

Objectification of female cosplayers in Indonesian digital communities: A case study of Ai Kirishima

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Abstract:

Female cosplayers (costume play) in Indonesian digital communities experience objectification and victim blaming, as illustrated in the case of Ai Kirishima, where online responses reinforce gender bias and moral surveillance. This study aims to critically analyze how digital discourse is constructed in cases of gender-based violence against female cosplayers, focusing on three layers of discourse: media framing, patterns of public comments, and the reproduction of legitimized violence. This study employs a qualitative approach using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to examine media framing, public comments, and social context in the Ai Kirishima case through digital comment data analyzed thematically. This study identifies three findings: 1) social media frames the tragedy in a sensational and gender-biased manner, prioritizing virality over victim sensitivity and generating ambiguous empathy and victim blaming. 2) public comments are dominated by victim blaming, body objectification, and perpetrator justification, while empathy toward victims remains a minority. 3) digital discourse reproduces the legitimization of gender-based violence by shifting sympathy from victims to perpetrators. This study concludes that digital media reproduces systemic gender bias: media frame events sensationally, online users engage in victim blaming, and sympathy shifts toward perpetrators, thereby reinforcing the legitimization of gender-based violence. This study contributes to digital gender studies by introducing the concept of sympathy reversal, while also promoting critical gender literacy, platform reform, and victim-centered media framing.

Keywords:

Cosplay, Gender, Media, Victim Blaming



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cosplay (costume play) has become an important component of global popular culture among younger generations, while also serving as a medium for creative expression and identity construction (Pushkareva & Agaltsova, 2021; Rahman et al., 2012). Cosplay further functions as a space for negotiating social and gender roles (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2022; Li & Liu, 2023; Haque, 2024). However, behind its popularity, female cosplayers remain vulnerable to objectification, stereotyping, and both online and offline harassment (Rasch, 2021; Yang, 2022; Tang et al., 2023). This occurs because revealing costumes are often used to justify harassment or blame victims, reflecting patriarchal norms that regulate and objectify women's bodies (Liu & Mu, 2022; Oswald & Adams, 2023; Berik et al., 2024). Evidence suggests that such practices not only harm individuals but also reinforce gender bias within digital spaces. Therefore, although cosplay possesses expressive and transformative potential, without critical engagement with patriarchal structures, female cosplayers will continue to face symbolic subordination and gender-based violence in contemporary social spaces.

Based on previous studies, research on structural victim blaming and the distortion of narratives surrounding the Ai Kirishima case has continued to develop, leading this study to classify them into several major research strands. Female cosplayers on Platform X experience cyber sexual harassment through anonymous comments without provocation, largely due to low levels of public awareness (Rouse & Salter, 2021; Walther, 2022; Van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024). Approximately one in three women globally has experienced violence, while in Indonesia victim blaming is shaped by patriarchy, media influence, and limited gender literacy across various social groups (Shopiani et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2024; Jacobus et al., 2025). The Ai Kirishima case illustrates gender-based victim blaming, in which the public blamed the victim through her digital appearance, thereby obscuring the perpetrator's responsibility for the violence (Nichols, 2019; Yang, 2022; crazyforanimetrivia, 2024). Therefore, this study addresses the research gap concerning the integration of platform framing, public comments, and sympathy reversal. The novelty of this research lies in mapping the three-layered digital discourse that simultaneously reproduces gender bias.

This study aims to critically examine how digital discourse is constructed in cases of gender-based violence against female cosplayers by focusing on three layers of discourse: media framing, patterns of public comments, and the reproduction of the legitimization of violence. To achieve this objective, three research questions are proposed: 1) how do social media platforms frame the tragedy involving female cosplayer victims? 2) why are public comments dominated by victim blaming, objectification, and the justification of perpetrators? 3) how does digital discourse shift sympathy from victims to perpetrators? Accordingly, this study contributes by offering an integrated framework that combines media framing, comment analysis, and sympathy reversal as a three-layered model of gender bias. Practically, these findings are expected to provide a foundation for digital literacy interventions and the development of content moderation policies that are more sensitive to gender-related issues.

This study is grounded in the argument that social media frames tragedies involving female cosplayers by prioritizing sensationalism and visual aesthetics, thereby shifting public attention away from the violence experienced by the victims. Such framing generates ambiguous empathy that can easily transform into victim blaming. Furthermore, public comments systematically reproduce gender bias: victims are blamed for their appearance and personal choices, their bodies are objectified, while perpetrators are justified through narratives of "emotional pain" or psychological distress. Meanwhile, empathy toward

victims becomes marginalized and is often intertwined with tragic irony. More critically, digital discourse actively shifts sympathy from victims to perpetrators, legitimizing violence as a reasonable expression of male emotion. Consequently, digital spaces are not neutral arenas, but rather sites for the reproduction of patriarchal ideology that reinforces gender inequality and injustice.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative method using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the representation of women and victim blaming in online public responses to the murder case of Ai Kirishima. Fairclough's model analyzes discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and socio-cultural context (Savitri et al., 2025). This approach reveals the relationship between discourse and ideological power structures, particularly gender (Alasiri, 2024), as well as how online communication sustains social inequality (Hackfort, 2021). In the context of cosplay, female cosplayers frequently experience objectification due to the visual and performative nature of the subculture (Martens & Zscheischler, 2022). CDA therefore enables this study to uncover how online narratives surrounding femininity and morality reinforce gender bias and normalize victim blaming.

Data Collection

The data were collected through the documentation of user comments on Indonesian digital platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, which play a significant role in shaping public discourse surrounding viral issues such as the murder case of Ai Kirishima (Alodat et al., 2023). Comments were purposively selected from posts explicitly discussing the case, with particular attention to narratives containing gender bias, victim blaming, or problematic assumptions toward female cosplayers. Purposive sampling in digital ethnography enables researchers to target discursive materials rich in ideological content (Mueller-Herbst et al., 2020). Only comments with substantial linguistic content and discursive relevance were included in the analysis. Achieving data saturation (Naeem et al., 2024) was essential to ensure that the collected data reflected both the diversity and consistency of public opinion.

Data Analysis and Thematic Coding

Thematic coding was employed to identify patterns in victim representation and event framing. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enables the identification of both latent and explicit meanings through the organization of recurring themes. Major themes, including the objectification of women's bodies, moral judgment, and the distortion of victimhood, were systematically identified. This method is effective in tracing how social narratives are constructed through language (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). For instance, some comments questioned the victim's morality based on her cosplay appearance or implied that the victim was partially responsible for the violence due to her online persona. These discursive tendencies were further analyzed using Fairclough's CDA framework. Textual analysis within CDA requires close attention to word choice, metaphors, and evaluative language that reflect ideological positions related to gender, power, and blame (Stokoe, 2006; Austin, 2010).

Social Context and Discursive Practice Analysis

At the level of discursive practice and social context, the analysis explores how user comments are simultaneously shaped by and contribute to dominant cultural narratives and

ideologies. Discourse cannot be separated from its socio-institutional context and continuously interacts with broader systems of meaning (Tenorio, 2011). In digital comment sections, this interaction is reflected through the reproduction of patriarchal values. Social media accelerates the circulation of gender-biased discourse, thereby reinforcing traditional power hierarchies (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Within cosplay communities, women frequently experience hypersexualization, moral judgment, and social surveillance. Digital culture further normalizes moral policing and victim blaming (Endendijk et al., 2019; Duman, 2023). By connecting individual expressions to broader systemic discursive patterns, this study highlights the importance of critical media literacy and gender awareness in challenging harmful narratives within online environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Digital narratives: Sensationalism, victimization, and tragic virality

Various patterns of comments reflect public perceptions of both the victim and the perpetrator, collected from digital spaces. The findings reveal victim blaming, the objectification of women’s bodies, and the rationalization of violence. Empathy toward the victim was less dominant. The researchers analyzed highly engaged posts from TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. The dynamics of digital discourse were heavily shaped by gender bias, particularly toward women who actively express themselves in communities such as cosplay.

Table 1

Classification of Case-Related Posts on TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram

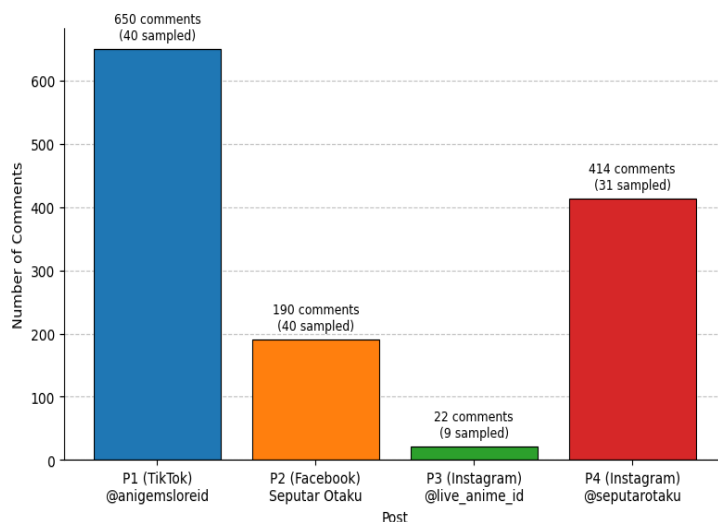
Gambar	Platform	Klasifikasi Narasi	Deskripsi Naratif
	TikTok (@anigemsl oreid)	Sensational mystery narratives based on visual evidence	Uses CCTV footage and video clips to construct a “real crime” and mystery impression. The narrative is highly dramatic, implicitly emphasizing violence while generating strong public curiosity through short, fast-paced, and emotionally charged video formats.
	Facebook (Seputar Otaku)	Sensational tragedy narratives with provocative framing	Employs capitalized headlines and hyperbolic language to emphasize the tragedy (“murdered by her boyfriend, mutilated”). The narrative is designed to provoke emotional reactions such as shock, sympathy, and anger, while reinforcing virality through explicit wording and striking imagery.
	Instagram (@live_anime_id)	Victim personalization narratives based on visual aesthetics	Highlights the victim’s cosplay visuals through feminine and aesthetically appealing framing. Although the tragedy is explicitly mentioned, the primary focus remains on the victim’s visual representation, which fosters emotional attachment and visual objectification.
	Instagram (Seputar Otaku)	Viral tragedy narratives with repetitive sensational framing	this narrative employs dramatic and clickbait-oriented structures. It emphasizes the murder, mutilation, and crime scene location to intensify shock value and stimulate high public engagement through emotional reactions.

Source: Processed by the researchers, 2025

Table 1 demonstrates that four posts from TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram reveal four distinct patterns of digital narratives. TikTok (@anigemsl oreid) presents a sensational

mystery narrative based on visual evidence, utilizing CCTV footage to construct a “real crime” impression. Facebook (Seputar Otaku) employs capitalized headlines and provocative hyperbolic language. Instagram (@live_anime_id) personalizes the victim through aesthetically framed cosplay visuals, potentially leading to objectification. Meanwhile, the Instagram account Seputar Otaku reproduces sensational framing through clickbait strategies to intensify shock value and generate high audience engagement.

Figure 1
Number of Comments



Source: Processed by the researchers, 2025

Figure 1 shows that the total number of comments collected up to July 3, 2024, reached 1,276. Among these, 120 comments were selected as the primary sample. The post with the highest level of engagement originated from TikTok (@anigemsloreid) with 650 comments, followed by Instagram (@seputarotaku) with 414 comments. Facebook (Seputar Otaku) contributed 190 comments, while Instagram (@live_anime_id) generated only 22 comments due to access limitations or limited posting duration. From each post, samples were proportionally selected: 40, 40, 9, and 31 comments, resulting in a total representative sample of 120 comments.

The findings reveal how social media constructs tragedy through sensationalism and gender bias. TikTok frames the case as a visual crime mystery that stimulates public curiosity, while Facebook uses hyperbolic language and capitalized headlines to intensify emotional shock. Instagram, meanwhile, personalizes the victim through cosplay aesthetics, shifting attention toward the objectification of women’s bodies rather than the injustice experienced by the victim. These recurring narrative patterns demonstrate how digital platforms prioritize virality over victim sensitivity. The dominance of sensational framing and aestheticized feminine imagery shapes ambiguous public responses: generating empathy on the one hand, yet simultaneously legitimizing violence through victim blaming on the other. These findings highlight the urgent need for critical digital literacy in responding to tragic narratives circulating online.

Gender bias: Victim blaming and objectification

Public responses in digital spaces demonstrate a lack of empathy toward victims of gender-based violence. Many comments instead blame the victim through judgments of her personal choices, appearance, and activities, while the perpetrator is justified on the basis of emotional distress. The victim’s body is also reduced to an object of physical evaluation. This

phenomenon reflects the normalization of victim blaming, the objectification of women, and the symbolic legitimization of gender-based violence within contemporary digital culture.

Figure 2

Distribution of Categories in Netizen Comments



Source: Processed by the researchers, 2025

Figure 2 shows that victim blaming emerged as the most dominant category, with 35 comments (29.2%). Empathy toward the victim followed with 32 comments (26.7%). The objectification of women's bodies accounted for 28 comments (23.3%), while the justification of the perpetrator represented the lowest category with 25 comments (20.8%). Sample comments revealed that online users blamed the victim's appearance or behavior, commented on her physical attractiveness, rationalized the perpetrator's actions as resulting from "emotional pain" or "psychological pressure," and expressed emotional grief. Cumulatively, narratives that tended to justify or legitimize violence accounted for 73.2% of the total comments.

Based on the findings, the study reveals systemic gender bias within digital discussions surrounding this case. Most comments tended to blame the victim by questioning her choices, accusing her of "taking advantage" of the perpetrator, or stigmatizing the cosplay community as a space of dangerous "daily drama." The objectification of the victim's body reduced her to mere physical attractiveness ("smooth skin," "very beautiful"), thereby diverting attention from the brutal violence she experienced. Meanwhile, the defense of the perpetrator rationalized the murder as a response to "emotional pain" or "suppressed jealousy," constructing a narrative that the victim deserved violence because she was perceived as "manipulative" or as causing "psychological pressure." Empathy toward the victim appeared only as a minority voice and was often intertwined with aesthetic comments or tragic irony comparing her to deceased anime characters. Overall, public discourse was dominated more by the legitimization of violence and objectification than by solidarity with the victim, confirming the urgent need for critical intervention against gender bias in digital spaces.

Gender bias in digital netizen comments

The phenomenon of public responses to cases of violence demonstrates the dominance of victim blaming and the justification of perpetrators. In numerous online comments, the victim was reduced through bodily and aesthetic narratives, while the

perpetrator was constructed as someone who had been provoked or driven by emotional motives. As a result, public empathy became marginalized. This condition reflects the systemic normalization of gender-based violence within digital spaces and reinforces social bias against victims in contemporary Indonesian digital discourse.

Table 3

Thematic Classification of Comments from an Academic Perspective

Theme	Description	Examples	Scholarly Perspective
Victim Blaming Comments	Comments that hold the victim responsible for the violence she experienced, shifting accountability away from the perpetrator.	- "Cosplayer drama? Killed, raped... that's everyday stuff."- "If you don't want to die horrifically, stay away from cosplayers."	Victim blaming reflects rape-myth acceptance, which justifies violence by blaming victims for their behavior or appearance (Peeters & Goetz, 2022; Adair & Senn, 2025). It remains a dominant narrative in digital discourse (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2024).
Objectification of Women's Bodies	Comments that reduce the victim to her physical attributes, ignoring her dignity and identity.	- "So pretty but into that blob of fat."- "What a pity... her skin was so smooth."	Objectification strips women of agency and constructs them as mere visual commodities, particularly in cosplay contexts (Leng, 2014). This legitimizes control and even violence against women.
Justifying the Perpetrator's Actions	Comments that defend or rationalize the perpetrator's violence by portraying him as emotionally wounded or manipulated.	- "He killed her out of heartbreak... maybe she was just using him."	Such comments reflect a reversal of the victim-perpetrator dynamic and normalize violence as a result of male emotional distress (Mannarini et al., 2023). This undermines justice by shifting sympathy toward the perpetrator.
Empathetic Responses	Comments that recognize the brutality of the crime and express sympathy for the victim as a human being.	- "So sad, the way she died was truly brutal."	Empathy can challenge toxic digital narratives and promote a survivor-centered discourse (Borah et al., 2023). However, such comments are still overshadowed by dominant victim-blaming and objectifying narratives.

Source: Processed by the researchers, 2025.

Table 3 demonstrates four major patterns of public comments. Victim blaming attributes responsibility for the violence to the victim, for instance by stigmatizing the cosplay community as a space of "daily drama." Body objectification reduces the victim to physical attributes such as "smooth skin." The justification of the perpetrator rationalizes violence as a response to "emotional pain" or alleged manipulation by the victim. Meanwhile, empathetic responses acknowledge the brutality of the crime and express sympathy toward the victim. From an academic perspective, victim blaming reflects the acceptance of rape myths, objectification legitimizes violence, perpetrator justification reverses the victim perpetrator dynamic, and empathy has the potential to challenge toxic digital narratives.

Based on the findings, the study reveals social constructions that support gender-based violence within digital spaces. Victim blaming emerged as the dominant narrative, justifying violence through the victim's behavior or appearance, reflecting the acceptance of myths suggesting that victims deserve violence. Body objectification, which is prevalent within cosplay communities, reduces women to visual commodities and indirectly legitimizes

control and violence over their bodies. The justification of perpetrators reverses the victim–perpetrator dynamic by normalizing violence as an expression of wounded male emotions, thereby shifting public sympathy toward the perpetrator. Although empathetic responses have the potential to foster victim-centered discourse, their quantity and visibility remain marginalized. Overall, the dominance of the first three narratives confirms that digital discourse reinforces gender bias rather than supporting justice for victims.

Discussion

This study concludes that netizen comments surrounding the Ai Kirishima case were dominated by three major patterns. First, social media platforms framed the tragedy in a sensational and gender-biased manner, prioritizing virality over sensitivity toward the victim and generating ambiguous empathy alongside victim blaming. Second, public comments were dominated by victim blaming, body objectification, and the justification of the perpetrator, while empathy toward the victim remained marginal. Third, digital discourse reproduced social constructions that legitimize gender-based violence by shifting sympathy from the victim to the perpetrator. Consequently, social media framed the tragedy sensationally, triggering victim blaming and objectification. Public discourse was largely dominated by the defense of the perpetrator, whereas empathetic responses toward the victim remained limited. Overall, digital discourse reproduced the legitimization of violence by redirecting public sympathy from the victim to the perpetrator.

These findings are highly relevant to the increasing prevalence of gender-based violence in digital spaces. Van der Bruggen and Grubb (2014) explain the significant rise of online violence against women, particularly within cosplay communities. Sensational media framing generates ambiguous empathy and victim blaming, while Santoniccolo et al. (2023) argue that online misogyny often serves as a gateway to physical violence. Women experience double pressure: they are expected to appear aesthetically attractive while simultaneously being subjected to moral surveillance, a condition that reinforces the findings regarding the dominance of body objectification and perpetrator justification (Rocha, 2013; Melea et al., 2019; Dekker, 2024). The Ai Kirishima case reflects the failure of digital culture to protect victims, as digital discourse instead shifts sympathy from the victim to the perpetrator (Gongane et al., 2022; Ert et al., 2024). This demonstrates that online spaces remain unsafe environments for women's expression.

From the perspective of Stuart Hall's Representation Theory (Omar, 2023), these findings demonstrate that meanings surrounding women are socially constructed through power-laden discourse. Sensational media framing triggers victim blaming, while netizen comments represent the victim as a passive object and the perpetrator as a subject whose actions can be understood, reflecting a hegemonic reading that reinforces patriarchal ideology (Suwana & Lily, 2017; Awasthi, 2017). The dominance of victim blaming and objectification is also reflected in Hall's encoding decoding model: aesthetically sensational posts encode ambivalent meanings, which are then decoded by audiences through dominant cultural codes that normalize objectification and perpetrator justification (Galizzi et al., 2024; Gqola et al., 2024). Digital spaces therefore function as arenas for the reproduction of gender ideology, reinforcing the third finding that digital discourse shifts sympathy from victims to perpetrators (Bevens et al., 2018; Ernanda, 2023).

This study demonstrates that the analysis of digital discourse should not be limited to measuring the quantity of comments, but must also examine the structures of meaning that shape public perception (Avelino, 2021; Al-Masri et al., 2023). Sensational framing that generates ambiguous empathy reinforces the arguments of Sullivan (2020) and Morales

(2023), who contend that seemingly trivial comments often reflect deeply embedded value systems. The dominance of victim blaming and perpetrator justification prevents empathy toward victims from emerging automatically, even in brutal cases, thereby revealing weak gender literacy (Gervais & Egan, 2017; Malekabadi & Baboli, 2022). Digital spaces therefore require cultural and educational interventions rather than merely technical solutions. The shift of sympathy from victims to perpetrators further demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary approaches involving media studies, gender studies, and sociology to uncover structural inequalities (Rodrigues, 2020; Mohamed, 2023).

These findings are consistent with the study by Peeters and Goetz (2022) on the acceptance of rape myths in online comments, as well as Gravelin et al. (2019) regarding the social tendency to evaluate women through their bodies. However, unlike Borah et al. (2023), who found that empathy can shift toxic narratives, this study demonstrates that empathy remains marginalized. The uniqueness of this research lies in its focus on female cosplayers, who, according to Leng (2014), are particularly vulnerable to objectification due to the visual culture of cosplay communities. Compared to Mannarini et al. (2023), who discussed the normalization of violence through male emotional narratives, this study further demonstrates how the justification of perpetrators successfully reverses the victim perpetrator dynamic. The novelty of this research lies at the intersection of digital media studies, feminism, and critical criminology, thereby addressing the limited scholarship on gender-based violence within cosplay communities in Southeast Asia.

Based on these findings, three practical recommendations are proposed. First, social media platforms should strengthen content moderation policies targeting comments that contain victim blaming and objectification, while also providing more responsive reporting mechanisms. Second, cosplay communities and digital literacy advocates should organize gender awareness and digital safety training for members, particularly women, to help them recognize and respond to narratives of symbolic violence. Third, governments and non-governmental organizations should promote media and gender education within school curricula and develop public campaigns addressing the dangers of online misogyny. Furthermore, researchers recommend that journalists and content creators avoid sensational framing that objectifies victims and instead prioritize survivor-centered narratives. These measures are expected to transform digital spaces from arenas of objectification into spaces of empowerment and gender justice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital discourse surrounding the Ai Kirishima case reproduces systemic gender bias through three major patterns. First, social media platforms frame the tragedy in sensational and aestheticized ways, prioritizing virality over sensitivity toward the victim, thereby generating ambiguity between empathy and victim blaming. Second, public comments are dominated by victim blaming, the objectification of women's bodies, and the justification of the perpetrator, while genuine empathy appears only as a minority voice. Third, digital discourse actively shifts public sympathy from the victim to the perpetrator by rationalizing violence as a response to "emotional pain" or psychological pressure. Critically, these findings demonstrate that digital spaces are not neutral but instead function as arenas for the reproduction of patriarchal ideology. The legitimization of gender-based violence is reinforced through everyday online language, while solidarity with victims becomes marginalized. This condition confirms that social media has yet to become a safe environment for women's expression, particularly within visual communities such as cosplay.

This study contributes to the enrichment of gender representation studies in digital discourse by integrating the perspectives of Stuart Hall's representation theory, media feminism, and critical criminology. The finding regarding the reversal of sympathy from the victim to the perpetrator offers a new conceptual understanding of how online discourse legitimizes violence through the rationalization of male emotions. Practically, this research highlights the urgent need for critical gender literacy among social media users, particularly within cosplay communities. Digital platforms are encouraged to revise their algorithms and moderation policies to reduce victim-blaming and objectifying content. Educational institutions and advocacy organizations may utilize these findings as training material for the early detection of online misogyny. Furthermore, journalists and content creators should adopt survivor-centered framing that avoids exploiting victims' aesthetics for the sake of virality.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample scope was limited to 120 comments drawn from four posts, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader digital discourses surrounding similar cases. Second, the focus on a single case (Ai Kirishima) limits cross-case comparisons involving gender-based violence within different cosplay communities. In addition, the analysis did not include interviews with commenters, thereby limiting the understanding of the subjective contexts underlying their statements. Future research is therefore recommended to expand the range of platforms examined, including Twitter, YouTube, and online forums, while also employing mixed-methods approaches such as surveys or focus group discussions. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian countries are also necessary to examine the influence of local cultures on patterns of victim blaming. Finally, experimental research on the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions could be designed to evaluate strategies for reducing gender bias in online spaces.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Syaqrah Karara Azzen: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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