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Critical discourse analysis of sexual violence on social media through the representation of victim blaming and sexist humor

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how sexual harassment and gender-based violence are represented in online comments, particularly focusing on the normalization of victim-blaming and the use of humor as a discursive disguise for harassment. The purpose of the research is to uncover how everyday language in digital spaces contributes to the reproduction or resistance of patriarchal ideologies. Employing a qualitative approach, the analysis applies Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, which consists of textual analysis, discourse practice analysis, and socio-cultural practice analysis. Textual analysis identifies lexical and grammatical choices, such as derogatory expressions and evaluative strategies, that function as victim-blaming devices, alongside counter-discourses of empathy and support. Discourse practice analysis examines how these comments are produced, shared, and interpreted within digital platforms, highlighting the role of humor, irony, and cultural justifications in sustaining gendered norms. Socio-cultural practice analysis situates the findings within broader contexts of patriarchy, digital literacy, and legal enforcement, thereby demonstrating how harassment becomes normalized in online interactions while also exposing the emergence of resistance discourses. The results reveal that although victim-blaming and normalization of harassment remain dominant, there are visible counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for gender equality.

KEYWORDS: critical discourse analysis, digital discourse, gender inequality, sexual harassment, victim-blaming

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1. Introduction

In conducting a critical discourse analysis of sexual violence on social media, it is essential to ground the study within an extensive body of scholarly literature. Fairclough (1995, 2001, 2010) provides the foundational framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), highlighting the interrelation between text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. His model has been widely applied in sociolinguistic and media studies, as also emphasized by Wodak & Meyer (2016) and Van Dijk (2008), who underscore the ideological power embedded in discourse. In the context of gender and sexuality, Lazar (2007) advances the perspective of Feminist CDA, arguing that language use often reproduces patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, Sunderland (2004) and Mills (2008) examine how discourse enacts and sustains gendered inequalities in media and public communication. These contributions are essential for situating the analysis of sexual harassment in digital spaces as a product not only of individual speech acts but also of broader structures of power that are discursively maintained.

The issue of victim blaming and sexist humor in sexual violence discourse has been analyzed by Ryan (1971) as an early conceptualization of victim-blaming attitudes, further explored by Grubb & Turner (2012) and Lonsway & Fitzgerald (1994) in relation to rape myths and gender stereotypes. Franiuk et al. (2008) demonstrate how media narratives normalize sexual violence through subtle linguistic frames, while Bohner et al. (2009) show how sexist humor perpetuates tolerance toward harassment. Ford & Ferguson (2004) and Romero-Sánchez et al. (2010) argue that humor trivializing sexual violence contributes to the desensitization of audiences, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, as also noted by Connell (2005) in her theory of gender and power. Beyond this, Glick & Fiske's (1996) concept of ambivalent sexism explains how hostile and benevolent sexist discourses combine to reinforce cultural narratives that both disparage and idealize women, often producing fertile ground for humor and victim-blaming in online contexts.

In media and digital discourse studies, Papacharissi (2015) explores affective publics on social media, showing how emotions are discursively constructed and mobilized, while McRobbie (2009) analyzes the postfeminist media culture that frequently trivializes or commodifies women's experiences. Kiesling (2005) and Baxter (2010) highlight how gendered identity and power are negotiated through interactional discourse. Moreover, Butler (1990, 1993) provides a philosophical lens on gender performativity, demonstrating how discursive practices shape lived experiences of sexuality and gender. Foucault's (1978) analysis of sexuality and discourse also remains crucial, particularly in understanding how institutional and cultural discourses normalize certain narratives while marginalizing others. Importantly, these perspectives underline that discourse is never neutral. Tt is always situated within networks of ideology, power, and resistance.

From the perspective of social media linguistics, Page (2012) and Zappavigna (2012) examine digital discourse practices and the role of hashtags in shaping collective meaning-making. This resonates with findings from Mendes, Ringrose & Keller (2019) on digital feminist activism, which challenge misogynistic discourses online. In a similar vein, Banet-Weiser (2018) discusses popular feminism and its tension with popular misogyny, reflecting the ambivalent role of media in both resisting and reproducing gender violence. Jane (2014, 2017) further emphasizes the prevalence of "e-bile" or gendered hate speech in online environments, revealing how violent language towards women is normalized under the guise of humor, banter, or free expression. Together, these works illuminate the ways digital discourse both reproduces and contests patriarchal structures.

Finally, methodological considerations in CDA are informed by Blommaert (2005) and Gee (2014), who emphasize the contextual and socio-political embedding of discourse. These works, when combined, provide a comprehensive theoretical and empirical foundation to analyze how sexual violence discourse on social media is constructed through victim blaming and sexist humor, ultimately sustaining patriarchal norms while simultaneously opening spaces for resistance. Importantly, CDA does not merely describe patterns of discourse; it also seeks to expose the ideological underpinnings of language use and its material consequences. Thus, by focusing on comments in Instagram threads, this research not only contributes to linguistic and gender studies but also underscores the societal responsibility of challenging harmful discourses in digital environments.

2. Litterature Review

The phenomenon of sexual violence has been widely examined in the fields of linguistics, gender studies, and media studies, particularly when it intersects with the digital era and social media. According to Fairclough (1995, 2010), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a theoretical and methodological framework that enables

researchers to investigate how language reflects, sustains, and reproduces power relations and ideologies in society. In the context of sexual violence discourse, CDA provides a lens to uncover how digital communication practices normalize or challenge oppressive discourses. Van Dijk (2008, 2015) further emphasizes that discourse is not neutral but is shaped by power and ideology, which makes it an effective tool for analyzing victim blaming and sexist humor in online contexts.

Victim blaming is one of the dominant discourses that perpetuate rape culture, often attributing responsibility for sexual violence to the victim rather than the perpetrator. According to Ryan (1971) and later extended by Grubb & Turner (2012), victim blaming serves as a social mechanism that sustains patriarchal values and reinforces gender inequality. In the context of social media, Powell & Henry (2017) show how digital platforms amplify these harmful narratives through viral posts, memes, and comments that trivialize or delegitimize victims' experiences. This is consistent with Glick & Fiske's (1996) ambivalent sexism theory, which explains how hostile sexism manifests in overtly discriminatory language, while benevolent sexism disguises itself as humor, sympathy, or "protection."

Sexist humor plays a central role in sustaining patriarchal discourse online. Studies by Ford & Ferguson (2004) and Milner Davis (2014) indicate that sexist humor functions as a "social lubricant" that normalizes misogyny, reinforces male dominance, and discourages resistance from marginalized groups. This kind of humor is not only an entertainment device but also a discursive practice that legitimizes violence, as shown in Bill & Naus (1992) and more recently in Shifman (2014) who analyzed humor and memes in the digital era. Furthermore, Kotthoff (2006) highlights that humor is culturally and contextually embedded, making it a powerful site for ideological reproduction.

In the Indonesian context, Nurhayati (2019) and Nilan et al. (2021) note that victim blaming and sexist humor are deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural frameworks, where women are often expected to uphold social morality. These expectations, when transposed into digital spaces, lead to a culture of online shaming and trivialization of violence. Meanwhile, global studies such as Salter (2013), Mendes, Ringrose & Keller (2018), and Jane (2017) show that online misogyny is not confined to specific regions but is part of a larger global trend in which social media platforms act as breeding grounds for sexist discourses.

Critical Discourse Analysis has been employed to investigate online gender-based violence in various studies. Lazar (2005) introduced Feminist CDA, emphasizing that discourses of gender are not merely reflections of reality but active sites of struggle where gendered power relations are negotiated. This perspective aligns with Gill (2007), who explores the postfeminist sensibility that shapes contemporary media, where sexist discourses often re-emerge in subtle or disguised ways. Similarly, Van Leeuwen (2008) discusses legitimation strategies in discourse, which can be applied to analyze how victim blaming is justified or excused in digital conversations.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study integrates insights from CDA, feminist theory, and media studies to analyze victim blaming and sexist humor on social media. By synthesizing perspectives from Fairclough (1995, 2010), Van Dijk (2008, 2015), Lazar (2005), Glick & Fiske (1996), and Ford & Ferguson (2004), this research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how language, ideology, and power operate in the context of sexual violence discourse.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model as developed by Fairclough (1995, 2001). The qualitative approach is selected because the research aims to examine not merely the written texts in the form of social media comments, but also the discourse practices and the broader socio-cultural practices in which such texts are embedded. CDA is considered the most appropriate framework since it emphasizes the dialectical relationship between language, power, and ideology. According to Fairclough (2010), discourse is both socially shaped and socially constitutive, meaning that it reflects social structures while at the same time contributing to their reproduction or transformation. Thus, the analysis does not stop at describing the texts but also interprets how language functions to normalize, legitimize, or challenge existing power relations in society, particularly in the context of gender-based violence online.

The primary data source consists of comments collected from three popular social media platforms in Indonesia: Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter). These platforms were selected due to their large number of active users and their prominence as spaces where public discourse on gender and sexual violence

frequently occurs. A total of 300 comments were purposively sampled, consisting of 100 from Instagram, 100 from TikTok, and 100 from X. The comments were drawn from posts that discuss sexual harassment and sexual violence, including news reports, victim testimonies, and posts where women appear as central subjects of discussion.

The purposive sampling technique ensures that the selected comments directly respond to issues of sexual harassment, whether in supportive, critical, humorous, or victim-blaming forms. For instance, comments such as "she is exaggerating," "she asked for it," or "just a joke" are included, as they represent linguistic strategies that minimize or delegitimize the victim's experience. On the other hand, supportive comments such as "stay strong" or "thank you for speaking out" are also considered, as they illustrate counter-discourses resisting patriarchal norms.

This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, which consists of textual analysis, discourse practice analysis, and socio-cultural practice analysis. In the first stage, textual analysis, the focus is placed on the language choices, grammatical constructions, metaphors, and evaluative strategies embedded in the comments. Derogatory terms such as lebay, cari perhatian, and pakaiannya salah sendiri are recognized as victim-blaming devices that shift responsibility away from the perpetrator and onto the victim. At the same time, supportive expressions from certain users are examined as counter-discourses that resist dominant narratives. Humor, irony, and sarcasm are also analyzed, as they often function as disguised mechanisms for harassment, allowing harmful speech to appear acceptable or entertaining.

The second stage, discourse practice analysis, examines the processes through which comments are produced, circulated, and interpreted within digital platforms. This includes analyzing how humor, expressed for instance in phrases like cuma bercanda kok ("just joking"), and cultural justifications such as "that's normal in our village," serve as discursive strategies that reinforce patriarchal norms. At this level, audience engagement plays an important role: whether users endorse, resist, or ignore such comments reflects the dynamics of meaning negotiation and shows how online communities contribute to the reproduction or contestation of gendered discourse.

Finally, the socio-cultural practice analysis connects these findings to broader contexts, particularly the role of patriarchy, levels of digital literacy, and the effectiveness of legal enforcement. This stage highlights the structural conditions that enable the normalization of harassment in online spaces and situates individual comments within wider systems of ideology and power. By linking the micro-level textual patterns and meso-level discursive practices to macro-level cultural and institutional structures, this stage uncovers how deeply rooted gender inequalities are sustained, as well as the emerging ideologies that challenge them.

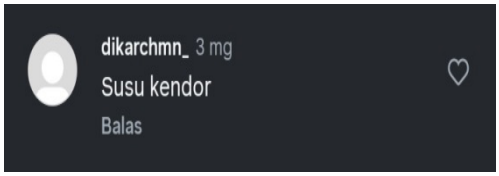
4. Result and Discussion

This study examined comments on Instagram posts related to public figures, with a particular focus on those containing elements of online sexual violence. The findings reveal that sexual violence in digital spaces is realized not only through explicit sexual propositions but also through subtle linguistic practices such as body shaming, derogatory remarks, and directives disguised as humor or casual commentary. These comments represent a form of verbal harassment that threatens the dignity and integrity of individuals in public digital spaces. Through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the data are categorized into textual analysis, discourse practice analysis, and socio-cultural practice analysis.

4.1. Textual Analysis of Instagram Comments

The textual analysis demonstrates that many comments employ words, phrases, or clauses that constitute verbal sexual violence. These linguistic forms serve as tools of humiliation, ridicule, and symbolic domination, primarily targeting women's bodies and appearances. For instance:

Data 1: "susu kendor"



The phrase literally describes sagging breasts, but pragmatically functions as a derogatory expression aimed at shaming a woman's body. This utterance belongs to the category of expressive illocutionary acts, as it expresses ridicule and contempt. The use of body-related terms to demean reflects a linguistic strategy of reinforcing gender hierarchy by reducing women's identities to their physical features.

Data 2: "kek cakep aja anu nya, mending gausah pke baju zahh"



This comment not only mocks a woman's appearance but also makes a vulgar reference to her body part (anu nya), followed by a directive suggesting she should not wear clothes. The expression carries both expressive illocutionary force (insult, ridicule) and directive force (suggestion or command), which intensifies the verbal harassment. It exemplifies how language functions as a means of disciplining women's bodies and choices in dress, reinforcing patriarchal expectations about female modesty.

Data 3: "susune wis melorot ewae kok jadi heboh"



This comment asserts that a woman's breasts are sagging and trivializes the surrounding discourse by suggesting it is not worth discussing. Linguistically, this utterance combines a representative act (framing the statement as a fact) with an expressive act (ridicule). This discursive strategy not only shames the female subject but also normalizes such degrading comments by positioning them as ordinary or unremarkable.

Across the examples, lexical items such as susu, anu, and evaluative markers like kendor or melorot illustrate how women's bodies are linguistically objectified and ridiculed. These findings highlight the discursive construction of gender inequality through everyday online interaction.

4.2. Discourse Practice Analysis

At the level of discourse practice, these comments emerge within the broader interactional environment of social media. Instagram provides a participatory platform where comments are not only posted but also amplified through likes, replies, and visibility within viral content. Humor markers ("just joking") and vulgar slang are often used to disguise harassment, making it socially acceptable or trivial in the eyes of audiences. Moreover, the circulation of such comments within posts viewed by millions demonstrates how digital discourse practices reproduce gendered violence on a large scale. Audience responses—whether in the form of agreement, silence, or resistance play a crucial role in either legitimizing or challenging these practices. The examples analyzed show a stronger tendency toward normalization and tolerance of verbal harassment, indicating a persistence of patriarchal ideology in digital communication.

4.3. Socio-Cultura Practice Analysis

From a socio-cultural perspective, these findings reflect broader cultural and structural issues. The persistence of victim-blaming, body shaming, and sexualized ridicule in online spaces can be traced back to entrenched patriarchal values that regulate women's bodies and sexualities. In Indonesian cultural contexts, references to clothing and bodily features are often tied to moral judgments, thereby positioning women as responsible

for harassment through their appearance. Low levels of digital literacy further exacerbate the issue, as many users fail to recognize the harmful impact of their language. In addition, weak legal enforcement regarding online sexual harassment contributes to the normalization of these practices, allowing perpetrators to remain unaccountable.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that online sexual violence on Instagram is not only a matter of individual misconduct but also part of a broader discursive system that reproduces gender inequality. Through linguistic strategies such as ridicule, directives, and pseudo-factual statements, these comments sustain symbolic violence against women in digital spaces. However, the identification of resistance discourses such as supportive or defensive comments toward victims suggests that online platforms can also become arenas of contestation where hegemonic ideologies are challenged.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that online sexual violence on social media is linguistically constructed through derogatory expressions, sexist humor, and victim-blaming discourses that target women's bodies and identities. Through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings show that these comments operate not merely as individual acts of harassment but as discursive practices that normalize, trivialize, and legitimize patriarchal domination in digital spaces. Textual analysis revealed the use of degrading lexical choices and illocutionary acts that ridicule and discipline women, while discourse practice analysis highlighted the reproduction of these harmful messages through humor, irony, and cultural justifications, often reinforced by audience interaction.

At a broader level, socio-cultural practice analysis reveals how these discourses are deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, low digital literacy, and weak legal enforcement, which together create fertile ground for the normalization of sexual violence online. Yet, the presence of counter-discourses supportive or resistant comments defending victims indicates that social media also provides spaces for contesting dominant narratives. Thus, this study not only underscores the need for critical awareness of how language sustains gendered violence in digital contexts but also emphasizes the importance of fostering resistance discourses and strengthening cultural, educational, and institutional mechanisms to challenge and transform these oppressive practices.

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Data availability statement
The data are available upon a request to the corresponding author.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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