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Media Language And The Construction Of Stigma Against Victims Of Sexual Violence: A Critical Study Of Media Coverage Of 2025 Cases In Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how the language and framing of online media reproduce stigma against victims of sexual violence in Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model by Norman Fairclough on two Detik.com news articles from 2025 discussing alleged sexual violence cases in higher education settings. Analysis is conducted at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social context, integrated with Mansour Fakih's theory of five faces of gender injustice. Findings reveal that stigma against victims is reproduced through ambiguous terms like "alleged sexual violence," dominance of institutional and perpetrator voices, and marginalization of victim perspectives. Media framing tends to shift public attention from power relations and coercion to victims' post-incident behavior, thereby reinforcing victim blaming logic. The study concludes that online media reporting practices are not neutral but influenced by clickbait logic and institutional interests, potentially hindering victim-centered justice. Therefore, a transformation in gender-sensitive and victim-oriented journalistic practices is needed.

Keyword: critical discourse analysis; sexual violence; online media; victim stigma; victim blaming.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence in Indonesia showed a significant increase throughout 2025, with thousands of cases recorded across various regions nationwide (Sali, 2025, p. 02). This increase

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has occurred not only in the physical sphere but has also extended into the digital realm through the growing prevalence of online exploitation on social media platforms. This phenomenon reflects an increasing risk faced by women and other vulnerable groups, who are exposed to various forms of sexual violence ranging from harassment to exploitation and the non-consensual distribution of explicit content (Anna Puji Lestari, 2019).

However, the rise in the number of sexual violence cases has not been accompanied by significant changes in the way the media reports on these issues. On the contrary, online media coverage in Indonesia tends to employ gender-biased language and framing, which in turn exacerbates injustice toward victims (Anna Puji Lestari, 2019). News reporting often implicitly blames victims, positioning them as passive, vulnerable, and voiceless objects, while perpetrators are granted a dominant role as active subjects (Najib & Sunarto, 2020). Such narratives not only disregard the suffering of victims but also reinforce social stigma, discouraging victims from reporting incidents and seeking support.

Furthermore, media coverage frequently focuses on legal proceedings and the criminalization of perpetrators, while neglecting the social and psychological consequences experienced by victims (Apriani & Agus Purbathin Hadi, 2021). When media narratives reinforce patriarchal norms and marginalize victims, the consequences are severe, including the intensification of psychological trauma, social isolation, and the perpetuation of structural injustices that are difficult to overcome (Asrul Nur Iman, 2025). Indonesian online media outlets such as Detik.com often employ sensational language in reporting femicide cases, for example by emphasizing victims' physical appearance, which contributes to victim-blaming narratives (Fahira, 2025). Detik.com has also been noted for publishing a high proportion of sensationalized femicide stories, placing victims under scrutiny rather than providing broader social context regarding violence. Such reporting is considered insensitive because it frequently reveals victims' identities and focuses on irrelevant aspects, such as allegations or physical appearance.

One example is a news article published by Detik.com on Wednesday, December 3, 2025, entitled "Kata Kampus soal Mahasiswa UNS Lecehkan Mahasiswi Modus Main Truth or Dare" ("University Responds to Allegations of UNS Student Harassing Female Student Through a Truth or Dare Scheme"). The article repeatedly uses the phrase "alleged sexual violence" (dugaan kekerasan seksual), which can be interpreted as a form of victim-blaming language because it subtly relativizes the victim's experience (Wahyu NV, 2025). According to the chronology presented in the report, the victim repeatedly refused, was nevertheless coerced, was intentionally made to lose the game, and was subjected to harassment under the pretext of

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"sportsmanship" in a game of truth or dare. Substantively, the elements of sexual violence are strongly evident within the narrative itself. However, when the media repeatedly employs the term "alleged sexual violence," particularly when paired with expressions such as "alleged victim," the victim's experience is repositioned as merely an unverified claim. This framing creates space for public doubt toward the victim rather than emphasizing that the coercive actions of the perpetrator are the primary issue requiring scrutiny.

Another example is a Detik.com article published on Thursday, August 21, 2025, entitled "Dituduh Lecehkan Mahasiswi, Pihak Dosen UIN Saizu Purwokerto Angkat Bicara" ("Accused of Harassing a Female Student, UIN Saizu Purwokerto Lecturer's Side Speaks Out"). The article contains several phrases that illustrate victim-blaming by framing the victim as less credible (Rinepta, 2025). For instance, it mentions "allegations of violence and harassment despite continued interaction after the incident." This phrase constructs the assumption that if a victim continues interacting with the alleged perpetrator, then harassment could not have occurred. In reality, many victims of sexual violence remain connected to perpetrators through power relations, academic dependencies, professional obligations, or emotional ties.

Therefore, it is important to conduct an in-depth examination of the language and framing used in media reporting as part of broader efforts to understand and address gender injustice, drawing upon Mansour Fakih's gender analysis framework and mass communication theory (Munsi, 2020). Such research is expected to encourage more empathetic and equitable forms of journalism while supporting the pursuit of justice for victims of sexual violence in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the reproduction of gender inequality in media reporting (Rahman et al., 2022). Two articles published by Detik.com were selected as units of analysis: (1) "Kata Kampus soal Mahasiswa UNS Lecehkan Mahasiswi Modus Main Truth or Dare" ("University Responds to Allegations of UNS Student Harassing Female Student Through a Truth or Dare Scheme") published on December 3, 2025, and (2) "Dituduh Lecehkan Mahasiswi, Pihak Dosen UIN Saizu Purwokerto Angkat Bicara" ("Accused of Harassing a Female Student, UIN Saizu Purwokerto Lecturer's Side Speaks Out") published on August 21, 2025. Data were collected through a documentation study by downloading and transcribing the texts of both articles, followed by identifying sections that portrayed the positions of victims and perpetrators, as well as phrases containing gender bias or victim-blaming tendencies. The analysis was conducted using Norman

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Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, focusing on discourse practice analysis and social context analysis (Naurah & Siregar, 2023).

The findings of the CDA were then integrated with Mansour Fakih's theory of the five forms of gender injustice marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and excessive burden to map how specific phrases and media framings contribute to the marginalization, devaluation, or blaming of victims (Munsi, 2020). Through this approach, the study provides a clear yet critical explanation of how the language used by online media plays a role in reproducing stigma against victims of sexual violence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reproduction of Stigma Through Language Choices

The textual analysis of the two Detik.com articles demonstrates that stigma against victims of sexual violence is primarily reproduced through language choices and narrative construction (Fendi Setiawan et al., 2022). The use of ambiguous, sensationalized, and victim-blaming diction indirectly shifts public attention away from the perpetrator's actions and toward the victim. In the article concerning the UNS student case, phrases such as "alleged sexual violence" and "alleged victim" are repeatedly employed despite a chronology that clearly depicts coercive behavior, including repeated refusals by the victim and continued pressure from the perpetrator during the truth or dare game. The repeated use of these expressions frames sexual violence as an unverified claim rather than a violation that warrants immediate concern and response. Similarly, in the UIN Saizu case, statements suggesting that the victim continued interacting with the lecturer after the incident construct the assumption that such interaction undermines the legitimacy of the victim's experience. This framing ignores the reality that victims often remain connected to perpetrators because of power imbalances, academic dependency, or social pressure. These linguistic patterns are consistent with previous studies of Indonesian media, which show a tendency to obscure victims' positions through cautious terminology and greater emphasis on institutional or perpetrator perspectives, thereby reinforcing a culture of victim blaming (Najib & Sunarto, 2020).

Narrative Structure and the Obscuring of Perpetrator Responsibility

Beyond lexical choices, the narrative structure of the news reports also contributes to shifting responsibility away from perpetrators. The articles frequently begin by describing the victim's background, personal circumstances, or relationship with the perpetrator rather than emphasizing the coercive acts committed by the accused (Mayuri et al., 2025). Such narrative

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arrangements implicitly encourage readers to associate the incident with the victim's behavior rather than the perpetrator's misconduct. Furthermore, the reports often foreground institutional responses through statements such as "the university issued a clarification," "the lecturer denied the allegations," or "the institution is conducting an internal investigation." As a result, institutions and alleged perpetrators become the central actors in the story, while the victim's experiences receive comparatively little attention. Readers are therefore exposed more extensively to institutional defenses and procedural explanations than to the victim's psychological and social suffering. This narrative strategy obscures issues of accountability and power imbalance, reducing sexual violence to a dispute over the credibility of allegations rather than recognizing it as a manifestation of structural inequality. Such findings align with recent framing studies showing that media frequently portray sexual violence cases as conflicts between competing accounts instead of addressing the broader patriarchal structures that enable such violence (Zikrina Munawarah, 2024).

Subject–Object Positioning in News Discourse

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis reveals a significant imbalance in the subject–object positioning of actors within the news texts (Rahman et al., 2022). Perpetrators and institutions are consistently represented as active subjects through expressions such as "the university explained," "the lecturer denied," and "the rector stated." These actors are granted extensive direct quotations, which present them as rational, authoritative, and credible sources of information. In contrast, victims are often positioned as passive objects, referred to through indirect descriptions such as "the female student was allegedly harassed" or "the victim claimed." Their voices are filtered through journalistic narration rather than presented directly through substantial quotations. This unequal representation can be understood through Mansour Fakih's theory of the five forms of gender injustice (Munsi, 2020). Victims are marginalized because their emotional experiences, recovery needs, and rights to protection are largely absent from the narrative. They are subordinated because institutional authority is prioritized over their testimonies, requiring them to continuously prove the validity of their experiences. Additionally, victims are subjected to stereotypes suggesting that a "real" victim would immediately cut ties with the perpetrator and display consistent signs of trauma. Such assumptions ignore the complex psychological and social realities faced by survivors of sexual violence.

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News Production Practices and the Logic of Online Media

At the level of discursive practice, the findings indicate that these patterns of language and framing are not merely individual journalistic choices but are closely connected to the operational logic of online media. Headlines tend to emphasize conflict, controversy, and sensational elements, such as accusations and denials, because these features attract audience attention and generate higher levels of engagement. In the analyzed articles, particular emphasis is placed on the truth or dare game and on institutional responses, both of which function as click-generating elements rather than as opportunities to discuss victim recovery or systemic gender-based violence. Moreover, the inverted-pyramid structure commonly used in online journalism places institutional statements near the beginning of the article, while the victim's perspective appears later and receives less detailed treatment. Readers who skim the articles are therefore more likely to absorb institutional narratives than victim-centered accounts. These findings support the argument that media language is not neutral but is produced within a system shaped by commercial pressures, audience metrics, speed, and institutional power relations. Consequently, such journalistic practices contribute to the reproduction of stigma, victim blaming, and the marginalization of victims' perspectives in media coverage of sexual violence (Adhrianti et al., 2024).

Social Context: Rising Cases and the Culture of Victim Blaming

The discourse found in these news reports must also be understood within the broader social context of increasing violence against women and children in Indonesia. National data from 2025 indicate a substantial rise in reported cases, with sexual violence emerging as one of the most alarming forms of abuse, including within educational institutions (Nurul Ulya & Prabowo, 2025). At the same time, experts and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection have identified persistent barriers to reporting, including shame, fear of social stigma, and distrust of institutional mechanisms. Within this context, media narratives that repeatedly emphasize the alleged nature of sexual violence despite clear indications of coercion, question victims' behavior after the incident, and prioritize institutional defenses cannot be considered neutral. Instead, they reinforce existing cultural norms that blame victims and perpetuate unequal power relations. Such reporting practices may discourage survivors from seeking justice and support because they anticipate public skepticism and social judgment. Rather than serving as a platform for advocacy and awareness, the media may inadvertently contribute to revictimization by reproducing harmful stereotypes and reinforcing public doubt toward victims (Najib & Sunarto,

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2020).

Implications of Media Framing for Public Perception

The implications of media framing extend beyond the news text itself and influence public perceptions at the individual, community, and institutional levels. At the individual level, victims who encounter such reporting may feel that their experiences are vulnerable to public scrutiny, distortion, or disbelief. This can intensify feelings of guilt, shame, and fear, thereby hindering psychological recovery and discouraging future reporting (Aviliani et al., 2025). At the community level, media narratives shape public understanding of what constitutes a "credible" victim. Instead of evaluating cases based on coercion and power imbalances, audiences may judge victims according to their behavior after the incident, such as whether they continued interacting with the perpetrator or appeared sufficiently traumatized. This perspective creates unrealistic expectations regarding how survivors should respond to violence and ignores the diverse psychological reactions that often follow traumatic experiences (Mayuri et al., 2025). At the institutional level, the prominence given to institutional defenses may encourage universities, law enforcement agencies, and government bodies to focus more on protecting their reputations than on addressing structural problems. Consequently, efforts to implement meaningful prevention and response mechanisms may be weakened because public attention remains focused on institutional image management rather than systemic reform (Aristi et al., 2021).

Methodological Relevance to the Findings

Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis proved highly effective for examining the relationship between textual representation, media practices, and broader social structures (Rahman et al., 2022). At the textual level, the analysis revealed how specific words, phrases, and sentence constructions reflect ideological assumptions, including patriarchal values and an appearance of neutrality. At the level of discursive practice, the study demonstrated how the commercial and operational demands of online journalism influence framing choices that often disadvantage victims. At the level of social practice, the findings were connected to broader patterns of gender-based violence and victim-blaming culture in Indonesia. Furthermore, integrating Fairclough's CDA with Mansour Fakih's theory of gender injustice enabled the study to move beyond linguistic critique and identify concrete forms of injustice, including marginalization, subordination, and stereotyping. This combined approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how media discourse contributes to the reproduction of stigma against victims

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of sexual violence and is consistent with contemporary feminist media studies that examine the intersection of language, power, and gender inequality.

CONCLUSION

The language and framing employed in online media reporting, particularly in cases of sexual violence, play a significant role in reproducing stigma and gender-based injustice against victims. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of two news articles published by Detik.com, this study found that the use of ambiguous diction, narrative structures that prioritize institutional defenses, and the systematic marginalization of victims' voices shift attention away from perpetrators' coercive actions and toward victims' behavior. These practices reinforce victim-blaming narratives and contribute to the formation of public perceptions that undermine victims' credibility.

The integration of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework with Mansour Fakih's theory of the five forms of gender injustice demonstrates that victims are subjected to marginalization, subordination, and stereotyping within media discourse. These findings confirm that online journalism practices are not neutral; rather, they are shaped by the logic of sensationalism, speed, and institutional power relations. Therefore, this study contributes to the advancement of feminist media criticism by highlighting the need for journalism that is victim-centered, gender-sensitive, and committed to justice, accountability, and the recovery of survivors of sexual violence.

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