



Language Framing of Corruption Offenders as Victims: An Analysis of Indonesian Media Coverage

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Abstract. This study investigates how Indonesian media portray corruptors as victims of their circumstances in reporting corruption cases. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach along with framing analysis, the research analyzed 800 online news articles about corruption published by national media between 2021 and 2025. The findings reveal four predominant patterns of framing. First, the victimhood narrative highlights the emotional and psychological distress of the perpetrators, encompassing factors such as illness, familial pressure, and political coercion. Second, the use of sympathetic language, including terms like "forced," "trapped," and "pressured," serves to mitigate the perpetrators' guilt. Third, the humanization of corruptors is evident through coverage focusing on their personal lives, emotional breakdowns in court, and family struggles. Ultimately, the narrative reframing of corruption portrays it as a consequence of systemic weaknesses or external pressures, rather than a deliberate criminal act. The novelty of this study lies in its fo-cused examination of how corruptors are linguistically recharacterized from criminals to victims within media texts. These findings have significant im-plications; academically, they contribute to the discourse on media represen-tation and corruption in Indonesia, and practically, they call for enhanced media literacy and journalistic accountability to prevent the normalization of corrupt practices through the use of victim narratives.

Keywords: Corruption, Language Framing, Discourse Analysis, Diction Choice, Media.

1 Introduction

Corruption is a significant issue in many countries, including Indonesia, and it has a direct impact on public welfare. Almost every year, the public is confronted with news stories about state officials, politicians, and businesspeople involved in corruption cases, resulting in substantial financial losses [17, 14, 20, 2,9].

Although law enforcement agencies, such as the Corruption Eradication Commission and the Attorney General's Office, have made considerable efforts to prosecute offenders, corruption persists, causing systemic issues for democracy, development, and public trust in government institutions. In this context, the mass media plays a vital

role, not only as a source of information but also as a significant actor in shaping public perceptions of corruption and the individuals involved.

Media coverage has the power to shape social reality, as the public often learns about corruption issues through media narratives. The choice of words, the structure of the text, and the perspectives emphasized in news reports can influence how audiences perceive the perpetrators of corruption [5, 3, 15]. The media can depict perpetrators as criminals who harm the public, but they may also frame them as victims of a system that pressures them to act in certain ways. Thus, the media not only reflect reality but also con-structs it through linguistic and discursive strategies [8, 21].

An interesting phenomenon in news reporting is the tendency of some media outlets to portray perpetrators as victims of circumstance [10, 6]. This narrative often emphasizes the emotional aspects of the perpetrators, such as declining health, the psychological burden of public scrutiny, and political or bureaucratic pressures that lead them to feel they have no other choice. Consequently, in the coverage of corruption cases, what should be viewed as a serious crime is sometimes overshadowed by a narrative that emphasizes its humanitarian aspects. This framing creates ambivalence: while the public is presented with the facts of the crime, they are also encouraged to sympathize with the perpetrator.

The practice of framing individuals as victims is certainly not neutral and carries serious implications. This type of framing can generate public empathy for the perpetrator, inadvertently reducing condemnation of the corruption itself. Moreover, the public may become apathetic, viewing corruption not as a serious crime but as a narrative that can be discussed and negotiated through language. An excessive focus on the perpetrator's personal circumstances can also undermine the anti-corruption agenda, presenting the perpetrator not as a criminal but as someone who has suffered or been victimized by external factors. Previous studies have addressed the media framing of corruption issues, including the politicization of cases, the use of state loss figures to create a shock effect, and the representation of corruption in legal discourse [16, 3, 13, 23]. However, research specifically examining how the media portrays the narrative of the perpetrator as a victim of circumstances is still limited. This aspect is critical because it highlights how criminal identities can be obscured through linguistic strategies.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on uncovering reframing practices that shift the perception of the perpetrator from a criminal to a victim, thus providing a new perspective in the study of corruption discourse. In addition to its thematic innovation, this research employs methodological novelty through discourse analysis. This approach enables researchers to analyze media texts in greater depth, revealing the power relations embedded in language and uncovering the underlying ideologies present in news reports. Consequently, this research not only describes language strategies but also connects them to broader social and political structures. This work makes a significant contribution to the fields of media studies, political communication, and the study of corruption in Indonesia.

The findings underscore the urgency and implications of this research. For academics, it emphasizes the importance of viewing corruption not merely as a legal issue but as a battleground for discursive contestation. For media practitioners, it serves as a critical reminder to ensure that corruption reporting does not perpetuate narratives that

mitigate the perpetrator's responsibility. Meanwhile, for policymakers, it highlights the need to promote public media literacy and encourage a more critical approach to reading news reports. Ultimately, this research enhances our understanding of how media language can either strengthen or undermine anti-corruption efforts, an essential consideration for the future of democracy and justice in Indonesia.

2 Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach utilizing a media text framing analysis method. The research focuses on how news texts construct specific meanings about perpetrators of corruption, particularly through word choice, narrative, and storytelling strategies that position these perpetrators as victims of their circumstances. Framing analysis was selected because it is effective in revealing the meanings embedded within the text without requiring a deep examination of aspects of discourse production or media ideology. The research data consists of 800 news stories about corruption cases published by national and local online media in Indonesia over the period from 2021 to 2025. This timeframe was chosen to ensure that the data reflects current news reporting dynamics while being sufficiently lengthy to identify consistent patterns. The news stories, which serve as the research data, were collected through a search of online media archives using keywords such as "corruption," "corruption trial," "plea," "corruption defendant," "corruption verdict," and various other relevant terms. Several criteria were established for selecting research data: (a) the news must explicitly mention the perpetrator or defendant of corruption, (b) the news must include direct quotes from the perpetrator's self-defense or narratives with a sympathetic tone, and (c) the news should present personal aspects of the perpetrator, such as family, health, or emotions. From the initial pool of 800 news stories, texts were selected for further analysis based on these criteria.

The analysis utilized a framing framework, dividing the text structure into four analytical tools: 1) Syntax, which examines how the news is structured, who is quoted, and the order of information presented; 2) Script, which investigates how the storyline of a corruption case is framed whether it emphasizes the criminal aspect or the perpetrator's suffering; 3) Thematic, which analyzes the developed themes, such as victimhood, humanization, or narratives of compulsion; and 4) Rhetoric, which explores word choice, language style, and sympathetic diction, including terms like "forced," "trapped," or "having no choice." To ensure data validity, the study employed source triangulation by using news from various national media outlets and maintaining an audit trail of the analysis. Validity was further enhanced through peer discussions to reduce subjective researcher bias. The study's results describe media framing patterns in reporting corruption cases, specifically how perpetrators are portrayed as victims of circumstance. The research findings will highlight variations in the narratives and diction used by the media and their implications for public understanding of corruption.

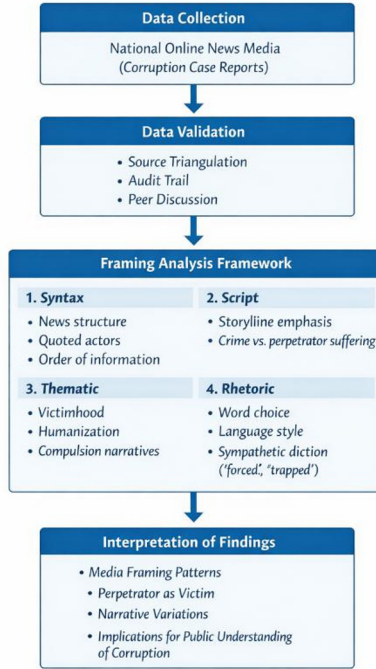


Fig. 1. Framing Analysis Process

3 Finding and Discussion

An analysis of 800 corruption news stories published by national and local online media in Indonesia between 2021 and 2025 reveals that reporting not only conveys legal facts but also constructs a particular narrative around the perpetrators. The media frequently employs linguistic strategies and text structures that reposition the perpetrator from being viewed as a state criminal to a figure deserving of understanding, or even sympathy. Through the process of coding and interpreting these texts, four prominent framing patterns were identified in media narratives: the prevalence of victimhood narratives, the use of sympathetic language, the humanization of perpetrators, and the narrative reframing of corruption. These patterns illustrate how the meaning of corruption is reconstituted in media texts, opening avenues for further analysis of its ramifications on public perception.

3.1 The Prevalence of Victimhood Narratives

Media coverage of corruption cases often depicts perpetrators as victims rather than individuals committing serious crimes. This narrative is conveyed through an emphasis on deteriorating health conditions, familial pressures stemming from public scrutiny, and political burdens perceived to compel certain decisions. By framing perpetrators as

oppressed, the media diverts attention from both the legal implications and state losses, focusing instead on the emotional facets of the individual. This portrayal presents the perpetrator more as a victim of the system than as a responsible actor. The following excerpts from news stories illustrate the dominance of the victimhood narrative:

“Perkara yang ia hadapi selama hampir 9 bulan tersebut membuatnya paham bagaimana karut-marutnya sistem penegakan hukum di Indonesia” (The case he faced for nearly nine months made him understand the chaos of Indonesia's law enforcement system)

“Dalam nota pembelaan (pledoi) pribadinya, dia mengaku terjebak dalam ‘permainan hukum’ yang melibatkan aparat penegak hukum” (In his personal defense (plea), he admitted to being caught in a 'legal game' involving law enforcement officials)

“Dihadapan majelis hakim, saya merasa orang yang paling terzalimi” (In front of the panel of judges, I felt like the most wronged person.)

These three narratives exemplify what can be termed "Dominant Victimhood Narratives," as they portray the perpetrator of corruption as a victim rather than the individual accountable for the crime. The first narrative frames the defendant's experience as a "bitter lesson" stemming from a chaotic legal system, suggesting he is merely a casualty of structural failures. The second narrative highlights that he was "trapped in the legal game," which infers coercion and a loss of personal agency. In the third narrative, the defendant is explicitly characterized as "the most oppressed person," diverting public attention from the criminal act that harmed the state to the perpetrator's individual suffering. This linguistic framing allows the victimhood narrative to take precedence, presenting the perpetrator as a figure deserving of understanding and compassion, which could dilute the public's censure of his corrupt actions.

The prevalence of the victimhood narrative in the discourse surrounding corruption cases is apparent when the perpetrator is depicted as someone suffering from systemic issues, rather than as the primary agent responsible for the crime. This approach aligns with the previous study, which asserts that claims of victimhood serve as a rhetorical strategy designed to elicit sympathy [7]. Another study indicated that personal suffering is frequently utilized for symbolic legitimacy [22]. In relation to the "ideal victim" narrative, previous study emphasized feelings of compulsion and helplessness effectively fosters public empathy [12], and the finding of the study observes that white-collar criminals often evade personal blame by highlighting institutional pressures or external circumstances. Consequently, the construction of victimhood not only diminishes public condemnation of corruption but also redirects the focus from the state's losses to the individual distress of the perpetrator.

3.2 The Use of Sympathetic Diction

The choice of language in news articles is the key to creating a sympathetic image of individuals accused of corruption. Terms such as "forced," "trapped," "pressured," and "had no choice" serve to lessen the perceived guilt of these individuals. This sympathetic diction shifts public perception, portraying the perpetrator not as a conscious actor committing a crime but rather as someone driven by circumstances. Consequently,

the language employed by the media plays a direct role in diminishing the seriousness of corruption cases. Several news excerpts exemplify the use of sympathetic diction.

“Saya terjebak dalam ‘permainan hukum’ yang melibatkan aparat penegak hukum”(I was caught in a 'legal game' involving law enforcement officers)

“Saya merasa orang yang paling terzalimi ... keadilan yang saya alami bukanlah suatu kesengajaan yang saya lakukan”(I feel like the most wronged person... the injustice I experienced was not intentional on my part)

“Merasa terintimidasi, terdakwa ajukan judicial review”(Feeling intimidated, the defendant filed for a judicial review)

These statements fall into this category because their word choices deliberately suggest that the perpetrator is in a vulnerable, powerless position, rather than being the primary actor in the crime. For instance, the phrase "trapped in the legal game" highlights a sense of coercion, implying that he is merely a victim of the system. The statement "feeling like the most oppressed person" presents the defendant as someone who has suffered and unintentionally committed wrongdoing. Additionally, the phrase "feeling intimidated" implies that the defendant's actions were influenced by external pressure rather than personal intent. This language effectively softens the severity of corruption crimes, redirecting public focus from the perpetrator's conscious guilt to the distress experienced by the victim. The use of sympathetic diction can construct the image of the perpetrator as weak and depressed, rather than as the main actor in the crime. This aligns with previous research that indicates the media often employs specific linguistic strategies to "soften" the image of the perpetrator. By describing external conditions, pressures, or helplessness, the media shifts public attention away from the criminal aspects of the actions and toward the individual's suffering [19].

3.3 Humanization of the Perpetrator

The media often emphasizes the personal aspects of individuals accused of corruption to create a more relatable image. Coverage that shows defendants crying in court, their family's grief, or personal struggles, such as illness and stress, presents the perpetrator as an ordinary human being facing life's challenges. This approach can weaken public condemnation of corruption, as sympathy is more often directed toward the perpetrator rather than the true victims of the public. Several news excerpts illustrate the humanization of the perpetrator:

“Terungkap dan terbukti dalam persidangan bahwa saya bukanlah koruptor, saya tidak pernah miliki tujuan menguntungkan diri sendiri atau orang lain ... Seraya menahan tangis” (It was revealed and proven in court that I am not corrupt. I never had any intention of benefiting myself or anyone else... " He held back tears)

“Dalam kasusnya sebagai terdakwa korupsi, Ia menangis di sidang sambil mengeluh bahwa ia tidur di lantai penjara”(In his case as a corruption defendant, he cried in court, complaining that he slept on the prison floor)

“Tangis terdakwa pecah dipeluk istri di luar ruang sidang” (The defendant broke down in tears as his wife hugged him outside the courtroom)

These statements exemplify the humanization of the perpetrator by highlighting the emotional, physical, and relational aspects of the defendant, making him appear as an ordinary person experiencing personal suffering, rather than merely a state criminal. The phrase "while holding back tears" conveys emotional honesty that evokes sympathy; the complaint about "sleeping on the prison floor" underscores difficult physical conditions, and the image of "breaking down in his wife's arms" emphasizes family ties and personal vulnerability. This narrative shifts the public focus from the societal harm of corruption to the individual's suffering, thereby humanizing the perpetrator and potentially diminishing the condemnation of their actions. Various studies indicate that the humanization of the perpetrator is often constructed through the use of human-interest framing and personal examples that highlight emotions, physical conditions, and family relationships. These elements enable the audience to empathize with the individual rather than evaluate their criminal actions. Such patterns demonstrate how language and scenes depicting tears, physical hardships in prison, or family embraces can shift public attention from the societal impact of corruption to the perpetrator's personal struggles, which may ultimately weaken the public's condemnation of the crime [4, 18].

3.4 Narrative Reframing of Corruption

In addition to emotional narratives, the media often reframes corruption by shifting its interpretation from an individual crime to a consequence of circumstances. Corruption is portrayed as the result of a broken bureaucratic system, intense political pressure, or an ingrained culture, rather than as a deliberate act committed by the perpetrator. This reframing has serious implications because it can obscure the identity of the criminal, normalize corrupt behavior, and diminish individual accountability. As a result, corruption risks are perceived not as a serious wrongdoing but as an inevitable outcome of external factors. Several news excerpts illustrate the narrative reframing of corruption:

"Dalam nota pembelaan (pledoi) pribadinya, Ia mengaku terjebak dalam 'permainan hukum' yang melibatkan aparat penegak hukum" (In his personal defense (plea), he admitted to being caught up in a 'legal game' involving law enforcement officials).

"Terungkap dan terbukti dalam persidangan bahwa saya bukanlah koruptor, saya tidak pernah miliki tujuan menguntungkan diri sendiri atau orang lain" (It was revealed and proven in court that I am not a corruptor. I never had any intention of benefiting myself or anyone else)

"Ia membantah bahwa uang Rp500 juta yang disebut jaksa sebagai hasil potongan ADD digunakan untuk kepentingan pribadinya. Menurutnya, dana tersebut merupakan titipan" (He denied that the Rp 500 million, which the prosecutor said was from Village Fund (ADD) deductions, was used for his personal gain. He stated that the funds were a trust).

These three statements exemplify the narrative reframing of corruption, as each attempts to shift the perception of corruption from a clear, harmful act to a gentler, more nuanced narrative. The assertion that he was "caught in a legal game" diverts attention from personal accountability to systemic failures. The claim that he was "not a corruptor" and had no intention of benefiting himself reconstructs the perpetrator's image as that of an innocent party. Meanwhile, the argument that the Rp500 million was merely

a "deposit" seeks to redefine corruption as an administrative issue rather than a criminal one.

Various studies have shown that reframing in crime reporting is a discursive strategy that alters the understanding of criminal acts toward more defensive and benign narratives. Media and political elites often frame corruption cases as structural or administrative issues, rather than personal crimes, thereby blurring public perceptions of individual responsibility [1]. Sympathetic or defensive framing can reduce public condemnation of perpetrators by emphasizing alternative narratives, such as systemic breakdowns or procedural misunderstandings [11]. Consequently, it can be concluded that through this reframing, the media or perpetrators create a new narrative that lessens the severity of blame and shapes public perceptions, leading many to view corruption as merely a misunderstanding or a result of external circumstances.

4 Conclusion

This study reveals that Indonesian media does not merely report on corruption cases as legal events; it also actively constructs specific narratives surrounding the perpetrators. Four predominant framing patterns were identified: (1) the prevalence of victimhood narratives, where perpetrators are portrayed as experiencing emotional and psychological suffering; (2) the use of sympathetic language that mitigates blame and shifts individual responsibility onto external factors; (3) the humanization of perpetrators by emphasizing their personal lives, families, and emotional displays in court; and (4) the narrative reframing of corruption, a tactic that reinterprets corruption from a serious crime into a consequence of circumstances or systemic issues. These findings underscore the significant role of media in shaping public perceptions of corruption. By reframing perpetrators as victims, there is a risk of obscuring the criminal's identity and diminishing social condemnation of corruption. The novelty of this research lies in its analytical focus on textual strategies that construct victimhood, a topic that has rarely been explored in depth before. The implications of this research are twofold. First, it enriches the academic discourse on media framing and corruption studies in Indonesia. Second, from a practical standpoint, the findings serve as a valuable reflection for journalists and editors, urging them to approach the framing of corruption perpetrators with greater caution. Additionally, these insights can foster media literacy among the public, promoting more critical consumption of news. Therefore, it is crucial for media coverage to resist the normalization of corruption through victimhood narratives and instead consistently and decisively uphold the anti-corruption agenda.

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