

Viral Justice and Public Pressure: The Role of Social Media in Handling Sexual Violence Cases in Indonesia

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Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed the landscape of justice, particularly in handling sexual violence cases in Indonesia, giving rise to the phenomenon known as “viral justice.” This study aims to analyze how social media shapes public pressure, influences institutional responses, and generates ethical dilemmas in legal processes. A qualitative socio-legal approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, and document analysis. Data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis to identify patterns in public discourse, institutional behavior, and ethical challenges. The results indicate that social media plays a dual role. On one hand, viral content accelerates institutional responses, enhances transparency, and amplifies victim voices, functioning as an informal mechanism of social control. On the other hand, it introduces significant risks, including trial by media, misinformation, and the erosion of legal principles such as due process and presumption of innocence. The discussion highlights that the phenomenon of “No Viral, No Justice” reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of the current legal system, emphasizing the need for balance between public engagement and legal integrity. In conclusion, social media has become a powerful but complex tool in the pursuit of justice. Its role must be managed through appropriate regulations and digital literacy to ensure fair and accountable legal processes.

Keywords: *Viral Justice, Social Media, Public Pressure, Sexual Violence, Legal Ethics*

1. Introduction

In the digital era, the rapid proliferation of social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of public discourse, information dissemination, and societal responses to legal issues. One of the most prominent emerging phenomena is what has been termed “viral justice,” a condition in which legal attention, institutional responses, and even judicial processes are significantly influenced by the level of public visibility and virality of a case on social media platforms. In the context of sexual violence cases in Indonesia, this phenomenon has become increasingly evident, where public narratives such as “No Viral No Justice” reflect a growing perception that justice is more likely to be achieved when cases gain widespread attention online. This shift signals a critical transformation in how justice is pursued, perceived, and delivered, moving beyond formal legal institutions into the realm of digital public engagement (Sihaloho & Sudarto, 2025; Wuysang et al., 2024; Runturambi et al., 2024).

The emergence of viral justice is closely linked to declining public trust in formal legal institutions and the increasing accessibility of digital platforms that enable individuals to



share, amplify, and mobilize information rapidly. In many cases, victims of sexual violence turn to social media as an alternative pathway to seek recognition, support, and accountability when formal procedures are perceived as slow, opaque, or biased. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok function as spaces for storytelling, advocacy, and collective action, where victims and activists can disseminate narratives that challenge institutional inaction. Consequently, the perceived importance of a legal case is no longer determined solely by the severity of the offense but also by its visibility and engagement metrics in the digital sphere. This phenomenon reflects a shift from institutional justice to networked justice, where public opinion and digital participation play a crucial role in shaping outcomes (Wuysang et al., 2024; Gussela et al., 2024; Yalcinoz-Ucan & Eslen-Ziya, 2023).

Furthermore, viral justice has created new forms of informal legal pathways, where public pressure acts as a mechanism of accountability. The use of hashtags, viral campaigns, and digital activism has proven effective in drawing attention to cases that might otherwise remain marginalized. For instance, hashtag movements and online disclosures by victims often serve to mobilize public empathy and solidarity, thereby increasing pressure on law enforcement agencies and policymakers to take action. This dynamic demonstrates the growing role of social media as a tool of social control, complementing or even substituting formal mechanisms of justice. In Indonesia, this trend is particularly pronounced in cases of gender-based violence, where digital activism has become a powerful means of advocating for justice and institutional reform (Sihaloho & Sudarto, 2025; Astuti & Jannah, 2025; Jalli, 2025; Sarioğlu & Özdemir, 2024).

However, while viral justice offers opportunities for enhancing transparency and accelerating institutional responses, it also presents significant challenges and risks. Empirical evidence suggests that cases that gain viral attention are more likely to receive faster investigation, increased media coverage, and stronger institutional responses. Public pressure generated through social media can compel authorities to act more swiftly and transparently, thereby addressing long-standing issues of bureaucratic inertia and lack of accountability. In this sense, viral justice can function as a corrective mechanism, ensuring that institutions remain responsive to public concerns. Moreover, systematic reviews indicate that viral content can influence judicial behavior and even shape public policy, highlighting the transformative impact of digital platforms on governance and legal processes (Muhammad et al., 2025; Gussela et al., 2024; Murtadlo & Saputra, 2025; Abadi et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the reliance on virality as a driver of justice raises critical concerns regarding the integrity of legal systems and the principles of the rule of law. One of the most significant issues is the potential erosion of fundamental legal principles, including equality before the law, presumption of innocence, and due process. When legal decisions are influenced by public pressure and media attention, there is a risk that outcomes may be shaped by popularity rather than legal reasoning. This can lead to the emergence of “trial by media,” where individuals are judged and condemned in the court of public opinion before formal legal proceedings have taken place. Such practices not only undermine the rights of the accused but also threaten the independence of the judiciary and the legitimacy of legal institutions (Muhammad et al., 2025; Flora & Kadir, 2026; Wuysang et al., 2024).

In addition to legal concerns, viral justice also creates disparities in access to justice. Cases that fail to attract public attention may be neglected, resulting in unequal treatment and the establishment of a dual system of justice—one for cases that go viral and another for those that do not. This phenomenon exacerbates existing inequalities within the legal system, as individuals without access to digital platforms or social networks may struggle to gain recognition for their cases. Furthermore, the dynamics of social media can lead to the spread of misinformation, manipulation of public opinion, and stigmatization of both victims and alleged perpetrators. These challenges highlight the complex and often contradictory role of social media in the pursuit of justice, where empowerment and risk coexist (Sihaloho & Sudarto, 2025; Gussela et al., 2024; Abadi et al., 2024; Tolossa et al., 2023; Akbar et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on viral justice, several research gaps remain. First, existing studies tend to focus either on the positive aspects of social media as a tool for advocacy or on its negative implications for legal processes, with limited integration of both perspectives into a comprehensive analytical framework. Second, there is a lack of empirical research that specifically examines the interaction between public pressure, institutional responses, and ethical dilemmas in the context of sexual violence cases in Indonesia. While global studies provide valuable insights, the socio-cultural and legal context of Indonesia presents unique challenges that require localized analysis. Third, prior research has not sufficiently explored how viral justice influences decision-making processes within legal institutions, particularly in terms of balancing public demands with legal principles.

In response to these gaps, this study offers a novel contribution by proposing an integrative framework that examines viral justice as a multidimensional phenomenon involving public pressure, institutional responsiveness, and ethical considerations. Unlike previous studies that treat these dimensions separately, this research emphasizes their interconnectedness and explores how they collectively shape the handling of sexual violence cases. The novelty of this study also lies in its focus on Indonesia as a case study, providing context-specific insights that contribute to the broader discourse on digital justice and governance. Furthermore, this research highlights the need to balance the empowering potential of social media with the protection of legal integrity and human rights.

Based on the identified phenomena, research gaps, and proposed novelty, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the role of social media in shaping public pressure, influencing institutional responses, and generating ethical dilemmas in the handling of sexual violence cases in Indonesia. This objective reflects the need to understand how digital platforms can both enhance and challenge the pursuit of justice, particularly in contexts where formal legal systems are perceived as inadequate.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of viral justice represents a significant transformation in the relationship between society, media, and the legal system. While social media has the potential to democratize access to justice and promote accountability, it also poses serious risks to the principles of fairness, due process, and equality. The interplay between public pressure, institutional responses, and ethical challenges underscores the complexity of navigating justice in the digital age. By examining these dynamics, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how justice can be pursued in a way that balances technological innovation with legal and ethical integrity.

2. Methods

This study employs a **qualitative approach with a socio-legal and explanatory design** to analyze the role of social media in shaping public pressure, influencing institutional responses, and generating ethical dilemmas in the handling of sexual violence cases in Indonesia. The qualitative method is chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of the “viral justice” phenomenon within its social, legal, and digital context. The study utilizes both **primary and secondary data sources**. Primary data are collected through **in-depth interviews** with key informants, including legal practitioners, law enforcement officers, victims’ advocates, and academics specializing in criminal law and digital media. In addition, **digital ethnography** is conducted by observing viral cases of sexual violence on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, focusing on hashtags, public narratives, and patterns of online engagement. Secondary data are obtained from legal documents, court decisions, policy reports, and relevant scholarly articles. The sampling technique used is **purposive sampling**, selecting cases and informants that are directly relevant to the research topic.

The data analysis is carried out using **qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis**. Initially, data from interviews and digital observations are transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes related to public pressure, institutional responses, and ethical challenges. The analysis then applies a **socio-legal perspective** to interpret how social media dynamics interact with formal legal principles such as due process, presumption of innocence, and equality before the law. Furthermore, **triangulation techniques** are used to ensure data validity by comparing findings from different sources, including interviews, digital content, and legal documents. The study also employs **interpretive analysis** to understand the implications of viral justice for legal practice and policy. The results are presented in a structured narrative to explain how social media both facilitates access to justice and creates new risks for fairness and legal integrity in the handling of sexual violence cases.

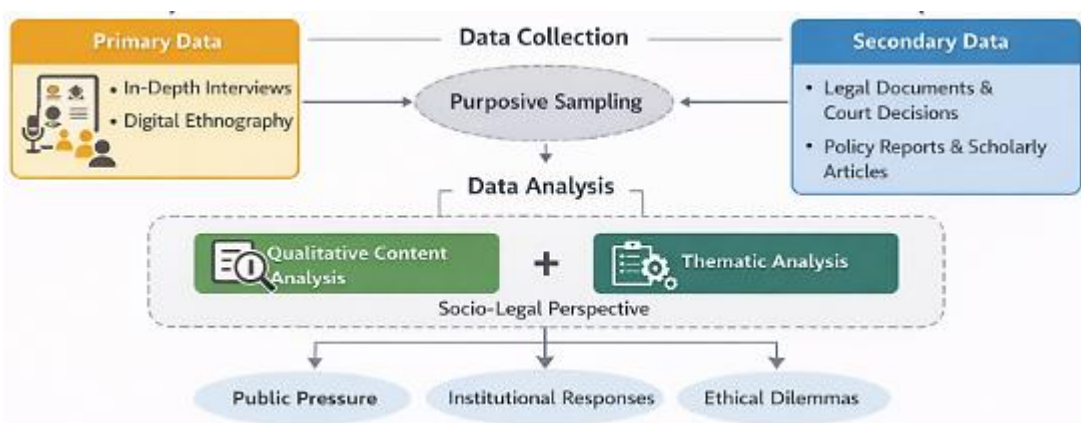


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented in the following table, which summarizes the results of qualitative analysis regarding the role of social media in shaping public pressure, influencing institutional responses, and generating ethical dilemmas in handling sexual violence cases in Indonesia.

Table 1. Findings on the Role of Social Media in Viral Justice and Case Handling

No	Aspect	Key Findings	Impact on Case Handling	Interpretation
1	Public Pressure	Viral hashtags and online campaigns amplify cases rapidly	Accelerates investigation and public attention	Social media acts as an informal control mechanism
2	Victim Disclosure	Victims share experiences through digital platforms	Increases awareness and public empathy	Enhances recognition and support for victims
3	Institutional Response	Authorities respond faster to viral cases	Improves transparency but may lead to reactive decisions	Decisions influenced by public opinion
4	Legal Process Integrity	Exposure to social media pressure	Risks bias, trial by media, and procedural deviations	Threatens due process and presumption of innocence
5	Ethical Challenges	Spread of misinformation and privacy concerns	Potential victim retraumatization and public misjudgment	Raises ethical and human rights concerns

Table 1 demonstrates that social media plays a dual role in the handling of sexual violence cases. On one hand, it serves as a powerful tool for generating public pressure, accelerating institutional responses, and increasing awareness of cases that might otherwise remain overlooked. This indicates that social media functions as an informal mechanism of social control that complements formal legal systems. On the other hand, the findings reveal significant risks, including the potential erosion of legal principles such as due process and presumption of innocence, as well as ethical challenges related to misinformation and privacy violations. The influence of virality may lead institutions to adopt reactive, popularity-driven decisions rather than purely legal reasoning. Overall, these results suggest that while social media can enhance access to justice, it must be managed carefully to ensure fairness, accountability, and the protection of fundamental legal and ethical standards.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and multidimensional relationship between social media, public pressure, and institutional responses in handling sexual violence cases in Indonesia. Based on the qualitative results summarized in Table 1, social media plays a dual role as both an empowering mechanism for justice and a source of legal and ethical challenges. These findings directly address the research objective, which seeks to analyze how social media shapes public pressure, influences institutional responses, and generates ethical dilemmas in the handling of sexual violence cases. The discussion demonstrates that the phenomenon of

“viral justice” has fundamentally altered the dynamics of legal processes, shifting the balance between formal legal institutions and informal digital publics.

One of the most prominent findings is the role of social media in generating **public pressure**, which significantly accelerates institutional responses. The emergence of viral hashtags, online campaigns, and digital activism reflects the formation of what scholars describe as *ad hoc publics*, where collective emotional reactions to cases of sexual violence rapidly mobilize public attention. In Indonesia, social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have become key arenas for discussing sexual violence cases, often triggered by news reports, media collaborations, and policy debates such as the enactment of the Sexual Violence Law (UU TPKS). These digital conversations are not merely reactive but also contribute to broader socio-legal transformations, including increased awareness and legislative change (Azmi, 2025; Mulyono, 2023).

The findings also confirm the phenomenon widely referred to as “**No Viral, No Justice**,” where cases are perceived to receive serious institutional attention only after gaining significant visibility on social media. This condition reflects a shift in the logic of justice, where visibility and virality become key determinants of institutional prioritization. Empirical evidence suggests that viral cases tend to receive faster investigation and more transparent handling, indicating that public pressure acts as an informal mechanism of accountability. However, this also creates disparities between viral and non-viral cases, leading to unequal access to justice. Cases that fail to gain attention may remain neglected, reinforcing structural inequalities within the legal system (Wahid et al., 2025; Muhammad et al., 2025; Fatakh, 2025).

From a socio-legal perspective, this phenomenon illustrates how social media functions as a form of **digital social control**, complementing traditional legal mechanisms. Public pressure generated through viral content compels institutions to respond more quickly and transparently, addressing long-standing issues of bureaucratic inertia and lack of accountability. This aligns with previous findings that social media can enhance transparency and responsiveness in governance and legal processes. However, the reliance on public pressure also raises concerns about the sustainability and fairness of such mechanisms, as institutional responses may become reactive rather than systematic (Syarofi, 2025; Murdadlo & Saputra, 2025).

In addition to its role in generating public pressure, social media serves as a crucial platform for **victim advocacy and digital citizenship**. The findings indicate that victims and their supporters actively use social media to share personal narratives, seek recognition, and mobilize support. This form of digital storytelling not only raises awareness but also fosters solidarity among users, creating a supportive environment for victims of sexual violence. Studies have shown that online platforms, particularly Twitter, are dominated by narratives from victims and their networks, with generally positive public responses. However, only a limited number of these cases proceed to formal legal processes, highlighting a gap between digital advocacy and institutional action (Nudiati et al., 2023).

The concept of **digital citizenship** is also evident in the active participation of online communities in discussing issues related to sexual violence, including legislative debates and policy reforms. Social media enables individuals to engage in civic discourse, express opinions, and advocate for change, thereby strengthening democratic participation. Campaigns such as “*Awas KBGO!*” and advocacy accounts like @perempuanberkisah demonstrate how digital platforms can be used strategically to disseminate information, mobilize collective action, and

support victims. These initiatives highlight the potential of social media as a tool for social transformation, particularly in addressing gender-based violence (Ratnasari et al., 2021; Primadini, 2021; Girsang & Hasugian, 2025; Girsang & Roseline, 2024).

Despite these positive contributions, the findings also reveal significant **ethical and legal challenges** associated with viral justice. One of the most critical issues is the risk of **trial by social media**, where individuals are judged and condemned in the public sphere before formal legal proceedings take place. This phenomenon undermines fundamental legal principles such as the presumption of innocence and due process. The rapid spread of information on social media can lead to the dissemination of unverified or misleading content, which may distort public perception and influence institutional decision-making. These risks are particularly concerning in sensitive cases such as sexual violence, where both victims and accused individuals may be subjected to stigmatization and harassment (Muhammad et al., 2025; Syarofi, 2025).

Furthermore, the findings highlight the potential erosion of key legal principles, including **equality before the law** and **legal certainty**. When institutional responses are influenced by public pressure, there is a risk that decisions may be driven by popularity rather than legal reasoning. This creates a dual system of justice, where cases that attract public attention are prioritized over those that do not. Such disparities undermine the legitimacy of legal institutions and may lead to a loss of public trust in the long term. The distortion of legal processes by social media dynamics represents a significant challenge for maintaining the integrity of the rule of law (Wahid et al., 2025; Fatakh, 2025).

Another important dimension of the findings is the **interaction between media virality and institutional behavior**. The data suggest that law enforcement agencies may adopt more populist approaches in response to public pressure, prioritizing quick resolutions over thorough legal procedures. While this may improve short-term responsiveness, it can compromise the quality and fairness of legal outcomes. This tension between responsiveness and procedural integrity reflects a broader challenge in modern governance, where institutions must balance the demands of transparency and accountability with the need to uphold legal standards (Murtadlo & Saputra, 2025; Muhammad et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, these challenges are further compounded by structural issues within the legal system, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited resources, and cultural barriers. The perception of the justice system as slow and patriarchal has contributed to the growing reliance on social media as an alternative pathway for seeking justice. Some studies suggest the development of **social media-based reporting mechanisms** as a means of improving access to justice, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These mechanisms can complement formal legal processes by providing more accessible and responsive channels for reporting and advocacy. However, their implementation must be carefully regulated to prevent misuse and ensure alignment with legal standards (Martitah et al., 2024; Lisi et al., 2025).

The findings also emphasize the importance of **regulatory frameworks and institutional guidelines** in managing the impact of social media on legal processes. To address the challenges of viral justice, it is necessary to develop policies that balance public participation with the protection of legal integrity. This includes establishing guidelines for law enforcement agencies on how to respond to public pressure, as well as promoting digital literacy among the public to ensure responsible use of social media. Legal and digital literacy

programs can help individuals understand the implications of their online actions and contribute to more constructive forms of social control (Muhammad et al., 2025; Fatakh, 2025).

Moreover, the study highlights the need for a **balanced approach** that recognizes both the benefits and risks of social media in the pursuit of justice. While social media can enhance transparency, accountability, and public engagement, it must not replace formal legal processes or undermine fundamental legal principles. Instead, it should be integrated into the legal system in a way that supports its objectives while maintaining its integrity. This requires collaboration between policymakers, legal practitioners, and digital platforms to develop comprehensive strategies for managing the impact of social media on justice processes.

In addressing the research objective, this study confirms that social media plays a significant role in shaping public pressure, influencing institutional responses, and creating ethical dilemmas in the handling of sexual violence cases in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that viral justice is both a response to and a reflection of systemic challenges within the legal system, highlighting the need for reform and adaptation. By understanding the dynamics of viral justice, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies for ensuring that justice is not only accessible but also fair and sustainable.

In conclusion, the discussion underscores the transformative impact of social media on the justice system in Indonesia. The phenomenon of viral justice reflects a shift toward more participatory and transparent forms of governance, where public engagement plays a central role in shaping institutional responses. However, this shift also introduces significant challenges that must be addressed to preserve the principles of the rule of law. By balancing the empowering potential of social media with the need for legal integrity, organizations and institutions can harness its benefits while mitigating its risks, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that social media plays a pivotal and paradoxical role in shaping the handling of sexual violence cases in Indonesia through the phenomenon of viral justice. The findings demonstrate that public pressure generated by social media significantly accelerates institutional responses, enhances visibility of cases, and functions as an informal mechanism of social control that compensates for limitations in formal legal processes. At the same time, this dynamic creates substantial challenges, including the risk of trial by media, erosion of due process, and unequal treatment between viral and non-viral cases. In achieving the research objective, the study confirms that the interaction between digital public pressure, institutional responsiveness, and ethical considerations is highly complex and requires careful balance. Therefore, while social media can serve as a powerful tool for promoting justice and accountability, its role must be managed through appropriate legal frameworks, institutional guidelines, and digital literacy to ensure that justice remains fair, transparent, and aligned with fundamental legal principles.

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