

Gender Representation in Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online News

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Abstract

In the digital media landscape, online news plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of gender and violence, particularly in the context of online gender-based violence (OGBV). Despite increasing visibility of such issues, the ways in which gender is represented in news discourse remain complex and often subtle. This study aims to examine how gender representation is constructed in online news through a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The research adopts a case-oriented qualitative design, focusing on selected online news articles published between 2024 and 2025 from major Indonesian media platforms, including Kompas.com, Detik.com, CNN Indonesia, and BBC Indonesia. Data were collected through document analysis of 20–30 purposively selected articles addressing OGBV and analyzed using a thematic approach informed by Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework. The findings reveal three dominant patterns: the positioning of victims as passive and voiceless subjects, the construction of perpetrators as collective actors that diffuse individual responsibility, and the prominence of legal-institutional framing that prioritizes regulation over lived experience. These patterns highlight how media discourse not only reflects but actively shapes social realities, reinforcing certain norms while obscuring others. The study contributes to discourse analysis and feminist media studies by emphasizing the role of ambiguity and discursive tension in gender representation. Practically, it underscores the importance of critical media literacy and more reflexive reporting practices, while opening avenues for further research on audience interpretation and digital media dynamics.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), online gender-based violence (OGBV), media discourse, online news, media framings, gender representation*

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, online news media have become one of the most influential platforms shaping public understanding of social realities, including gender roles and identities. For many readers, news consumption is not merely an act of receiving information but also an unconscious process of internalizing values and norms embedded within language. From the perspective of individuals who regularly engage with online news, representations of women and men often appear natural and unquestioned. However, these representations frequently position women within narratives of victimhood, emotionality, or marginalization, while men are constructed as dominant or authoritative actors. Such patterned portrayals subtly influence how audiences perceive gender relations in everyday life.

Preliminary observations of online news discourse reveal recurring linguistic patterns that reinforce gendered hierarchies, particularly in the reporting of gender-

based violence. In many cases, women are positioned as passive victims, while male actors are framed as agents whose actions are normalized or contextualized. These tendencies are not only embedded in textual structures but are also reflected in how audiences interpret and accept such narratives. Informal exploratory conversations with media consumers indicate that readers often perceive news discourse as neutral and objective, without critically engaging with the underlying power relations embedded in language. This uncritical acceptance contributes to the normalization of unequal gender relations, especially in the context of digital media, where information circulates rapidly and widely across social boundaries.

The urgency of this issue becomes more evident in recent cases of online gender-based violence reported in Indonesian media. One notable case involves allegations of sexual harassment occurring within digital chat groups among university students in Indonesia, which has been categorized as online gender-based violence (OGBV). The case highlights how non-physical forms of sexual harassment are facilitated through digital platforms and normalized within peer environments. Legal experts and human rights institutions have emphasized the need for legal enforcement under existing laws, such as the Law on Sexual Violence Crimes and the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, not only to provide justice for victims but also to challenge the broader “rape culture” that tolerates or trivializes such acts. Statistical reports further indicate the severity of the issue, with hundreds of thousands of gender-based violence cases recorded annually, a significant proportion of which involve sexual violence. This demonstrates that media representations of such cases are not isolated narratives but part of a broader socio-cultural structure that sustains gender inequality.

Recent scholarly works have increasingly examined gender representation in media through critical discourse analysis (CDA). Ulviani (2025) demonstrates that online news coverage of sexual violence tends to marginalize women through narrative structures emphasizing vulnerability. Yangxia and Mengdan (2025) show that discourse surrounding women with disabilities reinforces layered marginalization. Akinseye (2025) identifies asymmetrical representation of male and female actors in news texts through corpus-assisted CDA. Naveed *et al.* (2024) highlight the persistence of gender bias through the lack of neutral language in media reporting. Hanžek (2025) argues that online media serve as sites for reproducing dominant gender ideologies, while Agdelia and Kartika (2025) reveal how digital discourse sustains gendered power relations, particularly in contexts of violence.

Despite these contributions, existing studies predominantly focus on textual structures and linguistic patterns, often overlooking the experiential and interpretative dimensions of discourse. Limited attention has been given to how audiences make sense of gendered narratives or how meanings are negotiated within specific socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, the dominance of corpus-based and quantitative approaches tends to reduce the complexity of discourse into measurable patterns, neglecting the deeper processes through which ideology and power operate. This reveals a significant gap in understanding discourse as a lived and socially embedded practice.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to analyze gender representation in online news through a qualitative critical discourse analysis approach, focusing specifically on the discourse of online gender-based violence as reported in Indonesian media. This study examines how victims and perpetrators are constructed, how agency is distributed within the narrative, and how gendered meanings are embedded in the reporting of digital sexual harassment cases. The scope of the study is limited to selected online news articles covering cases of online gender-based violence, allowing for an in-

depth and context-sensitive analysis. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of discourse studies by emphasizing interpretative and socially grounded perspectives. Practically, it aims to foster critical awareness among media practitioners and audiences regarding the subtle reproduction of gender bias in digital news discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding gender representation in media requires a theoretical lens that goes beyond surface-level textual analysis and instead examines how meaning, power, and social identities are constructed through discourse. This study draws on three major theoretical perspectives: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Social Representation Theory, and Feminist Media Theory, each offering distinct but complementary insights into how gendered meanings are produced and interpreted.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly as developed by Fairclough and van Dijk, provides a framework for understanding how language operates as a form of social practice. Rather than viewing discourse as neutral, CDA emphasizes that media texts actively construct reality by embedding ideology and power relations within linguistic structures. From this perspective, gender representation is not simply a reflection of reality but a discursive construction that shapes how individuals perceive roles, agency, and legitimacy in society. CDA is particularly relevant in analyzing online gender-based violence (OGBV), where language can normalize or challenge harmful practices.

Complementing CDA, Social Representation Theory explains how shared meanings about gender are formed and circulated within society. This theory emphasizes that individuals interpret media content through collectively constructed knowledge systems, which are shaped by cultural norms and social interactions. Recent research shows that media narratives contribute significantly to the formation of social representations of gender, often reinforcing stereotypes through repeated patterns of depiction (Firmansyah & Nurhalizah, 2026; Nairi, 2025). In the context of online news, representations of victims and perpetrators in gender-based violence cases are not only textual constructions but also part of broader social processes that influence how audiences understand and respond to such issues.

In addition, Feminist Media Theory offers a critical lens to examine how media reproduces patriarchal structures and gendered power relations. This perspective focuses on how women are often positioned as marginalized subjects within media discourse, while male dominance is normalized. Contemporary studies indicate that digital media continues to reproduce gendered expectations and unequal portrayals of women through media framing and sociocultural discourse, particularly in relation to reproduction, social roles, and public judgement (Taqwim et al., 2026). Feminist theory thus highlights the emotional and experiential dimensions of gender representation, emphasizing how such portrayals affect the lived experiences of individuals and groups.

While these three approaches share a concern with power and inequality, they differ in emphasis. CDA focuses on linguistic and discursive structures, Social Representation Theory on collective meaning-making processes, and Feminist Media Theory on gendered power relations and lived experiences. This study primarily adopts Critical Discourse Analysis as the main analytical framework, as it provides a systematic method for examining how language constructs and legitimizes social realities. However, insights from Social Representation Theory and Feminist Media Theory are incorporated to enrich the interpretation, particularly in understanding how discourse is internalized and experienced by audiences.

Based on this theoretical positioning, the study views media texts not as isolated linguistic artifacts but as sites of meaning-making where gender identities, power relations, and social norms are continuously negotiated. The analytical focus is directed toward uncovering how victims and perpetrators are discursively constructed, how agency is distributed, and how certain meanings become normalized within news discourse. Rather than treating data as fixed variables, this study approaches discourse as a dynamic and interpretative process, where meaning emerges through the interaction between text, context, and social structures. This framework guides the analysis in capturing the deeper layers of gender representation and its implications within contemporary digital media.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how gender representation and online gender-based violence (OGBV) are constructed in online news. CDA is chosen because it enables the analysis of language, power relations, and ideology embedded in media discourse.

The study adopts a case-oriented design focusing on Indonesian online news. Data are collected using purposive sampling from reputable platforms, including *Kompas.com*, *Detik.com*, *CNN Indonesia*, and *BBC Indonesia*. The inclusion criteria are: (1) articles discussing gender-based violence or sexual harassment, (2) published between 2024–2025, and (3) containing sufficient narrative detail. A total of 20–30 articles are selected for in-depth analysis.

Data collection is conducted through document analysis, where news articles are systematically gathered using relevant keywords (e.g., “online gender-based violence,” “sexual harassment”). Selected social media comments may be used as supporting data to capture audience responses. Data analysis follows Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework: (1) textual analysis (language and structure), (2) discursive practice (production and consumption of texts), and (3) social practice (broader socio-cultural context). The process involves open coding, categorization into themes (e.g., victim representation, power relations), and interpretative analysis. Tools such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti may support data organization.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applies credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations are maintained by using publicly available data, ensuring accurate representation, and preserving anonymity where necessary.

Results

The analysis reveals that gender representation in online news discourse on online gender-based violence (OGBV) is constructed through three interrelated themes. These themes reflect not only linguistic patterns but also deeper social tensions surrounding power, normalization, and moral positioning.

Theme 1: The Victim as a Silent and Passive Subject

Across the analyzed news texts, victims are consistently positioned as recipients of actions rather than active agents. The narrative often unfolds in a way that distances the victim from agency, placing them within a passive grammatical and social role.

One excerpt illustrates this positioning:

“...pelecehan seksual nonfisik dan kekerasan seksual melalui sarana elektronik...” (BBC-01)

English version: *"...non-physical sexual harassment and sexual violence carried out through electronic means..." (BBC-01)*

Here, the victim is implied but not explicitly given a voice. The experience of harm is described in abstract terms, reducing its emotional and personal dimensions. The absence of the victim's perspective creates a sense of distance—as if the violence exists without a lived subject.

This silence is not neutral. It subtly constructs victims as objects of discourse rather than subjects with agency, reinforcing a broader tendency to speak *about* victims rather than *with* them. At the same time, this abstraction may reflect an institutional attempt to maintain neutrality, creating a tension between ethical reporting and the erasure of lived experience.

Theme 2: The Perpetrator as a Collective and Diffused Actor

In contrast to the invisibility of victims, perpetrators are often represented as part of a collective group, which simultaneously acknowledges wrongdoing while diluting individual responsibility.

This is evident in the following excerpt:

"...16 pelaku pelecehan seksual... terlibat dalam sebuah grup percakapan daring..." (BBC-01)

English version: *"...16 perpetrators of sexual harassment... were involved in an online chat group..." (BBC-01)*

The use of numerical and collective framing ("16 perpetrators") shifts attention away from individual accountability toward a generalized phenomenon. The perpetrators become a category rather than distinct individuals, creating an ambiguous moral space: the act is condemned, yet the actors remain socially distant.

This representation reflects a deeper paradox. On one hand, it highlights the scale of the problem, suggesting that such behavior is widespread. On the other hand, it risks normalizing the issue by embedding it within group dynamics, implying that the behavior emerges from shared environments rather than individual responsibility.

Theme 3: Legal and Moral Framing as a Tool of Social Control

A dominant theme across the data is the strong presence of legal and institutional voices, which frame the discourse within boundaries of law, justice, and deterrence.

This is clearly reflected in the excerpt:

"...harus dijerat secara hukum... untuk memberikan efek jera dan menghilangkan budaya pemerkosaan..." (BBC-01)

English version: *"...must be prosecuted under the law... to create a deterrent effect and eliminate rape culture..." (BBC-01)*

Here, the discourse shifts from describing the incident to prescribing solutions. Legal experts and institutions are given authority to define the meaning of the event, positioning the issue within a framework of punishment and prevention.

While this framing reinforces the seriousness of the crime, it also introduces a subtle shift: the focus moves from the lived experience of harm to the mechanisms of control and regulation. The emotional and psychological dimensions of victims are overshadowed by institutional narratives of justice.

At the same time, the reference to "rape culture" reveals a broader social tension. The discourse acknowledges that such incidents are not isolated but embedded within systemic norms. However, this acknowledgment coexists with a reliance on legal solutions, creating a paradox between structural problems and individual punishment.

Thematic Integration

Table 1. Theme, Code Meaning and Underlying Tension

Theme	Core Meaning	Underlying Tension
Victim as passive	Loss of voice and agency	Neutral reporting vs silencing experience
Perpetrator as collective	Diffused responsibility	Awareness vs normalization
Legal framing	Institutional control	Justice vs lived experience

Narrative Flow of Findings

Taken together, these themes reveal that online news discourse does not simply report cases of gender-based violence but actively constructs a particular reality. Victims are rendered distant, perpetrators are generalized, and institutions dominate the narrative space. What emerges is not a linear story of crime and justice, but a layered discourse where voice, responsibility, and meaning are unevenly distributed. Rather than presenting a clear-cut moral landscape, the data exposes ambiguities: the need to inform without sensationalizing, to condemn without individualizing too deeply, and to seek justice while navigating deeply rooted social norms. These tensions reflect the complexity of representing gender-based violence in contemporary digital media.

Discussion

This study reveals three central patterns in the representation of online gender-based violence (OGBV) in online news: the construction of victims as passive subjects, the portrayal of perpetrators as collective actors, and the dominance of legal-institutional framing. These findings highlight that media discourse does not merely report events but actively shapes how gender, power, and responsibility are understood in society.

The first theme, which positions victims as silent and passive, reflects a broader discursive pattern identified in recent studies. Ulviani (2025) and Hibatulloh & Rasyid (2024) similarly found that victims of sexual violence in online news are often marginalized through linguistic choices that suppress their agency. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, this indicates that discourse operates as a mechanism of power, where the absence of voice is itself a form of representation. Rather than empowering victims, such representation risks reinforcing their vulnerability as a fixed identity. However, this study extends previous findings by showing that this silence is not only a linguistic omission but also a discursive strategy that creates emotional distance, allowing readers to engage with the issue without confronting its human complexity. This suggests that neutrality in reporting may unintentionally contribute to the erasure of lived experiences.

The second theme is the construction of perpetrators as collective and diffused actors. This aligns with findings from Akinseye (2025), who demonstrates that media often generalizes social actors in ways that obscure individual accountability. Similarly, Nahdliyah and Robot (2024) found that collective framing in cases of gender-based violence can shift focus from personal responsibility to structural patterns. While such framing is important in highlighting the systemic nature of violence, this study reveals a more nuanced tension: the collective representation simultaneously acknowledges scale while diluting moral clarity. In this sense, the discourse oscillates between exposing a widespread problem and normalizing it as part of social environments. This duality

complicates how audiences interpret responsibility, raising questions about whether media discourse challenges or inadvertently sustains problematic norms.

The third theme emphasizes the dominance of legal and moral framing, where institutional voices define the meaning of the event. This finding resonates with Agdelia and Kartika (2025), who argue that digital media often constructs gender-based violence within a framework of regulation and control rather than lived experience. Likewise, Akhter and Shah (2024) highlight that news discourse tends to privilege authoritative voices, shaping public understanding through legal and policy-oriented narratives. While such framing reinforces the seriousness of the issue, this study suggests that it also repositions the discourse away from victims' experiences toward institutional legitimacy. The emphasis on punishment and deterrence may overshadow deeper socio-cultural dynamics, such as the normalization of "rape culture," which requires more than legal solutions.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a more complex understanding of gender representation in media. While previous studies have largely focused on identifying bias or inequality in representation (Yangxia & Mengdan, 2025; Lestari & Abd Elfattah, 2025), this study highlights the tensions and ambiguities within discourse itself. Media narratives are not simply biased or neutral; they are sites of negotiation where competing values—objectivity, morality, legality, and empathy—intersect. This perspective enriches Feminist Media Theory by showing that marginalization is not always explicit but can operate subtly through absence, abstraction, and framing.

From a Social Representation Theory perspective, these patterns also shape how audiences collectively understand gender-based violence. Repeated exposure to passive victim narratives and generalized perpetrators may normalize certain expectations about gender roles and social behavior. As noted by Yangxia and Mengdan (2025), media discourse plays a crucial role in constructing shared meanings that influence public attitudes. This study adds that such meanings are often ambivalent, containing both awareness and normalization within the same narrative structure.

A reflexive consideration is also necessary. The interpretation presented in this study is shaped by the researcher's position within an academic and socio-cultural context that is increasingly sensitive to issues of gender equality and media ethics. This perspective may foreground concerns about power and marginalization, while other interpretations—such as journalistic objectivity or legal responsibility—might emphasize different aspects of the same data. Recognizing this positionality is important to maintain analytical transparency and avoid overgeneralization.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that online news discourse on OGBV is characterized by uneven distributions of voice, responsibility, and authority. Its contribution lies not only in identifying patterns of gender representation but also in revealing the discursive tensions that sustain and challenge social norms simultaneously. By foregrounding these complexities, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how media discourse participates in shaping gendered realities in contemporary digital society.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gender representation in online news discourse on online gender-based violence (OGBV) is shaped through three interconnected patterns: the silencing of victims, the diffusion of perpetrator responsibility, and the dominance of legal-institutional framing. Rather than functioning as neutral reporting, media discourse

actively constructs a social reality in which voice, agency, and authority are unevenly distributed.

Beyond these patterns, the study offers a deeper insight into how discourse operates through subtle mechanisms, such as absence, abstraction, and framing to shape public understanding. Victims are not only marginalized through what is said, but also through what is left unsaid. At the same time, the collective portrayal of perpetrators and the emphasis on legal solutions reveal a tension between recognizing structural problems and addressing them through individual accountability. This highlights that media discourse is not simply biased or objective, but inherently complex and layered, reflecting competing values within society.

The findings contribute conceptually to Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminist Media Theory by emphasizing the importance of discursive ambiguity and tension in understanding gender representation. Practically, this study underscores the need for more inclusive and reflexive media practices. For policymakers, the findings suggest that addressing OGBV requires not only legal enforcement but also attention to how issues are publicly framed and understood. For educators and social practitioners, the study highlights the importance of critical media literacy, enabling individuals to recognize and question subtle forms of gender bias. In a broader sense, improving public awareness of media discourse can contribute to healthier social relations and more equitable digital environments.

However, this study is not without limitations. The analysis is limited to a relatively small corpus of online news articles within a specific temporal and cultural context, which may not fully capture the diversity of media representations. In addition, the focus on textual analysis means that audience reception and interpretation are not explored in depth. These limitations point to the partial nature of the findings and the need for cautious generalization.

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope by incorporating different media platforms, including social media and audiovisual content, as well as employing complementary methodologies such as audience studies or ethnographic approaches. Further exploration of how individuals interpret and negotiate media discourse would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social impact of gender representation. By continuing to examine discourse from multiple perspectives, future studies can deepen the critical engagement with media and contribute to more just and inclusive representations of gender in society.

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