

“Why The Media Often Gets Us Wrong?”: The Public Fantasies and Media’s Portrayal of Trans Women in Indonesia

Dinara Tsafina Asmarani¹ and Vania Pramudita Hanjani¹

¹Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275, Indonesia
dinara@students.undip.ac.id

Abstract. Reporting practices and the flow of information disseminated through mass media are inherently never one-directional looking from a sociocultural standpoint. Media plays a crucial role in re-projecting social narratives into a synthesis of notions to be more easily accepted by the public. Mediatized information is inextricably linked to how human thought is processed with their elaborations—which are expressed and articulated within societal dynamics—further clarifies that mass media also contributes in shaping the dynamics within the society itself. Henceforth, it is believed that the stigmatization and stereotypes against trans women in Indonesia are not solely driven by how the media portrayed them, but also by the deeply rooted public fantasies about gender norms. To examine how these affect trans women in Indonesia, a qualitative method was employed in this research with in-depth interviews and participant observations on several trans women in Semarang. A wider range of perspectives and perceptions were uncovered regarding the complexity between trans women and the mass media, along with the intrigues highlighting the ambiguity of freedom they possess. This research adopts Erving Goffman’s framing theory which highlights the existence of various schemes in how individuals perceive the world. Furthermore, Goffman’s theory intersects with how mass media reports the news, which can significantly have an impact on reconstructing social reality and creating a perceptual framework that is no longer multi-interpretive due to the framing of information. The findings indicate that without considering the characteristics of the depicted society, mass media cannot effectively convey its messages to achieve audience acceptance.

Keywords: Trans women, *Waria*, Stigmatization and Stereotyping,, Mass Media

1 Introduction

Social values represent the beliefs that are collectively embraced by society [1], and a society is considered well-balanced if the social values are consistently practiced by everyone. Therefore, norms and standards shape social dynamics serving as guidelines and boundaries that control one’s appearance and self-expression. Those complex backgrounds in the sociocultural dynamics are shaped by collective understanding of normalcy, highlighting that standards of what is considered normal and abnormal are not absolute, but socially constructed and often reshaped by the influence of mass media. In fact, what is highlighted and reported in the mass media represents the reality of a society’s dynamics through the journalists’ interpretation [2]. In this context, mass media is the primary channel in transmitting the information collected from the grassroots to broader audiences. Hence, it significantly plays a role in influencing

people's beliefs and cultural norms [2]. Furthermore, the presence of this cycle creates a situation where news in mass media acts like a rumor mill, potentially leading to the stigmatization and negative stereotyping against people who are seen as different or don't conform to what's considered normal.

Society is structured by power relations that create inequality, leading to the formation of opposing social groups and create a hierarchy where some dominant groups hold significant power and influence, while the marginalized face the disadvantages [3]. In this regard, *waria*¹—also used as an umbrella term for trans women in Indonesia [4]—represents such a marginalized group. The marginalization stems from societal norms that enforce conformity to heteronormative values, stigmatizing non-heteronormative gender expressions. Goffman's concept of 'passing' provides a framework to understand how individuals manage their stigmatized identities by controlling the impressions they project [5]. Thus, *waria* may adopt the strategies of passing to conform to societal norms, thereby minimizing further stigmatization.

Over the past few decades, biased portrayals of *waria* in mass media have shaped public perceptions. Moreover, these news reports of *waria* often rely on sensationalized narratives that reinforce harmful stereotypes and create social prejudice against them. This issue can be analyzed through Erving Goffman's framing analysis (1974), a theoretical approach to assist people in finding, understanding, identifying, and categorizing information that occurs in everyday life [6]. Using this theory, we will examine and identify the common media patterns used to frame the lives of *waria* in Indonesia and how these actions affect them in society.

2 Methods

This research applies a descriptive-analytical type of qualitative research with an ethnographic design. Furthermore, we use two primary methods to collect the data: participant observation with in-depth interviews with several *waria*'s representatives, and literature review that analyzes news from relevant mass media channels. The chosen informants represent *waria* in Semarang City and are purposely selected based on the specific criteria; thus, we employed purposive sampling, a technique in non-probability sampling. Also, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with informants that lasted 1-2 hours to provide flexible conversations related to the topics. In addition, an initial analysis for this research was conducted through a literature

¹Waria—based on the words *wanita-pria*—refers to individuals who are biologically identified as men but express themselves in a feminine manner [4].

review of news articles selected from various mass media based on their relevance to the research topic.

3 A Deep Dive Into Trans Women's Everyday Lives

3.1 "Am I Living the Right Way?"

Like birds in a cage, *waria*, as a marginalized group in society, have to live their lives under the shadow of rampant public fantasies, prejudice, and discrimination. For them to finally find the courage to express their true selves is a long journey filled with both anxiety and hope. Therefore, being outside the rigid gender norms eventually forces them to face the challenging process of seeking family acceptance through confessions, one crucial step towards expressing their true selves. Unfortunately, coming out to the family is not an easy one to deal with. The risk of rejection and ostracization are real possibilities, with only a small percentage of being accepted. Referring to these conditions, as seen in the experiences of Silvy and Tamara as our informants who faced very contradictory situations, indicates that the process can have a deep emotional impact on them and their families.

Heteronormativity, referred to here as a public fantasy, reflects society's idealization of binary gender and sexuality norms. These expectations are internalized through socio-cultural constructs, aligning with Žižek's interpretation of Kant's 'transcendental schematism,' where fantasy is beyond a desire in a hallucinatory way, but instead it teaches us how to desire [7]. Calling heteronormativity as a public fantasy captures how it oversimplifies into binary terms, with heterosexuality positioned as the norm, where it fulfills the prerequisites of 'fantasy' that are rooted in desire according to Žižek.

"For me, my Mother is the one who strengthens, comforts, and protects me. As for my Father, he is strict and stern. So, when I was young, he taught me that boys should be this way and that way, but my Mother saw that there were some things in me and didn't blame me for my behavior. She tended to blame herself because she really wanted a daughter when she was pregnant with me. When I was born male, she treated me like she would raise a daughter. She bought me girls' clothes and toys. On top of that, my older sisters helped her raise me, which eventually created emotional closeness." (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

"Since I was a kid, I've appeared feminine. I've been naturally gentle, enjoyed playing with girls' toys, and was a crybaby. However, my family didn't support this from the start, that's why they would immediately intervene if their child showed signs of being '*boti*'². Because if their child turns out to be a *boti*, it's going to be dangerous for them. But my family wasn't overly aware of *boti* in the media, simply because they didn't support it because the religious norms I

²Boti is a derogatory term for gay or trans women, referring to someone at the bottom of a sex position.

follow are very strict, I'm a Muslim ... Ideally, shouldn't families embrace their children? After all, no one chooses to be born this way. We never choose our gender or our family. Even now, my family isn't accepting." (Tamara, June 1, 2024).

Furthermore, the families' response becomes one factor that significantly affects their future lives. In this case, Tamara's rejection became a substantial reason for her to leave home and work on the streets to survive. On the other hand, Silvy is more socially active and involved as one of the managers of a *waria's* foundation in Semarang named PERWARIS Satu Hati.

"I used to secretly perform as a *waria* street performer, then I gave the earnings to my parents without them knowing where the money came from. They used it for shopping, household expenses, and my siblings' allowances. I've always helped them in every situation since then. Even when I fell, I still helped them, but they didn't want to acknowledge or accept me. That's why I decided to leave home. I was away for about 10-15 years and recently decided to return home. Back then, I never came back because I was never accepted. I became unwilling to face them. However, when I return, I always give them money. But they never thank me; they stay silent. They just take it without looking at me; they just want the money." (Tamara, June 1, 2024).

"My parents, especially my Mother, told me to be a good *waria* and not trouble others. In other words, I have to avoid negative actions and criminal behavior that would disgrace my family name and instead, if possible, bring pride to the family. That's what I held onto; then, I focused on working. I didn't engage in considered taboo activities in society, so I kept myself away. Usually, after I worked, I would come straight home and avoid socializing in the neighborhood, aiming to avoid anything that could bring negative perceptions. After gaining achievements through my work, I finally tried to open up and socialize in community activities because I had accomplishments to be proud of. Eventually, I became more accepted in society once I had established my values." (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

The diverse journeys experienced by both informants indicate that their experiences are not a standard that can depict and represent all trans women, even though they are in the same city. Family backgrounds, media influences and exposure, and different perspectives on trans women-related information are some of the determinant factors that significantly perpetuate stigma and stereotypes toward trans women.

3.2 Society's Prejudices and The Media's Take

Social acceptance of gender expression beyond heteronormativity remains a global goal but varies by geographical, historical, and cultural factors. In Indonesia, the belief in a strict male-masculine and female-feminine dichotomy limits acceptance of non-binary identities [8], emphasizes that safe spaces for those who are non-binary in Indonesia

are still minimal. The kinship of shame, as Davies describes, acts as powerful social control, regulating sexuality and gender expressions according societal norms [9]. As a result, gender expressions outside heteronormativity are often viewed as abnormal behavior outside the norms.

Widespread adherence to heteronormativity perpetuates negative stigma and stereotypes against *waria*, often without understanding their actual background. This is further propagated by the mass media, as the news presented reflects societal realities interpreted by journalists [2]. Unfortunately, in Indonesia, mass media often does not side with marginalized groups like *waria*. Instead, they tend to highlight sensational and controversial aspects as part of their selling points. But in sharp contrast, mass media in the United States often embraces and side with marginalized groups, due to the influence of movements that voice their rights, including LGBTQ+. The dichotomy underlines that what the media represents is closely related to the dynamics of society, rather than functioning as a neutral entity.

“The stereotype in society is that *warias* are sensitive, have anger issues, are emotional, and aggressive. To be short, if you touch them, they will chase and hit you. That is how they are stereotyping us. I mean, the media also plays a role in this portrayal. A few years ago, they tended to discriminate against us. We don’t expect much for now, but if there is positive news about us, it should be reported as well. It shouldn’t just be about crime or negative news, but also the positive stories. There are many headlines about *waria* criminals, murderers, or carrying scissors. However, many cases of us being persecuted get overshadowed because those sensational headlines focus on the negative aspects.” (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

“When I was a kid, I was scared of *waria* before I became one myself. Back then, if there were groups of *waria* street performers near my place, they were often shunned. They would sometimes throw stones, which made people scared. Moreover, *waria* in the past wore heavy makeup and had noticeable nose injections, which was intimidating. Their faces seemed harsh and scary. Most *waria*, especially before the 1980s, worked in the streets for prostitutes, and to protect themselves from aggressive men, they carried a knife. They were indeed cruel and violent. It’s true, they were mean. They had to be tough because of the times and living on the streets.” (Tamara, June 1, 2024).

In recent times, biased terms have often been found in headlines of mass media articles featuring *waria*. For example, headlines like “Cegat Mobil dan Motor, Waria Ini Bikin Macet Jalanan” (Stopping Cars and Motorcycles, This Waria Causes Traffic Jams)³, “Batalkan Pesanan PSK, Seorang Pria di Kendari Dianiaya Waria, Uangnya Juga Dicuri” (Canceling a Sex Worker Order, A Man in Kendari is Beaten by a Transgender

³Sumiyati, Cegat Mobil dan Motor, Waria Ini Bikin Macet Jalanan ([Cegat Mobil dan Motor, Waria Ini Bikin Macet Jalanan \(viva.co.id\)](https://www.viva.co.id)).

Person, and His Money is Also Stolen)⁴, “Kronologi Waria Bekasi Bunuh Pria Korban Kecelakaan gegara Mirip ‘Tamur’” (Chronology of a Waria in Bekasi Killing a Male Accident Victim Because He Resembled a ‘Customer’)⁵, “7 Transformasi Aby Respati Usai Tobat Jadi Waria, Sah Nikahi Kekasih” (7 Transformations of Aby Respati After Repenting as a Waria, Legally Marries His Lover)⁶, dan “Betulan Tobat, Waria yang Nonton Siksa Neraka Ini Sekarang Tampil dengan Sarung dan Peci” (Truly Repented, This Transgender Person Who Watched Hellfire Torment Now Appears in Sarung and Peci)⁷ are frequently seen in various mass media channels. These titles, filled with elements of crime, moral crisis, and distance from God, not only reflect the societal reality in Indonesia, where heteronormativity is strongly upheld, but also create public perceptions toward *waria*.

Living under rejection and social isolation severely limits their access to education and formal employment. Discrimination often prevents them from completing education and competing in formal sector jobs, stifling their potential. Despite the complexity of societal inclusivity in Indonesia, the media rarely addresses these issues. Consequently, this problem usually receives little public attention while it needs more practical efforts to address it.

“*Waria* works in the informal job sector because we are not accepted in formal sectors. Even at school, we face rejection and a lot of bullying too. From elementary school to junior high, we receive unfair treatment and persecution, both verbally and non-verbally. Many of us dropped out or stopped attending school, so we didn’t get a diploma. Without a diploma, we can’t find formal sector jobs. Eventually, we are forced or compelled to work in the informal sector, where we feel we can be accepted. Places like salons don’t require a diploma, and neither does entertainment. Despite most of us excelling in school and being capable of completing education, this is our reality to face.” (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

The negative framing of *waria* by the media shapes public perception, as mass media shapes public image through subjective interpretation of social realities aligned with cultural expressions and biases within their society [2]. Through Goffman’s concept of framing to construct situations based on subjective engagement of individuals [6], mass media constructs reality by presenting narratives that society accepts as truth. This is because what is portrayed in mass media is a framed social reality highlighted to be

⁴Pati, K. A., Rusiana, D. A., Batalkan Pesanan PSK, Seorang Pria di Kendari Dianiaya Waria, Uangnya Juga Dicuri ([Batalkan Pesanan PSK, Seorang Pria di Kendari Dianiaya Waria, Uangnya Juga Dicuri \(kompas.com\)](#)).

⁵Mahendra, R. A., Kronologi Waria Bekasi Bunuh Pria Korban Kecelakaan gegara Mirip ‘Tamur’ ([Kronologi Waria Bekasi Bunuh Pria Korban Kecelakaan gegara Mirip ‘Tamur’ \(detik.com\)](#)).

⁶Hasan, I., 7 Transformasi Aby Respati Usai Tobat Jadi Waria, Sah Nikahi Kekasih ([7 Transformasi Aby Respati Usai Tobat Jadi Waria, Sah Nikahi Kekasih - Hot Liputan6.com](#)).

⁷Rahmawati, Y., Betulan Tobat, Waria yang Nonton Siksa Neraka Ini Sekarang Tampil dengan Sarung dan Peci ([Betulan Tobat, Waria yang Nonton Siksa Neraka Ini Sekarang Tampil dengan Sarung dan Peci \(suara.com\)](#)).

more acceptable to the public [10]. Framing analysis suggests that published news curates and filters facts through storytelling frameworks before being presented to the public. As a result, the media's portrayal of *waria* reinforces public prejudice and further restricts their freedom of expression in the public sphere.

4 Conclusion

As a widely accessible platform for public communication, mass media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of *waria*. Moreover, the framing of news reported by the media has the potential to reinforce and perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigma, which can manifest as forms of discrimination in the public sphere. In this writing, informants' experiences serve as a gauge that family and community responses can be influenced by the media exposure they consume. Goffman's framing analysis theory is vividly realized in this issue, as these events can be understood through the media's way of choosing to represent social reality using biased and negative terms can create the public fantasies and prejudices that affect their perspectives on gender expression.

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