From Media Narratives to Stigma: The Social Construction of Juvenile Deviance through Becker's Outsiders

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Riassunto

Questo studio utilizza *Outsiders* di Howard Becker come lente teorica per esaminare la devianza giovanile, così come rappresentata nella stampa online greca, non come fenomeno intrinseco ma come costruzione sociale risultante da processi di etichettamento e di definizione delle regole promossi da attori politici e istituzionali.

L'analisi tematica e la codifica sistematica di 450 articoli, di cui 35 classificati come opinioni di esperti, evidenziano pattern ricorrenti e strategie discorsive che contribuiscono a una crociata morale e mostrano le relazioni che si instaurano in questo processo tra media, esperti e Stato.

I risultati sollevano preoccupazioni riguardo alla definizione selettiva delle regole, alla costruzione dei minori come gruppo marginalizzato e ai meccanismi attraverso cui vengono mantenuti lo status quo e le reazioni sociali alla devianza.

Parole chiave: Costruzione sociale della devianza, Narrazioni mediatiche, Crociate morali

Abstract

This study uses Howard Becker's "Outsiders" as a theoretical lens, to examine juvenile deviance, as presented in the Greek online press, not as an inherent phenomenon but as a social construction resulted by labeling and rule-making processes driven by political and institutional actors.

Thematic analysis and systematic coding of 450 articles, of which 35 labeled as expert opinions, highlights recurring patterns and discursive strategies that contribute to a moral crusade and indicate the relations in this process between media, experts, and state.

The findings raise concerns about selective rule-setting, the construction of minors as a marginalized group, and the mechanisms through which the status quo and social reactions to deviance are maintained.

Keywords: Social construction of deviance, Media narratives, Moral crusades

Résumé

Cette étude utilise *Outsiders* de Howard Becker comme cadre théorique pour examiner la déviance juvénile telle qu'elle est présentée dans la presse en ligne grecque, non pas comme un phénomène inhérent, mais comme une construction sociale résultant de processus d'étiquetage et de production normative menés par des acteurs politiques et institutionnels.

L'analyse thématique et le codage systématique de 450 articles, dont 35 classés comme avis d'experts, mettent en évidence des schémas récurrents et des stratégies discursives qui contribuent à une croisade morale et révèlent les relations entre médias, experts et État dans ce processus.

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Les résultats soulèvent des préoccupations concernant la définition sélective des règles, la construction des mineurs comme groupe marginalisé, ainsi que les mécanismes par lesquels le statu quo et les réactions sociales face à la déviance sont maintenus.

Mots-clés : Construction sociale de la déviance, Récits médiatiques, Croisades morales

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1. Introduction

Deviant behavior is a timeless issue for every society, as diversity, whether manifested in actions or ways of thinking, often causes insecurity and mistrust. This attitude can undermine social cohesion, as the "other" is sometimes perceived as a threat. Deviance, however, is not a fixed or universal concept; it depends on the system of rules and values that defines what behaviors are considered acceptable. This system changes historically and culturally (Vidali & Koulouris, 2012, p.90).

In the study of social issues, sociology points out that deviance has both objective and subjective dimensions (Thio & Taylor, 2011, p.8). The objective dimension is the actual extent and consequences of a phenomenon. However, an event does not automatically become a social problem; it must be perceived as such by society (Blumer, 1971, pp.300–302).

The subjective dimension concerns how people interpret it, which varies according to the era and social space (Zhang et al., 2024).

Blumer (1971, pp.298-306) argues that an issue is only recognized as a social problem when society defines and treats it as such. Behaviors that were considered deviant in one historical period may have been completely decriminalized in another. Therefore, deviance cannot be analyzed outside the social context in which it arises, as social representations and human experiences are constantly changing (Vidali & Koulouris, 2012, p.8).

Juvenile deviance is one of the most persistent issues of recent decades. As early as 1933, the Greek state recognized its importance and introduced measures to address it (Kourakis, 2012, p. 8).

In recent years, the media have reported a strong increase in juvenile deviance, as well as in substance abuse and violent incidents. Experts who intervene in public discourse link these trends to deeper changes in social structures and interpersonal relationships (Karatziou, 2023).

Journalistic coverage plays a decisive role in shaping public opinion (Pearson, 1983). Descriptions often reinforce a sense of threat and urgency, contributing to the creation of stereotypical images of minors as dangerous or violent. Such narratives can lead to stricter social control practices, such as mass police interventions, which are not always proportional to the actual picture of crime (Finnane, 1994, pp. 7-26).

At this point, Howard Becker's contribution is decisive. Becker (1963) argues that deviance is not a property of the act, but a product of processes of labeling and rule enforcement.

Authorities – political, institutional, or otherwise act as "rule makers" who define what behavior is considered problematic. The media and "moral entrepreneurs" often launch "moral crusades," presenting certain groups, such as minors, as a threat and mobilizing society toward stricter forms of control.

The evolution of juvenile deviance in Greece highlights the process of constructing a social problem through its public exposure (Gordon, et al., 1997, p.21). More than the actual data, the decisive factor is how they are interpreted and exploited politically. Often, intense publicity leads to political reactions that are disproportionate to the real causes of the phenomenon (Gordon, et al.., 1997, p.19).

This study examines how the media presents juvenile deviance and how this presentation influences social perceptions and political interventions, through the theoretical framework of Becker's labeling theory.

2.Theoretical Framework

The theory of Howard S. Becker in his work Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance provides an exceptional tool for understanding the process through which deviance is socially constructed.

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At the core of his approach lies the idea that deviance is not the result of the act itself, but a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to an offender (Becker, 1963, p.9).
This perspective offers a powerful interpretive framework for analyzing the ways in which juvenile deviance is defined, highlighted, and subjected to social control by institutions and the mass media. According to Becker, this process begins with the very creation of rules. Social rules are neither given nor absolute, rather, they are the products of specific groups that possess the social and political power to impose them. The enforcement of these rules is equally significant, as it is social groups that create deviance by establishing the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular individuals and labeling them as outsiders (Becker, 1963, p. 9). Deviance, therefore, does not exist in advance but is created through the transaction between the rule-breaker and the group that enforces the rule (Becker, 1963, p. 10).
A central role in this process of "construction" is played by the so-called moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963, p.147). These are ideologues, reformers, or organized pressure groups who take the initiative to present a particular behavior as a social evil, mobilize public opinion, and demand the establishment of new, stricter rules. Their action is not neutral, it holds specific moral convictions and often promotes their own worldview regarding what is "normal" and what is "deviant".
The success of such a moral crusade frequently leads to the creation of new enforcement institutions, which, in turn, must justify their existence and function (Becker, 1963, p.148).
Within this framework, the mass media doesn't operate as mere reflectors of reality but as active participants in shaping it. They do not "discover" juvenile deviance. Instead, they contribute to its social construction through selective reporting, dramatization, and interpretative framing of events.
The overrepresentation of violent acts committed by minors, for example, helps create and reinforce the stereotype of the "dangerous youth," which in turn makes the tightening of legal frameworks and enforcement practices socially acceptable and even necessary.
Law enforcement institutions (e.g. police) do not apply rules mechanically. Their actions are characterized by selective enforcement, influenced by social prejudices, political pressures, and the need to demonstrate effectiveness. The focus on groups perceived as vulnerable or "problematic" (such as young people from certain socioeconomic backgrounds) leads to a selective reinforcement of the idea that deviance is a characteristic of those groups (Gasparinatou, 2020, p.177).
The most critical consequence of this process is labelling. When a young person is publicly identified as a "deviant" by authoritative institutions (school, police), this label tends to become a master status (Becker, 1963, p.33), overshadowing all other aspects of their identity.
In sum, Becker's theoretical framework enables us to understand juvenile deviance not as statistically given, but as a dynamic product of social interactions, moral crusades, institutional practices, and communicative mechanisms.
Analyzing the role of the mass media and enforcement agencies within this framework enables us to reflect how "problem youth" is continuously reinvented and reproduced as a threat to social order.

3.Methodology

A qualitative research was conducted using the method of content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), in order to explore the following research questions; how is juvenile deviance portrayed in the Greek online press, to what extend can they contribute to the social construction of deviance and could they be perceived as a mean of justification for stricter policies.
By using the theoretical framework of Becker's work, a theoretically guided analysis was constructed, examining journalistic articles from the Greek online press.
Specifically, a total of 415 articles were analyzed, which were published in the calendar year of 2023. They were derived from 4 of the most influential electronic newspapers in Greece, two that are considered conservative (Proto Thema & I Kathimerini) and two that are considered progressive (Efimerida ton Syntakton & Documento), to present a more holistic approach and to highlight potential differences.

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Also, 35 articles quoting the opinion of experts, were similarly analysed and derived from multiple Greek online newspapers.
Since the internet provides faster and broader distribution of information (Brock, 2013, p.1), online press was selected over printed
Criterion sampling was the method used to select which "cases meet predetermined criteria of significance" (Patton, 2002, p.238).
Specifically, chronological, geographical, and qualitative criteria were applied, to filter the articles worth analysing.
The year of 2023 was chosen, as it was the time that most measures against the spread of Covid-19, were lifted in Greece.
These measures had a negative impact on the psychosocial development of children (Araujo et al., 2020) and this type of consequence presents a special meaning for this research since it is also invoked by the subjected articles as a root cause for the increase in juvenile deviance.
Secondly, in terms of geography, this phenomenon holds great scientific concern in Greece as it has a central role in public and scientific discourse. Law experts, psychologists, criminologists, sociologists and others, express opinions and provide research on this issue and as a result they interact with the moral crusade that takes place (Becker, 1965, p.165).
Finally, as for the qualitative criteria, the research focuses on articles covering cases that include acts of violence by minors, under 18 years of age, as defined by Greek legislation (Greek Penal Code, art. 121). Crimes with violent nature tend to occupy a disproportionate amount of space in news reports (Gordon et al., 1997, p.17).
The data produced from the analysis of these articles were organised into a theoretically structured coding framework. Codes are a set of conceptual categories into which important data are classified for the study of research questions (Krippendorff, 1980, p.270).
An inductive coding system was formed to extract data units that highlight meanings and themes that contribute to practices of moral crusade in relation to juvenile deviance and the ways in which it is portrayed in the press.
This process was carried out manually and independently by three different coders to minimize interpretative bias and detect nuanced meanings embedded in metaphorical or idiomatic language, which available software might not identify.
An initial pilot coding phase was carried out on a subset of articles to align interpretative criteria; discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, and the coding frame was refined accordingly.
In this case, two main coding categories were formulated; the first contains the codes related to the presentation of the perpetrators and the second, those related to the portrayal of the phenomenon itself.
As code units, were considered specific words, phrases, sentences and punctuation, that either appeared across the data pool multiple times in similar context, or were significant for the theoretical framework and the research questions.
Codes were then grouped in a series of subcategories regarding the main axes of media descriptions, such as age, gender, ethnicity and motives (for the perpetrators) and the type of offense, the location, the element of group involvement, the presence of a weapon or video recording of the incident, the manner in which the acts are described, the manner in which the police are presented, and, finally, words and phrases that suggest an increase in deviance (for the phenomenon).
The process of adding new codes was terminated when saturation occurred, meaning the conceptualisation of new categories that enrich the findings of the analysis was finished (Tsiolis, 2014, p.136).

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4. Analysis

After the analysis of the articles was complete, the data produced were categorized into two key concepts: the representation of the juvenile deviant and the representation of the phenomenon of juvenile deviance for both their quantitative and qualitative characteristics.

The use of linguistic means such as adjectives, phrases or punctuation marks is considered, in this case, as one of the tools of constructing the image of the social interpretation concerning social morality, the common good, and public interest (Becker, 2000, pp.197–202).

This process is completed in two main stages a) cooperation with other stakeholders who share common interests, and (b) the use of mass media to mobilize society around the proposed rule, with the aim of raising public awareness (Becker, 2000, p.185).

From an interactionist point of view, Becker argues that all interactions in a social landscape must be studied, since all the actors collectively contribute to the symbolic production of deviance (Pessin, 2017, p.6). Thus, this research attempts to highlight the interconnection between mass media, policy making, law enforcement, public opinion and ultimately juveniles themselves while also exploring the process of labelling, as it is considered a crucial element in the development of deviant practices.

The first category of data includes all methods and tools used to construct the image of the deviant.

This was accomplished by the presentation of attributes such as gender, ethnicity, age, prior criminal record, their motives and possible toxic personality traits.

Diving into the representation of the motives, it is evident that in almost 80% of the articles, the cause of the deviant case is not a main concern. Phrases such as "for unknown reasons" or "the causes are unknown" are considered an adequate presentation, with the exemption being fanaticism (7%) and economic gain (8%), in cases regarding football violence incidents or theft and mugging accordingly. Overall, the analysis of motives was for the most part superficial and oversimplified (Lambropoulou, 1997, p.51). This observation is especially interesting considering that "most people can be deviant, are tempted to be deviant, are on the point of becoming deviant, but nonetheless only a few actually become deviant" (Pessin, 2017, p.10), raising more questions on the importance of the motives enabling deviant behaviour.

The next characteristic that highly attracts the interest of media is that of gender. The criminal justice system and researchers have concluded that women show lower percentages of deviance than men (Junger-Tas et al., 2004, p.333).

This is one of the reasons that, in the articles analysed, when a case involved the participation of a female in acts of deviance, the produced narratives presented this fact with evident surprise «three girls…! », «but also girls». Moreover, when the actors were presented, females were always mentioned second, implying a minor role to the acts. (Whiteley, E. K., 2024).

The above constitute a sum of gender-based social labels, a cultural framework to define social reality and roles. Bearing in mind many studies on the criminogenic effect of labelling amongst the genders (Ray & Downs, 1986; Bartusch & Matsueda, 1996; Chiricos et al., 2007; McGrath, 2014) and in correlation to the analyzed data, while labeling could potentially have a more powerful impact on females, its application has different qualitative and quantitative characteristics, since males are more frequently and more likely to be labelled as deviant. Specifically, only groups of boys were labelled as «gangs», while the use of language is also indicative to the degree of disproportionate labelling practices against boys («he attacked viciously», «armed gang of boys», «they *the boys* were found guilty of the bloody attack»).

This is backed from the fact that in such cases, the females were usually found innocent from the court. It is worth mentioning, that articles covering the court decisions, used the words «guilty» and «innocent» contrary to the legal procedure of referencing to such decisions as «committed» or «hasn't committed». Such selection of words further amplifies the application of labels, especially formal ones. Afterall, social reaction to deviancy can only occur with the existence of a social group to label certain behaviours as deviant (Pessin, 2017, p.4).

Race or ethnicity seems to be another deciding factor in the shaping of journalistic presentations. Borrowing from Hughes analysis, Becker referenced that race is a «master status», a status that overrides the rest and

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becomes one's dominant. Becker highlighted that race and deviancy are alike in that context (Becker, 1963, p.33). Thus, in this research race plays a double role, since disadvantaged groups are more likely to experience criminal labelling than others (Bernburg, 2019, p.3).

It was observed that conservative newspapers tend to prioritise the identification of the individuals involved in an incident, in terms of their nationality, as "foreigners or nationals," especially when one or more individuals of non-Greek origin were involved in the incident. Specifically, references to foreign origin are found in conservative newspapers at a ratio of 2.5/1 compared to progressive newspapers for all articles published during the same timeframe. For example, descriptions such as «the perpetrator was Albanian» or «all of them were Roma», reveal a tendency to reinforce hostility towards groups that may already be stigmatized. The media and politicians exploit popular fears, «Folk Devils» as S. Cohen defines them (Cohen, 1972), resulting in a resurgence of hostility towards people who are easy to identify and dislike (Welch et al., 2002, p.5). Hierarchy of credibility, as Becker expressed it, is important to this phenomenon regarding the assumption that "the man at the top knows best, without realising that there are sides to be taken" (Becker,1967, p.243).

Now, regarding the second axis of this research, there will be analysed the total of ways in which the phenomenon of juvenile deviancy itself is portrayed through media.

It is of great research interest to go beyond the legal definition of deviance and explore the process in which news, presenting such acts, are selected and how they are ultimately portrayed. Niklas Luhmann distinguished eight different criteria of news selection: the surprise of viewers, the presentation of conflicts, the quantity of events and their comparison by year or place, local references, the violation of moral and legal rules, news reports with moral judgments, the portrayal of perpetrators and victims, seeking causes in individuals and current events (Luhmann,1996, pp.58-72). Bearing these criteria in mind, assists the attempt to grasp all those reasons behind the selection of overreporting cases of deviance and especially that in which juveniles are involved as perpetrators.

Some of the most important qualitative characteristics of juvenile deviance that are mediated through journalistic discourse are the use of violence and the element of groupism. Almost 70% of the analysed articles covered violent cases that involved groups of minors instead of individual perpetrators.

The decision to focus this analysis on incidents of deviance involving the use of violence is not coincidental. Overrepresentation of violent crimes against individuals and underrepresentation of property crimes is a common finding in multitude studies related to media portrayals (Ditton & Duffy, 1983; Opolot, 1980; Mawby & Brown, 1983). Specifically, Ditton and Duffy reported in their research that the percentage of violent crimes reported in the newspaper exceeded the percentage known to official sources by a ratio of 22 to 1 (Ditton & Duffy, 1983, pp.162-163).

It was observed that there was intensive journalistic interest in cases in which the use of violence exceeded by a margin in correlation to average rates. Cases that included excessive use of violence, such as the "Arsakeio case", where a group of students almost choked their classmate with a fishing line or the case of gang rape in Tirnavos, drew the attention of the press with the release of multiple articles across many weeks. Similarly, operation of groups, often labelled as «gangs», was considered a «key term» in most articles. «Groups» also play an important role in Becker's analysis as a catalyst of solidification of deviance. Specifically, belonging into a group, gives a person a sense of common fate based on facing similar problems. So, a set of perspectives is formed and upon those, routine activities are grown. That's how a deviant subculture arises and potentially leads to deviant identities (Becker, 1963, p.38).

Quantitative characteristics are of equal importance, since they are the ones suggesting an increase to juvenile deviance.

Phrases and words such as «one more incident», «another one», «increasing», and «a new case» are all part of a specific quantitative portrayal of the phenomenon. Such discourse is further amplified by the use of terms such as «epidemic» and «outbreak» that contain a strong medical context.

In the context of Becker's «moral crusade», the rule maker "… is interested in the content of rules. The existing rules do not satisfy him, because there is some evil which profoundly disturbs him. He feels that

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nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it." (Becker,1963, pp.147-148), hence the word «evil» also translates to the word «disease», and accordingly «rules» acquire a meaning of «cure». By approaching crime as a social pathology, and thus accepting the possibility of «cureness», advocates in favour of treating deviants in terms of medical intervention (Vidali, 2013, p.73).
In general, the increase in cases of juvenile deviance is considered as an undisputed fact in most articles, and upon on this specific fact, social discourse is developed. This is also evident by the observation of a corresponding increase in the number of articles by the final months of the year. Almost 40% of the articles were published between October and December, contributing to the legitimisation of the upcoming legislative reformation that followed in the first half 2024.

5.State measures as a result of a moral crusade

In past years, state policies aimed at combating juvenile deviance have focused on punishment and stricter measures (Gasparinatou,2024), while preventive measures have been few and far between in practice due to implementation deficits, such as the severe lack of personnel in the Juvenile Court Aid services and the inadequacy of infrastructure (Courakis, 2020, pp.113–114). The influence of public opinion shaped by the media is also important, as the phenomenon is exaggerated and selectively highlighted. This results in the public forming attitudes and perceptions about how to deal with the social problem and, by extension, has an indirect influence on the success of anti-crime policy (Lambropoulou, 1997, p.43).
A successful moral crusade is one in which the rule creator has managed to convince the public and legislators that rules are necessary to combat some kind of threatening social evil (Parrillo, 2008, p.597). Thus, once the public and legislators have been convinced that rules are necessary to address the problem, new laws are created or existing ones are stricter. The above seems to apply precisely to the case of juvenile deviance in Greece. The legislative changes and policies that follow are limited to the period that has been chosen, i.e. 2023, but also one more year, 2024, in order to highlight the long-term legislative changes and policies.
Legislative changes to the Penal Code and related government actions to address incidents of school violence and bullying are some of the solutions adopted by the government.
Law 5090/2024 introduced amendments to the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure. These changes also affected the relevant articles concerning juvenile deviance.
More specifically, in Article 54 of the Penal Code, named "Restriction in a special youth facility", the length of stay is increased in cases where the threatened imprisonment is life imprisonment or temporary, higher than that of the previous paragraph, the duration of confinement in a special detention facility does not exceed ten (10) years nor is it less than two (2). Previously, the duration of confinement in a special detention facility was not to exceed eight (8) years.
In addition, for Article 122, named "Reformative measures", the measure of attending special educational, artistic, or cultural programs at state, municipal, or private institutions and attending sports programs and participating in sports clubs is added. This addition shows the effort to include alternative measures in this article.
With regard to Article 127(1), the phrase "and contains elements of violence or is directed against life or physical integrity" is deleted and the provision is amended as follows: "Restriction to a special detention facility for minors shall be imposed only on minors who have reached the age of fifteen (15), provided that their act, if committed by an adult, would constitute a felony". This change was made to add both violent and non-violent felonies to this paragraph.
Finally, of major importance is the change in Article 133 entitled "Young adults", which states: "When the perpetrator, at the time of committing a criminal act, has not reached the age of twenty-one (21), the court may: a) order his confinement in a special detention facility for young people (Article 54) if it considers that the commission of the act is due to the incomplete development of his personality because of his young age, and that this restriction will be sufficient to prevent the commission of other crimes, or b) impose a reduced sentence (Article 83). In this case, the provision of paragraph 3(b) of Article 130 applies. The

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detainee may remain in the special correctional facility for young people until the age of twenty-five (25). Thus, there is a significant reduction in the age limit for the application of the above measures, from 25 years of age at the time of the offense, as stated in the older Penal Code, to 21 years of age at the time of the offense" (Mantzoutsos, 2024, pp.4-18).

Equally important are the policies implemented under Law 5029/2023 "Living Together in Harmony, Breaking the Silence", to address school violence and bullying.

First, the Stop-Bulling online platform is being launched, where incidents of bullying can be reported by both parents and students themselves, who were either victims or eyewitnesses.

Meanwhile, in order to reduce incidents of school violence, the penalties that can be applied are being tightened with the relevant amendment to Ministerial Decision 79942/2019, in Article 31/April 2024.

More specifically, each school principal now has the option of imposing a suspension of up to three (3) days, whereas previously they only had the option of a one (1) day suspension.

In addition, with the consent of the Teachers' Association, they now have the option of suspending a student for up to five (5) days, whereas previously they only had the option of suspending them for three days (3).

At the same time, two new types of penalties can be imposed by the Teachers' Association: changing the student's class and prohibiting the student from participating in artistic or athletic events and field trips.

Finally, the bureaucratic procedures required to apply the most severe penalties within the school setting, namely changing the school environment, have been reduced (Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, 2024, p. 26).

In conclusion, what emerges from these policies is a significant tightening of the framework and zero tolerance for bullying. The penalties imposed on students are punitive in nature and exemplary. Beyond the school setting, the role of the police is equally important, as they are used by the state mechanism to combat juvenile deviance.

A series of measures have been given to the police to limit juvenile deviance as much as possible. First, as a preventive measure, police patrols are carried out in places frequented by young people to prevent offenses. In such cases, police officers wear plain clothes and are basically unarmed.

At the same time, a record is kept of minors who commit theft, which is constantly updated.

Also, a five-digit, 24-hour hotline, 10201, has been set up to receive reports of juvenile deviance. In addition to receiving reports, the police are responsible for the central management of incidents, as well as for providing support and information.

A digital panic button for minors has also been put in place, as well as an app that lists their rights and how they should act in situations of bullying (Ministry of Citizen Protection, 2024).

Moral enforcers are the second type of moral entrepreneurs as Becker proposed. Police are the most fitting example of a moral enforcer as their job is to enforce whatever rules currently prevail. Their role is active in the application of all measures taken by the government to reduce juvenile deviance.

However, they are also subject to journalistic discourse themselves, as their actions and effectiveness are in the center of most articles analyzed. Around 80% of the articles mentioned the actions and role of the police in relation to the case covered with phrases such as «the police, with coordinated actions...», «the police stated...» and «police officers arrived immediately». It is observed that police operate as a tool of legitimization, since they enforce opinions of current political status and spread their dominant explanations about social facts (Fishman, 1980, p.154).

Thus, taking the above into account, the cultivation of fear by the media and the creation of new, or reinforcement of existing, prejudices in public opinion serve as means of strengthening the severity of social control.

However, such a practice is contrary to the recommendations of the UN and the Council of Europe, which seek to avoid the stigmatization of minors through incarceration and to promote alternative measures (Gasparinatou, 2024).

The constant promotion of daily views and narratives to citizens contributes to the legitimization and reinforcement of the actions of official social control agencies, such as the police and the courts.

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Consequently, formal social control cannot function effectively without informal control, as they are interdependent parts of a single system that transmits a specific evaluative and normative knowledge about crime and ways of dealing with it (Lambropoulou, 1997, p.43).

6.The experts' contribution to the crusade

The expert's opinion plays a decisive role in a moral crusade, as it lends credibility to it. Beyond the articles of journalists who often utilized experts to enrich and bring prestige and authority to their articles, 35 scientific articles expressing the opinion of experts published in the press, in both conservative and progressive newspapers, were examined.

They were collected using the same criteria as journalists' articles. The analysis revealed that experts, including psychologists, criminologists, sociologists, and lawyers, contributed to the establishment of specific interpretations of juvenile deviance.

In fact, there is an overrepresentation of those opinions that align with the dominant narrative about the phenomenon. They are asked to provide insight on causes, measures and specific cases, and since their attributed credibility can endorse policies, their role is crucial in the moral crusade.

In most interventions, especially in the conservative press, the experts did not act as a counterweight to the dramatization, but as a reinforcing mechanism, offering technical and scientific explanations that lent credibility to arguments about a "crisis of values" and "youthful deviance." Only a small minority of experts, mainly those who appeared in the progressive press, took a critical stance, pointing out the absence of empirical data to substantiate a substantial increase in youth crime, as well as the danger of the media acting as accelerators of panic and stigmatization (Cohen, 2011).

Overall, the study confirms Becker's central thesis that experts play a crucial role in establishing new moral norms. Their presence in the press in 2023 was not neutral on the contrary, it served either to reinforce moral crusades against juvenile deviance or, in rare cases of progressive interventions, to undermine them. The findings show that public discourse on juvenile deviance in Greece was shaped by a dynamic interaction between the press, experts, and policymakers, with scientific knowledge being used sometimes as a tool for legitimization and sometimes as a tool for deconstruction of the prevailing narratives.

7. Concluding Thoughts

The analysis of how the Greek online press covered juvenile deviance in 2023, through the lens of Howard Becker's thought, reveals a classic example of the social construction of deviant behavior. The findings confirm that juvenile deviance functions as a product of rule-making and labeling processes carried out by powerful social actors, rather than as a reflection of its objective extent.

In this context, the Mass Media emerges as a key actor in the moral crusade. Through their selective routines, which prioritize violent incidents and employ an exaggerated vocabulary, such as the frequent use of the term "gang", they actively participate in a moral crusade. This crusade seeks to generate social consensus around the necessity of its mission and, by extension, the imposition of stricter forms of social control. The systematic use of language implying escalation further strengthens this narrative, transforming the phenomenon into an indisputable "social evil" that demands immediate remedy.

The process of labeling is central. The media, often in coordination with police sources, contribute to elevating certain characteristics, particularly nationality, into a master status for young offenders. This label overshadows all other aspects of their identity, reinforcing existing stereotypes, and generating a cycle of marginalization. Legislative changes, which increase penalties and expand the reach of criminal law, as well as intensified police interventions, constitute the material manifestation of this successful moral crusade. The police reinforce this dynamic, legitimizing governmental measures and reproducing the narrative of threat.

Even the involvement of experts fits within this model: most of them functioned as mechanisms that provided technical and scientific legitimization to the socially constructed risk, reinforcing the hierarchy of credibility that favors rule-makers.

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Overall, this research illustrates the vicious cycle described by Becker's theory. Social institutions (media, politicians, police) create the rules and labels of deviance, these labels are differentially applied to already vulnerable groups, official responses focus on punishment and control, reinforcing stigma and marginalization, increased marginalization may in turn lead to further integration into deviant subcultures and worsening of the phenomenon.

The conclusion is that the real challenge does not lie in addressing a statistically increasing crime rate, but in dismantling the social mechanisms that continually reinvent and reproduce the idea of the problematic minor.

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