Is This News Report or Soft Porn?:
Audience Framing on Men as Sexual Harassment Victim

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Introduction

The use of hastag #metoo on social media has brought public awareness regarding sexual harassment in many places around the world. In fact, this issue happened in various situations, varies from workplace to classroom. This problem, unfortunately, is also happening in Indonesia, where both of women and men could become the victim of such sexual misconduct. According to the data released by Komisi Nasional Perempuan (Komnas Perempuan, 2016), there have been 312,752 cases of sexual harassment occurred in Indonesia back in 2016. Among those number, there were more than thousand cases of rape. Also, while numerous cases of sexual misconduct involved women as the victim, it does not mean that men can never became the victim of such crime.

Yet, people paid closer attention to these cases only when media intensively reported a murder and rape of Yuyun in 2016. Yuyun was a junior high school student in Bengkulu Province where she was group-raped by 14 men, and they later killed her. This case was immediately caught media attention and went viral in social media, and thus, gaining various sympathy of the media audience at that time.

Here we argue, when such crime of sexual harassment like rape was happened to a woman, people are easily give their sympathy. But the case would be different when the rape victim was a man. Indeed, thanks to the prevalence of patriarchy system within the society, Indonesian public are still considering there is no way that a man could become a victim of sexual harassment or rape. Moreover, most of the news related to sexual harassment is associated with negative stigma, especially toward the victim (plus if the victim was a man). Came from this kind of concern, we aim to further understand how news audiences interpret various news report regarding the case of rape where men became the victim of this sexual crime.
Literature Review

How media portray men as sexual victims

Naturally, both women and men can become the victim of any sexual misconduct. Also, many who became such victim are rarely eager to report to the police about what had happened to her/him on such sexual crime. According to Kirnandita (2017), one of the reasons why people who were the sexual crime victim reluctant to go straight to the law enforcer was that they were afraid with the stigma—especially if you are a man. Thus, they better decided to remain silent.

In fact, according to a survey made by Lentera Sintas, more than 93% of the sexual harassment victims did not report the crime to the police. Among those survey participants, around 1,636 said that they were a rape victim with 31.7% of them were men (Asmarani, 2016). Not only it was difficult for men to report such cases, it was also little support from the society to encourage men to disclose such sexual crime that has happened to them.

How media portray men as sexual crime victim is also another problem. News headline tend to use sensational words when telling a story about sexual harassment or rape where a man was the victim. From this kind of practice, it is difficult to say that media place sympathy to the man. This is in parallel with Khan’s (2008) study where he observed how print media in the United Kingdom covered sexual crime cases in the country within more than 13 years. Within his research, Khan found that media are putting negative stereotypes on men as sexual crime victims and placing little empathy to those men.

Moreover, Pitfield (quoted in Javaid, 2015) argued that media are usually incapable of portraying accurately regarding this matter. When reporting rape cases that involve men as the victim, reporters were difficult to find informants who were voluntarily telling their stories. In result, little attention is given by mainstream media to this kind of issue—and they prefer to produce news reports about women as the sexual crime victim instead.

The problem of hegemonic masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is brought up by Raewyn Connel (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005) through his various works on masculinity. This concept refers to the idea that men are controlling and legitimizing their power and dominance though social relationships. Through this kind of control, males are taking advantages of their female counterparts, including taking control over women. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity also works in controlling how men should represent themselves within the society.

Many argued that hegemonic masculinity would never disadvantage men since they would always be in a power within the system. However, this is not always the case. The idea of hegemonic masculinity demands that a man should always be superior, being a
leader, a strong person, etc. therefore, when a man does not fulfil this social expectation, then his masculinity should be put in question.

The case of men as the victim of rape is one interesting example of how hegemonic masculinity works. People would argue that there is little chance that a man became a victim of such sexual crime, and in return, a woman would never be a rapist. Our social expectation on the role of men and women are quite different with such case. As a result, when there is a news report about a woman who raped a man, there is a higher chance that news audience would deny such case as make senses. They would frame the news as something else other than understanding the fact that everybody could become the victim of sexual harassment, including rape.

Javaid (2017) further explained that there are three common concerns on how a man would never be a victim of such sexual crime. This include: women would never be the perpetrator, sexual crime against a man is never been taken seriously by the society, and a man should never be a victim since he is a strong figure and should always be able to defend himself against the rapist. In fact, we can easily find how news audience posts their comments referring to these assumptions when they read news report about how a man was raped by a woman. Yet, little empirical studies that could brought evidence on how news audience framed such problematic news reports, especially by taking case study in Indonesian media sphere.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes audience framing—a relatively newest approach in framing research. According to Wicks (2010), audience framing can be understood as an attempt to better examine how audience are actively frame news content they consume. When audience consume news report, he/she is negotiating the meaning by making sense the information he/she obtained from the news with their own background context. For this reason, there is no guarantee that news frames made by media organizations would always resonate with how their audiences frame the news content.

To better understand how news audiences developed their frames on news report about men who became the victims of rape crime, we recruited 26 research participants through online advertisement. Later, we arranged four Focus Group Discussions with groups of them to further discuss the selected news texts of the topic circa April 2018.

Results

Based on our Focus Group Discussions, we found that four major frames emerged within the discussion about the news texts on men as victims of rape. In general, the frames can be categorized into four major themes, which are:

Everyone Can Become the Rape Victim

Most research participant framed the news reports of the men as the rape victim as something less provoking. They tended to rationalize their frame of the news texts. For
instance, many research participants said they were being disturbed by the way the media use words of cantik (beautiful) and ganteng (handsome) to depict the perpetrator and the victim. Not only saying the such word picking irrelevant in the case of sexual crime like rape, news audience also thought that both sexes can be placed in any situation. By reading the news report about a man who was raped by a woman, they agreed that a man really has the potential to become a victim of any sexual misconduct.

Sexists

By being able to paying a closer attention to the selection of word used by the journalists, many our research participants framed the news report about rape against a man as a sexist news article. For example, by mentioning a physical attribution to either the victim or the rapists, news audience became aware that the news texts are being sexists and not so much care about the story itself.

Stigma against men

Not only depicting the man as the rape victim poorly, some research participants also argued that the news report are putting the stigma against the man. Here, the news texts illustrating that the men should never be powerless against any woman who wanted to rape him. In this case, how the media portray the rape victim is becoming double discrimination against the man. This is in parallel with the hegemonic masculinity idea that positioned a man as a powerful figure, and thus, should never be seen weak and even became a victim.

Soft porn

In discussing one news article from JawaPos.com, most of the research participants misinterpreted the news report as a (fictional) soft porn article. This kind of frame automatically came into their mind when they read these words within the news text:


From our research participants’ point of view, the use of this kind of narrative is more suitable for telling a soft porn rather than reporting a sexual crime like rape. They further argued, when a news portal used such frame in telling an important story like rape, it should never treat the case lightly or even portraying the event like a fictional and cheap pornographic fiction that can be easily found at Wattpad.

Discussion

It is true that media are constructing their own frames when they reported any news event, including a case where a man became the victim of such sexual crime like rape. However, their audience might also practice their own frames when they tried to
understand the news texts they consume. Disassociation between media frame and audience frame is always possible to happen.

In the case of understanding news report about men who were victims of rape cases, news audience displayed four major frames: everyone can be a rape victim, sexist, stigma against men, and soft porn frames. These frames were build upon how these audiences interpret the way the news texts were written (including graphic and illustration used within the articles) as well as how they utilized their personal background as modern and educated news audiences. Here, they exhibited the role of active audience where they did not passively interpret the news text but actively making sense and creating their own frames against the news texts that they thought giving less empathy and even discriminating the victim of the sexual crime.

Conclusion

While the news reports are often depicted sexual crime disproportionately, it does not mean that news audiences would automatically follow how media portrayed the case and the victim of such crime. Here, we found that news audiences are actively utilizing frames in making sense the news report and even articulating contrasting frames against the news text. As a result, this study not only highlights the ability of news audiences in constructing their own (and sometimes quite distinct) frames on the news they consumed, but also reinforces the notion that audiences are active actors who are creating meaning while they read controversial news report such as in the case of rape against the men.

References


