livingstone (2015) further argues that modern audiences are no longer passive consumers, but participatory agents who co-construct meaning and identity in digital networks, often through emotionally charged engagement and collective reflection (pp. 440-442). Furthermore, these processes of identification, parasocial interaction, and emotional transport can often lead to sustained engagement and even behavioural shifts, particularly when listeners feel morally aligned with the values of the podcast hosts or subjects (Brown, 2015, pp. 260-263). This engagement has led to a process that Pâquet (2020) refers to as

jurification: the process through which audiences informally take on the role of jurors, weighing evidence, questioning motives, and critiquing institutional failures within the justice system (pp. 424-425). Through her analysis of investigative true crime podcasts such as *The Teacher's Pet* (2018), Pâquet (2020) demonstrates how listeners are drawn into active processes of moral reasoning and legal assessment, forming opinions about guilt, complicity, and credibility (p. 6). This participatory dynamic is particularly relevant for women, who may turn to podcasts as alternative spaces for legal and moral reasoning when traditional justice systems feel inaccessible or untrustworthy. This aligns with Benkler's (2006) broader argument that networked information platforms can expand access to civic participation and redress by lowering institutional barriers to expression and collective action (p. 259). In this way, these practices align with broader developments in digital activism and informal civic participation. Indeed, contemporary media audiences increasingly blur the line between consumer and citizen, engaging with content not only to be informed, but to take action through online commentary, knowledge-sharing, or structural critique (Dahlgren and Hill, 2022, p. 25).

In the Italian context, this form of participatory justice-seeking is particularly significant. Although Italy has one of the lowest overall homicide rates in Europe, femicide remains a deeply entrenched and culturally specific issue: in 2023, for instance, 96 out of 117 female homicide victims were murdered by a partner or family member (ISTAT, 2023). Furthermore, the prevalence of femicides is not the only pressing issue in Italy; the way in which these crimes are portrayed in the traditional media is also a significant concern. Indeed, Italian media frequently reproduce a problematic narrative of gendered violence, relying on passive syntax, metaphors of illness, and discursive distancing to obscure perpetrators' accountability (Busso et al., 2020, pp. 34-36). Victims are often framed as naïve, complicit, or even responsible, while perpetrators are described as acting out of jealousy or emotional overwhelm. This language normalises violence and individualises its causes. In fact, several sociological studies conducted in Italy over the years have shown that violence against women and girls (VAWG) has long been presented primarily from the perpetrators' point of view in mainstream media coverage of femicides. In news stories, violent men have consistently been portrayed as being driven by feelings associated with romantic love, amour fou, jealousy or sudden madness. The media has stripped perpetrators of their responsibility, instead blaming those who have suffered the crime (Capecchi & Gius, 2023, p. 94). While previous studies, such as those by Vicary and Fraley (2010) and Pâquet (2020), have emphasised the informative and justice-seeking functions of true crime media,

they have not focused on how podcasts may perpetuate problematic discourse. By contrast, Slakoff (2023) provides a critical perspective, highlighting that even true crime podcasts can perpetuate victim-blaming and perpetrator justification, particularly when portraying intimate partner violence as an isolated, inevitable, or psychologically determined occurrence (p. 4349). The presence or absence of such framings is not inherent to the genre; it depends on how hosts choose to tell stories, what details they include or omit, and how they position victims, perpetrators, and institutions.

In this context, it is not podcasting itself that challenges dominant media narratives, but rather its capacity to encourage critical thinking. As Slakoff (2023) argue it is the role of audiences in practising narrative resistance that matters: a process through which listeners reject victim-blaming narratives, question institutional narratives, and demand justice (p. 4349). Through this lens, podcast audiences are active participants in meaning-making, rather than passive recipients (Livingstone, 2013, p. 25; Pâquet, 2020, pp. 424–425). They engage with stories both ethically and politically, often mobilising around cases to support victims' families, reopen investigations, or critique systemic failures. When storytelling practices and audience reception align with a justice-oriented ethics, true crime podcasts can function as tools for civic engagement. This is especially evident in countries such as Italy, where traditional media frequently depoliticise femicide by ignoring its structural roots. Here, podcasting emerges as a counterpublic platform, a space where alternative narratives can be constructed, debated, and circulated. As Arda and Akdemir (2021) show, these participatory spaces empower users to express their civic voice and to take collective action (p. 92). Rather than consuming crime as spectacle, listeners reframe it as a call to responsibility, transforming spectatorship into solidarity.

2.3 Podcasts as Community

As outlined in the previous sections, despite their inherently individualised modes of consumption, true crime podcasts foster a distinct sense of community through emotional storytelling, participatory affordances, and digitally networked interaction (Benkler, 2013, p. 215; Livingstone, 2013, p. 23; Pâquet, 2020, p. 428; Arda & Akdemir, 2021, p. 1079). This sense of community unfolds across two key dimensions: first, through the parasocial relationships that listeners develop with podcast hosts (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Green & Brock, 2000; Brown, 2015, p. 262; McGregor, 2022, p. 5; Pâquet & Williamson, 2023, p. 6), and second, through the collective identity and solidarity that emerges among listeners themselves (Arda & Akdemir, 2021, p. 1079; Benkler, 2013, p. 215; Slakoff, 2023, p. 4349;

Zembylas, 2007, pp. 214, 218). These forms of mediated intimacy and imagined connection become the foundation for deeper social engagement, shared meaning-making, and, in some cases, collective action around justice and gender-based violence.

One of the most powerful mechanisms underpinning podcast community-building is the parasocial relationship between listener and host. Originally theorised by Horton and Wohl (1956) and further expanded by Brown (2015), parasocial interaction involves the development of emotionally meaningful, one-sided relationships with media figures. In the podcast format, this bond is intensified by the medium's aural intimacy and conversational style. McGregor (2022), for example, describes this phenomenon as "a sense of one-to-one connection with hosts who feel like *friends in your ears*" (p. 5), a feeling that fosters trust, emotional alignment, and interpretive openness. Importantly, this emotional bond is not a coincidence; it plays a crucial role in shaping how audiences engage with true crime narratives. Indeed, according to transportation theory, individuals who are cognitively and emotionally immersed in a narrative are more likely to identify with the characters and internalise the story's moral lessons (Green & Brock, 2000, pp. 701-703, 710). In the context of true crime, this immersion may foster emotional alignment with the hosts, who are often positioned as moral commentators, and with the victims, whose stories are told in ways that evoke empathy and ethical reflection. Brown (2015) suggests that this emotional alignment can be especially meaningful for women, particularly when narratives reflect personal fears or broader experiences of vulnerability (p. 262). In this way, parasociality provides both emotional validation and interpretive structure, guiding how listeners understand violence, justice, and systemic institutional failure.

Crucially, parasocial intimacy does not remain confined to private emotional experience; it often serves as a bridge between personal emotion and public discourse. As mentioned in the previous sections, today's audiences are not passive recipients of stories, but active participants in shaping their meaning, often through emotionally charged discussions and collective reflection (Livingstone, 2013, p. 23). Parasocial trust can thus cultivate what Gorton (2007) calls an *emotional epistemology*, whereby feelings shape knowledge and form the basis for collective judgement and action (p. 344). When hosts express outrage, sorrow, or empathy, they model emotionally and morally appropriate responses, helping listeners to process their own reactions and recognise shared interests. Over time, these responses converge to form shared emotional orientations towards justice and social change.

Beyond this vertical axis of listener–host intimacy, podcast communities also develop through horizontal networks of listeners themselves. These connections, often formed through digital platforms, allow for the exchange of interpretations, the sharing of emotional experiences, and the coordination of responses to injustice. Arda and Akdemir (2021) describe this form of digitally networked activism as particularly powerful for marginalised users, who may not see their experiences reflected in mainstream media (p. 1079). In the context of gendered violence, this is especially salient. For many women, listening to stories of femicide, institutional neglect, or survivor resistance resonates with personal or collective experiences of fear, disillusionment, and trauma. These shared emotional responses, as Zembylas (2007) argues, can give rise to *affective communities*: groups united not by geography or identity, but by emotional investment and a commitment to justice (p. 260). Such communities foster recognition, solidarity, and even healing, particularly when built around shared affective responses to systemic harm (p. 261). Arguably, what distinguishes these podcast-based affective communities is their capacity to move from recognition to action. Listeners often transform their emotional investments into civic practices: sharing episodes to raise awareness, participating in digital campaigns, supporting victim advocacy efforts, or mobilising around legal reforms (Dahlgren & Hill, 2022, p. 25; Arda & Akdemir, 2021, p. 1079; Benkler, 2013, p. 215; Pâquet, 2020, pp. 424-429).

These actions are spontaneous, emerging from a moral culture of engagement shaped by repeated exposure to emotionally charged stories and guided by hosts who frame crime as a matter of public concern. In this sense, an *ethical citizenship* (Dahlgren and Hill, 2022, p. 25) arises through the everyday emotional and moral work of listeners who use media as a site for reflection, solidarity, and critique. Although these listener-driven forms of engagement are informal, they are far from inconsequential. As discussed in the previous section, Pâquet (2020) identifies a process she terms *jurification*, in which podcast audiences assume quasi-judicial roles: assessing credibility, interpreting evidence, and critiquing institutional responses (pp. 424-425). But in contrast to the neutrality of the courtroom, these communities are governed by what she calls a *moral economy*, one shaped by grief, care, and solidarity rather than legal protocols (p. 429). In this sense, true crime podcast audiences do not merely consume narratives of crime and justice; they reinterpret them through emotional and ethical lenses, creating alternative spaces of accountability and memory.

This framework is particularly relevant in the Italian context. As several studies have shown, Italian media frequently portray femicide through depoliticising frames that obscure

structural causes, individualise perpetrators' motives, and implicitly blame victims (Busso et al., 2020; Capecchi & Gius, 2023). Within this narrative void, true crime podcasts may offer a counterpublic platform, an affective and discursive space in which alternative interpretations of violence can be constructed and shared. While not all podcasts resist problematic framings (Slakoff, 2023, p. 4349), many afford listeners the opportunity to engage critically with stories, emotionally connect with victims and their advocates, and imagine justice in broader, more inclusive terms. Consequently, this shared emotional alignment, anchored in relationships with hosts, victims, and broader themes of systemic injustice, enables podcast communities to function as affective publics: groups capable of interpreting violence differently in ways that generate civic energy, social solidarity, and demands for change.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach taken to investigate how young Italian women engage with true crime podcasts as emotionally charged spaces where experiences of gender-based violence and justice are negotiated and reimagined. As the study focuses on emotions, meaning-making, and relational dynamics, a qualitative approach was taken to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. Rather than aiming for generalisability, the objective is to understand how listeners relate to podcast narratives, how these stories resonate with their lived realities, and how they engage in collective reflection and action, both online and offline. The chapter describes the research design, methods of data collection and analysis, and the operationalisation of core concepts such as empowerment, collective engagement, and community-building. It also discusses the ethical considerations involved in working with sensitive topics and personal experiences. Together, these methodological choices provide a coherent and reflexive foundation for addressing the research questions through a multi-layered exploration of both individual and collective listeners' responses.

3.1 Research Design

At the heart of this study is an exploration of how listening to true crime podcasts becomes a site for emotional reflection, informal learning, and collective identity among young Italian women navigating a cultural landscape marked by gendered violence and institutional failure. Given the emotional and relational nature of the phenomena under study, a qualitative approach offers the most appropriate lens to access the complexity of listener engagement. Rather than looking for generalisations, the focus is on how listeners interpret crime narratives, how they relate to them, and how they connect with others online and offline around shared concerns, fears, and values. As Brennen (2017) observes, qualitative methods are especially valuable for examining how people make sense of media and how these understandings shape their everyday lives (p. 65). This makes them especially fitting for this kind of research. Indeed, true crime podcasts are intimate and immersive media formats. However, while they are typically consumed individually, they often spark community-driven engagement and dialogue, making them valuable sites for exploring how women respond to and rework narratives of violence and justice (Pâquet & Williamson, 2023, pp. 1-2). This study contends that these spaces, whether they are comment sections or conversations between friends, can therefore become powerful sites of solidarity, resistance, and empowerment.

To answer the research question - *How do Italian true crime podcasts foster a sense of community and belonging among young women?* - this research employs a qualitative thematic analysis with a mixed data collection approach, combining semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Interviews are a widely used method in qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of personal experiences, opinions, and perceptions (Brennen, 2012, p. 30). This approach works particularly well for exploring complex and subjective ideas such as community, empowerment, and justice, as they allow for a more nuanced exploration of how young women engage with these podcasts, and how these foster a deeper understanding of the social structures that shape their experiences and perceptions (Brennen, 2012, p. 33). Because of their flexibility, interviews also allow for follow-up questions and the kind of open, conversational space where new themes can naturally emerge (Gubrium et al., 2012, p. 105). Alongside the interviews, this study uses qualitative content analysis (QCA) to examine the comment sections of selected podcast episodes. This method is particularly useful here, as it allows for a systematic and contextual exploration of meaning in communication. Indeed, as Krippendorff (2004) notes, qualitative content analysis is designed to explore both manifest and latent meanings in text, making it well-suited to studying social narratives and emotionally charged conversations in digital environments (p. 18). In the context of true crime, this study suggests that comments serve as active spaces of dialogue and reflection where listeners validate one another, share stories, express emotions, and collectively discuss justice-related issues.

The analysis is conducted using thematic analysis, following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is well-suited for qualitative research that aims to explore shared meanings, emotions, and values, as it allows the researcher to identify and interpret recurring patterns across a dataset (p. 1). Thematic analysis allows for flexibility in focus, whether across the full dataset or in depth within particular aspects, and can be applied consistently across interviews and online content such as comment sections (pp. 2-3). This makes it particularly suitable for this study, which draws on different forms of listener engagement while focusing on the same core themes of empowerment and community-building. The method also supports both deductive and inductive approaches (pp. 6-7), meaning that theoretical concepts such as justice or solidarity can guide the process, while still leaving room for unexpected insights to emerge from the data. Ultimately, thematic analysis helps to make sense of how listeners relate to podcast narratives and to each other, revealing the social, emotional, and cultural dynamics that shape their engagement with true crime. Together, these methods allow the research to

explore listener engagement from multiple angles, ensuring a coherent and consistent approach. Ultimately, the aim is to understand how young women reflect on the stories they hear, how these narratives resonate with their lived experiences, and how they participate in wider conversations, both personal and collective, about crime, gender, and justice. The following section outlines how the data was selected and collected to support this analytical focus.

3.2 Data collection

       This section outlines the data sources used in the study and the rationale behind their selection, focusing on how listeners' engagement with true crime podcasts was captured across both personal and public settings. In order to access both the intimate and collective dimensions, this study draws on two complementary data sources: semi-structured interviews and user-generated comments sections on selected podcast episodes on YouTube. Importantly, both the interviews and the comments were coded using the same thematic categories, allowing for conceptual triangulation. This approach, as described by Flick (2018), involves integrating different types of data to achieve a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the social phenomenon under investigation (p. 444). This integration serves two key purposes: it enhances the robustness of the findings by identifying recurring patterns across different forms of audience engagement, and it situates individual emotional responses within broader public discourses. In this way, the research treats the two methods as parallel expressions of podcast reception: one grounded in personal reflection and the other in public interaction. The goal is to explore how listeners engage with narratives around gender-based violence, how they participate in justice discourse, and how these podcasts serve as spaces of empowerment and community-building.

3.2.1 Interviews with Podcast Listeners

       The participants in this study are young Italian women, aged 24-35, who listen to true crime podcasts at least once a month. This age group was specifically chosen due to their active presence in digital spaces such as Spotify and YouTube, where contemporary audiences, particularly those embedded in networked cultures, are increasingly participatory, globally connected, and engaged in meaning-making across digital environments (Livingstone, 2015, p. 440). Furthermore, as McGregor (2022) notes, young women frequently describe podcast listening as a regular and even ritualised practice, integrated into moments of solitude and mobility (p. 4). Participants were selected using criterion-based

purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), a strategy commonly employed in qualitative research to identify and select *information-rich cases*; that is, individuals with substantial knowledge or experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (p. 534). Therefore, this method ensured the inclusion of participants with varying levels of engagement, all of whom regularly listen to true crime podcasts and could offer valuable insights into the research questions.

A total of eight women between the ages of 24 and 35 were interviewed. They were recruited through a combination of social media outreach and personal networks, ensuring a balance between self-selected participants and those personally known to the researcher. This approach enabled a variety of perspectives to be represented, reflecting different listening habits, backgrounds, and motivations. Three were recruited via a call for participation shared on Instagram Stories, while the other five were friends or acquaintances of the researcher who also identified as regular listeners of true crime podcasts. Given the study's focus on community-building among podcast listeners, the inclusion of participants from the researcher's personal network was both methodologically and conceptually appropriate. As someone who listens to true crime podcasts and interacts with others who do the same, the researcher is positioned as an insider within the cultural and media environment being investigated. This positionality offered several benefits. First, rapport had already been established with some participants, facilitating more open and in-depth interviews and enabling a more nuanced understanding of the participants' references and experiences. Moreover, shared cultural knowledge allowed for greater nuance in both questioning and interpretation. Such an approach aligns with existing scholarship on insider research, which highlights that proximity to the field can enhance access, trust, and data richness (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, pp. 60-61; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). Such an approach aligns with existing scholarship on insider research, which recognises that proximity to the field can improve access, trust, and data richness (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 63). In fact, in qualitative research, particularly when exploring social or cultural communities, the researcher's embeddedness is not viewed as a bias to be eliminated, but rather as a valuable reflexive asset (Berger, 2015, p. 230).

Following established methodological guidelines, each unit was interviewed for approximately 45-60 minutes and the interview process was stopped once saturation was met, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Guest et al., 2006, p. 65). The interviews were structured around an interview guide designed to explore the central themes of the study, such as community-building, empowerment, and collective

engagement. The guide consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely, while ensuring consistency across interviews. As a matter of fact, the semi-structured format is particularly effective in qualitative research as it balances structure with flexibility, providing space for participants to introduce topics the researcher may not have anticipated (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 151). The interview guide (Appendix A) was designed to prompt deeper reflection on participants' emotional connection to true crime podcasts and their views on justice-related issues and community. As Brennen (2012) notes, such open formats facilitate nuanced discussion while maintaining thematic coherence (p. 30). By following this guide, the study ensured that all relevant themes were addressed and created the opportunity for new, meaningful insights to emerge organically.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent to store data, and all personal information was anonymised to protect their privacy (Flick, 2018, pp. 84-85). Indeed, in line with Flick's (2018) ethical guidelines, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses (p. 88). Most of the interviews were conducted in person, while some others had to be conducted online due to the long distance with participants located in Italy. In all cases, a comfortable environment, respectful treatment, and confidentiality of responses were ensured to allow participants to express their responses spontaneously, thus building trust in discussing sensitive topics (Brennen, 2012, p. 30; Flick, 2018, p. 88). Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The study adhered to the principles of accurate data interpretation and non-deception, ensuring that no personal data or identifying information was included in the final analysis (Flick, 2018, p. 90).

3.2.2 Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

The qualitative content analysis (QCA) was conducted on user-generated comments posted under selected true crime podcast episodes on YouTube. Although both YouTube and Spotify offer space for audience engagement, only YouTube was selected for analysis due to its higher volume of comments and richer interactional affordances. Unlike Spotify, where comments tend to be sparse and not threaded, YouTube facilitates active dialogue between users through features such as comment replies and visible likes. This structure allows users not only to express their own reactions, but also to respond to others and collectively shape ongoing conversations. Consequently, YouTube comments offered a more dynamic and

participatory space for examining how listeners engage with true crime narratives. Rather than treating the comments merely as reactive expressions, they were analysed as artefacts of collective sense-making, embedded in broader symbolic practices through which audiences co-construct interpretations of media texts and social realities (Couldry, 2012, pp. 2, 35).

This study focused specifically on episodes from *Elisa True Crime* (De Marco, 2021-present), one of the most prominent Italian true crime storytellers on YouTube. Since launching her channel in 2020, Elisa has published over 390 videos and attracted more than 1.36 million subscribers, positioning her as a leading voice in the Italian crime storytelling landscape. Her videos are characterised by detailed narrative reconstructions, strong ethical positioning, and high levels of audience interaction, making her content particularly relevant to a study centred on affective engagement and collective discourse. The consistent popularity of her uploads, which typically generate between 800 and 1,500 comments per episode, provides a rich and dynamic environment in which to examine how audiences respond emotionally and socially to narratives of gender-based violence. This context was a critical factor in selecting her channel, as it enabled the analysis to go beyond individual reactions and explore how discussions evolve within a highly engaged and participatory community.

The selected videos focused on four high-profile Italian cases of gender-based violence, each involving significant institutional failure and widespread public attention. The case of Elisa Pomarelli *(Elisa True Crime*, 2024a), for instance, involved a young woman strangled by a male friend who reportedly believed they were in a romantic relationship, despite her lack of reciprocation. Her disappearance and death sparked national debate about male entitlement and the systemic inability to protect women from familiar perpetrators. Melania Rea (*Elisa True Crime*, 2024b) was killed by her husband, a member of the Italian military, whose eventual conviction came after an investigation marked by media sensationalism and delayed accountability. Manuela Murgia's case (*Elisa True Crime*, 2025), initially ruled a suicide, was archived for three decades before being re-opened; her former boyfriend is now under renewed investigation, and the case raises broader concerns about the institutional neglect of suspicious deaths involving women. Lastly, the case of Elisa Claps (*Elisa True Crime*, 2023) is emblematic of systemic obstructionism: despite her being last seen entering the central church of Potenza with an acquaintance, her body remained undiscovered in its attic for 17 years. Danilo Restivo, who was later convicted of her murder, was never thoroughly investigated at the time, enabling him to flee to the UK,

where he murdered another woman years later. The church's refusal to cooperate fully with the investigation, coupled with the broader institutional inertia surrounding the case, fuelled public outrage and enduring mistrust in both religious and legal authorities.

These videos attracted an average of 2,150 comments and reactions per video from users, reflecting a high level of viewer engagement and collective emotional investment. The cases were also notable for the widespread media coverage they received and the critical public discourse they generated, particularly around the role of institutions and the treatment of female victims. Interestingly, several of these episodes were spontaneously mentioned by participants during the interviews, underscoring their resonance across both personal and public dimensions of podcast engagement. This overlap supports the analytical integration of interview and comment data in the thematic analysis, offering a deeper understanding of how listeners process, discuss and relate to emotionally charged narratives of gender-based violence in the Italian context. Furthermore, the substantial number of comments across these episodes ensured a rich data pool from which to select the most relevant discussions. Indeed, comments were selected based on their relevance to the study's themes of solidarity, emotional support, and justice advocacy, with particular emphasis on those comments that had the most likes and replies.

The aim was to collect approximately 250 comments across the selected episodes, focusing on the most relevant interactions. These included replies to comments, which were analysed to capture how listeners engaged not only with the content, but also with each other in discussions about gender, justice, and community. This approach allowed for a richer understanding of how empowerment, justice-seeking and community-building emerge in the comment sections, providing insight into how listeners use these platforms for collective reflection and solidarity. For the content analysis of public comments, while the data was publicly available, all identifying information was removed from the comments to ensure confidentiality (Couldry, 2012, pp. 38-39). This was done in accordance with Flick's (2018) ethical guidelines, which emphasise the importance of non-deception, accuracy, and confidentiality (pp. 84-85). All data was securely stored and handled to ensure data protection (Flick, 2018, p. 91), guaranteeing that participants' identities and personal information remained protected.

Together, the interviews and user-generated comments provided a complementary dataset capable of capturing both intimate and collective dimensions of true crime listener engagement. The data collection process was designed to capture the layered nature of podcast engagement, examining how listeners both process true crime narratives internally

and participate in broader discursive practices. While the interviews shed light on the reflective and emotional dimensions of individual listening, the analysis of YouTube comments offered insight into the collective meaning-making and emotional resonance within digital communities. This dual approach enabled a more nuanced understanding of how young women in Italy engage with true crime podcasts, particularly in relation to themes of gendered violence, justice, and community. The next section outlines how the study's key analytical concepts were operationalised across both data sources, offering a structured framework through which these themes were identified, coded, and interpreted.

3.3 Operationalisation

This section outlines how the study's key analytical concepts – vulnerability, empowerment, participation and community – were operationalised in the analysis of both interview data and comments. These four concepts were selected due to their theoretical significance in the literature concerning civic media, feminist engagement, and affective publics (e.g., Zembylas, 2007; Kabeer, 1999; Dahlgren & Hill, 2022; Pâquet, 2020), as well as their empirical prominence during preliminary rounds of data familiarisation and initial coding. The concepts were approached as dynamic and overlapping modes of experience and expression, based on the ways participants and commenters made sense of true crime narratives. Indicators were developed iteratively by combining theory-driven (deductive) insights with in-vivo cues from the data (inductive), and applied consistently across interviews and comment sections. Thematic codes were first drafted based on the conceptual framework, refined during the initial rounds of coding, and finalised through iterative review. Both personal narratives from interviews and public commentaries from YouTube threads were analysed using the same thematic categories to allow for conceptual triangulation (Flick, 2018, p. 444). What follows is a description of how each concept was identified and understood in the data. Together, the concepts capture the emotional, reflective, and relational dimensions of listener engagement with true crime podcasts in the context of gender-based violence.

Vulnerability was defined as the expression of perceived exposure to physical or emotional harm, risk, or systemic neglect, whether experienced directly, anticipated, or empathically imagined through podcast narratives. It was understood as both an individual state and a shared emotional condition, shaped collectively through storytelling, emotional alignment, and moral witnessing. Indeed, based on Zembylas' (2007) idea of ethical witnessing, this concept recognises that emotions such as fear, grief or outrage are not

limited to personal experience, but circulate through communities as moral responses to violence and injustice (p. 177). Similarly, Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective circulation helped to frame vulnerability as a relational and spatial phenomenon; that is, an alignment of bodily and social space that indicates where one can safely exist (p. 11, p. 69). In the data, vulnerability was most clearly identified through moments of recognition and emotional identification with the victims, particularly when participants described how their stories disrupted their perceived distance from violence. These responses often arose from what Braun and Clarke (2006) call *semantic* and *latent* themes: explicit expressions of fear, as well as more subtle patterns reflecting internalised understandings of gendered risk (pp. 84-85). Therefore, key indicators of vulnerability included both explicit and implicit references to emotional exposure and perceived threat. These included direct statements about feeling unsafe, anxious, or emotionally unsettled after listening to podcast episodes, as well as more nuanced expressions, such as shifts in participants' perceptions of public spaces, interpersonal trust, or everyday activities. Phrases reflecting personal identification with victims, such as recognising similarities in terms of age, lifestyle, or environment, were treated as markers of emotional proximity and empathic vulnerability. Additionally, references to systemic inaction, disbelief in institutions, or feelings of helplessness in the face of gendered violence were understood as signs of structural vulnerability. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) distinction between semantic and latent themes (pp. 84-85), the coding process captured both overt articulations of fear and more subtle, emotionally charged patterns of meaning that revealed underlying social anxieties and embodied experiences of risk. Therefore, this study understands vulnerability as both a diagnostic and connective concept: it reveals how young women come to read the world differently through emotionally resonant narratives of violence. Rather than merely signalling weakness, vulnerability, as expressed in this study, can be understood as a condition that sharpens awareness and lays the foundation for empowerment, as will be explored in the following paragraph.

     Empowerment was operationalised as the process by which participants articulated greater emotional, cognitive, or behavioural agency in response to the risks and injustices narrated in true crime podcasts. Drawing on Kabeer's (1999) definition, empowerment was understood as the expansion of one's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this capacity had previously been denied or constrained (p. 437). Rather than being treated as a static trait, it was considered a dynamic, context-sensitive response to perceived vulnerability and injustice. In order to identify instances of empowerment in the data, the

analysis focused on cases where participants described shifts in their awareness, interpretation, or actions relating to their own safety, relational boundaries, or moral judgement. This included references to changes in attitudes or behaviours, expressions of self-efficacy, and moral positioning regarding violence and justice. For instance, descriptions of feeling more in control and better equipped to detect and act upon warning signs, sharing protective strategies, offering advice to others, or asserting a right to safety and justice. The concept was informed by two theories: Bandura's (1986) theory of *observational learning*, which focuses on how individuals internalise knowledge and behaviours through indirect experiences (p. 23); and Nabi et al.'s (2021) model of *media-based emotional coping*, which highlights how emotionally intense narratives can prompt cognitive processing and preparedness (p. 92). These frameworks informed the identification of codes linking podcast engagement to perceived emotional growth, tactical awareness, or the critical evaluation of gender norms and systemic injustice.

Resistance was defined as a relational and affective form of civic engagement, whereby participants responded to true crime narratives through subtle, socially embedded actions that challenged the dominant narratives around gender, safety, and justice. In this study, resistance is not considered to be formal activism, but rather as what Arda and Akdemir (2021) define as *activist communication*: the small-scale, often interpersonal or digital practices through which marginalised individuals participate in civic life and contest everyday injustice (p. 1079). These included ethical disagreement, correction of victim-blaming language, or the deliberate act of remembering and sharing the names and stories of victims. Furthermore, drawing on Gorton's (2007) framing of emotion as a form of political and epistemic engagement, these actions were interpreted as emotionally grounded responses to structural injustice (p. 344). In this context, feelings such as outrage, grief, and solidarity serve as ways of knowing and acting, connecting audiences through shared interpretation and subtle resistance. Analytically, the study focused on both explicit and implicit markers of resistance across interviews and comments. These included initiating conversations with others about true crime narratives; using podcast stories as a lens to critically reflect on social structures; commenting on videos to express solidarity or critique injustice; reposting or amplifying episodes with a stated moral or feminist purpose; and describing the act of listening itself as a form of refusal to look away. These practices align with Livingstone's (2013) understanding of media-facilitated participation, whereby civic engagement emerges through emotionally invested and interpretive interaction with media (p. 23), and with Pâquet's (2020) concept of jurification, according to which podcast

listeners assume quasi-judicial roles, and evaluate evidence, question institutional responses, and propose alternative justice frameworks (pp. 424-425).

Lastly, *community* was operationalised as a cohesive network of listeners bound not by formal membership, but by shared emotional investment, ethical awareness, and relational resonance. Drawing on Zembylas' (2007, pp. 214, 218) definition of *affective communities* as collectives constituted through shared vulnerability, remembrance, and accountability, this study did not seek evidence of explicit group identity or organised affiliation. Instead, it examined the notion of belonging as expressed through intimate practices of listening, care, and silent solidarity. Similarly, this approach was informed by Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, which views community as an emotionally driven, dynamic way of gathering around mediated experiences (p. 6). Within this framework, community is not understood as a fixed category, but rather as a felt relationship formed through repeated acts of recognition, interpretation, and care. Several indicators guided the identification of this concept in the data. These included spontaneous references to shared listening practices, such as discussing episodes with peers, reflecting on similar emotional responses, or recognising similarities in life experiences with other listeners or victims. These exchanges suggested that podcast engagement often extended beyond the solitary act of listening, taking the form of a socially embedded and emotionally charged experience. Moments of mutual recognition, such as discovering that a colleague or friend also followed the same podcasts, further reinforced this sense of belonging to an emotionally attuned and morally engaged audience. Another key indicator of community was the presence of relational care. For instance, actions such as reposting episodes, sharing safety tips, checking in on others, or acknowledging shared trauma indicated a collective moral responsiveness to the gendered violence described in the podcasts. Even practices such as reading and liking comments, particularly those that echoed personal experiences, were interpreted as gestures of solidarity and community validation. Finally, the development of intimacy with podcast hosts played a significant role in fostering a sense of collective identification. Building on Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational concept of *parasocial interaction* and McGregor's (2022) description of podcast hosts as "friends in your ears" (p. 5), this study treated parasocial intimacy as an ulterior sign of community. Crucially, by aligning emotionally with the host's perspective, listeners could arguably connect with one another through a shared commitment to empathy, justice, and remembrance. In the data, this intimacy was sought through listeners' appreciation of the host's tone, sense of justice, and emotional clarity, which often prompted deeper cognitive

and affective engagement with the narratives. This affective bond served as a bridge between solitary listening and collective feeling, allowing listeners to envision themselves as part of a wider, morally engaged audience (Arda & Akdemir, 2021, p. 1079).

In conclusion, the operationalisation of these crucial themes allowed for a structured but flexible approach to interpreting listener engagement with true crime podcasts. By grounding each theme in both theory and iterative reading of the data, the study ensured that coding was both conceptually coherent and empirically sensitive. The following section describes the analytical process through which these codes were applied, refined, and interpreted to generate insights from both interviews and comments.

3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis process for this study involved a systematic approach, which involved the evaluation of interview responses and user-generated comments from the podcast episodes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance on thematic analysis (TA), the concepts previously discussed in the operationalisation were not treated as fixed categories. Instead, they were approached as dynamic, overlapping constructs, identified through a flexible, iterative process of coding and theme development (p. 86). This reflects a reflexive approach to TA, emphasising the active role of the researcher in interpreting meaning and treating themes as constructions developed through engagement with the data, rather than as discoveries to be extracted (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). Indeed, thematic codes were first developed deductively, drawing from the theoretical framework, and then refined inductively through close engagement with the data. This combination of theory-driven and in-vivo coding enabled the development of analytical indicators that remained conceptually grounded while sensitive to the specificities of the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 83, 86-87). Both interviews and YouTube comments were coded using the same thematic categories to enable conceptual triangulation (Flick, 2018, p. 444), thus facilitating meaningful comparisons between private reflections and public expressions of engagement. The process of thematic data analysis is divided into six steps, as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2012): familiarisation with the data, creation of initial codes, searching for patterns, review of major themes, creation of final themes, and reflection on the overall analysis when complete.

The process began with the transcription of the interviews, as transcribing is crucial to familiarise with the data and to ensure that important nuances are not missed (Kvale, 2007, p. 94). Transcribing the interviews provided an initial overview of the participants'

perspectives and allowed for the first stage of data immersion. Similarly, comments from the podcast episodes were collected and read multiple times to ensure familiarity with their content.

Following transcription, the next step was to assign initial codes to both the interviews and the comments. Themes were developed across the four key analytical concepts outlined in the previous section – vulnerability, empowerment, resistance, and community – with attention to how these were expressed through both private narratives and public forms of listener engagement (Saldaña, 2021, pp. 4-5). Comments were coded based on recurring ideas; for example, several comments expressed empathy and emotional connection with the victim, while others focused on the failure of law enforcement. Similarly, interview responses were grouped under relevant categories that reflected the participants' shared experiences.

Following the initial coding, thematic analysis was conducted. Braun & Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning in a dataset (p. 82). This stage involved looking for themes or patterns that emerged in both the interview data and the comment sections. Themes were identified by looking for repeated references to particular topics, emotions, or perspectives that were related to the research question around community-building and empowerment. For instance, one theme that emerged consistently was emotional engagement. In both interviews and comments, listeners repeatedly described feeling connected to the victims and their families, and expressing solidarity with those affected by violence. Additionally, many comments addressed the failure of justice systems and expressed frustration or anger towards the authorities, reflecting the wider societal impact of these crimes.

Once the initial themes had been identified, the next step was to refine them to ensure that they accurately captured the essence of the data. Corbin & Strauss (2008) suggest that this process involves reviewing and revising the themes to ensure clarity and relevance, and that no important data is overlooked (p. 132). This step also involved eliminating overlapping themes and refining their definitions to make them more specific to the data.

Throughout the analysis, several steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Firstly, triangulation was used to cross-check the findings between the interview data and the comment data to ensure that the themes that emerged were supported by both sources of data (Flick, 2018, p. 444). The use of two different sources of data, interviews and comments, helped to ensure that the conclusions drawn were not based on any one source, thus increasing the robustness of the analysis. Secondly, reflexivity was

incorporated throughout the data analysis process in order to minimise researcher bias. Indeed, rather than being considered a neutral observer, the qualitative researcher is seen as an active interpreter who co-constructs themes through engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). Given my personal attachment to the subject matter, I was therefore particularly mindful of my own assumptions and biases.

4. Analysis

This chapter explores how young Italian women make sense of true crime podcasts as emotionally charged, socially embedded, and ethically resonant media experiences. Drawing on in-depth interviews and a qualitative content analysis of YouTube comments, the findings reveal how participants navigate gendered violence, media narratives, and collective memory through their deeply felt listening practices. What emerges is not only a personal engagement with emotionally difficult content, but a broader negotiation of power, care, and responsibility across individual, interpersonal, and public spheres.

The analysis is organised around four interrelated themes, which move progressively from the intimate to the collective. First, the chapter examines how listening heightens participants' sense of *vulnerability*, and how this awareness leads to practical and emotional preparedness and, consequently, *empowerment*. This is followed by a discussion of how such personal insights often evolve into a broader political awareness, particularly anger and disappointment with institutional and media responses to femicide in Italy. These emotional responses lead to tangible forms of participation, which in turn lead to *resistance*, such as discussing true crime cases with others, sharing content, or engaging in digital commentary. Finally, the chapter explores how these practices of resistance and participation contribute to a silent yet powerful sense of *community*: a network of women bound together by shared listening, remembrance, and feminist responsibility. Rather than viewing these dimensions in isolation, the chapter approaches them as dynamically connected: emotional resonance fuels critique, critique prompts participation, and participation builds community. In doing so, it offers an interpretation of podcast listening as a form of everyday feminist consciousness-making, a process that allows young women to feel, think, and act differently in relation to gendered violence.

Throughout the analysis, participants' voices are placed in dialogue with the conceptual framework introduced in the earlier chapters. This framework includes theories of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999), emotional coping (Nabi et al., 2021), activist communication (Arda & Akdemir, 2021), narrative justice (Slakoff, 2023), and affective publics (Zembylas, 2007; Livingstone, 2013). Indeed, verbatim excerpts and qualitative coding insights ensure that the theoretical analysis remains grounded in the lived realities of participants. As a result, the analysis is presented as a series of interconnected interpretive narratives, each tracing how individual responses transformed into moral reflections, civic practices, or collective imaginaries.

4.1 Preparedness as Empowerment

One of the key insights of this study was that participants' emotional engagement with true crime podcasts often led to a shift in how they perceived danger in their everyday lives. Indeed, for many participants, listening to these podcasts fostered a profound sense of emotional awareness of the risks faced by women. Hearing stories of violence, particularly those involving women close to their own age or social context, triggered a sense of emotional proximity that felt unsettling, yet significant. This emotional closeness did not stem from the violence itself, but from the way the victims were remembered and described: as ordinary people doing ordinary things, not unlike the listeners themselves. Several participants, as well as many commenters, reflected on this sense of familiarity, describing how stories that initially seemed distant became frighteningly relatable. One user, for instance, wrote under the Elisa Pomarelli's video: *"Perhaps we should never trust anyone, always keep our distance... It's sad, but the monster can hide inside anyone"*. The turning point often came when they realised that the women in these stories had similar routines, relationships and environments to their own. As one respondent put it: *"You think it won't happen to you, but after a while you realise these women were just like us"* (Interviewee 6). During the interviews, other respondents made similar points, explaining how this emotional identification disrupted the psychological distance that often exists between listeners and victims. In fact, as Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, fear "works to align bodily space with social space" teaching women where they can safely go, how they should move, and whom to avoid (p. 69). In the case of young women listening to true crime narratives, fear does not emerge spontaneously, but is cultivated through repeated exposure to narratives of violence that resonate with personal experience. All participants in this study described how regular engagement with true crime podcasts had made them more aware, realistic, and responsible in assessing the risks they face in everyday life. As one interviewee explained:

> *"It creates a kind of awareness that you almost try to push away, because*
> *your instinct is always to say, 'it won't happen to me'… and yet you realise*
> *that [the people in these stories] are often much more normal than we*
> *think."* (Interviewee 1)

Therefore, for many participants, listening to true crime podcasts became a form of ethical witnessing, an affective engagement that fostered a sense of connection with victims through shared experiences of loss and moral responsibility (Zembylas, 2007, p. 177). These

narratives are not absorbed simply as factual accounts of violence; rather, listeners came to know the victims as individuals with unfinished lives and relationships, whose stories resonated deeply. These responses reflect Ahmed (2004) argument that affect circulates not just between individuals and objects, but as part of social formations (p. 11). This means that emotions such as fear or grief are not confined to the story itself, but represent a structure of feeling that reshapes how participants experience their everyday environments. For instance, interviewees unanimously noted that they had become hyper-aware of familiar places, everyday routines and ordinary interactions, that had once felt safe but were now perceived through the lens of risk.

However, this emotional awareness was rarely described as overwhelming. Instead, participants seemed to experience it as clarifying. In some cases, it helped them reframe their assumptions about safety, challenging the idea that violence only happens elsewhere or to different types of people. This process is what Nabi et al. (2021) describe as media-based emotional coping: the way in which emotionally intense narratives provide opportunities to process fear and prepare psychologically for real-world threats (p. 92). The result is a kind of emotional realism. Indeed, rather than becoming desensitised by exposure to violence, participants became more aware of its patterns. Within the relatively safe setting of the podcast, they acknowledged their fear and then considered how they might act in similar situations. Thus, the act of listening becomes a way of thinking, noticing, and recalibrating one's relationship to risk. This ultimately aligns with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which states that individuals exposed to compelling narratives learn indirectly, by imagining responses and internalising models of action (p. 23). From the interviews, it seems clear that these 'emotional rehearsals' often translate into behavioural change. One respondent, for instance, said: *"Now I pick up on warning signs much faster... when a stranger man approaches me, I try to end the interaction as quickly as possible"* (Interviewee 2). Similarly, when asked whether they felt more prepared to face risks, nearly all participants described adopting preventative strategies, such as altering their routines, setting clearer boundaries or being more vigilant in public spaces. Hence, true crime podcasts can be understood as a means of developing tactical agency by equipping listeners with the emotional and practical vocabulary needed to recognise red flags and protect themselves in everyday life. Such changes reflect the definition of empowerment provided by Kabeer (1999): the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where one's capacity to choose was previously limited (p. 437). Participants were not merely reacting; they were reclaiming control over their environment, guided by what they had learned through stories

of violence, injustice and survival. Indeed, several participants described acquiring a deeper understanding of the dynamics of abuse and control, which helped them notice red flags, trust their instincts, and support others. As one participant explained, *"These stories give you survival strategies, even when they're not needed… It makes me think about how I would behave in certain situations, hoping that they never happen to me"* (Interviewee 5). Interestingly, another recalled a potentially threatening situation involving a former partner after she had ended the relationship. At that moment, she instinctively turned to the insights she had gained from true crime podcasts. She mobilised her support network and confronted the situation with renewed clarity. Reflecting on this shift, she said:

> *"Let's say that I have experienced this first-hand. I realised that I was potentially in a dangerous situation, and I prevented it by involving everyone in my network. I think the podcasts helped: often, when I listen to them, I'm in my comfort zone, perhaps with my friends, where it is possible to make judgements about the victim's actions before they became a victim. I found myself making comments like, "Tell someone. Go to the police!". When I found myself in a similar situation, I asked myself, "What did you advise those people when you listened to podcasts?"* (Interviewee 4)

Such accounts demonstrate how emotional engagement with victim narratives evolved into cognitive and behavioural preparedness. Participants developed what could be described as an emotional and cognitive toolkit; one that enabled them to assess danger more clearly, respond more decisively, and view their actions through a lens of moral responsibility. In this sense, vulnerability did not undermine their agency; it sharpened it. These findings echo those of earlier studies which found that women often engage with true crime media not despite, but because of the risks it portrays (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Boling & Hull, 2018). Overall, the data revealed a process that moves beyond simple narratives of fear or victimhood, confirming that fear became the basis for ethical reflection, tactical adaptation, and renewed self-trust. This shift highlights how the genre can function as more than just entertainment; it can also serve as a form of quiet pedagogy. This serves as a foundation for wider reflections on justice, gender, and the systemic failures that allow gender-based violence to persist without being addressed. These issues are explored in the following section.

4.2 Femicide as Collective Responsibility

One of the most compelling findings of this study is that emotional engagement with true crime podcasts did not remain confined to concerns about fear or safety. For many participants, it evolved into a broader form of civic consciousness, rooted in the recognition that the violence portrayed in these narratives was not incidental, but rather produced and sustained by structural and cultural factors deeply embedded within their national context. In this sense, listening to these podcasts became an opportunity for political reflection, where femicide was not only mourned, but also examined. Thus, listening became more than a private emotional exercise; it became a form of political reflection, through which listeners began to interpret femicide as a social and institutional failure. This transformation was especially visible in how participants began to link recurring narrative patterns, such as unheeded complaints, dismissive authorities, and repeated danger signals, in relation to the Italian femicide crisis. Several participants described a growing awareness that the same patterns kept reappearing across different cases, often with devastating consequences. Interviewee 2, for instance, noted that the dynamics of gender-based violence in these stories felt disturbingly predictable:

"It's hard to accept that, despite all the awareness, there's still not enough being done to prevent this from happening again. Especially because the dynamics are always so similar. You can practically predict the entire course of events."

Others, like Interviewee 6, went further in articulating a systemic critique. She described the justice system as lethargic and unresponsive, arguing that *"they wait for a cadaver before taking action"*. This idea recurred across multiple interviews and was widely echoed in the YouTube comments, where users violently condemn institutions for their negligence and superficiality. One particularly striking comment captures the affective intensity of this disillusionment:

"This crazy story, as the mother of a 15-year-old and as a spectator, completely blew my mind. How is this possible?!?!? How???!!! How can you not be filled with rage? How can you not be consumed by it?!? How can you not be overwhelmed and continue living with a sense of helplessness and anger? It can2t end like this. It mustn't. Please..."

Here, the listener is not merely reacting to a story, but articulating an overwhelming emotional response that blends personal fear, moral outrage, and a deep sense of civic urgency. This kind of reaction exemplifies what Zembylas (2007) describes as public feelings of loss and injustice, when emotions arising in response to structural violence become politicised through collective interpretation (p. 208). In this context, the podcast goes beyond mere information, but it compels listeners to engage in ethical reflection on the cultural and institutional structures that permit such violence to persist.

Although most academic literature on true crime podcasting has focused on Anglo-American contexts (Boling & Hull, 2018; Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Slakoff, 2023), the women in this study did not engage with the genre as neutral global consumers. Instead, they interpreted it through the lens of their own social, cultural, and political context. The stories they listened to, which predominantly involving female victims, were often described as painfully familiar. Participants invoked the names of women such as Giulia Cecchettin, Giulia Tramontano, and Elisa Claps, whose deaths had become emblematic of Italy's broader institutional and cultural failure to protect women. These names were not just referenced; they were felt. Repeatedly, participants described the victims they encountered through podcasts as "just like us", collapsing the psychological distance between media and life, and between story and society. A recurring theme in both the interviews and the comments was the rejection of how femicide is portrayed in the mainstream Italian media. Interviewee 5, for instance, stated: *"We're not talking about sociopaths. We're talking about normal people. These are not just flawed stories; they're the result of a flawed society"*. Similarly, in response to *Elisa True Crime*'s video, one commenter wrote: *"You may not be a member of the journalists' association, but you do the job that many journalists should be doing. You're really good at it"*. Taken together, these reflections point to a broader structural critique of the institutions that fail to protect women, and of the media narratives that obscure the systemic nature of gender-based violence. They reveal a growing awareness that violence against women is not a series of isolated incidents, but rather the outcome of deeply embedded cultural scripts and institutional logics within Italian society. This critique aligns with Busso et al.'s (2020) that Italian media coverage often absolves perpetrators of blame by attributing violence to external causes, using metaphorical framings such as 'illness' and 'raptus', as well as syntactic choices that remove agency (e.g., passive constructions without named perpetrators).

This study finds that these forms of rejection of institutional complicity, of passive

media narratives, and of individualising explanations, constitute more than personal opinion. Instead, they reflect a broader process of civic interpretation, whereby audiences collectively reinterpret femicide as a structural injustice rather than an isolated tragedy. The critical stance adopted by both interviewees and commenters alike shows how listeners engage both emotionally and analytically by identifying patterns, scrutinising institutional failures, and contesting cultural scripts that frame perpetrators as momentarily irrational and victims as naïve or complicit. This study finds that these forms of rejection of institutional complicity, of passive media narratives, and of individualising explanations, constitute more than personal opinion. Instead, they reflect a broader process of civic interpretation, whereby audiences collectively reinterpret femicide as a structural injustice rather than an isolated tragedy. The critical stance adopted by both interviewees and commenters alike shows how listeners engage both emotionally and analytically by identifying patterns, scrutinising institutional failures, and contesting cultural scripts that frame perpetrators as momentarily irrational and victims as naïve or complicit. In this sense, the findings of this study confirm what Slakoff (2023) and Pâquet (2020) have theorised: that true crime audiences are not passive consumers, but engaged interlocutors who read across stories, question dominant explanations, and adapt narratives towards ethical ends. What emerges in this context is not merely media critique, but a form of narrative resistance, one that is particularly urgent in Italy, where femicide continues to be depoliticised by the mainstream media and where cultural framings frequently obscure systemic accountability (Busso et al., 2020; Capecchi & Gius, 2023). Ultimately, what emerges is a shift from individual empowerment to civic consciousness. Listeners come to see their preparedness not only as personal strategy, but as part of a wider feminist response to the failures of the media, justice, and politics. This is not activism in a formal sense, or at least not yet. However, it is a form of civic literacy, that is both emotionally charged and politically consequential. In this context, consuming true crime media becomes a moral and interpretive practice, one that prepares the ground for the forms of everyday resistance and participation, explored in the next section.

4.3 Participation as Everyday Resistance

Although podcasts are a private and often solitary form of media consumption, the stories they tell have an outward impact: through conversations, social media posts, gestures of remembrance and subtle refusals. For many participants, the emotional and cognitive clarity gained from listening to true crime podcasts inspired them to take action, prompting a shift in their everyday practices. While these were not institutional forms of activism, they

were persistent, relational expressions of feminist awareness, aligning with what Arda and Akdemir (2021) term *activist communication.* These are expressions of civic voice enacted through everyday discourse, interpersonal engagement and digital media, which are aimed at disrupting normative injustice (p. 1079). This study revealed a clear pattern: frequent listening led to frequent talking. Indeed, for many of the women interviewed, episodes describing cases of femicide or institutional failure created a moral imperative to discuss what they had heard. Several participants described discussing podcast episodes with friends, family members or partners, even if they themselves did not listen to true crime podcasts. One of them, for instance, described this practice as *"the ultimate purpose… especially when there's something psychological and societal to reflect on"* (Interviewee 1). Similarly, another participant elaborated on how these conversations were often emotional and confrontational, surfacing most forcefully in response to narratives involving victim-blaming or systemic neglect. She said,

> *"Sometimes I get really into it. I'll talk about it with my boyfriend, with my friends, even people I don't know very well. Because these stories matter. And if we don't talk about it, who will?"* (Interviewee 6)

Consequently, speaking became a way of processing emotions and a form of feminist pedagogy, challenging dominant narratives within everyday relationships. For some, this meant confronting deep-rooted beliefs within their own families. Interviewee 4, for instance, recounted a particularly tense exchange with her father, who tended to minimise the actions of perpetrators:

> *"He always puts part of the blame on the victim. Like she should have seen it coming. And I get so angry, because that's exactly what needs to change."*

In essence, what had previously been endured in silence was now met with resistance, in the form of what Ahmed (2017) describes as the *feminist snap*: a moment of rupture where accumulated frustration transforms into action (pp. 178-179). In this instance, the emotional intensity was redirected into pedagogical work: naming the injustice, pushing back, and trying to shift the discourse, even in personal spaces where such conversations were not always welcomed. The act of "talking back" became a means of claiming interpretive

authority and unsettling dominant cultural scripts.

These acts of resistance did not remain confined to private spaces. For many, participation also extended into the digital realm, particularly through YouTube comment sections and Instagram Stories. Although only a few interviewees said they actively commented online, many of them said they read through user exchanges and sometimes paused podcast episodes to do so. These threads served as both venues for reactions and as affective and interpretive communities. The data provides a clear example in this regard: under the *Elisa True Crime*'s video about the Elisa Claps case, one user commented on the collective action taken against the church that hid her body for 17 years by writing:

> *"I love the fact that many people are showing solidarity with the Claps*
> *family by leaving only negative reviews about the location of the church on*
> *Google Maps. It's disgusting that they reopened it after so many years and*
> *didn't dedicate anything to Elisa…"*

Another listener replied under this comment: *"Thank you for letting us know, I have added my review too"*. These comments were more than expressions of sympathy; they were forms of what Gorton (2007) calls affective resistance; that is, the creation of emotional epistemic communities, where emotion becomes a shared means of understanding, interpreting, and pushing back against dominant narratives (p. 344). Even participants who considered themselves "ghost users" felt implicated in these spaces. Interviewee 5 shared that she usually reads the comments to find out more about specific concepts or specific topics discussed in the video, and that she always likes the posts and follows the hosts to show her support. Similarly, Interviewee 1 described how reading the comments and these exchanges shaped her reflections:

> *"Someone shares their experience, someone else replies… you realise*
> *people are giving each other a piece of their life. I feel like I have to*
> *acknowledge it, think about it, maybe even talk about it later with someone*
> *else"*

Such digital exchanges were not only received passively; they were absorbed, processed, and re-circulated in other contexts, as when listeners shared posts on Instagram or used the stories as entry points for conversations offline. For many, these were small but intentional

gestures of narrative resistance. These moments of speaking out, whether in person or online, represent what Livingstone (2013) refers to as *media-facilitated participation*: civic engagement that emerges through and across media practices, spanning public and private, individual and collective spheres (p. 23). Some participants even described taking further steps: resharing podcast content, following investigative updates, signing petitions, or supporting campaigns initiated by podcast hosts. She said:

> *"I often felt the need to act after listening to podcast episodes, whether by signing petitions or by commenting under certain videos… even just having those conversations with people I know"*

Here, grief and critique were not passively experienced; they became the basis for a collective response. Through seemingly minor gestures such as liking a comment, sharing an episode or rating a location on Google Maps, listeners expressed their refusal to forget, look away, or remain silent. These everyday acts align with Livingstone's (2013) "participation paradigm", which emphasises how people engage with the media to enact social and political participation. In today's mediatised environment, "audiencing" becomes a means of being in and acting upon the world (Livingstone, 2013, pp. 21–24). Therefore, participation is not measured by visibility or institutional affiliation, but by "the state of being related to a larger whole", which is defined by ethical responsibility and the desire to influence social understanding and awareness (p. 25).What emerges, then, is not activism in its traditional, institutionalised form. The resistance observed in this study is affective, distributed, and informal. Participants were not organising campaigns or lobbying institutions, at least not overtly. Instead, they were confronting victim-blaming at the dinner table, reposting podcast episodes, following threads of investigation, and refusing to let stories of gendered violence dissolve into background noise. These acts constitute what might be called a quiet feminism: a practice of critical listening, retelling, and remembrance that challenges dominant narratives, but also lays the basis for a collective sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility binds listeners to each other through shared feelings, ethical awareness, and a refusal to look away.

4.4 Relating as Community-Building

Although true crime podcasts are often consumed in solitude, this study reveals that listening rarely remains a solitary experience. The previous section explored how listeners

responded to true crime podcasts through everyday acts of resistance, such as speaking out, sharing stories, and challenging problematic narratives. Yet these gestures often lead to a process of relational identification, through which listeners developed a subtle, emotionally grounded sense of community. This was not a formal or organised collective, but a network held together by memory, care, and shared ethical attentiveness. While few participants initially described themselves as members of a podcast community, many later articulated a strong emotional connection to fellow listeners and to the victims whose stories they encountered. As Interviewee 4 put it, an *"invisible thread"* links these women, not formally or explicitly, but through remembrance, grief and moral responsiveness. She reflected:

> *"This is what gives life to the community: the fact that information is passed on from one person to another, who then passes it on to a friend, a family member or talks about it at a bar, and this creates a sort of invisible thread that connects people in some way, even to someone who is no longer there. I think this is a beautiful thing."*

This "invisible thread" echoes what Zembylas (2007) describes as *affective communities*: groups bound by shared emotions and a collective ethical response to suffering, where affect becomes a political and pedagogical force that moves people to witness, to care, and to act (p. 218). Viewed through this lens, the community of true crime podcast listeners in this study is best understood as an affective formation: an informal network united by shared practices of listening, grieving, and remembering. Here, belonging is not about identifying with others based on background or belief, but about aligning emotionally and ethically with the stories being told, and with those bearing their weight.

These relational ties were particularly evident in the digital comment sections, where listeners often responded to episodes with deeply personal disclosures and small gestures of care. Under the video about Elisa Pomarelli's story, for example, one user shared the harrowing experience of surviving a violent relationship in which she was stabbed by her ex-partner. Her testimony was met with an outpouring of support in the form of likes, heart emojis, and expressions of solidarity. Another commenter recalled being in a toxic relationship as a teenager and encouraged others to "get help". These disclosures, though often brief, created moments of emotional recognition, making the comment section a space of shared vulnerability and support, where pain is shared and acknowledged. Such exchanges illustrate what Gorton (2007) describes as *emotional epistemologies*: forms of

embodied, situated knowledge through which individuals interpret and make sense of the world (p. 333). In this context, emotions such as grief or care are not private sentiments but surface in relational gestures, such as liking, replying, sharing, which become modes of feminist knowledge-making and subtle activism (pp. 338-339). Interviewee 1 captured this sentiment, noting: *"Someone shares their experience, someone else replies… you realise people are giving each other a piece of their life. I feel like I have to acknowledge it, think about it, maybe even talk about it later"*. Such acknowledgements may appear minimal, yet they carry emotional weight. Indeed, they represent what Ahmed (2004) terms affective orientation: a turning toward others in acts of care, recognition, and solidarity. In this way, listeners engage in quiet but meaningful forms of ethical witnessing, acknowledging the pain of others, affirming their visibility, and contributing to a communal archive of remembrance.

In this affective ecology, podcast hosts also played a crucial role. As a matter of fact, all the participants unanimously described the hosts as a kind of emotional anchor, a companion whose voice offered both comfort and moral clarity. Interviewee 6, for instance, explained how listening to the same host across episodes created a sense of familiarity and trust, especially when engaging with distressing or emotionally charged cases. Commenters often mirrored this sentiment. Under the episode on Manuela Murgia, one listener wrote:

> *"Elisa, thank you for telling these stories with empathy and realism.*
> *Hearing the testimonies of family members is a key component in helping*
> *us understand that these stories are not just macabre tales to tell around*
> *the campfire, but realities that we need to know about to ensure that they*
> *never happen again."*

This sense of familiarity and trust reflects McGregor's (2022) observation that podcast hosts often become "friends in your ears" (pp. 4-6), figures with whom listeners develop a sense of emotional closeness over time. These bonds are neither imagined nor superficial. As Horton and Wohl (1956) originally suggested, parasocial relationships offer relational stability, particularly during emotionally intense experiences. In this context, hosts are not just narrators; they are moral guides, shaping how listeners process trauma, frame meaning, and connect to others. Indded, several interviewees saw hosts as responsible for the tone and values of the communities they helped cultivate. Their empathy and care set a standard, encouraging listeners to engage not just with curiosity, but with ethical seriousness. Interviewee 6 recalled how these dynamics crystallised during a live theatre event with

journalist and podcast host Stefano Nazzi:

> *"There was a remarkable variety of ages... When things like this happen, I feel like I'm part of a large group of people who are doing the same thing I'm doing… even though we don't know each other, we're all here for the same reason."*

As Nazzi closed with the Circeo Massacre, a heavy silence fell, followed by a long, unanimous applause. For her, that moment made the community real: not imagined, but embodied. A private listening ritual had become a public act of remembrance. Other interviewees described similar offline moments of recognition. In particular, Interviewee 6 recounted how a discussion about a recent femicide among her classmates had prompted them to attend a *Non Una di Meno* protest together. The protest became a moment of collective validation and solidarity, made possible by their shared attention to stories of gendered violence. Similarly, Interviewee 7 recounted how discovering a shared interest in true crime with new acquaintances led them to visit a crime museum together. There, she found a rare sense of comfort: a space where she could openly discuss "macabre" topics that were usually left unsaid. These moments, whether in the form of spontaneous conversations or organised events, reflect the power of shared attention and emotional resonance. In comment threads too, this was palpable. One user, reflecting on Elisa Pomarelli's case, wrote, *"I like to use the term 'sister' even for a stranger like Elisa… because in cases like these, you feel anger as if it were a relative who had suffered such violence"*. These findings align with what Papacharissi (2015) terms affective publics: loosely organised collectives formed around shared emotional responses to mediated narratives (p. 6). What binds these publics is not a fixed identity or cause, but a shared care and orientation towards stories, injustices, and each other. For many participants, this shared affective orientation was not just toward the stories, but toward each other through moments in which private grief becomes public ritual. Ultimately, this creates an affective infrastructure (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 6) centred on *"the weight of a form of social responsibility"* (Interviewee 2). What emerges is not just a community of listeners, but a collective of quiet witnesses: women connected by a shared refusal to look away. This is not fandom, but a feminist counterpublic shaped by care, forged through recognition, and sustained by ethical listening.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that true crime podcasts function as emotionally and politically significant spaces for community-building among young Italian women. Through analysing eight in-depth interviews and conducting a qualitative content analysis of approximately 300 user comments, the study has demonstrated that listening to podcasts is not merely an entertaining, passive activity, but rather a layered, emotional practice influenced by structural contexts, gendered vulnerability and the desire for solidarity. In the Italian media landscape, where femicide is often depoliticised and institutional failures normalised, podcasts emerge as alternative narrative spaces offering tools for emotional processing, cultural critique and feminist meaning-making.

The first analytical dimension, *Preparedness as Empowerment*, showed that listening enables women to process fear by transforming it into awareness and vigilance. Rather than fostering paranoia, participants described their engagement with true crime podcasts as a form of emotional rehearsal, which Nabi et al. (2021) call "meaningful affective engagement". Indeed, through emotional resonance and reflection, listeners come to recognise the structural nature of gender-based violence and equip themselves with interpretive tools that support a heightened sense of agency. This finding affirms Ahmed's (2004) notion of affective orientation, whereby emotions shape personal responses and guide individuals towards collective concerns.

This individual sense of preparedness, however, does not exist in isolation. In the second theme, *Femicide as Collective Responsibility*, emotional recognition extended outward into political critique. Listeners often identified recurring patterns across podcast cases, such as ignored warnings, institutional negligence, and media distortion, and articulated a sense of outrage not only towards the perpetrators, but also towards the broader systems that failed the victims. Here, drawing on Pâquet's (2020) concept of jurification, the analysis highlighted how women use these narratives to reframe their relationship with public justice, transforming personal emotion into structural awareness and symbolic accountability. As such, podcasts become sites where civic responsibility is cultivated through informal, emotional engagement with institutional narratives.

This ethical engagement further unfolded in the third theme, *Participation as Everyday Resistance*, in which listeners translated emotional reactions into relational action. Whether by challenging victim-blaming within their social circles, sharing content online, or taking part in digital memorialisation, participants engaged in subtle yet persistent practices of feminist resistance. These acts, such as liking, sharing, commenting, may appear minimal,

but they actually constitute what Arda and Akdemir (2021) describe as activist communication, that is, everyday performances of civic voice that resist dominant narratives and affirm shared values. This expands Livingstone's (2013) understanding of media audiences as interpretive agents who do not simply absorb stories, but transform them into meaningful cultural practices (p. 23).

The final theme, *Relating as Community-Building*, illustrated how these emotional practices ultimately give rise to a form of deeply felt belonging. In fact, despite the private nature of podcast listening, participants described feeling connected to both hosts and fellow listeners through shared emotions, ethical recognition, and the collective act of remembering victims. In digital comment sections, many listeners shared stories of grief or trauma, and these were acknowledged by others through micro-interactions. This reflects Gorton's (2007) concept of emotional epistemologies, which are knowledge practices grounded in emotion, embodiment, and relationships. For many participants, the podcast hosts themselves functioned as "emotional anchors" (McGregor, 2022), whose voice and tone fostered a sense of trust and ethical alignment. These dynamics were mirrored in offline spaces as well, where participants reported moments of recognition at protests, live events, or even in spontaneous conversations, which confirmed the existence of an affective community that, while diffuse, was nonetheless powerful (Zembylas, 2007). These groups are formed not through shared identity or political ideology, but through emotional responsiveness to suffering and injustice.

Together, these findings suggest that podcast listening can create what Papacharissi (2015) calls 'affective publics': loosely organised collectives structured around emotional alignment, ethical attention, and the collective desire to remember and resist, rather than traditional political engagement. Thus, true crime podcasts tell stories of violence and provide an emotional framework through which women can process, challenge and redefine the circumstances of that violence in their own lives. By situating this inquiry in the Italian context, this study makes an original contribution to feminist media studies, affect theory, and podcast research. Whereas much existing scholarship has focused on Anglo-American settings, this thesis underscores that the political and emotional impact of true crime podcasts takes on new dimensions when analysed within a media environment characterised by sensationalism, institutional mistrust, and an ongoing femicide crisis. The findings suggest that meaningful podcast communities do not require formal organisation or activism. Instead, they are formed through shared narrative engagement, affective reflexivity, and the quiet work of attentive listening. These insights may be useful to podcast creators, educators

and activists alike. For producers, the findings emphasise the importance of ethical storytelling and of taking responsibility for shaping emotional narratives. For educators and advocates, podcasts offer powerful tools for informal feminist pedagogy, capable of reaching and mobilising audiences in emotionally engaging and culturally resonant ways.

The decision to prioritise in-depth narratives over breadth enabled a nuanced exploration of how listening practices are shaped by gendered vulnerability, media discourse, and emotional exchange. Rather than aiming for generalisability, the study provides an accessible introduction to an under-explored phenomenon of how true crime podcasts functioning as emotional and political spaces within the Italian context. As such, this research should be viewed as a starting point for a broader inquiry. Indeed, future studies could expand this work by conducting longitudinal interviews that trace how listeners' relationships with podcasts evolve over time, or by adopting a comparative lens to examine differences across national and cultural settings. Additionally, incorporating an intersectional approach would offer further insights into how race, sexuality, class, and geography shape the emotional and ethical dynamics of true crime podcast listening. Building on this foundation, future research could continue to explore the role of podcasting in shaping feminist consciousness, informal pedagogical practices, and collective engagement.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that true crime podcasts serve not merely as sources of information or entertainment, but as emotionally charged spaces where young women listen, care, and connect. They are spaces where fear is transformed into preparedness, grief into critique, and private listening into collective belonging. By engaging with these stories, women are not only recognising injustice, they are actively participating in contestating it. In this way, podcast listening to true crime becomes an everyday feminist act: an intimate and at the same time collective refusal to forget or remain silent.

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Appendices

Appendix A (Interview guide)
Introduction & Informed Consent

Thank you for participating in this study on the role of true crime podcasts in fostering community-building. This interview will focus on your experiences as a podcaster, how you perceive your audience's engagement, and how your work interacts with broader discussions on crime and justice.

Would it be all right with you if I recorded the interview?

Your responses will remain confidential, and you may skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Podcast Listening Habits & Initial Engagement

Goal: Understand participants' podcast preferences, motivations, and patterns of engagement.

1. Can you tell me about your listening habits when it comes to true crime podcasts?
   How often do you listen?
   Do you listen at specific times (e.g., during commutes, before bed)?

2. Which true crime podcasts do you listen to regularly?
   What makes you return to these specific ones?

3. How did you first become interested in true crime podcasts?
   Was there a particular case or podcast that sparked your interest?

4. What do you enjoy most about these podcasts?
   Is it the storytelling, the investigative aspect, the hosts, or something else?

5. Do you usually listen alone, or do you discuss episodes with others?
   If you discuss, with whom? How do these conversations typically unfold?

6. How do you engage with podcast content outside of listening?

    Do you participate in online discussions (e.g., forums, social media, comment sections)?

    Have you ever followed up on a case outside of the podcast (e.g., reading articles, watching documentaries, joining discussions)?

2. Community Building as Empowerment and Negotiation with Fear

Goal: Explore how true crime podcasts help listeners process fear, gain a sense of preparedness, and build resilience.

7. Have true crime podcasts changed the way you think about safety and crime in your daily life?

    Do they make you feel more alert or more fearful?

8. Do you feel that listening to these podcasts has helped you feel more prepared or aware of potential dangers?

    Have you changed any behaviors (e.g., being more cautious, carrying self-defense tools) as a result?

9. Some research suggests that true crime media can serve as a form of emotional coping.

    Do you feel that listening to these stories helps you process fears or anxieties? If so, how?

    Do you ever find the content overwhelming or distressing? How do you manage that?

10. Have you ever related personally to a case discussed in a podcast?

    How did that affect your listening experience?

11. Do you think true crime podcasts empower their female audience in any way?

    If yes, how do they foster empowerment?

    If no, do you think they reinforce fear rather than reduce it?

12. How do you feel when podcasts discuss cases of gender-based violence, domestic

abuse, or sexual assault?

Do you feel these topics are handled sensitively?

Do they make you more aware of systemic issues related to crime and gender?

3. Community Building as a Space for Justice-Seeking

Goal: Examine how listeners engage critically with justice narratives and legal discourse.

13. How do you feel true crime podcasts portray the criminal justice system?

Do they reinforce trust in institutions, or do they raise skepticism?

14. Have you ever researched a case further after hearing it on a podcast?

If yes, what motivated you to do so?

Did it change how you viewed the case or justice system?

15. Some podcasts advocate for justice or raise awareness about unsolved cases.

Have you ever felt compelled to take action (e.g., signing petitions, sharing stories, joining discussions)?

Do you think audience participation has any real impact on justice?

16. Some scholars argue that true crime podcasts contribute to "*jurification*", where audiences act as informal jurors in criminal cases. Do you feel that listening to these podcasts has shaped how you judge real-world crime cases?

Do you feel that the information presented in podcasts is reliable?

17. Do you believe that true crime podcasts contribute to justice for victims? Why or why not?

18. Have you encountered cases where media exposure led to real-world legal changes or justice outcomes?

4. Participatory Media and Collective Identity Formation

Goal: Understand how listeners engage in digital spaces and form a sense of community.

19. Do you feel like there is a true crime podcast community that you are a part of?

        If yes, how do you participate in it?

        If no, why not?

20. Have you interacted with other listeners online or in real life to discuss true crime stories? If so, how do these discussions take place (e.g., social media groups, comments, real-life conversations)

21. Do you feel a sense of connection or trust with podcast hosts?

        If yes, why? What makes them feel relatable or trustworthy?

        If no, what makes you skeptical of them?

22. Have you noticed differences in how male and female hosts discuss true crime?

        Do you think female-hosted podcasts handle topics like sexual violence or domestic abuse differently?

        Are there aspects of male-hosted true crime podcasts that you find unappealing or problematic?

23. Some researchers argue that women engage with true crime differently than men. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

5. Reflections and Closing Questions

Goal: Summarize insights and allow the participant to reflect on their experiences.

24. If you had to describe what true crime podcasts mean to you in a few words, what would they be?

25. Has your engagement with true crime podcasts changed over time?

        Do you listen more or less than before?

        Have your motivations for listening evolved?

26. Are there any ethical concerns you have about the way true crime podcasts cover cases?

        Do you ever feel like some cases are sensationalized or exploited?

Are there any storytelling approaches that you feel are particularly responsible or irresponsible?

27. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important about how women engage with true crime podcasts?

Thank you for your time and insights! Do you have any questions about the study?

Would you like to be updated on the results of this research?

Appendix B (Interviewees overview)

Interviewee n.	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Based in
1	25	Female	MS in political science	Student	Rome, Italy
2	25	Female	MS in clinical psychology	Educator/Social Worker	Rome, Italy
3	27	Female	MS in literature and Languages	Support teacher (middle school)	Rome, Italy
4	26	Female	MS in clinical psychology	Educator/Social Worker	Rome, Italy
5	26	Female	MS in Classical Literature and Music Conservatory	Student	Rome, Italy
6	24	Female	Degree in Educational Sciences	Kindergarten teacher	Rome, Italy
7	27	Female	Degree in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation (English and German)	Interaction Design Analyst	Rome, Italy
8	33	Female	Degree in Languages	Researcher	Rome, Italy

Appendix C (Coding tree)

This coding tree visualises the analytical structure that informed the interpretation of how young Italian women engage with true crime podcasts. The main themes reflect the interconnected processes of vulnerability, empowerment, resistance and community building, as set out in the operationalisation and theoretical framework, and analysed through Thematic Analysis.

Vulnerability
    ├── Recognition of shared risk
    ├── Emotional resonance with victims
    ├── Realisation of patterns of violence
    ├── Identification with "normal" perpetrators
    └── Fear management

Empowerment
    ├── Emotional rehearsal
    ├── Recognition of warning signs
    ├── Preparedness strategies
    ├── Coping through information
    ├── Safety strategies
    └── Sense of agency and control

Resistance
    ├── Feminist snap / speaking up
    ├── Confronting victim-blaming
    ├── Narrative resistance
    ├── Commenting or reading others' stories
    ├── Sharing and reposting episodes
    ├── Institutional critique
    ├── Moral outrage
    └── Critique of mainstream media

Community
    ├── Affective alignment with others
    ├── Emotional recognition in comments
    ├── Parasocial closeness with hosts
    ├── Offline moments of solidarity
    ├── Shared mourning and remembrance
    └── "Invisible thread" / sisterhood

Appendix D (Code Overview Table)

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Quote or Comment
Vulnerability	Recognition of shared risk	"You think it won't happen to you, but after a while you realise these women were just like us." (Interviewee 6)
Vulnerability	Emotional resonance with victims	"It makes me feel much closer to the victim for this reason, because in some way I empathise with the fact that in Marta's case, I could have been walking through that tunnel." (Interviewee 1)
Vulnerability	Realisation of patterns of violence	"It creates a kind of awareness that you almost try to push away, because your instinct is always to say, 'it won't happen to me'…" (Interviewee 1)
Vulnerability	Identification with 'normal' perpetrators	"Nowadays, YouTube is full of people telling these true stories as if they were scenes from a TV series... Elisa, thank you for telling these stories with empathy and realism." (Comment under Manuela Murgia's video; 413 likes, 5 replies)
Vulnerability	Critique of institutional failure	"After being stabbed by my ex-partner... the police had the nerve to tell me that he was also a victim…" (Comment under Elisa Pomarelli's video; 420 likes, 21 replies)
Vulnerability	Recognition of shared risk	"Hearing about Italian cases has more impact; we feel closer to them, and above all, it opens our eyes, because we often think that evil is miles away from us, but it's closer than we think. You're the best, Elisa😊" (Comment under Elisa Claps's video; 884 likes, 2 replies)
Empowerment	Emotional rehearsal	"That podcast episode really triggered that kind of reaction. I felt more alarmed and less safe than I usually do…" (Interviewee 2)
Empowerment	Recognition of warning signs	"Now I pick up on warning signs much faster... when a stranger man approaches me, I try to end the interaction as quickly as possible." (Interviewee 2)
Empowerment	Preparedness strategies	"I've changed a lot of attitudes... I always look around me. I keep an eye on who's behind me." (Interviewee 7)
Empowerment	Coping through information	"Every time you tackle a subject or hear about something new, you become more aware of it." (Interviewee 1)
Empowerment	Sense of agency and control	"You realise you have the right to feel safe and that you can set boundaries." (Interviewee 5)
Resistance	Feminist snap / speaking up	"Debate has been fundamental in reopening cases, in speaking out... even from a legal point of view." (Interviewee 1)
Resistance	Confronting victim-blaming	"When I was 15... he would beat me up... he said it was my fault. I thought it was love... get help." (Comment under Elisa Pomarelli's video; 11 likes, 0 replies)
Resistance	Narrative resistance	"Let yourself be guided by the podcaster's voice... these are real events, real life." (Interviewee 1)
Community	Commenting or reading others' stories	"Sometimes I find myself having to pause the content to give my full attention to the comment..." (Interviewee 1)

Resistance	Critique of mainstream media	"Videos that give you a taste of reality... without the momentary terror that some content creators want to instil in you." (Comment under Manuela Murgia's video)
Community	Affective alignment with others	"Even if we don't know each other, we're all here for the same reason." (Interviewee 6)
Vulnerabiity	Emotional resonance with victims	"What breaks my heart every time is imagining myself in the victim's place, in the moment before death, when you have someone you trust and love in front of you. I always hope that the victims were taken by surprise and didn't realise that the person who was their friend or partner a moment before had now become their killer." (Comment under Elisa Pomarelli's video; 16 likes; 0 comments)
Community	Parasocial closeness with hosts	Your teary eyes during the video are the key to everything you have built. Your sensitivity is rare and indispensable today for telling stories like these and raising awareness around the world. The love you put into all your work and your ability to empathise make these stories even more real, making you realise how much suffering there has been and how much this is unfortunately reality and not a bad joke. You are special, Elisa💜 (Comment under Elisa Pomarelli's video; 68 likes; 0 comments)
Community	Offline moments of solidarity	"I recommended the podcast about Marta Russo to a friend... so we can talk about it." (Interviewee 1)
Community	Shared mourning and remembrance	"Dear Elisa, you will not be forgotten 🕊." (Comment under Elisa Pomarelli's video, 13 likes, 0 replies)
Community	'Invisible thread' / sisterhood	"I feel part of a community... I can talk about the issue... I know about this story." (Interviewee 1)