

# Gender Exploitation in the Entertainment Industry: A Sociological Analysis of Digital Media

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**ABSTRACT.** The exploitation of women in the entertainment industry is a complex issue that is often hidden behind popular narratives. Meanwhile, the circus context, particularly in Indonesia, still receives minimal academic attention. This study aims to understand how podcasts frame narratives about violence and gender inequality in entertainment work. Using a qualitative approach and thematic content analysis, the unit of analysis includes episodes of Deddy Corbuzier's podcast on YouTube that discuss women's experiences in the circus industry. The primary data consists of podcast transcripts, while the secondary data comes from literature related to gender exploitation in the entertainment sector. Referring to George Simmel's theory of social structure, the results show that exploitation is systemic, covering physical and psychological aspects, and is legitimised by unequal power relations. Podcasts provide an alternative space for victims, although patriarchal public responses limit social transformation. This study emphasises the importance of synergy between the media, law, and society in strengthening the protection of women.

**Keywords:** *Gender Exploitation, Entertainment Industry, Sociology, Social Media*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has had a significant influence on global life. The ease of access to digital media does open up space for public participation, but it also poses serious challenges, especially related to user privacy and security (Biru & Arifin, 2025). One of the most prominent impacts is the increasing spread of non-consensual sexual content, which mostly involves women, causing psychological trauma while reinforcing the social stigma against them (Rizka et al., 2025). In Indonesia, women have taken an active role in various fields, ranging from politics and activism to the professional world. However, this participation goes hand in hand with vulnerability to exploitation, both in the physical and digital spaces (Wahyuni et al., 2023). This phenomenon confirms the contradiction: women appear as empowered actors, but are still placed as objects of exploitation in a system that is still full of patriarchal biases (Israwati & Hanalir, 2023). This practice is reflected in the entertainment industry, advertising, and human trafficking cases that continue to increase globally, including in Indonesia and the United States (Frix, 2023; Hendra et al., n.d.; Kurniadi & Qomarudin, 2022).

The latest data shows that the exploitation of women is increasingly widespread in the digital space. SAFEnet recorded 480 cases of Online Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in the first quarter of 2024, with the most victims coming from the 18–25 year old age group (57%) (*Collaborating with a number of parties, the Ministry of PPPA encourages joint action to protect women and children from violence in the online realm*, n.d.). These cases show that digitalization not only expands access to

information but also becomes a new medium for gender-based violence (*Africa in the Eyes of Indonesian Youth*, n.d.). Along with that, digital media also serves as a means of expression and resistance, opening up space for victims to voice their experiences and build public solidarity (Hendra et al., n.d.; Wahyu, 2020; Zuhri & Fadil, 2024). It is in this context that the relevance of George Simmel's theory becomes important. Simmel emphasized that social structures are formed through patterns of interaction that are constantly reproduced, so that power relations and gender inequality are not only formally institutionalized, but also present in daily interactions, including in the digital space (Suhaili et al., 2024). The theory of social structure and social interaction that he developed explains that social interaction is the foundation of shaping society, where power relations are continuously negotiated in the dynamics of daily life. The concept of dyad and Simmel's triad is also relevant to reading the victim–perpetrator–media relationship, where the presence of third parties (digital media) changes the pattern of interaction and opens up new representation spaces for women's experiences (Musso, 2020). Moreover, Simmel's idea of modernity, which presents a contradiction between individual freedom and social attachment, may explain why women, despite appearing as active actors in public spaces, remain entangled in exploitative structures. This approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how women's exploitation is interpreted, negotiated, and publicized through digital media, particularly when their narratives are mediated by popular platforms such as podcasts (Risnanda, 2023).

In order to understand how the exploitation of women in the circus industry is mediated and revealed through digital media, this study uses Georg Simmel's sociological approach, especially the theory of social structure and social interaction. (Ely Zulaikha, 2024). So far, studies on the exploitation of women have focused mostly on psychological impacts, legal aspects, or visual representations (Jailani & Fatikh, 2026). However, there is still a lack of research that highlights this problem from a sociological perspective, particularly using Simmel's theoretical framework. In addition, there have been no studies that specifically address how digital media, such as podcasts, frame narratives of exploitation in the entertainment industry. Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze how the exploitation of women in the circus industry is revealed through digital media, especially Deddy Corbuzier's podcast. With the framework of Simmel's theory of social structure and social interaction, this study seeks to understand how digital media mediates public awareness of the exploitation of women and drives transformation towards a more just and equal social structure.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical discourse analysis method to uncover the construction of narratives of women's exploitation in the circus industry through digital media. The analysis unit of this research is a discourse formed in podcast conversations, with a focus on how language structures reflect power relations and gender inequality. The subject of the research is an episode of Deddy Corbuzier's podcast titled "*There is a Secret Bunker!! Our Place In 'Gituin'!! 60 Children Since Childhood!! Circus Oci Taman Safari*", which was published on YouTube on April 18, 2025. The selection of this episode was based on purposive sampling considerations because the episode contained testimony about exploitative practices in Oriental Circus Indonesia (OCI), as well as being one of the popular shows that triggered a wide public discussion. Thus, although this

study is neither comparative nor longitudinal, focusing on a single episode is considered adequate to uncover the discursive representation of women's exploitation in the digital space.

Identify the data in the form of a verbatim-derived transcript of the podcast conversation. Observation of the narrative by marking the patterns of representation, actors, and power relations displayed. Critical content analysis emphasizing language structure, subject position, and social implications. To maintain validity and reliability, data triangulation was carried out through: (a) comparison of podcast content with online media reports about OCI cases, (b) *peer debriefing* to test the consistency of findings, and (c) researcher reflexivity in recording interpretive biases. The main instrument of this research is a theory-based thematic observation and recording sheet, with the help of NVivo 14 software for the coding process, theme categorization, and discourse pattern tracing. The analysis was carried out using George Simmel's theoretical framework of social structure and social interaction to map the power relationship between circus management, women workers, and digital media. Epistemologically, this research is based on a paradigm of critical interpretivism that views social reality as the result of interaction constructions, but remains tied to a larger power structure. This position allows the research to not only describe the discourse but also to uncover the ideological dimension behind the representation of gender exploitation in digital media.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

This study found that cases of exploitation of women in Oriental Circus Indonesia (OCI) show the complex, layered, and ongoing reality of violence in various dimensions of workers' lives. From the testimonies of the victims that appeared in the digital public space, it is clear that women's bodies are reduced to mere entertainment tools that are completely controlled by management. They are forced to work in extreme conditions, facing physical violence, sexual harassment, and cruel punishment when they try to fight back. This situation signifies the loss of women's sovereignty over their own bodies, and their bodies are treated as commodities that are displayed as well as fully controlled. The exploitation experienced does not stop at the physical aspect, but seeps into the psychological realm. The victim shows deep trauma in the form of fear, loss of confidence, and long-term mental suffering. The pressure to keep working despite being sick or injured illustrates how powerful the threat looms over them. This condition shows that the exploitation of women not only damages the body but also eats away at the soul, leaving wounds that are difficult to heal (Safi'i et al., 2025).

In addition, exploitation is also rooted in unequal social and economic structures. Female workers receive the minimum wage, have no access to legal protection, and are trapped in situations with no realistic option to leave. Economic pressures and cultural norms make it difficult for them to break free from the circle of exploitation. Thus, this case not only shows individual problems but also reveals the existence of a system that normalizes injustice against women in the entertainment sector. Behind this dark reality, the podcast that raises the case of OCI shows the role of digital media as an important space to lift the veil on the hidden reality. The presence of digital media allows victims to speak directly in front of the public and get wider attention. This case shows that digital media not only functions as a means of entertainment, but also has the

capacity as an advocacy instrument that can encourage social attention and even follow-up from related institutions.

However, digital media also shows ambivalence. Even though it provides space for victims to speak, digital platforms actually give rise to nuanced comments blaming the victim. This phenomenon shows that the digital space is not completely neutral. It can be an arena of resistance as well as an arena for the reproduction of symbolic violence, where gender stereotypes and degrading views of women remain widely held. Furthermore, this study found that the pattern of unequal power relations between management and workers is clearly reflected in the case of OCI. Management occupies a dominant position with full control over the lives of workers, while female workers lose space to negotiate their rights. The social relations that are built are dominative, threatening, and close opportunities for workers to fight for their dignity and well-being. This pattern does not just take place in real workspaces, but it also continues in the digital space through public comments that demean the victim. The exploitation cases at the OCI also reveal the failure of the legal and social system to provide adequate protection for women. The lack of regulation, weak supervision, and the absence of legal protection make women more vulnerable to exploitative practices. The demands of the victims are not only related to the restoration of personal rights, but also contain a collective meaning as a struggle against oppressive social structures (Talukdar et al., 2026).

The findings of this study confirm that social change is urgently needed to prevent the recurrence of similar cases. These changes include updating regulations that better protect women workers, strengthening supervisory mechanisms in the entertainment industry, and transforming the public perspective so that women are no longer placed as mere objects of entertainment but as subjects who have full rights, dignity, and sovereignty. Despite its ambivalence, digital media still has great potential to drive social transformation. If directed critically, the media can be a space for education and advocacy that amplifies victims' voices, raises public awareness, and builds social solidarity. However, this requires collective awareness from the public, the government, and the entertainment industry so that they do not get caught up in sensational consumption, but rather make cases like OCI a real momentum for change. Ultimately, the exploitation of women can only be suppressed if women in the entertainment industry are seen not as "performance assets" but as human beings who have equal rights and dignity.

## **Discussion**

An analysis of Deddy Corbuzier's podcast on the case of Oriental Circus Indonesia (OCI) shows that female workers experience exploitation that includes physical, psychological, and symbolic aspects, where their bodies are reduced to entertainment tools so that they lose control of time, space, and identity (Deddy Corbuzier, 2025). This phenomenon, if read through Georg Simmel's theory, is a reflection of the unequal social relations between management and workers, with a social structure that places women in subordinate positions (Masudi, 2015). The presence of this podcast also shows the function of digital media as an important space to unveil hidden reality, as well as remind the public that the exploitation of women is still ongoing, even in the entertainment industry, which is considered to be the world of art (Mustaqim et al., 2024).

The case of Oriental Circus Indonesia (OCI), which was revealed through Deddy Corbuzier's podcast, is one example of the exploitation of women in the entertainment sector that is often hidden from the public. From the testimony of victims, such as Butet and Vivi, it is clear that the exploitation took place in various interrelated forms. First, body control can be seen from coercion to work in extreme conditions, including physical violence, sexual harassment, and even punishment in the form of beatings, arranging, and electrocution when trying to resist. Women's bodies are reduced to entertainment tools that are shown while being fully controlled by management (Deddy Corbuzier, 2025). Second, psychological trauma is a long-term consequence of this violence. The fear, loss of confidence, and mental suffering experienced by the victim show that the exploitation does not stop at the physical level, but also touches on a deeper psychological aspect (Fauziah & Nurwahidin, 2022). Many victims continue to work despite being sick or injured due to the looming threat of punishment. Third, exploitation is also linked to structural injustice. Female performers receive minimal wages, have no access to legal protection, and have no realistic exit options because they are trapped by economic pressures and cultural norms (Israwati & Hanalir, 2023; Sari & Rusliawati, 2023). This condition shows that the exploitation of women does not stand alone, but is closely linked to the weakened patriarchal system in the entertainment industry. Women's bodies and identities are placed as commodities that can be exchanged for the benefit of management (Hendra et al., n.d.).

Deddy Corbuzier's podcast acts as a digital space that allows victims to speak directly to the public. The YouTube platform, for example, provides affordance in the form of wide accessibility, speed of spread, and potential virality that has made OCI's case receive national attention (Deddy Corbuzier, 2025; Evangeline, 2024). In this way, digital media is not only a means of entertainment but also an advocacy instrument that paves the way for institutions such as Komnas HAM to follow up on cases (Julianti et al., 2023; Roos et al., 2024). Thus, digital media also present ambivalence. Interactivity, which is its advantage, actually gives rise to nuanced comments *victim-blaming*, where the victim is held responsible for his or her suffering (Zuhri & Fadil, 2024). This situation shows that the affordance of the media is not neutral: it can be a space of resistance as well as a space for the reproduction of symbolic violence. Criticism of the digitalization phenomenon needs to be directed at how violent narratives are produced and consumed. On the one hand, digital platforms provide an alternative space for victims to voice their experiences; On the other hand, algorithmic logic and media culture often highlight the sensation of suffering rather than the structural substance behind exploitation. As a result, violent cases can easily become viral public consumption, but they are difficult to translate into concrete social change.

To understand the case of OCI more deeply, Georg Simmel's theory of social structure and social interaction is relevant to use. According to Simmel, social structures are formed from repetitive interactions that then create a pattern of power relations (Dr. Alfien, 2024). In the context of OCI, the social structure shows hierarchical inequalities: management is in a dominant position that controls all aspects of workers' lives, while workers, especially women, have no room to negotiate (Dakhi, 2022; Sunarto, 2005). This power relationship is not only in the form of an unequal employment contract, but is also reflected in daily interaction patterns. According to Simmel's theory of social interaction, the relationship built between management and workers is dominative, with a relationship character full of threats and punishments. This makes women workers lose the capacity to negotiate their rights (RAHO, 2021). Furthermore, digital interactions can also be read through the Simmel framework. Social media creates new spaces for interaction,

but continues existing patterns of inequality. Sexist or ridiculous comments towards victims suggest that gender stereotypes are widely reproduced in the digital space (Revelation, 2020). Thus, both in real and virtual space, unequal power relations that are detrimental to women continue to operate (Israwati & Hanalir, 2023; Zahid et al., 2023).

Cases of exploitation in the OCI reflect the failure of the legal and social system to protect women (Prihantini et al., 2024). Therefore, the demands for justice from victims are not only about personal compensation but also part of women's collective struggle against oppressive social structures (Steven et al., 2024). The expected social changes include: (1) updating legal regulations that better protect women workers, (2) strengthening the supervision mechanism of the entertainment industry, and (3) public education to change the perspective of women from objects of consumption to subjects with equal rights (Pearson, 2023). Digital media, although problematic, can still be used to support this social transformation. If directed appropriately, digital platforms can serve as an education and advocacy space that strengthens victims' voices, raises public awareness, and builds social solidarity (Amelia & Rohimi, 2024). However, this requires critical awareness from media users so that not trapped in sensational consumption, but rather move towards real advocacy. Social transformation can only be achieved through collaboration between government, civil society, the media, and the entertainment industry. Women in the entertainment industry need to be seen not as "performance assets" but as human beings who have rights and dignity. That way, the exploitation of women can be suppressed, and the entertainment industry truly becomes an art space, not a space of covert violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research contributes scientifically by showing that the exploitation of women in the circus industry, as represented through Deddy Corbuzier's podcast, can be understood from George Simmel's perspective as a reflection of unequal social structures and unequal power interactions. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration of the analysis of digital media representation with the theory of social structure and social interaction, thus enriching the study of media sociology and gender. In practice, these findings confirm the importance of digital media not only as an alternative narrative space but also as an instrument of advocacy and empowerment for victims. Rather, the challenges of victim-blaming and cultural resistance underscore the need for a critical approach in utilizing digital platforms.

The implications of this study highlight the need for the involvement of the state, the entertainment industry, and civil society in building a more robust legal protection system while developing digital literacy based on gender equality. For the next direction of research, cross-industry exploration (e.g. film, music, or advertising) is suggested to test whether similar patterns of exploitation also emerge, as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of digital education policies and programs aimed at minimizing the exploitation of women in both public and digital spaces.

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