

From Outsider to ‘Saint’: Digital Resistance in the Mangione Case

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DOI: 10.14664/rcvs/267

Riassunto

Questo articolo analizza il caso Luigi Mangione come banco di prova contemporaneo per la teoria classica dell’etichettamento. A partire dal quadro teorico di Howard S. Becker, si sostiene che il caso mostri un passaggio dalla criminalizzazione alla santificazione e, più in generale, da un processo di costruzione della devianza avviato istituzionalmente a forme di resistenza simbolica che emergono dal basso. Invece di produrre uno stigma stabile e unidirezionale, la costruzione pubblica di Mangione si è sviluppata attraverso una frammentazione della reazione sociale tra informazione mainstream, social media, meme, arte di strada e merchandising. All’interno di questo campo frammentato, l’articolo individua tre principali meccanismi attraverso cui l’etichetta deviante è stata ribaltata: santificazione, sessualizzazione e ricodifica anticapitalista. Dal punto di vista metodologico, l’articolo si basa su un’analisi qualitativa multimodale di articoli di giornale, post sui social media, meme e artefatti visivi raccolti tra il 4 dicembre 2024 e il 31 marzo 2025. L’analisi mostra come, in settori rilevanti dei pubblici digitali, Mangione sia stato ri-scritto come santo, martire, folk hero, oggetto sessuale e simbolo anticapitalistico. Su questa base, l’articolo propone il concetto di ‘etichetta al contrario’, con cui si indicano le situazioni in cui attori istituzionali, come le autorità giudiziarie e i media mainstream, cercano di fissare la devianza sul singolo soggetto, mentre i pubblici connessi ridirezionano parzialmente la condanna morale verso strutture più ampie di potere e di danno sistemico.

Parole chiave: Santificazione, Criminologia culturale, Luigi Mangione

Abstract

This article examines the Luigi Mangione phenomenon as a contemporary test case for classical labelling theory. Drawing on Howard S. Becker’s framework, it argues that the case reveals a shift from criminalization to sanctification, and more broadly from a process of deviance construction initiated institutionally to forms of symbolic resistance emerging from below. Rather than producing a stable and unidirectional stigma, the public construction of Mangione developed through a fragmented social reaction across mainstream news, social media, memes, street art, and commercial merchandise. Within this fragmented field, the article identifies three main mechanisms through which the deviant label was destabilized: sanctification, sexualization, and anti-capitalist recoding. Methodologically, the article is based on a qualitative multi-modal analysis of news articles, social media posts, memes, and visual artifacts collected between 4 December 2024 and 31 March 2025. It shows how, in important sectors of digital publics, Mangione was re-authored as saint, martyr, folk hero, sex object, and anti-corporate symbol. On this basis, the article proposes the concept of ‘inverted labelling’, referring to situations in which institutional actors such as legal authorities and mainstream media seek to fix deviance onto an individual subject, while networked publics partially redirect moral blame toward broader structures of power and systemic harm.

Keywords: cultural criminology; sanctification; Luigi Mangione

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Rivista di Criminologia, Vittimologia e Sicurezza – Vol. XIX - gennaio-dicembre 2025

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Résumé

Cet article analyse le cas Luigi Mangione comme un terrain d'épreuve contemporaine pour la théorie classique de l'étiquetage. À partir du cadre théorique de Howard S. Becker, le travail soutient que ce cas met en évidence un passage de la criminalisation à la sanctification et, plus largement, d'un processus institutionnel de construction de la déviance à des formes de résistance symbolique venant d'en bas. Au lieu de produire un stigmat stable et unidirectionnel, la construction publique de Mangione s'est développée à travers une fragmentation de la réaction sociale entre presse généraliste, réseaux sociaux, mèmes, street art et produits dérivés. À l'intérieur de ce champ fragmenté, l'article met en évidence trois mécanismes principaux par lesquels l'étiquette déviante a été déstabilisée : la sanctification, la sexualisation et le recodage anticapitaliste. Sur le plan méthodologique, l'article s'appuie sur une analyse qualitative multimodale d'articles de presse, de publications sur les réseaux sociaux, de mèmes et d'artefacts visuels recueillis entre le 4 décembre 2024 et le 31 mars 2025. L'analyse montre ainsi que, dans d'importants secteurs des publics numériques, Mangione a été reconfiguré comme saint, martyr, *folke hero*, objet sexuel et symbole anticapitaliste. Sur cette base, l'article propose le concept d'«étiquetage inversé» qui désigne les situations dans lesquelles des acteurs institutionnels, tels que les autorités judiciaires et les médias dominants, cherchent à fixer la déviance sur un individu, tandis que les publics en réseau redirigent partiellement le blâme moral vers des structures plus larges de pouvoir et de violence systémique.

Mots-clés: Sanctification; Criminologie culturelle; Luigi Mangione

1. Introduction

Since the publication of *Outsiders*, Howard S. Becker's labelling theory has remained a cornerstone of the sociology of deviance, shifting the analytical focus from acts themselves to the social processes through which some actors, rather than others, come to be defined as deviant. Becker's foundational claim is well known: «deviance is not a quality of the act» but rather «a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions». In the same passage, Becker adds that «the deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied» (Becker, 1963, p. 9). The analytical emphasis, then, is not on what an individual objectively is, but on whether a social definition of deviance becomes authoritative and sticks. In this sense, the outsider is not simply the person who violates a norm, but the one who is successfully fixed as deviant in the eyes of others. This distinction is crucial here, because the Mangione case suggests a situation in which the institutional production of the outsider remains active, but its symbolic stabilization becomes far more uncertain.

This article takes as its case study the public and mediated construction of Luigi Mangione, who became the object of intense criminal, political, and memetic attention following the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson. Beyond its legal dimensions, the case quickly developed into a broader struggle over meaning across news coverage, social media discourse, memes, and visual culture. Rather than producing a stable image of the accused as a self-evident deviant, the case generated competing constructions of blame, legitimacy, and moral significance. It is precisely this instability that makes the Mangione case especially useful for reconsidering the conditions under which labelling succeeds, fails, or becomes inverted¹. The reflection starts from that Beckerian premise but argues that the Mangione case exposes an important problem in the classical direction of labelling. In Becker's original formulation, deviance emerges through a sequence in which social groups make rules, institutions apply them, and the labelled subject is successfully stabilized as an outsider (Becker, 1963). Yet in highly mediatized and platformed environments, this sequence no longer guarantees symbolic closure. The accused may still be legally processed, publicly named, and institutionally stigmatized, but the broader field of mediated interpretation can resist that classification,

¹ This article does not assess legal guilt or innocence. Rather, it examines the Mangione case as a mediated site of symbolic struggle in which deviance, legitimacy, and moral blame are publicly constructed and contested.

circulate alternative meanings, and even redirect moral condemnation toward the institutional order itself. In such cases, labelling does not disappear; rather, it becomes unstable, conflictual, and publicly contestable (Becker, 1963; Becker, 1967). This uncertainty becomes even more significant in a hyperconnected social environment in which the distinction between online and offline can no longer be treated as analytically self-evident. If deviance depends, as Matza's emphasis on signification suggests, on the social production of meaning around actors, circumstances, and authority, then contemporary processes of labelling must be understood within communicative environments in which such meanings are continuously circulated, contested, and re-authored. In this sense, the Mangione case unfolds in an 'onlife' condition in which institutional accusation, visual mediation, and public reinterpretation are no longer separable domains (Matza, 1969; Floridi, 2014).

The Mangione case is sociologically useful precisely because it appears to dramatize this instability. Instead of producing a fully coherent and consensual image of the accused as a self-evident deviant, the case generated competing moral narratives across news media, social platforms, memes, and visual culture. In some settings, Mangione was framed through familiar criminalizing codes; in others, he was aestheticized, eroticized, 'memefied', politicized, or even sanctified. This article therefore argues that the case is best understood not simply as an example of labelling, but as an example of failed or inverted labelling; a situation in which institutional actors attempt to define deviance at the level of the individual, while networked publics partially relocate moral stigma onto wider structures of power, legitimacy, and systemic harm. To develop this claim, the article first revisits Becker's distinction between moral entrepreneurs, rule creators, and rule enforcers. It then expands the discussion through Becker's notion of the hierarchy of credibility, before connecting labelling theory to Stanley Cohen's analysis of folk devils and moral panics, Stuart Hall's work on representation and mediated social order, and the insights of cultural criminology, visual criminology, and popular criminology on image, symbolism, affect, and the public circulation of crime (Becker, 1963, 1967; Cohen, 1972; Hall, 1997; Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; Rafter & Brown, 2011; Brown & Carrabine, 2017; Urwin, 2024; Tuzza, 2026). Methodologically, the article draws on a qualitative multi-modal analysis of publicly circulating materials, including news coverage, online posts, memes, and visual artifacts that frame Mangione through criminalizing, heroic, romanticized, and sanctifying codes. The central argument is that the Mangione case reveals not the obsolescence of labelling theory, but the need to reformulate it for a media environment in which the authority to define deviance is increasingly dispersed and contested.

2. Deviance, the structure of moral entrepreneurship and the hierarchy of credibility

Becker's classic intervention begins from the proposition that deviance is socially produced rather than ontologically given. «Social groups create deviance», he writes, «by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance» and by applying those rules to persons labelled as outsiders (Becker, 1963, p. 9). This statement remains decisive because it shifts sociological attention away from essentialist theories of deviance and toward the politics of classification. In Becker's framework, the key question is not whether an act is inherently deviant, but how specific forms of conduct and specific kinds of people come to be publicly defined as such. This process is organized through what Becker (1963) calls moral entrepreneurship. Importantly, moral entrepreneurs are not a single undifferentiated category. Becker distinguishes between rule creators and rule enforcers, and that distinction is indispensable for the present argument. Rule creators are the actors who define a condition, behaviour, or social type as morally troubling and in need of regulation. Their work is fundamentally normative, they name an evil, dramatize its consequences, and seek to transform moral concern into rulemaking. Becker's own formulation is telling: «The prototype of the rule creator... is the crusading reformer» who sees «some evil which profoundly disturbs him» and believes «nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it» (Becker, 1963, pp. 147–148). The rule creator, then, does not merely observe deviance; he actively constitutes the moral field in which deviance becomes recognizable. Rule enforcers, by contrast, are concerned less with inventing the moral order than with administering it. As Becker notes, they may even be «morally indifferent» to the content of the rule

while nevertheless being professionally committed to its enforcement (Becker, 1963, p. 155). Their work lies in surveillance, classification, implementation, and sanction. If rule creators dramatize danger, rule enforcers routinize it. If rule creators produce the moral grammar of prohibition, rule enforcers transform that grammar into institutional practice. The labelling process succeeds most fully when these two levels align: when a moralized definition of conduct is successfully translated into institutional authority and subsequently accepted by wider audiences as legitimate (Becker, 1963). This is precisely where the Mangione case becomes theoretically significant. The case does not suggest that moral entrepreneurship has disappeared. On the contrary, it suggests that the processes Becker identified are still operative. Public discourse still contains attempts to define threat, identify culpability, and stabilize a deviant subject. Institutional actors still work to enforce legal and symbolic classifications. What appears to break down, however, is the assumption that such classifications will enjoy uncontested moral authority in the wider public sphere. In a networked media environment, the success of labelling can no longer be presumed simply because institutions initiate it. Becker's theory remains correct in identifying deviance as a social achievement; what now requires revision is the model of how, and by whom, that achievement is secured. A second concept from Becker is especially important here, the 'hierarchy of credibility'. In his 1967 essay "Whose Side Are We On?", Becker argues that social life is structured by unequal distributions of definitional authority. Those at the top of institutions and social hierarchies are more likely to be taken as truthful, reasonable, and authoritative, whereas subordinate actors are more readily discredited or ignored. Becker's wording is instructive, researchers often «accept the hierarchy of credibility» by taking «the accusation made by responsible officials» as presumptively valid (Becker, 1967, p. 241). The concept captures more than epistemic bias; it identifies a social mechanism through which official definitions acquire legitimacy in advance. Classical labelling theory relies, at least implicitly, on this hierarchy. Rule creators and rule enforcers are effective not only because they possess legal or institutional power, but because they are conventionally recognized as more credible definers of social reality than the subjects they label. This asymmetry helps explain why labels stick, the accused is narratively subordinated to official accounts, while institutional descriptions of events, motives, and identities appear naturally authoritative. Under such conditions, the label 'deviant' can be imposed with relative stability (Becker, 1967).

In the digital public sphere, however, this structure becomes more unstable. Institutional actors retain enormous formal power, but they no longer exercise an uncontested symbolic monopoly over meaning. In contemporary digital society, social reaction appears less monolithic and more fragmented, as multiple publics and media actors participate in the circulation and contestation of moral judgments. Counter-publics can now circulate rival interpretations at high speed, remix official images, attach alternative affective codes to accused subjects, and publicly dispute institutional framings. In this sense, the hierarchy of credibility is not abolished, but destabilized. The Mangione case appears to exemplify this shift, the institutional effort to classify the accused did not simply meet denial or support; it encountered a dense and fragmented field of memetic, visual, political, and affective reinterpretation.

3. From 'folk devils' to representational struggle and 'inverted' labelling

Stanley Cohen's work helps extend Becker by foregrounding the role of media in the amplification of deviance. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen famously writes that «societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic», during which «a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests» (Cohen, 1972, p. 9-10). Crucially, he adds that this threat is «presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media» (Cohen, 1972, p. 9-10). This formulation is central because it shows that deviance is not merely named; it is dramatized through representational routines that condense social anxiety into recognizable figures of danger. Cohen's 'folk devil' sharpens Becker's 'outsider'. The outsider is the person to whom the label has been successfully applied; the folk devil is the person or group through whom a society narrates its fears. In classical moral panics, media institutions, experts, and moral entrepreneurs work in tandem to produce a relatively coherent object of condemnation. The deviant becomes legible through repetition, stereotype, and symbolic

simplification. What the Mangione case seems to reveal, however, is that such a process may now fail to achieve full coherence. The accused can still be criminalized, but he can also circulate simultaneously as an anti-hero, martyr, saint, meme-object, or symptom of systemic grievance. That plurality of meanings complicates the folk-devil model, because it fragments the representational field in which moral panic traditionally operates (Cohen, 1972). This is where Stuart Hall becomes particularly useful. Hall's constructionist theory of representation insists that meaning does not simply reflect the world; it is produced through signifying practices (Hall, 1997). As Hall writes, «meaning depends on the system of concepts and images» formed within a culture (Hall, 1997, p. 19). Applied to deviance, this insight means that criminalization is never merely descriptive. It is representational and political. Crime does not enter public consciousness as a neutral fact; it enters through culturally available codes, images, categories, and narratives. From this perspective, the struggle over the meaning of Mangione is also a struggle over representation, over what kind of figure he can be made to signify, and over what wider moral order that signification supports.

Seen in these terms, the case calls for an approach capable of accounting not only for labelling, but also for the circulation of crime through media, images, and affective codes. Cultural criminology provides the most direct bridge between labelling theory and the contemporary media environment. In a foundational formulation, Ferrell, Hayward and Young argue that cultural criminology «highlights issues of image, meaning, and representation in the interplay of crime and crime control» (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008, p. 2). This sentence is especially useful because it captures exactly what a purely legal or institutional reading of the Mangione case would miss; crime and crime control are not only administrative processes; they are also cultural processes mediated by images, affects, spectacle, and symbolic struggle. A cultural criminological approach therefore does not replace Becker; it extends him. Becker explains how deviance is institutionally named, but cultural criminology clarifies how that naming is transformed once it circulates through media ecologies structured by virality, visibility, participation, and affect. Ferrell, Hayward and Young further insist that «cultural dynamics carry within them the meaning of crime» (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008, p. 4). This is especially relevant here. In the Mangione case, the accused did not circulate only as a legal subject. He circulated as an image-bearing figure available for meme production, aesthetic recoding, erotic investment, political projection, and moral reinterpretation. This point can be strengthened further through visual criminology. Brown and Carrabine (2017) frame the visual as central to criminological understanding, assembling scholarship devoted to 'the role of the visual in criminology' and to the ways crime, deviance, and control are rendered through diverse visual media. That framing is especially apt for a case in which mugshots, reposted portraits, memes, saint-like iconography, and digitally remixed images become part of the struggle over moral meaning. Treating images as constitutive rather than merely illustrative allows the analysis to account for how deviance is softened, aestheticized, eroticized, or symbolically re-coded in circulation. This point also opens toward popular criminology, which examines how crime and justice are reworked within popular media and participatory culture. Rafter & Brown (2011) argue that criminological theory is produced not only in the academy but also in popular culture, thereby challenging the assumption that criminological meaning is generated exclusively within scholarly or legal discourse. Urwin's more recent work (2024) similarly emphasizes that what appears on screen contributes to perceptions of justice 'in society, policy, and practice', while Tuzza (2026) explicitly presents media as active in defining crime rather than merely describing it. These interventions are especially useful here because they underline that mediated crime becomes consumable, narrativized, emotionally inhabited, and publicly debated across cultural forms.

Once an accused figure becomes embedded in meme cultures, fandom logics, visual templates, and affective publics, the classical distinction between condemnation and identification becomes harder to sustain. The Mangione case is especially revealing in this respect because the public construction of meaning appears to exceed both legal discourse and traditional journalism, moving into spaces where deviance is not only narrated but stylized, desired, and symbolically repurposed.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that labelling theory must now be reformulated in a more explicitly mediatic and conflictual register. Becker (1963) was right that deviance is socially constructed; Cohen (1972) was right that media stylization helps consolidate threat; Hall (1997) was right that meaning is constructed through representation; and cultural, visual, and popular criminology are right to insist that crime and crime control unfold through image, affect, symbolism, and circulation (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; Brown & Carrabine, 2017; Rafter & Brown, 2011; Urwin, 2024; Tuzza, 2026). For this reason, this article proposes the concept of ‘inverted’ labelling. Inverted labelling refers to a situation in which rule creators and rule enforcers attempt to fix deviance at the level of the accused individual, but networked publics contest this attribution and partially redirect moral condemnation toward broader institutions, structures, or systems claimed to have generated the underlying harm. The key sociological point is not that the accused ceases to be prosecutable, nor that criminal accountability disappears. It is that the symbolic location of deviance becomes unstable. The question shifts from whether labelling occurs to whether the labelling process can still organize a dominant moral consensus. In the Mangione case, the answer appears to be far less certain than classical labelling theory would suggest.

4. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative case study design centred on the Mangione case and employs a multi-modal document analysis of publicly circulating materials. The choice of a case study design is appropriate because the article examines a contemporary and highly mediatized phenomenon within its real-world context, rather than isolating variables in an abstract way (Yin, 2018). The aim is not to reconstruct the legal truth of the case, nor to assess guilt or innocence, but to examine how deviance, legitimacy, and moral blame are symbolically constructed, contested, and redistributed across a fragmented digital media environment. In this sense, the Mangione case is treated as a mediated site of symbolic struggle, rather than as a purely juridical event². The methodological approach combines elements of qualitative document analysis, digital discourse analysis, and visual analysis. This choice follows directly from the theoretical framework developed above. If labelling is understood not as a fixed institutional act but as a contested process of public meaning-making, then the relevant materials are not limited to legal statements or traditional news coverage. They also include the wider range of texts and images through which the accused is framed, circulated, aestheticized, condemned, defended, or symbolically transformed. In this sense, the study treats news articles, social media posts, and memes as analytically meaningful documents, following approaches that understand documents not as neutral containers of information but as socially produced and interpretable materials (Rapley, 2018; Tracy, 2024). The analysis therefore focuses on how moral definitions are articulated across different media forms and interpretive environments.

4.1 Corpus Construction and Source Selection

The corpus was constructed through purposive sampling and manual retrieval through Google-based searches. Rather than attempting to build an exhaustive archive of all materials related to the case, the study selected materials that were especially relevant to the public construction of Mangione as a morally contested figure. The emphasis was therefore placed on materials that showed explicit processes of criminalization, heroization, romanticization, sanctification, politicization, institutional displacement, or affective/sexualized recoding. Searches were conducted using combinations of keywords such as “Luigi Mangione,” “Luigi Mangione memes,” “Luigi Mangione saint,” “Luigi Mangione holy card,” “Luigi Mangione Jesus,” “Luigi Mangione fan edit,” “Luigi Mangione handsome,” “Luigi Mangione social media reaction,” “Luigi Mangione Reddit,” “Luigi Mangione Instagram,” “Luigi Mangione Brian Thompson reaction,” “Luigi Mangione heroic,” “Luigi Mangione martyr,” and “Luigi Mangione terrorist.” For the news sample, the study focuses

² This study does not assess legal guilt or innocence and does not endorse the views expressed in the materials analysed. It examines publicly circulating texts and images for interpretive purposes only.

on a reduced set of major English-language online news organizations selected on the basis of visibility, agenda-setting relevance, and recognizability within Anglophone public discourse. The core outlets are The New York Times, The Washington Post, Reuters, Associated Press, The Guardian, and BBC News. To make the source base fully transparent, the analysis also identifies a limited number of supplementary journalistic and contextual sources used for specific interpretive questions: El País³ and Newsweek⁴ are used in the section on aestheticization and sexualized reception, while LSU Media is used to document one publicly circulating X-based example. These supplementary sources are not treated as statistically representative additions to the core media corpus; they are used because they preserve or describe concrete examples of the interpretive frames already visible in the platform material. For digital public discourse, the analysis focuses on X, Instagram, and Reddit. These platforms were selected because they enable different but complementary forms of meaning production. X is especially useful for immediate, reactive, and polemical discourse; Instagram is particularly relevant for visual circulation, aesthetic framing, and saint-like or romanticized representations; Reddit allows for longer, more interpretive threads in which users collectively debate the meaning of the case. Restricting the corpus to these three platforms makes the dataset more coherent while still capturing the fragmentation of social reaction in digital society. The inclusion of X, Instagram, and Reddit also reflects the growing importance of digital discourse analysis for understanding how meaning is produced across platformed communication environments. Rather than treating online discourse as secondary commentary, this approach recognizes that platforms are central sites in which actors circulate, contest, and reframe public meanings in real time (Jones, Chik & Hafner, 2021). The final corpus consists of a core dataset of approximately 60 items, supplemented by a small number of contextual sources used to clarify specific frames already identified within the dataset:

- 20 news articles and opinion pieces drawn from the selected US and UK online outlets;
- 25 publicly accessible posts or threads collected from X, Instagram, and Reddit;
- 15 visual artifacts, including memes, edited images, screenshots, and saint-like graphic representations of Mangione.

For transparency, Table A summarizes the main categories of material used in the analysis and distinguishes between core analytical sources and supplementary contextual sources. This distinction is important because the article does not claim representativeness of all public reaction; it instead reconstructs recurrent mechanisms of meaning-making through a defined and explicitly delimited corpus.

Category	Sources/platforms	Approx. number / role	Analytical function
Core news coverage	The New York Times; The Washington Post; Reuters; Associated Press; The Guardian; BBC News	Approx. 20 items	Institutional framing, criminalization, mainstream interpretive coverage, and early journalistic registration of fragmented public reaction.
Supplementary media sources	El País; Newsweek; LSU Media	Contextual sources used in selected passages	Documentation of aestheticization, sexualization, gay-icon framing, and a specific X-based meme example

³ <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2024-12-12/in-love-with-a-killer-how-the-internet-became-obsessed-with-luigi-mangione.html>.

⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/how-luigi-mangione-became-gay-icon-online-2000660>.

Platform discourse	X; Instagram; Reddit	Approx. 25 public posts/threads	not fully captured by the core outlet list. Public contestation, counter-labelling, affective reaction, martyr/folk-hero narratives, and explicit commentary on canonization.
Visual artifacts	Memes; edited images; saint-like portraits; screenshots; street images; merchandise listings	Approx. 15 items	Sanctification, visual recoding, devotional aesthetics, commodification, and the migration of digital meaning into consumer and urban space.
Institutional documents	Prosecutorial statements; early court/charge reporting; law-enforcement and official media references	Contextual evidence	Reconstruction of the institutional grammar through which the accused was framed as criminal, dangerous, and individually culpable.

[Table A]

These numbers are intended to provide a dataset large enough to identify recurrent discursive and visual patterns while remaining consistent with the interpretive and qualitative nature of the study. The goal is not statistical representativeness, but analytical depth⁵.

4.2 Temporal Scope

The study focuses on the initial phase of intense public visibility surrounding the Mangione case, from 4 December 2024, the date of Brian Thompson's killing, to 31 March 2025. This period was selected because it captures the emergence and consolidation of the earliest and most intense journalistic, digital, and visual reactions to the case, including Luigi Mangione's arrest on 9 December 2024 and the rapid circulation of competing moral framings across news coverage, social platforms, and visual culture. The emphasis is therefore not on the full legal chronology of the case, but on the period in which its mediated meaning became publicly unstable and fragmented.

4.3 Inclusion criteria

Materials were included when they met at least one of the following criteria: they framed Mangione through a clearly identifiable moral code, such as criminalization, heroization, sanctification, romanticization, or political justification; they explicitly linked Mangione to broader debates about legitimacy, systemic violence, institutional injustice, or media representation; they circulated images or visual edits that transformed the accused into a morally or aesthetically elevated figure; they provided evidence of public contestation over

⁵ While the analysis is based on a defined core corpus of news articles, social media posts, and visual materials, a small number of external contextual sources were used selectively to verify, trace, or contextualize the broader circulation of specific motifs already identified within the dataset. Such sources were not included as primary analytical units but served a supplementary corroborative function.

the meaning of the case. Materials were excluded when they were purely duplicative, lacked substantive interpretive content, or were inaccessible in their original public form.

4.4 Visual materials and meme selection

Attention was given to memes, edited images, and saint-like graphic representations of Mangione. For visual materials, the article employs a qualitative visual analysis attentive to iconography, framing, composition, symbolic references, and text-image interaction. This choice is consistent with visual methodology approaches that treat images as culturally situated and socially productive, rather than merely illustrative (Rose, 2016). It is especially appropriate in a case where memes, edited portraits, and saint-like representations participate directly in the symbolic recoding of the accused. These materials were collected from publicly accessible posts and reposts on X, Instagram, and Reddit, as well as from journalistic articles that reproduced or discussed their circulation. Visual items were included when they showed clear processes of symbolic recoding, especially through religious, charismatic, heroic, romanticized, or aestheticized imagery. This includes, for example, images that represent Mangione with halos, sacred iconography, prayer-card aesthetics, martyr-like poses, devotional visual language, or other forms of sanctification. Such materials are methodologically relevant not because they provide information about the case, but because they reveal how digital publics may interrupt the classical stigmatizing force of labelling and replace it with alternative affective and moral scripts. Reports and image-based coverage documenting saint-like, heroic, or quasi-religious depictions of Mangione indicate that these forms of visual recoding circulated publicly during the period under analysis. Visual materials also included commercially circulating artifacts, such as t-shirts, mugs, candles, posters, and other merchandise, when these reproduced saint-like, heroic, or supportive representations of Mangione and formed part of the broader visual recoding of the case.

4.5 Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeds through a qualitative thematic reading of both textual and visual materials. For textual documents, the study identifies recurring discursive frames through which Mangione is constructed. These include: criminalization, where the accused is framed as a clear deviant or threat; politicization, where the case is interpreted through broader systemic grievances; heroization or martyrdom, where the accused is recast as morally intelligible or symbolically elevated; romanticization and eroticization, where aesthetic attraction softens condemnation; institutional displacement, where blame is reassigned from the accused to wider corporate, political, or social structures.

For visual materials, the article employs a qualitative visual analysis attentive to iconography, framing, composition, symbolic references, and text-image interaction. Emphasis is placed on how visual artifacts produce forms of moral elevation, aesthetic mitigation, or symbolic reversal. In this way, the visual analysis complements the textual one by showing how meaning is not only argued but also seen, stylized, and affectively circulated.

4.6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the corpus is purposive and interpretive and therefore cannot be understood as representative of all public reactions to the case. Second, digital materials are unstable: posts may be deleted, edited, reposted, or algorithmically amplified in ways that are difficult to reconstruct fully. Third, the analysis does not claim that alternative framings of Mangione were dominant across society. Rather, it argues that they were sufficiently visible and culturally resonant to destabilize the expectation of a unified moral reaction. These limits do not undermine the value of the study. On the contrary, they clarify that the object of analysis is not the totality of public opinion, but the fragmentation of moral meaning in a digitally saturated environment. The methodological goal is therefore to capture how competing representations emerge, circulate, and acquire force within public discourse, and how such processes complicate the classical direction of labelling.

5. The Mangione case: institutional framing and the fragmentation of social reaction

The earliest phase of public discourse surrounding the Mangione case was shaped by a relatively familiar mechanism of institutional framing. In the immediate aftermath of Brian Thompson's killing on 4 December 2024 and Luigi Mangione's arrest on 9 December 2024, mainstream coverage largely organized the event through conventional categories of criminal accusation, public danger, and moral shock. A New York federal press release, for example, stated that Mangione had allegedly acted in a «grossly misguided attempt» to broadcast his views and concluded in unambiguous terms: «this wasn't a debate, it was murder» (U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, 2024). This is precisely the kind of language through which institutional actors attempt to stabilize the moral meaning of an act and secure the public recognizability of the accused as deviant. At this initial stage, the media did not simply report the facts of the case. Rather, they helped circulate and reinforce a classificatory order in which Mangione could be read as an intelligible criminal subject. Associated Press coverage⁷ of the early charges placed strong emphasis on the official prosecutorial response and the state's presentation of the arrest, thereby reproducing the authority of institutional actors in defining the case. In Beckerian terms, this corresponds closely to the early success conditions of labelling: rules are not merely present, but publicly activated through recognizable mechanisms of accusation, enforcement, and narrative stabilization (Becker, 1963). From this perspective, the earliest public construction of the case followed a recognizable pattern. The accused was positioned within a familiar vocabulary of violence, culpability, and threat, while the event itself was framed as a rupture requiring intelligibility through established moral categories. In Cohen's terms, this is the terrain on which a potentially powerful process of symbolic condensation begins: the accused may become more than an individual defendant and start to function as a figure onto which broader anxieties are projected (Cohen, 1972). At this level, the conditions to produce a contemporary folk devil appeared to be present.

This institutional reaction was not limited to the formal language of prosecution. It also involved a wider assemblage of actors and communicative practices: law-enforcement briefings, court records, police descriptions, security-oriented media routines, corporate expressions of shock, and journalistic repetition of official categories. Taken together, these practices helped construct the case as a problem of public danger and individual culpability before it became a platformed object of reinterpretation. The repeated emphasis on murder, manhunt, planning, manifesto-like writings, and alleged ideological motivation gave the case a strongly institutional grammar. This grammar did two things at once. First, it located the source of deviance in the accused individual. Second, it positioned state and corporate actors as the credible interpreters of the event. In Becker's terms, the hierarchy of credibility was therefore activated not only by a press release, but by the broader institutional ecosystem through which the case was made legible as crime, threat, and disorder. However, the Mangione case did not remain confined within this initial script. Almost immediately, the institutional framing of the accused encountered a more unstable and contested media environment than classical labelling models would lead us to expect. Rather than generating a socially unified reaction, the case quickly produced fragmented and competing publics. Coverage in *The Guardian*, for example, explicitly described Mangione as having become an 'online folk hero' in some digital spaces⁸, while another *Guardian* report documented a legal defence fundraiser that had already attracted over \$120,000 by mid-December 2024⁹. The same coverage repeatedly used contrastive formulations that are analytically revealing; Mangione appeared in journalistic discourse as both an object of criminal accusation and as a figure around whom admiration, irony, and political grievance were accumulating. In other words, the media archive does not simply show support or condemnation; it shows the coexistence of incompatible moral vocabularies.

⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/luigi-mangione-charged-stalking-and-murder-unitedhealthcare-ceo-brian-thompson-and-use>.

⁷ <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2024/new-york-prosecutors-charge-suspect-in-unitedhealthcare-ceo-killing-with-murder-court-records-show/>.

⁸ *Guardian staff* (2024) 'Kimmel on suspect in CEO shooting: "America's most unseemly new sex symbol"', *The Guardian*, 12 December.

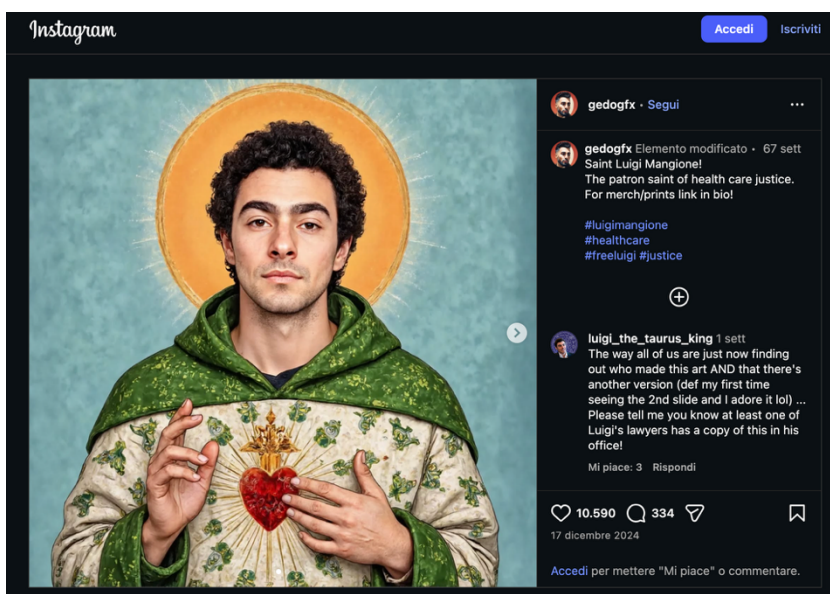
⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/16/luigi-mangione-fundraiser-legal-defense>.

On one side, official discourse condensed the case into the phrase ‘this wasn’t a debate, it was murder’; on the other, digital and journalistic accounts registered phrases such as ‘online folk hero’, ‘healthcare justice’, ‘martyr’, and ‘Robin Hood figure’. These excerpts are important because they make visible the very instability that the concept of inverted labelling seeks to capture. The label of deviance was not simply rejected; it was forced to compete with rival labels that attached different moral meanings to the same figure. This shift is sociologically significant because it suggests that the success of labelling can no longer be assumed because of institutional authority alone. The hierarchy of credibility described by Becker (1967) remains operative, but it is increasingly destabilized by the proliferation of digitally networked arenas in which official definitions encounter immediate reinterpretation.

This institutional framing can also be read in relation to the broader literature on the criminalization of dissent and protest. Selmini and Di Ronco (2023) show that dissent is not criminalized only through legal sanctions or policing practices, but also through discursive processes that recode political conflict as disorder, threat, or security emergency. This perspective is useful here because the Mangione case did not involve protest in a conventional organizational sense, yet the public meanings attached to it quickly moved onto a terrain of dissent, legitimacy, and anti-systemic grievance. The official insistence that the act could not be interpreted as political debate, but only as murder, can therefore be understood as part of a wider institutional effort to close down alternative moral readings of the event. Against this background, the digital counter-labelling analysed in this article appears not simply as admiration for an accused individual, but as a communicative struggle over whether the case should be read through criminal deviance alone or through a broader critique of institutional and corporate violence.

News discourse may still establish the first dominant frame, but it does not necessarily retain exclusive control over the case’s symbolic trajectory. In the Mangione case, the initial effort to criminalize the accused did not simply meet denial or support; it encountered a dense field of memetic, visual, political, and affective reinterpretation. What emerges, then, is not the absence of labelling but a struggle over its completion. Mainstream coverage contributed to the early criminalization of Mangione, yet this process unfolded alongside a competing field of public meaning in which the accused was framed not only as deviant but also as charismatic, politically legible, visually desirable, or symbolically elevated. The case thus moved rapidly from institutional classification to representational conflict. It is this conflict, rather than the mere existence of accusation, that makes the Mangione case especially useful for reconsidering the contemporary limits of Becker’s model. In this sense, the empirical significance of the case lies not simply in the fact that Mangione

was labelled, but in the fact that the label did not remain morally self-evident. Its meaning was contested across journalism, platform discourse, and visual culture. The relevant question is therefore no longer whether labelling occurred, but how far the initial process of criminalization was able to organize a stable consensus before being fragmented by alternative moral and aesthetic frames.



[Fig. n°1: Saint-like representation of Luigi Mangione posted by

@gedogfx on Instagram (17 December 2024)].

6. From Criminalization to sanctification: visual recoding and the redistribution of deviance

If the first phase of the Mangione case was marked by institutional criminalization, the second was characterized by a striking process of symbolic and visual recoding. Rather than remaining fixed within the moral language of accusation, Mangione rapidly began to circulate across digital media as a figure of fascination, admiration, and quasi-religious elevation. This shift did not erase the criminal frame, but it complicated it by attaching to the accused a set of alternative meanings that were affective, aesthetic, and political at once. One of the clearest indicators of this transformation was the emergence of explicitly saint-like representations within the visual corpus. In the Instagram, X, and Reddit materials collected for this study, Mangione appears in images marked by halos, devotional colour schemes, prayer-card aesthetics, and other forms of religious coding. In these representations, he is not merely defended or humanized; he is symbolically elevated. Such visual artifacts are analytically significant because they do not simply soften the criminal label. Rather, they partially reverse it by refiguring the accused as morally purified, sacrificial, or redemptive. In this sense, the visual corpus points not only to support, but to a process of sanctification. Before examining the individual posts, it is useful to identify the core iconographic structure of the most widely circulating saint-like image of Mangione. Across several versions, the figure is represented frontally, wearing a green mantle or robe, framed by a gold halo, and associated with Sacred Heart imagery. The visual language clearly draws on Catholic devotional iconography: the pose is solemn, the gaze is calm and direct, and the overall composition resembles a holy card or saint portrait rather than an ordinary meme or fan edit. Analytically, what matters is that this iconography does not merely aestheticize the accused; it symbolically elevates him by placing him within a visual grammar of sanctity, sacrifice, and moral righteousness. In visual terms, the accused is no longer coded as a polluted or stigmatized subject, but as a purified and morally elevated figure. A particularly clear example from the dataset is an Instagram post by @gedogfx dated 17 December 2024, in which Mangione is depicted frontally with a gold halo, green mantle, and Sacred Heart iconography. The accompanying caption reads: “Saint Luigi Mangione! The patron saint of health care justice. For merch/prints link in bio!” followed by hashtags such as #luigimangione, #healthcare, #freeluigi, and #justice. The post, as captured in the dataset, also displayed more than 10,000 likes and over 300 comments, indicating substantial circulation and engagement. This example is especially important because it combines three dimensions at once: devotional imagery, explicit political framing, and a direct link to commodified circulation through prints and merchandise. The image does not merely defend Mangione; it repositions him as a saint-like figure associated with healthcare justice. A second useful example comes from X. In a post dated 13 December 2024, Leah McElrath wrote: “Some people on social media are canonizing Luigi Mangione as ‘Saint Luigi.’” She then added: “Below are examples of the iconographic images being used. (I’ve seen these images on TikTok, Instagram, and this platform.)” The post included a



[Fig.n°2: Street graffiti in Marseille, France, recoding Mangione as “hero of the people”. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. Attribution: insignificent1312].

This is analytically important because it does not merely reproduce one image; it explicitly identifies an emerging pattern of cross-platform canonization. In other words, the post functions as meta-commentary on the circulation of the saint frame itself, showing that

sanctification was already recognizable as a social media phenomenon. A third relevant example emerges from Reddit, where the post “Saint Luigi of Mangione” was published in r/pics by user XXX¹⁰. The post title itself is significant, since it frames Mangione through explicitly saint-like language rather than through neutral description or criminal terminology. The associated discussion further amplifies this recoding. In the comment thread, one user reduces the figure to a single word – “Martyr” – while another writes that Mangione “etched himself into history as a Robin Hood figure fighting back against evil elites¹¹.” These responses are important because they show that saint-like imagery was not functioning as mere decoration. It anchored a broader reinterpretation in which Mangione was no longer read only as an accused offender, but as a morally legible and even heroic figure. Taken together, these three examples show that sanctification was not confined to a single platform or authorial context. The Instagram material links saint-like imagery to political framing and merchandise; the X post explicitly names and aggregates the process of canonization across platforms; and the Reddit thread demonstrates how these images were received and elaborated through martyr and Robin Hood narratives. What emerges, therefore, is not an isolated meme, but a broader process of visual and moral recoding in which Mangione becomes available as saint, martyr, folk hero, and anti-corporate symbol. The same pattern can be observed in the visual and spatial extension of the case beyond platform-based circulation. The visual corpus also includes documented instances of graffiti, posters, stickers, and other street-based representations in which Mangione is publicly re-coded through heroic or sanctified imagery. One especially useful example is the openly documented work “Luigi Mangione, hero of the people – Marseilles, France”



[Fig. n°3: X post by Leah McElrath documenting the cross-platform canonization of “Saint Luigi” (13 December 2024)].

These materials show that the symbolic transformation of the accused did not remain confined to online discourse. Instead, it migrated into urban space, where digital re-coding became materially visible in public settings. Reports of saint-like or supportive projections and poster campaigns extend this pattern

further, indicating that Mangione’s visual recoding circulated not only on platforms but also as public visual intervention.

The sanctification of Mangione also extended into a more explicitly commercial register. Within the visual corpus, saint-like representations did not circulate only as memes, reposted images, or platform-based fan edits, but also as commodities. The same iconographic logic visible in the Instagram post by XXX was linked directly to merchandise and prints, and the artist’s Threadless shop hosted a design titled “St. Luigi

¹⁰ Usernames of ordinary social media users were anonymized, except where the post was produced by a public-facing account, an artist, journalist, or commentator whose authorship is analytically relevant and already publicly attached to the material.

¹¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/1hizslj/saint_luigi_of_mangione/.

Mangione” sold as a t-shirt¹². More broadly, the visual recoding of Mangione appears to have generated a wider merchandise ecology that included not only apparel but also mugs, posters, calendars, candles, and other devotional-style or supportive objects. Commercial sites and marketplace listings offered “Luigi Mangione” or “Saint Luigi” mugs and candles, while stores built around the case advertised saint-like imagery across multiple everyday objects. This matters analytically because it shows that the sanctification of Mangione did not remain confined to discourse or visual circulation alone. It became commodified, repeatable, and materially portable, thereby extending the symbolic recoding of the accused into everyday consumer culture.

The symbolic elevation of Mangione also entered more durable intellectual and editorial forms. Nicolas Framont’s 2025 volume *Saint Luigi: Comment répondre à la violence du capitalisme?* does not simply reproduce the saint-like framing at the level of title and cover. It explicitly treats the case as a lens through which to interrogate the asymmetry between individualized illegality and systemic violence, while also noting that Mangione had already become an icon capable of eliciting hatred, fascination, and attraction. This is precisely the point at which the concept of inverted labelling becomes visible. Institutional actors sought to fix deviance onto Mangione as the obvious bearer of criminal stigma. Yet the social and visual materials analysed here suggest that digital publics partially redirected that stigma toward the wider order that the case was taken to signify. Through saint-like imagery, platform commentary, street inscriptions, commodified iconography, and even editorial forms such as *Saint Luigi*, Mangione was not simply defended; he was symbolically repositioned within an alternative moral framework. In this framework, the accused appears less as the sole source of disorder than as a figure through which a deeper institutional violence is made visible.

7. The Aestheticization of the Accused

Sanctification was not the only form through which the deviant label was destabilized. Alongside saint-like imagery and heroic recoding, Mangione also circulated as an object of attraction, desire, and aesthetic fascination. These affective investments require separate attention, since they reveal another mechanism through which stigma may be softened, reworked, or suspended. If sanctification elevates the accused morally and symbolically, attraction renders him affectively desirable, visually consumable, and easier to identify with rather than reject. This dimension of the case is repeatedly documented in the wider media record. In an article explicitly titled *In love with a killer: How the internet became obsessed with Luigi Mangione*, *El País* describes the online narrative around him as that of a «handsome, idealistic young man» and notes that bodily images, style, and appearance became central to public fascination (*El País*, 2024¹³). The article emphasizes that users were drawn not only to the politics of the case but also to Mangione’s looks, mentioning the online fixation with his body and clothing as part of the case’s broader digital appeal. A concrete example of this affective reframing appears on X. As documented by LSU Media, one post by user XXX captioned Mangione’s image with the phrase «brat summer is over get ready for Italian winter» (LSU Media, 2024¹⁴). The significance of this post lies in the fact that it does not frame Mangione through criminal stigma, legal accusation, or even explicit political argument. Instead, it recodes him through the language of internet aesthetics, style, desirability, and seasonal meme culture. In this case, the accused circulates less as a deviant subject than as an object of visual consumption and affective fascination. This is methodologically and theoretically important.

Classical labelling theory would lead us to expect that a figure accused of lethal violence should be stabilized through distance, repulsion, and stigma (Becker, 1963). The X example points in the opposite direction. It shows how platform culture can convert criminal accusation into aesthetic legibility. Rather than intensifying moral separation, the image makes Mangione easier to consume, share, stylize, and desire. The deviant label

¹² <https://gedogfx.threadless.com/designs/st-luigi-mangione/womens/t-shirt/fitted>.

¹³ <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2024-12-12/in-love-with-a-killer-how-the-internet-became-obsessed-with-luigi-mangione.html>.

¹⁴ <https://media.lsu.co.uk/2024/12/22/the-internets-reaction-to-luigi-mangione/>.

is not simply denied; it is displaced by an alternative affective frame. More explicit discussion of this phenomenon appears in journalistic accounts of the digital reaction surrounding the case. Newsweek, for example, explicitly frames Mangione's online circulation through the language of gay iconization, arguing that once his social media presence became visible, «the thirsting for Mangione exploded – with the gay community leading the charge» (Newsweek, 2024¹⁵). This is useful not because it replaces platform evidence, but because it helps name a phenomenon that is already visible in the social media environment: the accused does not circulate only as a criminal suspect or political symbol, but also as a body and face onto which desire is projected. El País similarly notes that online discourse was quick to transform Mangione into multiple symbolic figures, including 'the gay gym icon', suggesting that his aestheticization took specifically gendered and sexualized forms (El País, 2024). This does not mean that desire replaced politics. On the contrary, the two often operated together. What made Mangione especially legible as an affective figure was not only that he was perceived as handsome, but that his appearance was combined with a narrative of anti-corporate grievance, youth, intelligence, and mediated charisma. Attraction, in this sense, did not function outside the political meaning of the case; it intensified its emotional accessibility and made counter-labelling more persuasive (El País, 2024; Newsweek, 2024). This interpretation is reinforced by recent scholarship on the case. In a study of what it calls the 'hot felony' of Luigi Mangione, Horeck (2026) analyses the hyper-sexualized focus on him, the meme culture that positions him as a sex object, and the relationship between this eroticization and his wider valorisation as both a white folk hero and a patron saint of healthcare justice. Particularly important is their argument that Mangione's desirability became tied to the circulation of his image within a broader digital face culture of celebrity, sexual appraisal, and public judgment. This line of analysis strongly supports the claim that attraction was not incidental to the destabilization of the deviant label, but one of its central affective mechanisms. For this reason, the sexualization of Mangione should be understood not as a trivial side effect of internet culture, but as part of the affective economy of deviance. The accused became available not only for condemnation or heroization, but also for desire, fantasy, admiration, and bodily fascination. This affective availability helped weaken the social distance on which stigmatization often depends. If sanctification elevated Mangione morally, attraction rendered him intimate and desirable. Together, these processes made the deviant label less stable than classical labelling theory would predict.

8. Discussion: stigma, sanctification, sexualization and the politics of inverted labelling

The Mangione case does not invalidate Becker's central insight that deviance is socially constructed rather than inherent in the act itself. On the contrary, the case confirms that deviance is produced through processes of classification, moral framing, and social reaction (Becker, 1963). Institutional actors, prosecutors, and mainstream news coverage all contributed to the initial construction of Mangione as an intelligible deviant subject. In this sense, the early phase of the case followed the classical direction of labelling, an act of lethal violence was rapidly translated into a recognizable script of accusation, culpability, and moral danger. What the case complicates, however, is the expectation that this process will culminate in a stable and socially unified stigma. Here Goffman becomes especially useful. In *Stigma*, he defines stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting and that reduces the bearer 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman, 1963). The Mangione case is significant because the processes analysed above repeatedly interrupt that reduction. Instead of remaining tainted or socially discounted, Mangione is re-coded in ways that purify, elevate, aestheticize, and politically reframe him. The result is not the disappearance of stigma, but a struggle over whether the accused can be stabilized as its proper bearer. The first major mechanism in this destabilization is sanctification. The saint-like representations circulating across Instagram, X, Reddit, graffiti, merchandise, and editorial forms do not merely express support; they symbolically invert the moral coding of the accused. In Goffman's terms, the stigmatized subject should appear spoiled, discredited, and morally diminished (Goffman, 1963). In the saint image, by contrast,

¹⁵ <https://www.newsweek.com/how-luigi-mangione-became-gay-icon-online-2000660>.

Mangione appears purified, serene, and morally elevated. He is no longer represented as polluted but as sacred. This is where it becomes useful to bring Goffman into dialogue with Mary Douglas and the Durkheimian tradition. Douglas argues that ideas of purity and pollution are central to the maintenance of social order, while Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction locates moral authority in acts of separation and consecration rather than in inherent properties of things themselves (Douglas, 1966; Durkheim, 2008[1912]). In that sense, saint-like iconography does not simply beautify Mangione; it performs a symbolic transfer from the profane domain of crime to the sacred domain of moral significance. This shift is crucial because it helps explain why the saint image is analytically stronger than a simple meme. A meme may ironize or support; a saint-like representation performs a more radical moral reclassification. The accused becomes available not as a contaminated body but as a consecrated figure. This explains why sanctification matters so much for the article's argument, it does not merely coexist with stigma but directly interferes with the stigma mechanism by producing symbolic purity where social taint would ordinarily be expected. In visual terms, the deviant label is not only resisted but ritually displaced.

The second major mechanism is sexualization, or more broadly the affective and aesthetic softening of deviance. The analysis above shows that Mangione circulated not only as a saint-like icon but also as an object of attraction, admiration, and desire. This dimension is important because successful stigmatization usually depends upon distance, boundary-making, and some degree of repulsion. Attraction works against that logic. When the accused becomes 'handsome', a 'gay gym icon', or an object of thirst discourse, the moral economy of labelling changes. The body of the accused no longer functions only as evidence of deviance; it becomes a site of fantasy, intimacy, and identification. Here the literature on queer and critical masculinity studies becomes especially helpful. Bacio and Rinaldi (2019) emphasize that queer masculinities are socially constructed and publicly negotiated, while Rinaldi, Bacio and Caldarera (2025) explicitly argue that sexuality is shaped by a «performative imperative» through which subjects must appear to others as plausible sexualized actors. This is useful for the Mangione case because it suggests that attraction is not simply a private reaction but a public mode of recognition. Mangione's visibility as an apparently desirable masculine figure helps make him legible in ways that exceed the criminal frame. The accused becomes not only a legal subject but a performed and consumed masculinity.

This line of interpretation is strengthened by recent queer criminological work, which argues that criminology needs to take more seriously the intertwining of deviance, sexuality, desire, affect, and recognition. Recent work in queer criminology stresses the importance of anti-normative and politically radical approaches to gendered and sexual life, while also emphasizing the deeply affective character of queer criminological research and knowledge production (Mitchell et al., 2025; Mitchell, O'Neill and Redd, 2025). Emerging empirical work also points in the same direction. Clarkson et al. (2025) and Horeck (2026) find that favourable judgments toward Mangione were associated not only with political variables such as cynicism, but also with perceptions of his attractiveness, reinforcing the argument that moral and political recoding in this case cannot be separated from affective and aesthetic dynamics. Read in this light, the eroticization of Mangione is not a trivial side effect of internet culture. It is one of the mechanisms through which the deviant label is affectively destabilized. If sanctification produces purity, sexualization produces proximity. Together, they weaken the distance on which stigma depends.

The third and most politically consequential mechanism is anticapitalist recoding. The inversion of labelling in this case does not operate in a moral vacuum. It is tied to a broader reinterpretation of violence in which the accused is not read only as the perpetrator of a singular criminal act, but as a figure through whom other forms of violence become visible; especially the violence of privatized healthcare, corporate denial of care, and systemic indifference to suffering. This is why Framont's Saint Luigi is so useful, the book explicitly reframes the case as a question about how to respond to the violence of capitalism, rather than as a purely individual problem of criminal transgression (Framont, 2025). In the same direction, journalistic accounts of the saint-like imagery often tie Mangione to 'healthcare justice', while support discourse repeatedly relocates blame toward insurers, elites, and the broader political economy of care. This is the point at which the concept of inverted labelling becomes analytically necessary. Institutional actors seek to fix deviance

onto Mangione as the obvious bearer of criminal stigma. But in important sectors of digital reaction, the moral charge of deviance is partially relocated; from the accused individual to the healthcare industry, the insurance system, and the class structure those institutions represent. The issue is no longer only what he did, but what forms of systemic violence were already being normalized before the act occurred. This inversion does not erase the legal category of crime, but it profoundly disrupts the symbolic certainty that crime should carry with it. The person legally labelled as deviant (and criminal) becomes, in part, the lens through which a deeper and more socially protected deviance is named.

At this point, it is important to specify where this inversion appears most clearly. It is not the dominant logic of mainstream journalism, which remains more anchored to criminal accusation, prosecutorial discourse, and the hierarchy of credibility Becker described (Becker, 1967). Rather, the inverted label becomes more visible in subcultural and semi-subcultural arenas: youth-oriented internet discourse, meme culture, digitally networked publics, queer/gay online commentary, and user-generated visual culture. The corpus strongly suggests that canonization, sexualization, and anti-corporate heroization are concentrated not in the most institutionalized forms of public discourse, but in spaces where symbolic experimentation and affective participation are easier; especially Instagram, X, Reddit, merchandising ecosystems, and youth-coded or queer-coded meme environments. This distinction matters theoretically because it allows the article to avoid overstating the claim. Mangione was not transformed into a saint or gay icon across society, and the mainstream public sphere did not simply stop recognizing him as an accused killer. What changed, rather, was the plurality of 'moral publics' involved in defining the case. The digital and subcultural domains did not abolish labelling; they multiplied its direction. They created environments in which the criminal label could be mocked, aesthetically softened, ritualized, eroticized, and politically reversed. The result is not the end of stigma, but the fragmentation of its audience and the instability of its target.

This case should not be treated as wholly unprecedented. The public recoding of criminalized figures into anti-establishment or romanticized icons has historical precedents, including the Depression-era reception of Bonnie and Clyde, who were at times imagined as Robin Hood-like figures and later absorbed into a broader gangster-chic mythology. Partially comparable dynamics also appear in narco-cultures in Latin America, where traffickers can be transformed, through narcocorridos, devotional imagery, local patronage, and popular media, into ambivalent figures of power, protection, and resistance rather than simply criminal outsiders (Edberg, 2004; Chesnut, 2012). Similar ambiguities can be observed in some Italian contexts marked by Mafia, Camorra and 'Ndrangheta power, where bosses and affiliates may be represented locally not only through fear and illegality but also through charisma, neighbourhood protection, masculinity, generosity, and anti-state symbolism (Dickie, 2004; Saviano, 2007; Allum, 2016). These dynamics also resonate with earlier forms of criminal celebrification associated with mafia-type organisations. Scholars of organised crime have shown that mafia power is never purely material, but also symbolic, reputational, and cultural (Sergi and Lavorgna, 2016). Anna Sergi's work on the 'Ndrangheta for instance is useful in this respect, especially because it shows how the 'Ndrangheta cannot be understood only as an organisational structure, but also as a symbolic and reputational resource (Sergi, 2022). Similarly, analyses of mafia culture, symbols, rituals, and myth have shown how media and popular culture contribute to the construction of the mafioso as a figure of honour, masculinity, charisma, and cultural fascination (Nicaso and Danesi, 2013; Dainotto, 2015). These examples do not amount to the same phenomenon as the Mangione case. In Narcos and Mafia contexts, romanticization is often embedded in territorial control, clientelism, intimidation, and durable criminal economies. In the Mangione case, by contrast, the inversion was more episodic, platformed, visually accelerated, and detached from an organization claiming social authority. The comparison therefore clarifies both continuity and specificity; Mangione belongs to a longer history of counter-labelling criminalized figures, but the speed, density, and multimodal character of his recoding through memes, saint-like imagery, sexualized attention, merchandising, and queer/youth-coded platform circulation make the case distinctive.

What emerges, then, is a revision rather than a rejection of Becker. Rule creators and rule enforcers remain central; institutional power has not disappeared. But the symbolic completion of labelling now depends far

more than Becker's original model anticipated on circulation across visual, affective, and platformed environments. The deviant label still begins institutionally, but it no longer necessarily ends there. In digital society, and especially within youth, queer, and subcultural publics, the label can be re-authored by others – sometimes in ways that purify the accused, eroticize him, politicize him, and redirect deviance toward the institutions he comes to symbolize. That is the broader theoretical significance of inverted labelling.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that the Mangione case offers a useful lens through which to rethink classical labelling theory in the context of digital society. Becker's central insight remains valid, deviance is not an intrinsic quality of the act, but the outcome of social processes through which rules are made, sanctions are applied, and certain actors are publicly defined as outsiders (Becker, 1963). What the present case shows, however, is that the symbolic completion of this process can no longer be assumed. Institutional actors may still initiate labelling, but they do not necessarily retain control over its moral and cultural outcome.

The analysis identified three key mechanisms through which this instability emerged. First, saint-like imagery and devotional iconography symbolically purified the accused, interrupting the stigmatizing logic through which he would ordinarily be rendered morally tainted. Second, aesthetic attraction and sexualization weakened the distance on which stigma depends by making the accused affectively legible as desirable, intimate, and visually consumable. Third, anti-capitalist recoding displaced moral blame from the individual to wider structures of harm, especially the healthcare and insurance system, thereby transforming the case into a site of conflict over the meaning of violence itself. Together, these processes reveal that labelling in the platformed public sphere is not simply applied; it is contested, aestheticized, fragmented, and sometimes reversed. For this reason, the article proposed the concept of inverted labelling. This does not mean that legal accusation disappears or that criminal responsibility becomes irrelevant. Rather, it names a situation in which the deviant label remains institutionally active while losing its exclusive claim to moral meaning. In the Mangione case, significant sectors of digital, subcultural, youth-oriented, and queer/gay publics did not simply reject the label; they re-authored it, redirecting stigma toward broader institutions and recoding the accused as saint, martyr, folk hero, sex object, and anti-corporate symbol.

The broader implication is that contemporary sociology of deviance must pay greater attention to the visual, affective, and platformed dimensions of social reaction. In digital media environments, the struggle over deviance is no longer only a struggle over rule-breaking, but over who has the authority to assign purity and pollution, desire and disgust, heroism and blame. In this sense, the case also highlights the importance of 'popular criminology' (Rafter & Brown, 2011). Far from merely reproducing official definitions of crime and deviance, popular criminology can resist, soften, or overturn canonical framings by circulating alternative moral narratives through memes, images, merchandise, fandom, and networked commentary. But it does more than that, it can also act as a producer of social phenomena, helping bring into being cases like Mangione as recognizable public formations. Through repetition, aestheticization, eroticization, and political recoding, popular criminology does not simply respond to crime; it participates in the making of the criminal figure as a cultural object. This point can also be read through Quinney's (1970) insistence that crime is never simply discovered but socially produced within relations of power and conflict. In the digital age, however, the social production of crime appears less capable of generating a fully unidirectional stigma. Social media and a fragmented media landscape make it more difficult for institutional definitions to secure a single and stable moral outcome, especially in cases that activate competing moral values already present in public life. The Mangione case is exemplary in this regard because the criminal accusation did not unfold in a moral vacuum; it collided with widespread anger over structural inequality, the violence of the health insurance system, and the perception that poor and vulnerable subjects are disproportionately exposed to abandonment and denial of care. Under such conditions, stigma does not disappear, but it becomes harder to stabilize in a singular direction.

What emerges, then, is not the obsolescence of Becker, but the need to extend him. If labelling theory once showed that deviance is made by society, the Mangione case suggests that, in digital culture, society no

longer speaks with one voice. It speaks through fractured publics, contested images, competing desires, and moral counter-narratives. The future of labelling theory may therefore lie not only in explaining how outsiders are produced, but in understanding how, under contemporary conditions, they can also be purified, desired, commodified, politicized, and reclaimed. In that reversal lies the deeper significance of the case, not simply that a label was applied, but that the struggle over who had the power to make it stick became the real social fact.

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