

## STUDENTS' RECEPTION TOWARDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT CASE OF GEN-Z AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN DEPOK

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### Abstract

Sexual harassment could happen everywhere, including workplace and university. This involves any person who has the opportunity to do the misconduct. Information about sexual harassment is now available on many media platforms, whether it is printed or online. As a group of young people who are highly aware of social problems, Gen Z circle have spoken up about this particular issue, starting from their own social network to national level. This study aims to explain the students' reception towards sexual harassment case on media which took place in a private university in Depok, West Java. The author will lead the discussion into three categories, the causative factors, the forms, and students' resistance of sexual harassment. The data collected from 122 students involved in focused group discussion and 4 students were interviewed. An article from Indonesian online media regarding sexual harassment was presented and the research allows the student to react to the news. The results show that student participants believe sexual drive is the main factor and any form of sexual harassment could happen if there is not consent. They disagreed if the perpetrator was treated badly like in the news, even though protection for the victim should be prioritized.

Keywords : Sexual harassment, Gen Z, University, Students, Media

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### 1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is defined as a behavior which is represented by inappropriate sexual comments or physical approach at social circumstances (Suprihatin & Azis, 2020). According to sociocultural perspectives, sexual harassment could happen due to the power gap between men and women in public (Weinberg & Nielsen, 2017). In Indonesia, the prevention on sexual harassment is regulated under Sexual Harassment Act No. 12 Year 2022. Refer to the rules, sexual harassment is an action that addresses and condescends human's dignity by conducting sexual activity. Sexual harassment has occurred in the society in several forms, such as rape, obscenity, child pornography, forced prostitution, and so on.

It was first said that sexual harassment itself was "women's issue" which causes some biased perception within the society (Quick & McFadyen, 2016). However, sexual harassment is a comprehensive issue which involves all kinds of gender, range of age, and even socio-economic status. People, whether they are young or old, need to pay attention to sexual harassment because it can happen anywhere and anytime. Unfortunately, young generation in Indonesia still have improper knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and education (Buwono & Tyas, 2021).

Workplace and campuses are quite common for a sexual harassment case to happen. Even though those institutions have provided trainings to prevent the problem, young workers/students still do not give much focus to the message and even they could not

understand it (Stewart & Davison, 2021). Gen Z is supposed to be the generation that is socially aware about something “viral” and progressive towards their surroundings. They are the generation that is close to digital media as we call it “digital native” because they were born with the access to new media, including social media platforms (Paramita, Pramiyanti, & Mahestu, 2021).

Nowadays, social media contents could easily go “viral” due to its sensitivity yet appeal to open up a discussion in public. Social media allow the citizens (or ‘netizens’) to report any news and to bring it to the public (Newman, Dutton, & Blank, 2014). An article from Center for Digital Society (2022) said that sexual harassment is one of the social issues remaining on the internet from the beginning. In Indonesia, there are some cases of sexual harassment that take a lot of public attention and involve Gen Z, such as obscenity at an Islamic boarding school in Bandung and sexual harassment at a private university in Depok, West Java.

It is very ironic that this kind of offense take place in academic environment. Schools and universities are institutions which ideally give education around healthy and legal sex for young students. Those are the places where young learners gain knowledge and realize the awareness of protection from sexual harassment (Fatimah, 2021). With some knowledge and awareness, Gen Z students are supposed to be more critical towards sexual harassment issue circulated among them which is excellent for their developmental growth.

This article will investigate how the Gen Z receive and respond to the news of sexual harassment in social media. The analysis will be drawn with qualitative approach by using communication theory of reception. This study will be useful as a reference for academic researcher to discuss on similar topic such as sexual harassment among young generations. This study is also beneficial for Gen Z to obtain some knowledge and new perspective towards sexual harassment issue.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Reception Theory**

Reception theory in communication studies focuses on the active role of the audience when they receive a message. One of the key concepts in reception theory is encoding-decoding. According to Stuart Hall (1973 in Anindya, 2021), media generate messages (encoding) which is transferred to the audience and being processed by dissemination and interpretation (decoding). Audience/public have the ability to construct the meaning of the message which is processed through some reading. The images and texts provided in media content are helpful for the audience since they support their process of understanding.

Reception theory has been applied in wide range of media platforms, such as literature, film, television, and advertising. Nowadays, reception theory is implemented to process the message from political and social issues. This theory also highlights the strengths of public’s pre-existing beliefs, such as personal values and cultural background.

### **2.2 Social Cognitive Theory**

According to Albert Bandura (Sulandjari, 2017), Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes that humans will follow the object and action they see in mass media by two processes, such as imitation and identification. This theory is strongly related to media consumption problems, especially in young generation. In this research, the process that is more related

to the subject is identification. The process of identification means that the viewers do not precisely imitate the action but, to what extent they relate to the issue and become familiar with it. They also have some opinions towards the content on the media. There are three factors that influence young generation's thought in consuming media, such as behavior, cognitive and physical characteristics, and environment or social events.

### 2.3 Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is an offensive action that initiate unwanted sexual approach, sexual favors, and any verbal or physical gesture towards somebody. According to International Labor Organization (ILO), sexual harassment is an intense indication of sexual intolerance and it is one of human rights violation. Commonly, women are the victims and men are the perpetrator of this conduct (ILO, 2019).

There are some forms of sexual harassment in society, for instance unacceptable touching, undesirable comments or jokes regarding sexual appeal, or unpopular spread of sex images or materials. A lot of cases in sexual harassment can take place in different settings, such as shopping centers, streets, or public transportation (Suprihatin & Azis, 2020). Sexual harassment does not represent the idea of gender equality and healthy life, especially for women who are mostly persecuted in this issue. The case is still escalating and this is a crime that society should take into account (Noviani, et.al., 2018). Patriarchal culture and men's privilege in Indonesia are still some important factors that still permit the perpetrator to conduct such criminal action towards the victims.

Based on the article written by Dwiyantri (2014), there are three things that are always linked to each other when sexual harassment takes place, such as, causative factors, forms of sexual harassment, and students' response. Below are the explanation of each category and each of them will be examined in the discussion part.

#### 1) Causative factors

This part will discuss about factors that contribute to sexual harassment. The factors can be drawn from psychological, sociological, or environmental factors. After students receive the message from the news, they will consider the cause-and-effect dimension of sexual harassment within Gen Z group.

#### 2) Forms of sexual harassment

As mentioned by National Commission on Violence Against Women of Indonesia (2020), forms of sexual harassment are illustrated as any sexual abuse whether it is physical, verbal, non-verbal, visual, and any other unwanted sexual course. University is one of the places where sexual harassment has occurred which could be perpetrated by internal staffs and students or external side.

#### 3) Students' Resistance

Resistance in this matter refers to any kind of support mechanism or boundaries that students make due to the case of sexual harassment. This part will also talk about the students' reaction towards the case in the media.

### 2.4 Gen Z

According to McKinsey & Company (2023), Generation Z is a group of people who were born between 1996 and 2010. This generation has been through some big moments in their life, including the birth of digital networking platforms, climate change, economic

crisis, and even a pandemic like COVID-19 outbreak. Situated between the Millennials and Alpha, Generation Z is often associated with the 'digital natives' who seek information and awareness on the internet.

As they are occupied with their online activities, Generation Z is very fast in accessing news, including something viral in their timeline. They have desire to be involved and informed with others with their contribution and creativity in creating and reacting to contents (Yadav & Rai, 2017). They are also 'socially conscious' people who are engaged and passionate about enforcing justice in society. Therefore, when a case like sexual harassment is raised, especially in a higher education institution, this generation can relate enough to speak up and stand up with their peers to protect the victims.

#### 2.4.1 Gen Z and Sexual Harassment

Digital literacy is very important to be understood and applied by Gen Z so that they will be thorough in accessing sexual harassment case (Sulandjari, 2017). In the world where we are exposed with a lot of perspectives, Gen Z should be able to be more critical towards some social issues. Since many sexual harassment cases happen in high schools and universities, sex education should be promoted to the curriculum and manifested in a task force to avoid more events and to protect the (young) victims (Azhari & Saepulmilah, 2023).

Unhealthy relationship with their peers and misinformation are main factors that can cause this generation to have deviant sexual behavior (Qudriani, Baroroh, & Hidayah, 2021). In this era where information is widely open, Gen Z is supposed to be supervised by their parents and schools to adapt with the advancement of technology. Lack of support, identity crisis, and low performance at school/university will risk their sexual behavior and irresponsible actions.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Social Constructivist Paradigm

This paradigm believes that humans are able to understand what happens in the world through their experiences in living and doing actions (Cresswell, 2014). Everyone has their own subjective meaning towards certain objects and the meanings are not singular. The meanings could be varied which enable individuals to explore their perspectives. This paradigm is suitable for this research because the participants can construct the meaning of a case by holding some discussion and interaction with other people. The subjective meanings in this paradigm could be negotiated and interpreted depending on the specific context they are addressing. This paradigm believes in participants' point of view and the situation that is being observed. Open-ended questioning really explores people's settings in life by interacting with the participants. Because the researcher has personal background towards the research problem, it influences their interpretation and position which can make the sense of the meanings.

#### 3.2 Qualitative Method

Qualitative method is an approach that believes in texts or image data (Creswell, 2014). This method applies when the participants narrate their experience which includes their point of view towards certain problem. Research participants will observe a phenomenon which will be described and strengthened by interview process. Qualitative method has strong relations with social sciences, such as Politics, Economics, Marketing, Leadership, or Behavioral Change.

Qualitative research has an essential role in manifesting the relationship between the author and the paper because qualitative research describes the way it is perceived and symbolizes humans' experience (Daba-Buzoianu, et.al., 2017). When there is a complex social phenomenon, qualitative method will examine the details and analyze the issue with data. Subjective experiences of individuals really matter in qualitative study and changes are very adaptable to qualitative researchers since it is very flexible to develop. Researchers can get a lot of insights by doing qualitative approach, including criticism to their subjectivity and personal biases in collecting and analyzing the data.

### 3.3 Data Collection

This research already invited students between 19-21 years old at a private university as participants. There were 122 students in four classes who were observed and participated in a focused group discussion (FGD). There were also 4 students (2 males and 2 females) being interviewed to get deeper understanding and wider perspectives towards the case so the data will be saturated. The author provided a sample case from online media regarding sexual harassment at a private university with the title "*Sexual Harassment Conduct Ended with Bullying at Gunadarma University*".

The news was published on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022 through online platform, Popbela.com and this article was presented to the participants so they could create meaning from the issue. Local online media was chosen because the media platform, "Popbela.com", brings up some topics that are related to Millennials and Gen Z, such as fashion, pop culture, and lifestyle. The news was presented in very clear and concise way which is easy for younger group of students to digest the information. The article was also written with the point of view of Millennials dan Gen Z and that would help the student participants in receiving the meaning from the narratives.

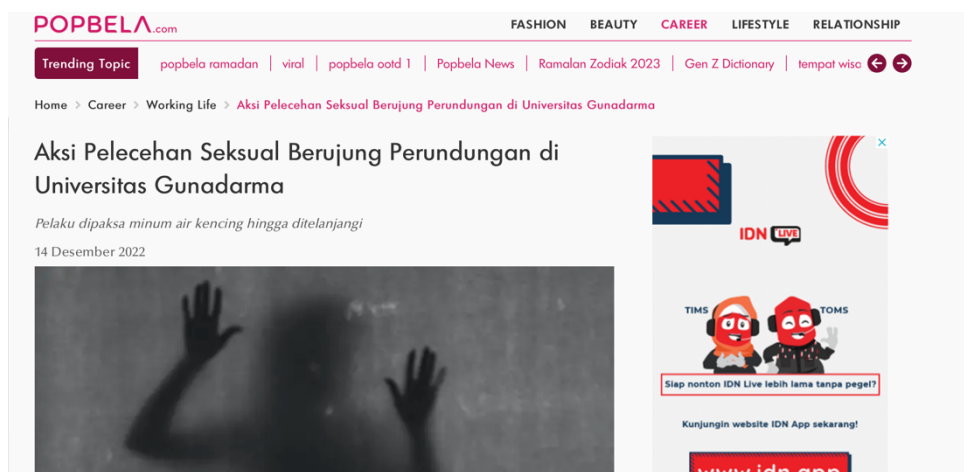


Figure 1. News Article about Sexual Harassment  
(Source: Popbela.com, December 14<sup>th</sup> 2022)

The news contained the chronology about sexual harassment happened to two students with different genders (male and female). It was first started by the male students and the female one became the victim. The action was conducted in secluded area around the campus and the victim could not accept the unwanted approach. Thus, the victim published the chronology onto social media and the perpetrator was caught by their fellow students. As a consequence, the perpetrator/male student was forced to accept the social sanction by other students. This perpetrator was forced to accept verbal and non-verbal bullying as a warning. Definitely it opens up some controversy in public. One side

believes that the victim should be defended and the perpetrator deserves the punishment. The other side thinks that the social sanction is not appropriate because it is more like a bullying.

### 3.4 Analysis Method

This research will use descriptive qualitative approach. Qualitative and descriptive research method has already been applied in different disciplines, such as education, psychology, and social sciences (Nassaji, 2015). The aim of this analysis method is to explain a phenomenon with its characteristics. In this matter, the author will present students' reception towards the sexual harassment case which is presented in the news article. The discussion will be explained in three category, causative factors, forms of sexual harassment, and students' resistance.

## 4. Results dan Discussion

### 4.1 Causative Factors

Causative factors are the key important causes that contribute to an event or actions. This part will discuss about the causative factors that push the perpetrators to execute the harassment. As collected from the group discussion and interview, 50% of the participants have answered that the main causative factor is sexual desire. It started from human anatomy when the key elements of sexual anatomy are formed in adolescence age (Fortenberry, 2013). This sexual drive sustains until the person grows into an adult and hormonal activity starts vigorous.

Students who were interviewed by the author agree that sexual drive is one of the natural factor that stimulates the perpetrator to attack the victim. However, even that natural factor comes with 'perfect occasion', there is supposed to be a settlement between two sides which is called as 'consent'. Student participants saw that the action conducted by the male student/perpetrator began without any consent with the victim. Consent should be communicated prior to sexual relationship between male and female due to the prevention of sexual harassment and assault and other collateral damage impacted to the individuals (Buwono & Tyas, 2021).

Another important reason that causes sexual harassment between male and female is social environment. For Gen Z, as a sophisticated and optimistic generation, social networking is an important need in their life (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). The negative impact of being engaged in an unhealthy circle is embracing the deviant behavior. There are 30% of student participants thought that the negative influence from social circle could direct the perpetrator to start harassing someone sexually. Pre-marital sex has been a trend between young people and it could be just less restricted due to lack of parental monitoring and the existence of its infrastructure (Setyawan, et. al., 2019).

Some few factors that still contribute to sexual harassment are clothing and the effect of patriarchal system. Ten percent of participants' opinion is about clothing which can invite sexual temptation and initiate sexual harassment. This judgment is usually addressed to females and the males will use it as inducement. Nevertheless, the data from Koalisi Ruang Publik Aman (KRPA) showed that most of the victims (17,47%) even wear long skirt/pants and 15,82% wear long-sleeves (Asumsi.co, 2021). The data declined the presumption that women's clothes (especially the seductive ones) can trigger the sexual harassment conduct.

Siti Aminah Tardi, the Commissioner of Komisi Nasional Perempuan of Indonesia (Women's National Commission), stated that seductive clothes of women never become a trigger to sexual harassment. In a decade, there are 45,000 cases of sexual harassment being reported to the commission and only few of them are wearing seductive clothing (Asumsi.co, 2021). It is the myth that should be erased in society that seductive clothes of women are not only the single factor in imposing sexual harassment case.

The assumption about women's clothes is supposed to be accustomed by patriarchal system. The other ten percent of the participants said that this culture can lead to the event of sexual harassment. However, this misconception is created after the patriarchal system which creates stereotypes around gender and its problems, whether people receive it consciously or not (Barli, Sili, & Valiantien, 2017).

#### 4.2 Forms of Sexual Harassment

The observation towards the article news by students deciphered some forms of sexual harassment. According to the news article, partnered sexual behavior become forceful and unwanted. The male perpetrator invited the female student to go to silent area and tried to kiss the victim. That kind of sexual exchange was regarded as an inappropriate action. Hugging, touching someone's body sexually, stroking, and, including, kissing are considered as physical / nonverbal sexual harassment (Mallista, Soetikno, & Risnawaty, 2020).

Student participants viewed the situation as unsafe for their generation and women's life. In these recent days, sexual harassment has occurred in daily life, especially for the girls and women around the globe (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021). One of the participants think that there are few parts of the body (especially for women) which need to be protected. Refer to the paper produced by the United Nations (2017), some of the women's rights are equality, dignity, and a private life.

Student participants also think that people's safety from sexual harassment should be taken into account on digital platform too. The article presented the communication between the perpetrator and the victim through personal chat with suspicious intention. This is the situation when student participants perceive mobile communication should be secured. In the area of online communication, sexual harassment could start with unacceptable text messages and immoral contents by mobile phone (Budiman, et.al., 2020).

As the most prominent users of social media, Gen Z are supposed to be reminded of digital footprint. They should be aware that the data or any information they share can be harmful behind the screen, not to mention the sexual harassment contents (Wook, et. al., 2019). Positively, social media are supposed to be used by the youth to raise awareness about social, economic, and cultural issues. Furthermore, Gen Z can use it to encourage human rights and freedom of life so the victims of sexual harassment can be represented and accommodated.

#### 4.3 Students' Response

Once a victim accepts a sexual harassment, the first action that needs to be expressed is making resistance. By reading the article, student participants recognized that there was a form of rejection showed by the victim. Once the perpetrator (male student) was caught, he was brought to the center of the campus and being punished by other students. He was

treated inhumanely with inappropriate manners. Student participants in this research perceived that students' reactions towards the perpetrator are exaggerating.

There could have been other responses towards the case. The public should find the evidence which supports the accusation, such as recorded CCTV video or post mortem results. Evidence found near the location and on the body could help the investigation for the victim (Fonseca, et. al., 2018). When the evidences are collected, the supporters can speak up and report the case for the victim to the university officials and policemen.

Supports from family and closest people are very important for the victim of sexual harassment. This case should be viewed as something serious and provided or accompanied by professional groups or family (Sulaiman, et. al., 2020). Healthy friendship among Gen Z is also one of the best support systems when one is suffering from a case like sexual harassment. Gen Z are more courageous to speak up and they will not stay quiet about it with the help of social media which they are very fond of (USA Today, 2021)

If the case gets heightened, the university and/or the family of the victim can apply lawsuit to the perpetrator. In Indonesia, there is an institution called "Komnas Perempuan" or National Commission on Violence Against Women based in Jakarta. This commission can accompany the victim while their case is being investigated. The Commission has documented the data of sexual harassment case and they are ready to accommodate any inquiry and protection towards the victim (Noviani, et. al., 2018).

The student participants also believe that university has their own mechanism to help tackling sexual harassment issue. They believe that university students are following certain code of ethics that prohibit them to misconduct their behavior at an academic environment. A formation of task force in preventing sexual harassment at university is a necessary step which also could involve our Gen Z students to contribute with their tremendous and creative ideas.

## 5. Conclusion

As described in the news article, our young students believe that there are some factors uncoincidentally causing sexual harassment to happen. First of all, natural factors such as sexual drive of adolescence and their social environment are the major issues behind the misconduct. Not many of them assume that seductive clothing of the victim (or women) can invite the perpetrator to attack. In the article, it was presented that the perpetrator was not aroused at all by any accessories or fashion item that attribute to the victim's appearance. The student participants agreed that it was his sexual drive which should have been more controlled and that is where sex education holds important role for teenagers' awareness in sexual health.

The incomplete understanding of sexual drive could lead to some unwanted actions of harassment. Based on the news article, the perpetrator tried to kiss the victim in one of the silent areas at their campus and he got caught for his forceful drive. Student participants did not see any consent made between two people and that clearly made the case stronger. Meanwhile, consent should be confirmed at the beginning prior to any action between two actors. With their high awareness on social and political issue, our Gen Z participants support that all kind of protection for the victim should be enforced regardless the media or setting surrounding harassment case. They believe that the victims are supposed to be defended in the right manner.

Nevertheless, the perpetrator should be treated as well, even though he already had



done the wrong sexual approach. The punishment given to the perpetrator was exaggerating and it was quite inappropriate. Any consequence must be taken, but it has to go through certain mechanism with fair assessment. As part of Gen Z, university students are really aware of that victims of sexual harassment have to be protected and defended, but the perpetrator also has right to receive some respect from the public as well.

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