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The Impact of Victim Blaming on Social Media and Handling Efforts for Victims of Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Victim blaming is a persistent legal and social problem in cases of sexual violence, particularly on social media, where victims are often judged and blamed for their clothing, behavior, or background. Such responses not only reflect gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms but also hinder justice and support for survivors. This study aims to examine the forms of victim blaming on digital platforms, its legal and social implications, and strategies to address it. Using a literature review method, sources from psychology, media studies, law, and socio-cultural perspectives were analyzed. The findings indicate that victim blaming is fueled by media bias, entrenched gender norms, patriarchal culture, and low public digital literacy. Its consequences include severe psychological trauma, social isolation, and reluctance to pursue legal action or professional assistance. The study concludes that a comprehensive, cross-sectoral approach encompassing public education, media reform, stronger legal protections, and empathetic psychological support is essential to creating a safer, more just, and victim-centered digital environment. Such synergy between legal, psychological, and social sectors is necessary to break the cycle of secondary victimization and promote justice for survivors.

Keywords

Legal Protection, Gender-Based Violence, Psychological Trauma, Sexual Violence, Victim Blaming.

1. Introduction

Victim blaming is a social phenomenon that is increasingly prevalent in cases of sexual violence, especially with the rise of social media as a public arena. It occurs when victims are made the target of blame for incidents they experience (Shopiani et al., 2021). Alfi and Halwati (2019) define it as holding victims responsible for the harm or wrongdoing they suffer. Santoso (2018) notes that the media often portray women both as victims and as instigators, justifying injustice through biased reporting. According to Shopiani et al. (2021), forms of victim blaming include lack of empathy, trivializing the incident, and judging victims based on dress, behavior, or online activity. This is urgent because social media amplifies these harmful narratives, shaping public opinion and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Ihsani (2021) found that biased diction in online media perpetuates such stereotypes, underscoring the critical need for interventions to foster digital empathy and awareness.

Recently, there was a case where a woman was a victim of harassment at Tanah Abang Station, Central Jakarta, on Wednesday, 2/4/2025. This case emerged after the victim reported the incident to an online taxi driver and posted it on their Instagram account. The victim admitted that he experienced an unpleasant incident when he got off the escalator. There was an unknown man behind him who committed an inappropriate act, namely, spraying his sperm on the back of the victim's pants. From these cases, several comments are made that are considered reasonable, including jokes, and even blame the victim. Like the comments on the TikTok account @kumparan that reposted the incident, statements such as "If he wears a covered shirt, harassment can be avoided" or "It is very fluffy, who cannot resist?" reflect a victim-blaming mindset. Phrases such as "Eat, take care of the aurat" and "The importance of dressing covered" shift blame to women, ignoring the perpetrator's responsibility entirely.

In Thacker's (2017) research, the Steubenville, Ohio, case involved the rape of a 16-year-old schoolgirl by two teenage boys after she became unconscious due to alcohol. The perpetrators documented the assault with photos and videos that were widely disseminated on social media, worsening the victim's situation. Many online comments, even from those not directly involved, criticized and blamed the victim, with some claiming she had "requested" the rape through her dress or behavior. Mass media reporting further deepened stigma by focusing on the perpetrators' prospects rather than the victim's suffering (Masser et al., 2009; Thacker, 2017). Similarly, the Tanah Abang Station case in Indonesia demonstrated how social media reproduces victim-blaming narratives, such as criticizing clothing or mocking the incident, reinforcing gender bias that frames women as instigators of sexual violence (Dyar et al., 2021; Car & Ravbar, 2021).

Although these cases occur in different cultural contexts, both reveal how social media intensifies victim blaming, exacerbating psychological trauma and stigmatization. However, a significant legal gap persists while sexual violence laws address physical acts, they often lack explicit provisions for online victim blaming, leaving perpetrators of digital harassment largely unaccountable. Current legal mechanisms rarely provide clear enforcement guidelines for harmful online narratives, creating barriers for victims seeking justice. Academic studies tend to be fragmented. Gravelin et al. (2024) focus on media influence, Anderson and Overby (2021) on psychological trauma, Shopiani et al. (2021) on socio-cultural factors, and Putri and Kusnadi (2024), as well as Patisina and Sari (2025) on legal aspects, without integrating these perspectives. This study addresses that gap by reviewing literature from psychology, media studies, socio-cultural analysis, and law.

The primary purpose of this study is to analyze the phenomenon of victims blaming on social media against victims of sexual violence, review the latest findings, explore the causes and impacts, and identify practical treatment-based approaches.

More broadly, this study also aims to enhance social awareness and promote the creation of a safer, fairer, and more equitable digital environment that supports the recovery of victims.

2. Literature Review

Victim blaming in cases of sexual violence is deeply rooted in social and cultural dynamics, particularly patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes that perpetuate harmful narratives on social media. Shopiani et al. (2021) defines victim blaming as the act of holding victims responsible for the harm they suffer, often through judgments about their appearance, behavior, or social background. This phenomenon is amplified by social media, where biased narratives thrive due to anonymity and algorithmic amplification of sensational content. For instance, comments on platforms like TikTok and Instagram frequently criticize victims' clothing or actions, framing them as provocateurs (Ihsani, 2021). Such reactions reflect the "just world hypothesis," which posits that individuals rationalize violence by assuming victims deserve their fate (Wulandari & Krisnani, 2020). Patriarchal culture further entrenches these attitudes, with women often judged for deviating from traditional gender roles, such as posting assertive or sensual content online (Wijayanti & Suarya, 2023). This cultural bias is not uniform globally; in collectivist societies, such as Indonesia, victim blaming often ties to communal expectations of modesty, whereas in individualist contexts, like the U.S., it may focus on personal responsibility (Simanjorang, 2024).

Intersectional factors, such as race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, exacerbate victim blaming, particularly for marginalized groups. Dyar et al. (2021) highlight that bisexual women face heightened blame due to stereotypes about their sexual orientation, while Velasco and Sanmartín (2025) note that sex workers encounter compounded stigma due to their profession. These intersecting identities amplify the scrutiny victims face, with social media amplifying stereotypes through viral content. However, literature often overlooks how cultural and intersectional contexts shape these narratives, thereby limiting our understanding of global variations. Studies like Witte and Flechsenhar (2025) suggest that men are more likely to blame victims who defy gender norms, underscoring the need for education to challenge these biases. Addressing these cultural and intersectional drivers requires targeted public awareness campaigns to foster empathy and reduce stigma.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping victim-blaming narratives, often amplifying stigma through biased reporting and platform dynamics. Thacker (2017) illustrates this in the Steubenville case, where media coverage focused on the perpetrators' lost potential rather than the victim's trauma, perpetuating a narrative that excused the assailants. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok exacerbate this by enabling rapid dissemination of blame-laden content, often driven by algorithms that prioritize engagement over ethical considerations (Amudhan et al., 2024). For example, Ihsani (2021) notes that online news outlets frequently use diction that subtly shifts blame to victims, such as emphasizing their clothing or behavior. This skewed framing influences public perception, normalizing victim-blaming as a socially acceptable response. The anonymity afforded by platforms further emboldens users to post harmful comments without accountability, as seen in the Tanah Abang Station case, where netizens mocked the victim's appearance (Santoso, 2018).

The design of social media platforms, including algorithmic amplification and inadequate content moderation, significantly contributes to victim-blaming. Amudhan et al. (2024) argues that algorithms often promote polarizing or sensational content, which can include victim-blaming narratives that gain traction through likes and shares. This creates a feedback loop where harmful stereotypes are reinforced, making it difficult for victims to find supportive spaces online. Ethical

journalism, as advocated by Mindedal et al. (2024), can counter this by prioritizing victim-centered reporting; however, such practices remain limited. The literature suggests a need for stricter platform regulations and journalist training to mitigate the spread of biased narratives. However, studies like Gravelin et al. (2024) lack quantitative data on the prevalence of victim-blaming comments, which could better illustrate the scale of the issue. Media reform, including responsible reporting and platform accountability, is critical to dismantling harmful narratives.

Victim blaming on social media inflicts profound psychological and social harm on survivors of sexual violence, compounding their trauma and hindering recovery. Anderson and Overby (2021) highlight that myths about sexual violence, perpetuated online, lead to shame, anxiety, and depression among victims, often resulting in social isolation. Public comments blaming victims' appearance or behavior, as seen in cases like Tanah Abang Station, intensify feelings of self-blame and fear, contributing to chronic conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Mellen et al., 2024). Victims may internalize these judgments, perceiving themselves as responsible for the violence, which discourages them from seeking professional help or reporting incidents (Reich et al., 2021). Patterson (2010) notes that adverse reactions from justice institutions further exacerbate this, leading victims to disengage from legal processes. The social stigma amplified by online platforms creates a hostile environment, reducing victims' access to supportive communities (Shahali et al., 2016).

The social consequences of victim blaming extend beyond individual trauma, shaping broader societal attitudes. Van der Bruggen and Grubb (2014) explain that prolonged exposure to victim-blaming content normalizes these attitudes, making them appear rational to the public. This perpetuates a cycle where victims face increased scrutiny and perpetrators face less accountability, as seen in media focus on assailants' futures rather than victims' suffering (Thacker, 2017). Counter-narratives, such as the #MeToo movement, have emerged to challenge this stigma, but their impact is underexplored in the literature (Mindedal et al., 2024). Kusumastuti et al. (2023) emphasize that empathetic interventions, including counseling and public education, are vital for rebuilding victims' self-worth and fostering supportive environments. However, the lack of quantitative studies on the prevalence of victim-blaming comments limits a complete understanding of its social impact, necessitating further research.

Legal frameworks often fail to address online victim blaming, leaving survivors vulnerable to digital harassment without adequate recourse. Putri and Kusnadi (2024) highlight significant gaps in legal protections, particularly in addressing online narratives that perpetuate victim-blaming. While laws like Indonesia's Law on Sexual Violence target physical acts, they lack provisions for digital harassment, allowing harmful comments to persist without consequence (Patisina & Sari, 2025). International frameworks, such as the Istanbul Convention, emphasize protections against gender-based violence but are not universally adopted, limiting their impact (Firmanda et al., 2023). This legal shortfall discourages victims from pursuing justice, as public shaming on social media compounds their trauma (Patterson, 2010). Paradias and Soponyono (2022) advocate for integrating psychological support into legal processes to empower victims, but such measures remain inconsistently implemented. Consistent enforcement and trauma-informed legal approaches are crucial for addressing these gaps.

Counter-narratives and advocacy efforts offer hope for challenging victim blaming. Movements like #MeToo and #BelieveSurvivors have gained traction on social media, amplifying the voices of survivors and promoting empathy-driven discourse (Mindedal et al., 2024). These initiatives challenge stereotypes and demand accountability; however, their long-term impact remains understudied. Khanifah and Legowo (2022) suggest that individuals with higher education levels are less likely

to engage in victim blaming, indicating that public education campaigns can shift attitudes. Sugiarti (2021) emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive education to dismantle patriarchal norms. However, literature lacks comprehensive data on the effectiveness of these counter-narratives, particularly in diverse cultural contexts. Strengthening legal protections and amplifying advocacy efforts requires cross-sectoral collaboration, including media reform and platform accountability, to create safer digital spaces for survivors.

3. Methods

This study adopts a literature review approach to examine the phenomenon of victim-blaming against survivors of sexual violence on social media. A literature review is particularly suited to this research because the issue is inherently complex, multidimensional, and situated at the intersection of psychology, sociology, media studies, and law. Direct observational or experimental studies on survivors pose significant ethical challenges due to the sensitive nature of sexual violence; therefore, a literature-based method enables a comprehensive and ethically responsible exploration using existing scholarly work and documented cases.

Selection criteria were applied to ensure the quality and relevance of sources. Materials were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, authoritative books, and verified documentation of real-life cases from reputable online media and legal archives. Sources were selected based on three main criteria include relevance to the themes of victim blaming, sexual violence, and social media; credibility of the publication or author; and recency, with priority given to works published within the last ten years to ensure contemporary applicability. Searches were conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate, employing keywords including “victim blaming,” “sexual violence,” “social media,” “digital stigma,” and “psychological impact.”

The scope of sources covers multiple disciplines to capture the full spectrum of the issue. Studies addressing trauma, self-blame, and victim resilience from psychology are considered. Works on gender stereotypes, online discourse, and media framing from sociology and media studies are analyzed. Additionally, literature from legal scholarship examining statutory frameworks, digital harassment laws, and enforcement gaps is included.

A thematic content analysis framework is employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and arguments across the selected literature. The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions are manifestations of victim blaming in online discourse, including language, imagery, and framing; the psychological, social, and legal impacts on survivors, such as trauma, stigma, and barriers to justice; and proposed interventions from researchers and practitioners, including legal reforms, media guidelines, and public education strategies.

By integrating legal, psychological, and media perspectives into a unified analytical framework, this study enables cross-disciplinary insight into how victim blaming operates in the digital environment. The legal dimension addresses gaps in accountability for online harassment; the psychological dimension explores the mental health consequences; and the media dimension examines the role of platforms and journalism in amplifying or countering harmful narratives. This integrated approach enables both comparative analysis across cultural contexts and the identification of universal mechanisms that drive victim blaming in the digital era.

4. Results

4.1. Manifestations and Factors Causing Victim Blaming

This study explores the phenomenon of victim blaming on social media in cases of sexual violence by examining literature, actual case documentation, and previous

research. The results indicate that victim blaming is not only prevalent but also deeply rooted in the interaction of psychological, socio-cultural, media, and legal dimensions.

The content analysis of public responses to several cases, such as the viral Tanah Abang Station incident, reveals that netizens often blame the victim based on appearance, behavior, or lifestyle choices. Comments like “she invited it with her outfit” or “why didn’t she cover herself?” reflect strong societal bias, portraying women as provocateurs rather than victims of assault. These statements mirror a broader narrative found in similar cases abroad. For example, Thacker (2017) recounts the Steubenville, Ohio, case, where a 16-year-old rape victim was vilified on social media. Images and videos of the assault were widely shared, and rather than sympathy, the public response focused on defending the perpetrators and blaming the girl for her behavior and appearance.

Such reactions illustrate how victim-blaming becomes normalized in digital spaces. Ihsani (2021) found that online news often employs biased language that subtly shifts blame to the victim, thereby reinforcing public stereotypes. Similarly, Amudhan et al. (2024) demonstrate that the delivery of skewed information on platforms like TikTok and Instagram enables users to easily internalize and reproduce blame-laden narratives. Gravelin et al. (2024) further highlight that prolonged exposure to victim-blaming content alters social perception, making such attitudes appear rational and acceptable.

From a psychological perspective, victim blaming stems from the “just world hypothesis,” where people believe that bad things happen only to those who deserve them (Wulandari & Krisnani, 2020). This leads the public to justify or rationalize sexual violence by blaming the victim’s choices. Gender stereotypes exacerbate this trend. Wijayanti and Suarya (2023) show that women are judged more harshly, particularly when they are seen violating traditional gender roles for instance, by posting sensual images or acting assertively. Research by Witte and Flechsenhar (2025) supports this, showing that men are more likely to blame victims, especially when the victims deviate from gender norms.

The media’s role is central. It not only amplifies these biases but also shapes public discourse. Thacker (2017) noted that the media often focused on the rapist’s lost potential (e.g., sports careers) rather than the victim’s trauma. Santoso (2018) also observed that women are disproportionately held responsible for the sexual violence they experience. On the contrary, balanced reporting as advocated by Mindedal et al. (2024) can help dismantle stigma and provide social support. Shopiani et al. (2021) add that comments mocking or shaming victims worsen the trauma, reinforcing a hostile environment.

4.2. Psychological, Social, and Legal Impacts

Psychological effects of such public judgment are severe. Triwijati (2007) notes that victim blaming can lead to panic attacks, depression, anxiety, and emotional withdrawal. Studies by Adhrianti et al. (2024) emphasize that narratives blaming the victim embolden perpetrators while exacerbating the victim’s emotional burden. Furthermore, the stigma amplified by social media comments contributes to chronic psychological disorders such as PTSD, social anxiety, and feelings of alienation (Mellen et al., 2024). Victims may internalize guilt and avoid seeking professional help due to shame and fear of judgment (Reich et al., 2021). Patterson (2010) study found that when victims perceive adverse reactions from justice institutions, they often disengage from legal processes, hindering both recovery and justice.

Clinically, comments that blame the victim intensify trauma symptoms like self-blame and fear. Shopiani et al. (2021) stress that empathetic intervention is key to rebuilding self-worth. Kusumastuti et al. (2023) assert that validation and emotional support are essential for healing. This is echoed by Musyafaah and Syafaq (2022) and Padmanabhanunni and Gqomfa (2022), who advocate for public education and

empathy-driven communication to reduce stigma. On the socio-cultural level, patriarchal norms and rigid gender roles continue to influence perceptions of sexual violence. Wijayanti and Suarya (2020) emphasize that these cultural patterns sustain victim blaming. Witte and Flechsenhar (2020) observed that men are more judgmental if the victim defies gender expectations. Educational programs that challenge these stereotypes and promote gender equality are crucial (Rusyidi & Nurwati, 2016; Sugiarti, 2021). Khanifah and Legowo (2022) found that individuals with higher education levels are less likely to engage in victim blaming. Similarly, Pangestika et al. (2022) suggest that human rights and gender-sensitive education can foster a more supportive society.

Ethical reporting can mitigate stigma, as noted by Adhrianti et al. (2022), who argue that journalistic responsibility includes avoiding language that victim-blames individuals. Fitriana and Abdullah (2021) recommend psychoeducation via social media to raise awareness and encourage responsible discourse. Journalist training in fair gender representation and sensitivity toward issues of violence is essential (Kogoya, 2023). Additionally, media regulation policies must be enforced to penalize outlets that promote biased narratives. Legally, while some protection exists, they are often inadequate. Putri and Kusnadi (2023) highlight the gap between legal provisions and actual protection. Patisina and Sari (2025) call for a legal framework that is sensitive to social dynamics and the trauma of victims. Consistent law enforcement can empower victims to report and pursue justice (Mawarni et al., 2023). Firmanda et al. (2023) emphasize the need for legal instruments that protect not only from perpetrators but also from social stigma. Paradiaz and Soponyono (2022) advocate for integrating professional psychological support within the legal process to aid victims.

Psychologically, support services are crucial. Kurniawan et al. (2019) found that therapeutic intervention helps victims reframe traumatic experiences and navigate legal proceedings. Tambaip and Tjilen (2023) support this view, emphasizing the importance of identity restoration through counseling. Sirait (2023) adds that such support equips victims to face public judgment with resilience. Nurmawati and Safitri (2023) also note that trauma-informed approaches help victims manage not only past violence but also future stressors. The findings from this literature review illustrate that victim-blaming on social media is a multidimensional issue that inflicts psychological, social, and legal harm. The normalization of blaming language fosters an unsafe environment, discouraging victims from speaking out and seeking help. The perpetuation of stigma via media and public commentary worsens victims' mental well-being and hinders their recovery.

5. Discussion

Based on this result, victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence emerges from deeply embedded psychological and socio-cultural dynamics, particularly the “just world hypothesis” and entrenched gender stereotypes that frame women, especially those who deviate from traditional roles, as responsible for the violence they experience. These biases are further amplified by media and digital platforms, where sensationalized or biased coverage shifts public discourse toward scrutinizing victims' appearance, behavior, or lifestyle rather than holding perpetrators accountable. Such narratives, widely circulated on social media, normalize stigma and reinforce harmful stereotypes, creating an environment where blame is not only socially accepted but perpetuated (Wyatt, 2012).

Victim blaming imposes severe and lasting consequences on survivors of sexual violence, compounding the trauma they have already endured. When society, media, or online communities shift the focus from the perpetrator's actions to scrutinizing the victim's appearance, behavior, or lifestyle, survivors often internalize these judgments, leading to self-blame and feelings of shame. This psychological burden

can manifest depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), significantly impairing daily functioning and overall well-being. Moreover, the stigma associated with public judgment frequently discourages victims from seeking professional help or pursuing justice, leaving them isolated and vulnerable. Over time, this environment not only deepens emotional wounds but also reinforces a cycle where silence and inaction perpetuate the prevalence of sexual violence (Velasco & Sanmartin, 2025; Taccini & Mannarini, 2025).

To address these issues, several strategies are proposed. First, education must play a central role. Formal curricula and public awareness campaigns should promote empathy, gender equality, and digital literacy. Rusyidi and Nurwati (2016) and Sugiarti (2021) argue that education can shift attitudes and empower critical responses to harmful narratives. Second, media ethics and reform are vital. Journalists must be trained to report sensitively, and social media platforms must enforce community standards that prohibit content that victim-blames (Kogoya, 2023). Responsible media practice can create safer digital spaces for victims. Third, legal systems need enhancement. Laws must be enforced consistently and sensitively, with an emphasis on the rights of victims (Putri & Kusnadi, 2023; Patisina & Sari, 2025). Legal professionals should be trained to recognize and reject victim-blaming tendencies during proceedings. Fourth, psychological support must be accessible and trauma-informed. Counselling and therapy can reduce self-blame and support emotional recovery (Kurniawan et al., 2019; Tambaip & Tjilen, 2023). Empathetic environments help victims rebuild their confidence and reenter society with dignity.

The findings underscore the urgent need for multi-level interventions to dismantle the social, cultural, and institutional structures that perpetuate victim blaming. At a societal level, public education campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes and promote empathy-driven narratives are crucial for shifting perceptions and reducing stigma. Media organizations should adopt ethical reporting standards that avoid blame-laden language and center the experiences and rights of survivors. At the same time, social media platforms can implement content moderation policies to limit the spread of harmful narratives. In the legal sphere, integrating trauma-informed approaches and psychological support into investigative and judicial processes can improve victims' willingness to seek justice. Collectively, these efforts can foster a safer and more supportive environment, where survivors are empowered to speak out and access the resources necessary for recovery.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that victim blaming on social media is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that worsens the psychological and social burden of sexual violence survivors. Patriarchal culture, biased media reporting, gender stereotypes, and low digital empathy reinforce narratives blaming victims' clothing, behavior, or background. Such discourse triggers shame, fear, depression, and reluctance to report. The media's focus on perpetrators and lack of victim-centered narratives amplifies stigma and reduces public support, while inconsistent legal protection further exacerbates harm.

Theoretically, the study contributes to an integrated understanding of victim blaming by linking psychological, socio-cultural, legal, and media dimensions. Practically, it emphasizes the urgency of cross-sectoral action: public education campaigns to combat gender-based violence, ethical reforms in journalism, and strengthened victim-sensitive legal frameworks. Policy reforms should include explicit legal provisions against online victim blaming, enforcement of ethical media standards, mandatory journalist training, and integration of trauma-informed psychological support into judicial processes. Strengthening mental health services

and community-based networks is crucial for promoting recovery and resilience. Collaboration among law enforcement, the media, and civil society is crucial to creating safe digital spaces. This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture survivors lived experiences or the real-time dynamics of online discourse. Future research should incorporate empirical interviews, digital ethnography, and cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding of how victim blaming operates in different contexts and inform more targeted policy interventions.

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Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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