

# RAPE AND MOLKA IN CLUB BURNING SUN: ANALYZING SOUTH KOREAN NEWSPAPER PORTRAYALS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

A Thesis By

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**Abstract:**

Journalist framing, linguistic, and visual choices shape societal understandings of gender and sexual violence against women. News media is a primary source of information about social issues, making the language they use important to relaying a sense of importance or a lack of to the public. Extant literature on media representation indicates that there are significant differences in the framing of gendered violence in Western countries when high-status perpetrators are involved, but East Asian media has not been extensively researched. Considering rapid globalization of the South Korean entertainment industry and growing sexual violence accusations against prolific celebrities in the country, this research analyzes how Korean news media frames and portrays high-status perpetrators and victims of sexual violence. Using the most widespread recent sexual violence investigation in South Korean history with more than 4,000 suspects implicated in the case from around the world, this research uses a case study approach to investigate the “Burning Sun Scandal.” This investigation is known for drawing global attention to popular celebrities who have been using their influence, power, and wealth for sex trafficking, abuse, and blackmail of women from lower socioeconomic statuses. Employing a content analysis methodology, 278 articles from the *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo* were coded for latent and manifest content. Coding revealed themes of minimization, trivialization, victim-blaming, questioning of victim credibility, and male privilege. Overall, representation by these newspapers on Burning Sun were celebrity centric and demonstrated stigmatization of victim experiences which contributes to rape myths that perpetuate misogynic beliefs in the country.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

From dusk until dawn, the South Korean entertainment industry booms as a popular nightclub destination for young adults and foreign vacationers. Exorbitant and lavish events, scouting by media executives, and favorability among famous Korean pop (K-pop) artists and entertainers has attracted significant attention to nightclub districts throughout Seoul. Access to these clubs is a source of achievement, prompting many young adults to seek entry for chances to network with talent managers and party with celebrities. Known for its location in Gangnam, Seoul, and affiliation with Seungri of the popular K-pop group Big Bang, Club Burning Sun (Burning Sun) quickly became one of the most popular clubs in the world. However, it has recently become synonymous with sex trafficking and gained a nefarious reputation.

Burning Sun opened their doors February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 at the Le Méridien Seoul Hotel after promoting the club as elegant, brimming with celebrity endorsements, having a high-priced drink menu, and offering exclusive VIP rooms and table service. Immediately met with success, the club reached full capacity nightly with more than 1,000 guests in attendance and long lines of hopeful clubbers. It was the ultimate nightlife destination. But, without much notice, on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the club abruptly locked up the entrance and began demolishing the venue.

Rumors of police negligence and collusion in claims of sexual assault at the club warranted public petitions requesting government intervention. In response, the CEO of Burning Sun urgently closed the club after two closed-circuit television (CCTV) videos were leaked on social media. Footage from the first video was uploaded in December 2018 by an anonymous club affiliate to several popular websites. They claimed they were tired of the frequency that young women were targeted and victimized by club representatives and VIP members (J. K. 2019a; N. Kim 2019). In this nine second clip, a woman is forcefully dragged from the club dance floor by her hair to a VIP room while screaming and flailing her arms in front of several staff members. The victim contacted police stating she was sexually assaulted in a VIP room after being drugged and abused. She was sued for

defamation and property damage by club representatives and police dismissed her report (J. K. 2019a; N. Kim 2019).

Weeks later, the second video surfaced. In this footage, a man is dragged outside the club where he was brutally assaulted by security, a club director, and police (U. Kim 2019b; W. Lee 2019). The victim, Sang-kyo Kim (Mr. Kim), claimed he was protecting a sexual assault victim inside the club when he was attacked by a senior club affiliate and dragged outside where the subsequent attacks transpired (T. Lee 2019; U. Kim 2019b). Mr. Kim was then taken to the police station where officers continued to assault him for another eight hours. Upon release to the hospital, Mr. Kim had fractured ribs, rhabdomyolysis<sup>1</sup>, bruising, and internal bleeding (T. Lee 2019). His family contacted the media generating public interest in his claims and a petition calling for a government investigation was created (T. Lee 2019). Quickly exceeding the signature threshold, an investigation of the club and Gangnam Police began (T. Lee 2019).

Social media and news coverage of these events garnered public attention to the “Burning Sun Scandal.” Within weeks, several additional female victims came forward with claims that they were drugged with gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB), raped, sexually assaulted, and/or secretly filmed for the purpose of blackmail and sexual exploitation at the club. Lawyer Jeong-hyun Bang who was investigating many of these accusations found evidence of the hidden camera crimes which had been publicly shared online and in private chat rooms. These hidden camera crimes, or “molka<sup>2</sup>” as it is known in South Korea, are a highly exploitative and stigmatized crime type which is widely recognized as contributing to a sexual violence epidemic in the country (M. Lee 2019; Pambouc 2018; Y. Lee 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> A life-threatening condition in which damaged muscle releases protein into the bloodstream (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4365849/>).

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this research, the term molka will be used to describe this particular crime.

The molka were found to be shared publicly in group messages via KaKaoTalk<sup>3</sup> with various well-known K-pop celebrities, business owners, and public officials. Bang released the redacted chat transcripts to the public while on a news program after announcing he had gathered sufficient evidence to proceed with the investigations. A single chat transcript exposed several sexual crimes that were recorded and shared publicly. Chats included some of the following messages: “[after sending molka] I did her at a shopping center,” “Take a photo with the silencer<sup>4</sup> on. Let’s record it,” “Let’s all get together... and rape them in the car,” “I gave her sleeping pills and did her,” and “You raped her (laughs)” (Dong 2019). Following the public chat release, several additional claims were made against male K-pop idols and company representatives.

Seungri, to whom the club owes much of its success, was indicted along with investors and employees of Club Burning Sun, multiple K-pop celebrities, entertainment management companies, senior police officers, and public officials. Charges vary from molka, rape, gang rape, aggravated rape, sex and drug trafficking, assault, defamation, police misconduct, bribery, and various other criminal acts. Incidents that should have been made public were covered up through police bribery and victim blackmail (D-H. Kim 2019; J. K. 2019b; Koreaboo 2019). The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency claims they are continuing to work on the Burning Sun investigation and have arrested over 4,000 suspects. Despite significant evidence, fans around the world and public figures continue to criticize victim claims and rally for the innocence of these celebrities.

As the largest investigation of its kind in South Korean history, media reporting of this case shapes societal understanding of violence against women, the ways public officials address these crimes, and how the public feels about victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. Using Burning Sun as a case study, my research seeks to answer: How does South Korean newspaper media represent and frame of sexual violence against women by male perpetrators of high societal status?

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<sup>3</sup> KaKaoTalk is a popular South Korean instant messaging app; sometimes referred to as KaTalk.

<sup>4</sup> Phones in several East Asian countries require a shutter sound for filming and photos to combat sex crimes.



The exploitative nature of the entertainment industry, societal prestige of celebrities, and historical gender inequality and media censorship in South Korea could contribute to a misrepresentation of this case by journalists. Expressions of misogyny and biased framing would symbolically demonstrate a cultural approval and normalization of female victimization by males of high social status and power. By normalizing sexual violence, victims would also be deterred from reporting their experiences and perpetrators would likely face fewer consequences for their actions, if any. Furthermore, the media interpretation of the case could affect social constructions of gender and sexual expression, in which the sexual assault of women becomes an acceptable performance of masculinity. Because the Burning Sun investigation includes reputable celebrities and public officials, news of this case is likely to attract a larger number of readers than a case involving an unknown perpetrator. This makes the linguistic choices of journalists meaningful as it will influence a larger audience and impact beliefs about social issues in South Korea.

Throughout this thesis, I will unpack issues surrounding the Burning Sun investigation and the ways in which the media disseminates information about cases involving sexual violence against women. I begin by reviewing relevant literature on gender inequality in South Korea, sexual exploitation by high-status perpetrators, victimization, victim stigma, and discuss how this thesis bridges gaps in existent research. Then, I discuss my theoretical framework and the way it shapes my research design and coding approach. Next, I explain my methodological orientation, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations, and reflexivity and positionality. Lastly, I discuss my findings and provide a discussion of my work in relation to extant scholarship and offer concluding thoughts regarding implications of the findings, limitations to the current study, and future directions for study.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Gender Inequality in South Korea**

South Korea is a historically patriarchal society struggling with rampant sexism that reinforces gender inequities. Cultural and religious traditions in the country have withheld power from women and are reflected in the retention of laws that emulate Confucian ideologies (E. Cho 1998; R. Kim

1994). Similar to Judeo-Christianity, Confucianism affirms misogynistic beliefs that women exist to serve men (E. Cho 1998; Haggard, Kaelen, Saroglou, Klien, and Rowatt 2019; Malley-Morrison and Hines 2003). While Confucianism is no longer the dominant religion<sup>5</sup>, its presence in the country is relatively unchanged (E. Cho 1998).

To alter the significant effect these issues have had on gender norms and inequalities over the past several decades, updates have been made to the Korean Constitution. These changes mandated legal measures to support victims of sexual assault and implement anti-discrimination policies, but sexual violence remains a stagnant issue (R. Kim 1994). According to the Korean Statistical Information Service (2021), arrests of sexually violent criminals in South Korea has increased by about 5,000 people annually since 2014 and approximately 96% of perpetrators are men. Additionally, the popular South Korean e-commerce site *GMarket* has reported a 333% rise in hidden camera sales from March 2018 to 2019 which has bolstered the molka epidemic in the country (H. Park 2019b).

Reinforcing these gender inequities, government censorship in education, news, and media has historically withheld information from the public that has disproportionately oppressed women over men. Throughout 2008-2017, conservative policies limited the freedom of the press and investigative reporting (M. Lee 2019). Coverage of sexual violence against women during this period was largely ignored or spun with criticism that portrayed female victims as gold-diggers, promiscuous, and substance abusers (M. Lee 2019). Ultimately, predominantly hegemonic male perspectives were relayed to the public. The JoongAng Tongyang Broadcasting Company (JTBC) fought this suppression by covering stories on President Geun-hye Park's crimes<sup>6</sup> in 2017. JTBC's courage ignited a rebellion by the media to provide greater inclusion of stories on historically underrepresented groups and social problems. This period of strict media censorship ended shortly after President Park

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<sup>5</sup> According to a 2015 census, most South Koreans do not claim a religious affiliation (56.1%) (KOSIS 2015).

<sup>6</sup> President Geun-hye is currently serving a 20-year sentence for extortion, bribery, abuse of power, censorship, and leaking confidential government information.

was impeached, but it is possible that the effects of information suppression still linger along with some regulations that restrict the freedom of press (M. Lee 2019).

Gender inequality continues to be an issue because of historical mistreatment of information related to violence against women and girls by the government, news and media, religions, and sociocultural conservative norms. Ultimately, this signifies that the devaluation of women is ingrained in South Korean society and likely to be replicated without significant change. Countries with significant gender inequality, like South Korea, are more likely to suffer from high rates of sexual violence and rape culture (Bograd 1988; Yodanis 2004). Rape culture is associated with patterns of objectification and control of female sexuality, denial or blame of victims, dehumanizing and devaluing women, toxic masculinity, along with minimizing and trivializing tactics (McPhail 2015). These issues are justified and reproduced in societies where gender inequalities are upheld by social institutions and seemingly inescapable for victims (Rentschler 2014).

Missing from current research about gender inequality in South Korea are the ways in which the media's sociolinguistic choices uphold or denounce patriarchal beliefs in society. Because this research does not exist, it is important to examine the operationalization of gender in articles that discuss sexual violence. This research, as guided by theory, explores the absence of such data to understand whether gender inequalities and misogynic undertones are present in popular newspaper media. As a social institution, the media socializes the masses about social issues (Silverblatt 2004). The meaning they provide contributes to societal knowledge about gender and violence which is increasingly important when crime rates continue to reflect sexism in the country (Silverblatt 2004).

### **Social Status, Power, & Sexual Assault Perpetration**

In cases like that of Burning Sun, the financial resources, notoriety, and positions of power held by the accused individuals have often affected the presence and outcomes of cases. These individuals, because of their financial and social capital, are able to push their own agendas and skirt the legal consequences otherwise given to lay citizens. To my knowledge, there are no existing works

examining such issues within South Korea. However, extant literature drawing on cases in the United States provide insight into how such factors affect legal cases.

Research on sexual violence in the American entertainment industry largely focus on the impact of the “Me Too” (#MeToo) movement and allegations against well-known actors, musicians, and industry producers. These issues parallel those described in the Burning Sun investigation. The Me Too movement, created by Tarana Burke, seeks to connect victims of sexual violence, dismantle the stigma reflected in underreporting, and challenge expectations of silence about gendered violence and institutionalized discrimination (Evans 2018; Lee and Webster 2018; Mack and McCann 2020; Powis 2018). It received global attention in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag (#MeToo) on Twitter to call attention to widespread sexual assault occurring in the entertainment industry (Evans 2018; Lee and Webster 2018; Ghosh, Su, Abhishek, Suk, Tong, Kamath, Hills, Correa, Garlough, Borah, and Shah 2020). Sexual misconduct within the industry until this point was underreported by women because if they attempted to report their experiences or retaliate, they received severe backlash that could damage their careers or result in defamation lawsuits against them (Evans 2018; Ghosh et al.; Lee and Webster 2018). Me Too encouraged public discourse and has since increased social unity for victims in countries with high rates of sexual violence and gender inequality (Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Lee and Webster 2018).

Among the hundreds of cases filed against notable men within the entertainment industry, Harvey Weinstein’s case stands out. Weinstein, who was a Hollywood industry executive and producer, is a recently convicted sex offender who used his pervasive power relations to sexually exploit women within the media industry and silence victims (Evans 2018; Lee and Webster 2018; Mack and McCann 2020; Moniuszko 2018; Powis 2018). Weinstein’s money, status, and power afforded him the privileges necessary to suppress allegations and public knowledge of his crimes, blackmail and intimidate accusers, and abuse women and girls (Levin 2017; Peters and Besley 2019). Being a well-known industry leader, he easily blackmailed anyone who sought to report his sexual advances (Levin 2017; Peters and Besley 2019). Because he was in a good financial position,

he could afford to pay off publications, bribe police, and afford better legal representation than his victims (Levin 2017; Peters and Besley 2019). Additionally, selecting women who were seeking positions in the entertainment industry meant Weinstein could exploit women in exchange for roles in his films or abuse them for money and casting opportunities (Levin 2017; Peters and Besley 2019).

While there are several famous celebrities who have been indicted for sexual assault, few have been convicted of their crimes. Accusations against popular actors, musicians, and entertainment industry executives like Bryan Singer, Ben Affleck, XXXTentacion, Kevin Spacey, Nelly, James Franco, Marilyn Manson, Richard Dreyfuss, Donald Trump, Dustin Hoffman, and Woody Allen are among those that have failed to result in conviction (Moniuszko 2018). There could be several explanations for this including: cases being settled outside of court, dropped due to statute of limitations, final investigations are on-going, or were not substantiated by enough evidence to support prosecution efforts (Moniuszko 2018). In one example, rape allegations against Nick Carter, an American musician from the male pop group the Backstreet Boys, failed to result in an indictment because of the statute of limitations in California at the time (Moniuszko 2018). Supporting work by Leung and Williams (2019) who contend that male celebrities may attempt to claim that their victims were active, consenting participants of the sexual violence they experienced, Carter and his representatives portrayed the allegations as untrue and stated that the incident was consensual (Moniuszko 2018). Following the dropping of the case, no additional legal actions against him were made and his career has been unaffected by the claims (Moniuszko 2018). This common defense is mirrored by other American men in the entertainment industry, and several men in the Burning Sun case, who present their victims as adult fans who consented to having sex (Leung and Williams 2019; Moniuszko 2018; Peters and Besley 2019). Cases like these are widely accepted as false or seemingly brushed off through bribery and extortion (Moniuszko 2018; Peters and Besley 2019). For these reasons, it is difficult to collect data on sexual violence cases in the entertainment industry.

Because many of the indicted and guilty offenders in the Burning Sun investigation are young male musicians who have large female fanbases, research on the indictments of R. Kelly and Chris

Brown were examined; however, it is important to first note that the media portray men of color in the United States differently than white men. Historical racism within the country has depicted men of color, specifically Black men, as sexual predators, deviants, and are often referred to with dehumanizing terms like “monster” (Mack and McCann 2020). Black men are more likely to be convicted of crimes than any other race because of institutionalized racism that has implemented racial profiling and policing policies against them (Mack and McCann 2020). Antiracism within the United States has also resulted in a higher reporting of crimes committed by black perpetrators in the media and are often given narratives that are drastically more negative than white perpetrators who commit the same or more violent crimes (Mack and McCann 2020). While race is extremely important to understanding crimes and rates of reporting within the United States, it was not a factor in the Burning Sun cases. Therefore, in the context of this literature review, these cases are solely examined as examples of globally popular male musicians that have been convicted or indicted of sexual violence against women.

Leung and Williams’ (2019) research explores American rapper R. Kelly’s “sex cult” and compared the investigation to other high-profile sexual violence cases (i.e. Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein). They found that victims were often fans and expressed being intimidated, coerced, and feared retaliation against themselves or their loved ones (Leung and Williams 2019). Leung and Williams (2019) findings also indicated that without widespread media coverage of the events in a way that humanized the victims, sexual predators like Kelly are unlikely to experience social consequences and diminished reputation. Kelly, who remains in a federal prison without bail, is awaiting his next trial for alleged bribery, extortion, and intimidation of witnesses and victims to interfere with the rulings of his sexual violence cases (Meisner 2020). Should he be found guilty, Kelly, like Weinstein, will be prosecuted for using his power to silence victims and their families.

Although R. Kelly is likely to face conviction in the future, American rapper Chris Brown has already been formally convicted of violence against women (Breedon 2019; Desta and McDermott 2019; Salam 2018). In 2009, Brown pled guilty to felony assault of his former girlfriend, Barbadian

pop musician Rihanna (Breedon 2019; Salam 2018). He was sentenced to five-years' probation and six months' community service. Years later, Brown allegedly aided the rape of a woman in his home by forcefully holding her down to prevent her from escaping the man raping her, but the case was settled outside of court (Breedon 2019; Salam 2018). More recently, in 2019, Parisian police arrested Brown after allegations arose that he raped a woman he had coerced from a club to a hotel with him (Breedon 2019; Shepard 2019). There, she claims she was raped by Chris Brown, his friend, and bodyguard but there has been no updated media coverage of the case since Brown's second failure to appear in May 2019 (Breedon 2019; Desta and McDermott 2019; Shepard 2019).

Despite his felony record and miscellaneous misdemeanors not mentioned here, Brown still boasts a large fanbase and continues to work in the entertainment industry without much change to his reputation (Breedon 2019; Given 2019). While in many ways the status and power of accused perpetrators such as Weinstein, Carter, Kelly, and Brown afford them special privileges, the sociodemographic status of victims in these cases often also affects the media coverage they, as victims, receive. According to Leung and Williams (2019), the media oppresses and silences female victims and those of lower socioeconomic statuses. Assuming the victims are not prominent figures in the entertainment industry or public officials, victim experiences are often brushed off or reported on with less authority (Leung and Williams 2019). Although this is not the case for all victims of sexual violence, many endure greater criticism when famous celebrities and musicians are involved.

The case of Chris Brown and Rihanna serves as an example of the way social status and power play a role in case perception by the public since, unlike his other accusers, Rihanna is also a prominent figure in the entertainment industry. Even more, though, the importance of gender is highlighted as, despite visible bruising and injury, Brown remained favored by the public. Rothman, Nagaswaran, Johnson, Adams, Scrivens, and Baughman (2012) found that just under 50% of adolescents in Boston believed Rihanna did something to deserve being physically battered by Chris Brown even after seeing the photo of her bruised and swollen face. Despite both artists being

famous, abuse of women by men is normalized in the media reporting of such incidents (Rothman et al. 2012).

The normalization of these crimes supports public perceptions that men who are considered attractive or successful, by societal expectations, do not commit rape (Alexandra 2019; Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross 2001; Matoesian 1993; Nyúl, Kende, Engyel, and Szabó 2018). An investigation led by KQED reporter Rae Alexandra (2019) examined public comments by industry leaders and Brown's friends. In one example from Alexandra (2019), American rapper Stiches stated:

There is no way in the world that Chris Brown has to rape any woman... That man can literally pick out of a hundred women at each show. 'You're coming home. You're coming home...' Whoever makes these fake allegations, you deserve to die.

Rape myths that suggest that physically attractive males and people in positions of power do not commit crimes are perpetuated by hypermasculine norms in media coverage. Victim attempts to seek punishment of their high-status abusers are likely to face retaliation and are viewed as an attempt to ruin the career and private life of successful men (Alexandra 2019; Knight et al. 2001; Leung and Williams 2019; Matoesian 1993; Nyúl et al. 2018; Rothman et al. 2012). Support of perpetrators and passive participation in upholding these values are harmful to society and contribute to growing stigma and victim blaming (Edgar 2014; Leung and Williams 2019).

Building on literature about celebrities in the United States, this research seeks to understand if these rape myths are present in South Korean news media. Because the rapid globalization of K-pop has contributed to global fandoms that idolize South Korean celebrities, it is important to know whether sexual predators in the entertainment industry there are provided similar opportunities to exploit fans and mold public perceptions that allow them to get away with their crimes.

### **(re)Victimization, Ideal Victimhood, and Stigma**

Normalized misogyny leads to underreporting of sexual crimes, heightened victim stigma, victim-blaming, and lawsuits of defamation (An, Moon, Kim, Lee-Trauler, Jeon, Cho, Sung, and Hong 2019; Hasunuma and Shin 2019; J. Kim 2018). Additionally, victims who seek assistance are often revictimized by institutions in place to help them (Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, and Barnes 2001a;



Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, and Barnes 2001b; Finkelhor, Wolak, and Berliner 2001; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). Historical underreporting in South Korea is associated with a cultural refusal to take accusations of rape seriously, thus making victims fear that their claims will be ignored if they contact authorities (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). A study by Yi, Lamb, and Jo (2014) found that South Korean police officers rarely follow protocols when interviewing victims of sexual abuse. Nearly all officers in their study utilized a question format that is most likely to result in inaccurate recollections of victim experiences (Yi et al. 2014). Yi et al. (2014) believes these practices are insensitive to victim trauma and can result in misclassifications, unfiled reports, loss of victim testimony and/or evidence, and perpetrators not being appropriately punished for their crimes (Frazier and Haney 1996). Additionally, their actions may discourage victims from trusting police in the future (Frazier and Borgida 1992; Yi et al. 2014).

Cases that advance to courts increase the opportunity for victims to be revictimized further. According to Calton and Cattaneo (2014), it is the court system that subjects victims to the most trauma. There, they must, again, relay their traumatic experience(s) to prosecutors, the judge, and jury all while being within feet of their abuser. The victim is positioned as on trial while everyone passes judgement about their character, claim, evidence, and testimony. Historically, judges have had more sympathy for accused males, which can lead to case dismissal or reduced punitive measures (Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Matoesian 1993). A sense of justice is rarely provided and many victims report feeling as though the accused's rights are more important than their own (Frazier and Borgida 1992; Frazier and Haney 1996; Matoesian 1993).

Regardless of whether victims seek help, they are often revictimized by socially constructed beliefs about who can or cannot be a victim based on the 'ideal victim' model and expected behaviors of sexual predators (Christie 1986; Matoesian 1993). According to Christie (1986), the 'ideal victim' is characterized as someone blameless, either very young or old, weak or unable to defend themselves, and respectable by society's standards. Adding to characterizations, victims are expected to escape the abuser (without harming them), immediately report the crime to police and seek help, not be

under the influence of any substances, not have exposed skin or tight-fitting clothing, and not have been aggressive or assertive toward the offender among many other restricting expectations that make it impossible to be seen as blameless by many (Christie 1986; DiBernardo 2018; Roberts, Donovan and Durey 2019). Additionally, if the perpetrator does not fit the expected standards of sexual predators (typically defined as unattractive, of a low-socioeconomic status, and social outcasts that suffer from mental illness), their actions are often dismissed or forgiven (Christie 1986; Matoesian 1993). These societal standards of victimhood infringe on some victim's help seeking behaviors because they torment themselves with fears of having deserved the sexual violence (DiBernardo 2018; Matoesian 1993; Roberts, Donovan and Durey 2019).

Sexual violence victims largely do not seek support when struggling with mental illness because of these stigmatized reporting experiences and revictimization (Briere and Jordan 2004; Lauber and Rossler 2007; Simmel, Postmus, and Lee 2016). Consistent with research in other countries, in a study funded by the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, An et al. (2019) found that most victims of sexual violence are diagnosed with severe lifelong disorders (Briere and Jordan 2004). Underreporting and low rates of mental health treatments also contribute to high rates of suicide (An et al. 2019; Chen, Wu, Yousef, and Yip. 2011). According to the OECD (2020), South Korea has the highest rate of suicide in the world; however, stigma towards mental health issues and substance abuse make it difficult for those with severe trauma to discuss their experiences (Chen et al. 2011; Lauber and Rossler 2007).

The media, as a socializer, plays a significant role in contributing to victim stigma and beliefs about of ideal victimhood. According to Anastasio and Costa (2004), the ways in which the media describe a crime, victim, and perpetrator will determine how the audience interprets the importance. They found that female victims were less likely to be provided pseudonyms than male victims and fewer details were given about the attacks (Anastasio and Costa 2004). The imbalance in journalistic reporting methods overall generated less empathy for female victims and communicated that their experiences were less important (Anastasio and Costa 2004). By failing to humanize the female

victims with the same care that male victims received, they are seen as more deserving of blame or perceived to be untrustworthy (Anastasio and Costa 2004). These findings highlight the importance of understanding the South Korean media's interpretation of the Burning Sun case. Should these same issues be present in the media's portrayal of the case, it is likely that victims will be dealt additional trauma.

### **Social Change Attempts**

Stigma faced by victims of sexual violence deters them from seeking emotional and physical support, reporting their experiences, and pursuing punishment against their abusers. Combined with social beliefs and norms that men and boys are entitled to greater privileges, women and girl victims often blame themselves or their actions for the sexual violence they experience. Accounting for the challenges victims face socially and legally upon reporting sexual assault, social movements addressing stigma and victim blaming have gained momentum in South Korea.

Inspired by the Me Too movement in the United States, South Korean prosecutor Ji-hyun Suh publicly announced her experiences as a victim of sexual assault and discrimination by a senior public official on live television with JTBC in January 2018 (Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Jo 2018). Her claim pushed back against societal expectations for women to ignore issues of sexual assault because it is the "cost for being in the workplace" (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). JTBC framed her story as sexual violence silenced by fundamental cultural stigma and gender power dynamics. At the time, it was the largest sexual violence coverage in South Korean media history (M. Lee 2019). JTBC's coverage of Ji-hyun Suh's story encouraged other victims to come forward online under an anonymous veil of safety, but they continue to remain stigmatized by society.

A survey by the Korea Women's Development Institute (2019) on attitudes towards Me Too indicated more than half of the male respondents aged 20-30 had negative and unsupportive views of feminism (M. Lee 2019). Like other feminist movements, Me Too faces harsh criticism in South Korea and is silenced by social ridicule and defamation lawsuits against victims (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). Much of the male population view feminism and the Me Too movement as a form of "witch

hunting” against men. The phrase witch hunt, which has historically been associated with gender and power, is problematic in this sense as characterizes sexual assault as mythical, fictitious or something that is expected to be tolerated in society (Kunst, Bailey, Prendergast, and Gundersen 2018; Lanius 2019). The publicity of the Me Too movement has resulted in widespread denial of sexual assault accusations and labeling of such claims as a witch hunt because it questions the credibility of the claims and victim’s experience. Additionally, social anxiety about the Me Too movement is generated from a slow recognition that unwanted sexual advances are abusive and that treating women as property or sexual conquests can lead to punishment and social ridicule (Kunst et al. 2018; Lanius 2019).

These attempts to address gender inequality and sexual exploitation occurred the year before the Burning Sun investigations began. With much of the push back against sexual violence and molka in the country rising through digital means, it’s probable that the anonymity that the internet provides is what made it possible for the CCTV footage of the assault to be leaked. However, views about feminism and the Me Too movement were still widely viewed as negative by the male population in South Korea making it unclear how the media interpreted and presented the crimes to the public (Korea Women’s Development Institute 2019; M. Lee 2019).

### **Addressing Gaps in the Literature**

Extant literature offers historical context on gender inequality and sexual violence in South Korea. What remains unclear, though, is how news media in South Korea portray and frame sexual violence and gender inequality to the public. To address this gap, the present research uses the Burning Sun investigation as a case study to explore newspaper representation of sexual violence against women. Because the male perpetrators of this case are of a higher social status than the female victims, this research applies social conflict and feminist theory to guide the analysis on hierarchical relationships of domination and subordination based on social categories. Frame analysis is applied to determine sociolinguistic meaning and media framing. The following section will explore the ways in which these theories guide my research and how data was analyzed.

## Theoretical Framework

### Media Framing

News media consciously disseminates information to shape audience perceptions and meaning through the process of framing. Framing analysis theory explains that individuals “actively classify, organize, and interpret our life experiences to make sense of them” (Pan and Kosicki 1993: 56). The meaning society obtains from the media frame is applied to other aspects of our lives and reflected in perspectives about social issues (DiBennardo 2018; Ferrell and Websdale 1999; Fischel 2016; Gillespie, Jewitt and Oyama 2004; Richards, Givens, and Smith 2013; Goffman [1974] 1986; Stack 2003). Linguistically, media representation relays a sense of importance, or a lack thereof, when discussing social problems to the public (Gillespie et al. 2013).

There is little research on media coverage of sexual violence against women in South Korea beyond the scope of the Me Too movement. While the current study does not seek to compare countries, findings from research on the United States is useful in providing insight on another historically patriarchal country and how the media discourse contributes to public awareness. According to several researchers, newspapers often focus on male perspectives leading to an under-representation and over-sexualization of women (Collins 2011; Schwartz 2011; Zoch and VanSlyke Turk 1998). In a U.S. study from 2018 conducted by DiBennardo (2018), female sexual assault victim narratives are largely sexualized and framed them in ways that lack empathy and present their accusations as questionable. These victims are held to the standards of the ideal victim model which views children as the only innocent and blameless victim (DiBennardo 2018).

Western media sources contribute to twisted gender perceptions by generating a greater ratio of male perspectives and voices than female (Wood 1994). Consistent with feminist theory, the dominance of male perspectives distorts societal understandings of gender in which “women are unimportant or invisible... [and] portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender” (Wood 1994:31). These representations normalize violence against women, provide inaccurate information on rape myths, and encourage victim blaming (Wood 1994).

Victim reporting is also stigmatized by the way the media portrays male aggression and female passivity as a natural element of male and female relationships. Abusive behaviors by males are accepted as a component of masculinity and high testosterone levels (Wood 1994).

Research on the linguistic framing by journalists has also indicated that use of passive or active voice contributes to social acceptance of rape myths and violence against women (Frazer and Miller 2009; Henley, Miller, and Beazley 1995). In a study conducted by Henley et al. (1995), male news readers perceived passively written articles about sexual violence against women as less harmful crimes than those that used active voice. Additionally, males viewed the perpetrators and accused as less responsible for the crimes when passive voice was used (Henley et al. 1995). Women and men both were more accepting of rape accusations and violence against women when explained passively as well (Henley et al. 1995).

Passive voice is used more often than active voice in articles examining sexual violence in the United States (Frazer and Miller 2009). Frazer and Miller (2009) analyzed the framing of articles about sexual violence when either a male attacked a female or a female attacked a male and the gender of the journalist. They found that the gender of those involved had a significant impact on the tone that was used, but the gender of the writer did not. Female attackers were written about actively while male perpetrators were more likely to be written about passively. Male victims were written about actively and female victims were written about passively. Their findings highlight sociocultural norms that value men and their experiences more than women. Therefore, passive and active tone are used to demonstrate the stance of the journalist which often discredit female victims and increase the responsibility of female perpetrators (Henley et al. 1995; Frazer and Miller 2009). Their actions actively uphold male privileges and rape myth acceptance (Henley et al. 1995; Frazer and Miller 2009).

Besides specific sociolinguistic meaning and gender representation, the ways media present their article or “frame” the story will have an effect on how important issues are perceived (Englehart 2014; Feezell, Glazier, and Boydston 2019; Iyengar 1990). Media frame portrays story coverage as

either episodic or thematic. Episodic framing presents social issues as single, unrelated incidents of investigation (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). Thematic coverage connects information to broader systemic issues thus provoking an understanding that the occurrence may be widespread (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). According to Englehart (2014:4), “framing affect the attribution of responsibility for sexual violence against women to either society as a whole, as well as government and legal structures (thematic), or to the individuals involved, thus relieving society and the public from feelings of societal responsibility (episodic).” The media frame of gendered violence structures public awareness and discourse of social problems (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). More so, using a feminist media theory, victim testimony should overwhelmingly exceed perpetrator testimony whenever possible to avoid further victimization (Steiner 2014).

In my own research, media framing played an important role in shaping my coding method. I applied media framing techniques to analyze the frame as either episodic or thematic, the tone and perspective, and also who or what the media chose to be the subject of the article. Using a feminist, social conflict, and media framing theories, I examined language for both explicit and implicit meaning through verbiage as well. Media framing allowed me to understand if the journalists perceived these issues to be significant for society to understand or something to sensationalize and capitalize on.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminism, as a movement, is defined by resistance to oppressions stemming from socially regulated and constructed identities of gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, disability, and sexual orientation. This ethos is reflected in feminist theories which articulates these intersectional identities as historical sources of social stratification that escalate matters of inequality, inequity, and access, deeming some (often white men) as deserving of greater rights and privileges (Crenshaw 1991; Gerassi 2015; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). Although, these tensions manifest differently in each society, there are significant differences in the ways that gender identities specifically shape an individual’s lived experiences and opportunities (Gerassi 2015; Yodanis 2004).

Social constructions of gender and sexuality are stratified by society into organizational hierarchies that have long sustained beliefs that a woman's identity and value is tied to their ability to reproduce and provide a nurturing, caregiver role for males and children (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Gerassi 2015; Loue 2001). This affects every aspect of a woman's lived experience. According to Dorothy Smith's (1974) feminist standpoint theory, women and girl's lives are governed by male experiences and perspectives, or standpoints, that dictate social control and norms. A woman's standpoint is left out and their experiences are subjected to stigma if they do not meet social expectations stemming from knowledge generated by men (Gerassi 2015; Smith 1974). Furthermore, this prevents women from being equally accepted, integrated, and connected to society as they are placed in a subservient position by social institutions. They experience a bifurcated consciousness that rivals their intersectional identities (Smith 1974). Privileges afforded to males through their dominant role are thus reliant on the maintenance of heteropatriarchy and are upheld in society. Social relationships are constrained by these beliefs and biases from domineering male standpoints that exclude and devalue women and girls (Gerassi 2015; Malbon, Carson, and Yates 2018; Smith 1974).

The social imbalances that feminist theories explore are applied to existent literature on gendered violence. According to feminist theory, women and girls are devalued by beliefs and norms that stem from male standpoints. With knowledge generating from male standpoints, institutions and laws are also framed with standards that perpetuate inequalities (Mackinnon 1987; Smith 1974). For example, laws in both the United States and South Korea use the "reasonable/ordinary person" test. This test examines the situation and characteristics of both the victim and the perpetrator to assume if any other person in their situation would likely do the same things they did. Essentially, it questions whether any other ordinary person would believe either the victim or perpetrator's actions were reasonable in the circumstances. MacKinnon (1987) uses a feminist lens to explore this issue and explains that sexual consent becomes further muddled by these issues as well. They explain, "measuring consent from the socially reasonable, meaning objective man's, point of view reproduces



the same problem under a more elevated label” (MacKinnon 1987:181). Tying back into feminist standpoint theory, if reasonability and knowledge derive from male perspectives, women are already placed in a poor position beneath those with greater social capital that they accuse (Gerassi 2015; Konstantopoulos, Ahn, Alpert, Cafferty, McGahan, Williams, Palmer Castor, Wolferstan, Purcell, and Burke 2013; MacKinnon 1987). Additionally, when social imbalances place males and their perspectives as standards of authority, intent, or mens rea<sup>7</sup>, also becomes harder to prove and can complicate criminal legal proceedings and reporting (MacKinnon 1987; Smith 1974).

Although feminist framework suggests that there is no single reason why sexual violence occurs, historical issues of power, control, and hegemonic patriarchy in South Korea are factors contributing to high rates of sexual violence and underreporting. Feminist theory overall shaped my approach in framing my research question and coding journalist’s language in the articles sampled. For instance, I examined how reporters talked about victims and their perpetrators and which perspectives about the cases were widely reported on. These perspectives, should they also represent a male standpoint, would likely misrepresent victims and their experiences. Taking this into consideration, passive voices about victim experiences was also important to understanding which side of a case the media believes to be true or important.

### **Social Conflict Theory**

In conjunction with feminist theory, social conflict theory guides the ways in which this study examines social stratification and sexual violence against women. Social conflict theory explains that the maintenance of social inequalities are the result of exploitative relationships of domination and subordination based on social categories, like gender and class, that compete for privileges and authority (Mooney, Knox, and Schacht 2007). The existence of patriarchal standards and norms in society exacerbate class conflicts and sexual violence because high-status offenders have greater opportunities to escape punishment or be let off easy. From an economic standpoint, women and

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<sup>7</sup> Mens rea translates to guilty/criminal mind. It is found in “strict liability” or “absolute liability” tort and criminal laws in South Korea (Ministry of Government Legislation, for more information see <https://law.go.kr>).

girls are treated as a currency to be traded and exploited around the world for sexual conquests of the wealthy and privileged.

The treatment of women and girls as sexual property by high-status individuals through a social conflict theory lens was examined by Maas, McCauley, Bonomi, and Leija (2018). In their study, Maas et al. (2018) found that rape culture is often perpetuated by news stories about politicians who have committed acts of sexual violence. Celebrities who are accused of sexual violence are often seen as hypermasculine which condones these behaviors in patriarchal societies. This ultimately minimizes the claims of victims (Maas et al. 2018). In the case of Donald Trump, who has been accused of sexual abuse on numerous occasions and often excuses his own sexist and abusive behaviors publicly, “locker room talk” and “boys will be boys” mentalities continue to contribute to apathy towards victims and discrediting of their experiences (Maas et al. 2018). By excusing these high-status celebrities, aggression and violent behaviors become neutralized aspects of masculinity that is expected and maintained in social relationships and institutions (Maas et al. 2018; Sykes and Matza 1957).

These power dynamics along with patriarchal norms make reporting efforts even more difficult for victims. For this research, social conflict theory guided the way I sought to understand the perspectives the media was providing to readers. Because victims were not celebrities, I looked for ways in which their treatment from celebrities may differ. Most importantly, social conflict theory is applied in the way I examine credibility and the media’s discussion of the crimes. If they are spun in a way that minimizes the crime, readers may question victim credibility and/or vilify them as actors that sought to cause harm to celebrities.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This thesis employs a mixed method content analysis to examine South Korean newspaper representations of sexual assault in the context of the Burning Sun investigations. This chapter begins with an introduction to the research approach used in this study and why it was most appropriate for answering the research questions. Next, I explain the sample selection process and how preliminary research guided my decision in choosing which keywords were essential to data collection. Then, I explain the coding procedures and data analysis. Finally, I explain the ethical considerations relevant to this research along with my personal reflexivity and positionality.

#### **Methodological Orientation**

Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research methods are carefully chosen to guide the exploration of a sociological phenomenon or answer a research question. Qualitative methods are designed to answer open-ended questions and are utilized to find meaning in social interactions or problems (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The communicative content and underlying meaning found in newspaper journalism is best investigated with qualitative research; however, I opted to using a mixed methodology to ensure that frequency data could be integrated into my analysis. This method allowed me to interpret the significance and frequency behind the linguistic and visual media choices made by newspaper journalists whose framing determines the societal understanding of sexual violence against women in a patriarchal society.

Careful consideration of the research questions and goals led to the decision to utilize a content analysis methodology for this study. Content analysis examines all communicative components within the content that is being explored. This includes a review of verbal and non-verbal communication within the text, photos, videos, and audio for characteristics that are attached to deeper socio-linguistic meanings (Bengtsson 2016; Cho and Lee 2014). It is used to investigate the manifest and latent content within the context it is being analyzed. However, by utilizing content analysis, “conclusions can be drawn about the communicator, the message or text, the situation

surrounding its creation—including the sociocultural background of the communication—and/or the effect of the message” (White and Marsh 2006:27). This is important for the present work considering the purpose to examine the depiction that South Korean news outlets provide to the public about accusations of sexual violence and the experiences of those involved in the Burning Sun investigation.

To build the most effective research model to explore these issues, I adapted a case study research strategy. According to Kohlbacher (2006), combining a case study strategy with a content analysis methodology reduces the generalization of a social phenomenon or problem by considering the factors and circumstances surrounding the incident being investigated. Using this strategy, multiple sources are reviewed to gain a holistic understanding of the sentiment towards sexually violent crimes, victims, and high-status perpetrators within the context of this case.

### **Data Collection**

Several factors contributed to my decision to choose newspaper media over other forms of media coverage on the Burning Sun investigation. First, newspapers “serve to shape popular attitudes and beliefs, act as agents of public education, and can play an important role in determining the policy agenda” (Clegg Smith, Wakefield, Siebel, Szczyпка, Slater, Terry-McElrath, Emery, and Chaloupka 2002). Journalists contribute to societal understanding of the world around them and issues of inequality. Newspapers were therefore selected to see how sexual assault is addressed in a historically patriarchal society during a period of relatively significant cultural and economic change. Second, the availability of newspapers in both print and online format makes it largely accessible to a wider population. This is a convenience that allows anyone to access news at any time or location making journalist’s framing of sexual assault and sources of information regarding the case that much more important (Collins 2011; Schwartz 2011; Zoch and VanSlyke Turk 1998). Lastly, newspapers include notes on original publication dates and may include any subsequent adjustments for corrections, adjustments, or related content. While reporting errors can alter the validity of the information and often go uncorrected (Maier 2007), newspapers are still perceived to be slightly more

trustworthy and credible than television news sources according to audience opinion polls and tracking conducted over the last 40 years in the United States and throughout Asian countries (Johnson and Kaye 1998; Lee T. 2018).

### **Data Sources, Sampling, and Procedures**

Preliminary data sampling included five highly circulated newspapers in South Korea including: the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, *Hankook Ilbo*, and the *Korea Herald Economy*. Although these newspapers present themselves as unbiased, they reflect various socio-political ideologies. I conducted preliminary searches within each newspaper's website to better understand the keywords utilized in articles relating to the Burning Sun investigation; however, these sites lacked advanced search capabilities. To ensure all articles involving the investigation were accounted for, I also performed an advanced Google search for each newspaper with the keyword "Burning Sun." The newspaper websites found 226 articles (excluding the *JoongAng Ilbo*, which required Korean citizenship for open article access), whereas the Google search collected 4,437 articles. The difference of 4,211 articles created a reliability issue.

Acknowledging that the websites themselves had limited functionality, other resources were reviewed until I eventually selected the Korea Integrated News Database System (KINDS). This database compiles and archives data on newspapers throughout South Korea. KINDS provided free access to all news data which allowed me to bypass the Korean citizenship required of membership to the *JoongAng Ilbo* for article review.

Utilizing this new database, a time period was required to ensure that the search results were limited to relevant information. A start date of February 23rd, 2018 was selected based on the opening date of the Club at Le Méridien Seoul Hotel. No crimes related to the Burning Sun investigations are recorded before the club had officially opened. The end date was left open until the final data was collected on June 10th, 2020 to ensure newer articles could be included.

A search through KINDS utilizing the keyword "Burning Sun" and the selected time period for the five newspapers yielded 12,659 articles. To reduce the dataset, keywords were introduced. These

keywords would also ensure that the selected articles would be focused on the sexual violence aspects of the cases in this investigation. Various test phrases and words that are commonly used to describe sexual assault and molka were run through KINDS. A thorough review of the search results provided a simple way to remove duplicates, or articles that would come up with the use of similar words and phrases. I tested 52 vague and explicit words/phrases commonly used to describe sexual violence, assaults, and molka (i.e., trafficking, harassment, attack, spy cam, molka, filming, prostitution, etc.) to gauge how the incidents were described, but I found that these newspapers referred to the sexual crimes in a limited capacity. Several words and phrases were utilized in all articles of interest, making the keyword list significantly smaller than initially expected because there was overlap within articles. After careful review, the final search terms were selected as follows:

- “버닝썬 +” (Burning Sun +) and “성폭행” (Sexual Assault)
- “버닝썬 +” (Burning Sun +) and “성범죄” (Sex Crime / Sexual Offense)
- “버닝썬 +” (Burning Sun +) and “관계” (Sexual Relationship)
- “버닝썬 +” (Burning Sun +) and “강간” (Rape)

Apart from the word “강간” (rape), which was isolated to significantly fewer articles ( $n = 75$ ; less than 5% of the current sample size of 1,615 articles), there was a high frequency of these search terms within South Korean news media to describe elements of the investigations or sexual violence accusations. Initially, I had concerns that my research criteria could overlook other ways the incidents were described, but I did not find that to be the case. All original 52 test phrases, if existing within the data, were found with these four keywords. This ensured all articles would be within the scope of the research study and eliminate any articles that solely focused on other criminal activity involved in this case. Despite these keywords being used as a tool to limit how many articles were to be researched, there was still far too much data ( $N = 1,615$ ) for a single researcher to analyze within a reasonable amount of time.

Review of prior studies on media content analysis led to a decision to reduce the original newspaper source sample size further. Qualitative research and mixed methods are smaller “to

support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry” (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young 2018:2). This allows the study to be more time efficient and diminish the possibility of “exhaustion of sources and ‘saturation’ of categories (limited new knowledge appears to be forthcoming)” (Suter 2012:361). Using 2018 and 2019 data from the Korean Audit Bureau of Certification (KABC), I selected the final three newspapers. The KABC (2018 and 2019) produces annual reports indicating country-wide circulation and readership rankings of all 172 South Korean newspapers. The three highest ranking newspapers by circulation and paid readership happened to be consistent for both 2018 and 2019-- the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo* (ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd respectively). All three newspapers are accessible in print and online for Korean and English-reading audiences.

Utilizing the keyword and time period criteria previously established, a final search through KINDS yielded 1,062 articles. These results were exported to an Excel spreadsheet where they were organized by date of publication and reviewed for duplicates, editorials, and opinion pieces which I removed from the dataset. With more than 800 articles still available, I employed systematic random sampling, which selected “every nth unit from the total population of articles” (Macnamara 2005:13). Every third article was selected for final analysis producing a smaller sample ( $N = 278$ ) from the population of articles relevant to this research.

### **Final Research Sample**

The final sample size included 278 articles from the *Chosun Ilbo* ( $n = 88$ ), *JoongAng Ilbo* ( $n = 126$ ), and *Dong-A Ilbo* ( $n = 64$ ). This sample included articles published on January 29th, 2019 (first article related to the incident) through June 3rd, 2020 (last article published at the time data collection ended). Of the 278 articles, 263 contained embedded images ( $N = 442$ ). Additionally, a single video was included in these articles; however, it contained unrelated material prompting my decision to exclude it from the study. See Table 1 and the Appendix for greater detail.

Table 1. Distribution of articles and visual content by newspaper sources

Newspaper Source	Total Number of Articles	Total Embedded Images per Source
<i>Chosun Ilbo</i>	88	125
<i>JoongAng Ilbo</i>	126	253
<i>Dong-A Ilbo</i>	64	64
<b>Totals</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>442</b>

### Data Analysis

All text and embedded photos from the sample were saved as word documents and backed-up in the format and layout in which they were originally published. The data was then imported into MAXQDA, an analysis software. MAXQDA was chosen specifically for this research as it provides extensive coverage of analysis types (text, video/photos, audio, webpages, etc.) and tools (coding, visualization, query, etc.). In this program, I created analytical memos throughout the initial reading of each article. According to Saldaña (2009), analytical memos are an important step for research as it encourages critical thought and reflection about the data being analyzed. The analytical memos contained my personal reflection on things that stood out, seemed to require deeper inquiry, provided descriptive data, or generally seemed important. This varied from my own observations about phrases that were passive, indirect, insensitive, or potentially misleading for readers.

Following the initial review and memo process, articles were then coded line-by-line based on manifest (observable; objective) content and patterns. According to Saldaña (2009), “A pattern can be characterized by similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation” (6). I identified patterns by observing the similarities and differences in linguistic choices made by journalists and coded frequency as a result of tools built into the MAXQDA software.

After the first line-by-line coding was complete, I conducted a second round of coding to further investigate the initial analysis. In this stage, the latent (subjective underlying interpretation) content data was coded within condensed units of meaning for each individual article. These coded units are based on my probe into the specific linguistic and visual characteristics that imply greater meaning. This qualitative coding procedure allowed me to make observations about what the data is trying to



convey to the publication's audience (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). This final process utilized focused coding procedures which helped narrow down of the findings of previous codes and memos (Emerson et al. 2011).

Visual data was initially coded as distinct units of analysis, separate from the text in the first round of coding; however, they were integrated in the second coding phase which focused on latent context. This did not create an additional dataset; but, instead, allowed the manifest, line-by-line coding to report observations most effectively as separate observations. In many cases, photos were used as a tool to give context and symbolically represent a position, as determined by the journalist, for audiences to take on the issues being reported. MAXQDA's frequency counts were revisited after the completion of the final coding. This provided a unit of measurement for me to review my coded observations against. This numerical data was used as a comparative measure to determine if coding and frequency agreed upon who the focus of an article, or set of articles, was. It was beneficial in the creation of categories as well.

Once coding was complete, I placed codes into distinct categories. These categories were determined by the connections and sub-connections of the dataset. Not all categories were mutually exclusive and could be compounded further. These categories were collapsed into smaller sub-categories where there were overarching similarities and connections. For example, initial codes that included the vilification of a victim based on their assumed decision to consume alcohol, attend a club, and/or be sexually active, were collapsed into either victim-blaming or stigma. Rather than assume there is single meaning behind each word or phrase, it was possible for codes to be placed in more than one theme depending on the implications that were present. The process utilized a taxonomic approach, as described by Saldaña (2009), in which the similarities, results of specific actions, and/or meanings were woven into relationships and collapsed into more emerging conceptualizations and themes of focus. The result of this compounding distribution process was the creation of three central themes which are discussed in the findings chapter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There were no expected ethical issues or harm associated with this study; however, special considerations were made throughout the research process to ensure that any sensitive information found was protected. As for most research utilizing secondary newspaper data, it is unlikely that a researcher will come across any private and/or personal information that should not be publicly disclosed. Journalists have specific restrictions on what they are allowed to print due to liability concerns. These restrictions are a source of protection as sexual crimes require an additional level of sensitivity and confidentiality to protect parties involved. Victims and survivors have the right to not be publicly named and revictimized by the media just as perpetrators, or the suspects, have the right to fair trials. Considering that this is a mixed method content analysis, all issues surrounding implicit and explicit meanings behind word choices in English and Korean have been made to the best of my ability by reviewing additional resources and conducting peer editing sessions with academic peers and advisors for validity and reliability.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

This research is rooted in a desire to understand how news sources, specifically print media, can perpetuate gender discrimination and sexual violence against women in societies around the world. To perform research of this capacity, it was important to be conscious and critical of my own biases to remain as objective as possible. Generalizations about sexual assault and cultural gender norms, ultimately constructed from misinformation, assumptions (based on education, personal experience, or otherwise), and biases, lead to data that create false realities that other and exoticize (Emerson et al. 2011). Specifically, when conducting mixed method research, positionality and reflexivity become important factors in producing an ethical and informed analysis. Reflexivity “helps us to see those worlds as shaped, not by variables or structures that stand above or apart from people, but rather as meaning systems negotiated and constructed in and through relationships” (Emerson et al. 2011:248). The examination of additional historical information was critical to avoiding ethnocentric deductions in which cultures are measured by my own experiences and reasoning.

My reflection, or reflexivity, throughout this study required a constant lens of self-critique and understanding the perspectives of the people that this research focuses on. I evaluated the way I collected data and consistently questioned how my findings would be analyzed for meaning that is representative of the sample. Cultural relativism, not to be confused with moral relativism, is a “methodological position that explains the practices and ideas of other cultures within the terms of their own cosmologies, without necessarily sanctioning them” (Howson 2009:4). Essentially, cultural relativism focuses on understanding a culture from the culture and people itself. I utilized this reflexivity strategy throughout my research process.

My positionality and identity place me as an outsider to most of the research I am most interested in, including this study. I am not South Korean and have never lived in the country. I am a white American female conducting research on a country I have no connection to. I recognize that my privilege as a white woman, bias, and westernized education are potential barriers in this study because my knowledge stems from my American upbringing and experiences which differ from the population I am investigating. Despite the concerns I have as an outsider, I am confident that my research was conducted ethically and coded to the best of my ability. The interest I have in exploring criminality and gender inequalities in South Korea is not to compare it to another country nor to form criticism, but instead to analyze how sexual violence is represented in the media within a South Korean context. The few ways in which I could be considered to be an insider to South Korean culture, for which I do not claim to be, is limited to my interest in South Korean pop-culture over the last two decades. All research was conducted with professional academic reflexivity in acknowledgment of my own personal biases and positionality as an outsider to this culture and country.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS

Analysis of the 278 articles from the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo* yielded three distinct themes: Tactics of Minimization, Trivialization, and Victim-blaming, Questioning Victim Credibility, Male Privilege and Power (see Table 2). First, I explain the semantics and framing that compose findings of minimization, trivialization, and victim-blaming. In this section I present examples of sensationalized language, passive tone, and varied consent-implying phrasing about the crimes that journalists used to blame victims. Second, the tactics that questioned victim credibility and character are examined. Here, I explain how journalists diminished the accusations against male celebrities by making victims appear unreasonable and unreliable. Lastly, the heavy use of male voices and perspectives are identified as dominating the overall coverage of sexual violence cases. Table 2 represents the presence of these themes within the articles examined.

Table 2. Distribution of articles by theme

Theme	Number of Articles	Percentage of Articles
Tactics of Minimization, Trivialization, and Victim-blaming	269	97%
Questioning Victim Credibility	163	59%
Male Privilege and Power	278	100%

Note: Themes are not mutually exclusive as mentioned in the Methods chapter.

#### **Tactics of Minimization, Trivialization, and Victim-blaming**

Journalists made linguistic decisions in their representation of the Burning Sun investigation that demonstrated minimization, trivialization, and victim-blaming which was present in approximately 97% of the article sample ( $n = 269$ ). Coverage of Burning Sun was mostly represented through an episodic frame ( $n = 264$ ). Only 5% ( $n = 14$ ) of the articles were framed thematically. Although articles were all presented under the context that they were related to sex crimes within the Burning Sun investigation, each article presented the information as separate, isolated incidents, ignoring connective patterns of sexual violence and criminal behavior. These long-term criminal acts and the

ways that they effect the country are, therefore, minimized and trivialized by journalists when presented through this frame (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). Consistent with literature on framing theory, the use of episodic framing placed the responsibility of the incident on the involved parties, either the victim or perpetrator, rather than posing the crimes as social problems that are the result of inequities and gender norms in the country (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). The result of such framing, while not measured in this study, is more likely to influence beliefs that sexually violent crimes are uncommon or that the accusation is fabricated (Englehart 2014; Wood 1994).

The 14 articles that were framed thematically mentioned the Burning Sun investigation in discussions about on-going social justice protests for women's rights, drug trafficking, and molka crime statistics in South Korea. Information about sex crimes as a national issue and social problem was missing from these thematic articles and, instead, journalists framed sex crimes from the Burning Sun cases as: issues women are protesting ( $n = 9$ ), international drug trafficking ( $n = 3$ ), and use of the dark web for molka crimes ( $n = 2$ ). By framing sexual violence as a woman's issue or sensationalizing the act of protesting against sexual violence, crimes are trivialized and victims are blamed. In mentioning issues of drug trafficking, blame was assigned to other countries, namely China, and their citizens. This provided an avenue of admonishing crime statistics in the country.

Discourses about the dark web in two thematic articles presented sexual abusers as blameless and focused more on the availability and ease of access to molka from the Burning Sun case. In a *Chosun Ilbo* article titled "'Scarlet letters' in the names of portal related search terms," the issue of secondary female victims was brought to public attention (R. Kwak and A. Choi 2019). As one of the most informative thematically framed articles within the sample, reporters R. Kwak and A. Choi (2019) provided data on increased search word frequency for Naver, Daum<sup>8</sup>, and Google about women implicated or assumed to be involved in the Burning Sun case. They claim that anonymous posters

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<sup>8</sup> Naver and Daum are South Korean web portals that provide web search functions, site hosting, email, and messaging services like Google.

on social media began to circulate fabricated lists that accuse women in the entertainment industry of being involved and links to leaked molka from the case files were spread. Early in the article they state these sites are “indiscriminately spreading false information... raising the secondary damage of specific people” (R. Kwak and A. Choi 2019). However, they then point out that a basic search through these sites with an accused celebrity’s name will result in a list of female celebrity names that could have been involved or are recognized as deviant for having been caught smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol in public, or have been victims of sexual violence in the past (R. Kwak and A. Choi 2019).

Rather than focus on the crime, defamation, or the ways that search engines perpetuate sexual violence, R. Kwak and A. Choi (2019) drew attention to known sexual assault survivors, possible victims of this case, the ease of finding molka online, and female entertainers who have histories of drug and alcohol use. Additionally, the title itself includes the mention of “scarlet letters” which references *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, a fictitious book that investigates gendered social stigma, sin, sympathy, and adultery. Using the sensationalized title, “‘Scarlet letters’ in the names of portal related search terms,” both primary and secondary victims are referred to as “names” related to search terms (accused celebrity abusers) and marked by the journalist’s affiliation of them with the scarlet letter. Although this could be used to evoke sympathy for the victims, I argue it appears to further stigmatize victims by dehumanizing and devaluing their individual experiences by categorizing them all as such (Anastasio and Costa 2004).

While the role of search engines and the dark web use in sexual violence cases are important social problems requiring public attention, the thematic framing of this article encourages a negative discourse about women and victims that could generate increased search results which the reporters recognize as problematic. Using feminist theory to better understand the framing of this article, I also found that a male standpoint is present throughout the entire article. The primary reporter for this article, R. Kwak, is a man and all of the experts quoted in the article, a professor and lawyer, are both men as well. This suggests that the journalist did not feel a female standpoint or perspective on these

issues was considered of value (Anastasio and Costa 2004; Gerassi 2015; Smith 1974; Wood 1994). Overall, the context in these thematically framed articles provided mixed messages about the Burning Sun investigation and minimized sexual abuse.

In addition to framing issues, reporters referred to incidents with sensationalized verbiage, which stated the investigation of these crimes were “unusual” (D. Kim 2019a; H. Choi 2019c; K. Sohn 2019b; Kim, Cho, and Yoon 2019; Kwon and Park 2019), “controversial” (H. Choi 2019b; H. Kim 2019c; H. Kim 2019e; Sohn and Lee 2019; Y. Kwon 2019b), or described the case as a “scandal” (H. Yoon 2019; Kwak and Choi 2019; Lee and Pyo 2019; Min 2019; Y. Baek 2019a). Framing the articles with this language instills a position that these crimes are not happening on a larger scale and that it is out of the norm for such a case to be investigated (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). As a largely underreported crime in South Korea, sexual violence is being presented by journalists as an uncommon occurrence which affects the way readers interpret these incidents as something they or their loved ones will never have to be concerned with (An et al. 2019; Anastasio and Costa 2004; Christie 1986; Mateoesian 1993). Moreover, this diminishes the importance of reporting which is likely to discourage other victims from coming forward (Christie 1986; Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Mateoesian 1993).

Furthermore, none of the articles from this research sample provided victim resources or police contact information. This demonstrates a lack of interest in resolving the case and fails to provide a trauma-informed approach. Because news media acts as an institution of socialization, there is a public reliance on these newspapers to educate them about these social problems and how they should feel about them (Anastasio and Costa 2004; Silverblatt 2004). By not providing the public with resources to seek help or report, they are downplaying the severity of the crime. The results of such support stigmatized views of sexual violence victims, underreporting, and mental health care (An et al. 2019; Anastasio and Costa 2004; Chen et al. 2011; Lauber and Rossler 2007). The comprehensive message is void of empathy to victims.

Minimization and trivialization were also present in the journalist's use of passive tone throughout the articles. Passive tone and verbs were used to describe crimes committed by celebrities and victim accusations, whereas active tone was used with statements of defense for celebrities, hinting at the individual journalist's own judgment about the incident and overall disbelief of the victims (Frazer and Miller 2009; Henley et al. 1995). Commonly used phrases included: "was accused" (H. Choi 2019e; J. Jeong 2019c; J. Kim 2019b; K. Park 2020; O. Kwon and H. Choi 2019; Y. Baek 2019b), "was sexually assaulted" (H. Chae 2019c; H. Park 2019a; S. Hao 2019d; Y. Kwon 2019c), and "was assaulted" (D. Kim and G. Lee 2019; E. Kim 2019c; H. Kim 2019a; H. Kwon 2019a; K. Sohn 2019a; S. Hao 2019c). The use of these passive phrases changes the interpretation of the actions of the subjects in the sentence (Henley et al. 1995).

Although victims were not directly quoted in articles, reference to victim claims and on-going police investigations were described passively. In an article from the *JoongAng Ilbo*, Y. Kwon (2019c) describes multiple perpetrator rape as the following:

SBS<sup>9</sup> reported that there was a situation in which a woman, A, who was familiar with Jung Joon-young and singer Choi Jong-hoon (29), was subjected to group rape by them. According to reports, A lost their memory after drinking in a hotel suite with Jung Joon-young, Choi Jong-hoon, and a Burning Sun employee after Jung Joon-young's fan signing event and claimed that they were sexually assaulted afterwards.

In this example there is variation between the passive and active tone. Their use of passive and active tone manipulates who is given agency by the reporter (Frazer and Miller 2009; Henley et al. 1995). Rather than use active voice and directly state the reported claim, that Jung Joon-young Jung, Jong-hoon Choi, and the Burning Sun employee raped A, Y. Kwon (2019c) first notes the relationship with the woman and two men and then indirectly states that she "was subjected to group rape by them." The phrases "was subjected to" and "claimed that they were sexually assaulted afterwards" are both passive descriptions that use different verbs to describe the multiple perpetrator rape. This impacts the reader's understanding of the crime by removing the direct action from the subjects of the

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<sup>9</sup> SBS stands for "Seoul Broadcasting System" which is a television and radio company. In this example they are referring to a news program on SBS.



sentence. Without using explicit language to describe the crimes with active voice, readers will be unable to determine the severity of the claim and it will be perceived as less damaging for the victim. However, this journalist also uses active voice to state “A lost their memory after drinking in a hotel suite.” Use of active tone suggests that the reporter believes the victim lost their memory and assigns some responsibility to them based on their use of alcohol and the location the incident occurred. This form of victim blaming is present elsewhere by other journalists who wrote about this incident.

When the victim’s accusation is described passively, their claim is minimized, suppressed, and presented as questionable to readers. Additionally, the accused and their testimony were either directly quoted or given active voice, making their claims appear to be more factual and direct. In this sense, the use of passive or active tone reflected the journalist’s belief as to who is responsible (Frazer and Miller 2009; Henley et al. 1995).

Journalists also used ambiguous and euphemistic terms to describe the sex crimes which inferred consent. The term “rape” was rarely used to describe non-consensual, involuntary sexual penetration and was only present in 22 articles which was slightly less than 8% of the total sample size. Instead, reporters relied on verbs that implied consent and intimacy, like “sex” (H. Chae 2019b; H. Park 2019a; K. Oh 2019a; S. Hao 2019b; S. Lee 2019), “sexual intercourse” (B. Jeong 2019; D. Kim 2019b; E. Kim 2019a; K. Sohn 2019c; O. Kwon and H. Choi 2019; Y. Kwon 2019a), and “sexual relationship” (H. Choi 2019b; H. Choi 2019d; J. Kim 2019a; S. Lee 2019; Y. Baek 2019a; S. Yoon 2019). In an example from the *JoongAng Ilbo*, a reporter states, “a video of a man and a woman having sex in the bathroom of the Burning Sun Club (VIP) room was circulated about a month ago” (S. Hao 2019b). This sentence suggests both the woman and man were engaged in a consensual sexual act that was filmed and uploaded online. By not mentioning that this video was molka and a case of sexual assault, it leaves out the information necessary to define it as such.

This same incident is described by H. Choi (2019a) of the *Chosun Ilbo* a day later in four different ways within a single article, including:

- “Burning Sun presumed sex video distribution initiates police investigation”

- “a video of a sexual relationship, which is believed to have been filmed at the famous club 'Burning Sun,' in Gangnam, Seoul, was distributed on the Internet”
- “[the video] contains a scene where a man molested a woman who cannot properly control her body in a place believed to be the club's VIP room toilet”
- “Rumors spread that the video was filmed after distracting the woman with drugs”

In these examples, explaining the molka as a “sex video” and “video of a sexual relationship” implies it was filmed between two consenting sexual partners. There is no mention of the video being connected to a specific crime in either passage. In the third example from this article, H. Choi (2019a) elaborates that a woman is being “molested” which is completely different from the first two descriptions and also includes victim blaming about the condition of her body or mental state. The final mention of the video explains that drugs were involved, but instead of using an active voice to explain that the man drugged and raped this woman, they state she was distracted with drugs (H. Choi 2019a). The use of the word distract makes the incident seem to be less serious and implies that she may have willingly took the drugs.

Varied word choices by journalists in the coverage of this incident were not isolated as coverage of other sexual crimes in the Burning Sun investigations also used verbs interchangeably. By using words that vary by meaning, inconsistently explaining incidents, and withholding information on the sexual crime or lack of consent, the severity of the sexual crime is diminished and trivialized as a sexual act between two consenting adults (Henley et al. 1995). The framing also presents the victim’s experience as unimportant and less serious (Frazer and Miller 2009; Henley et al. 1995).

Minimizing and trivializing tactics contribute to implied victim blaming throughout the articles; however, there was also more direct victim blaming. In approximately 31% of the articles ( $n = 87$ ) journalists used male perpetrator’s voices to directly discredit victim testimony or were combined with derogatory statements made by reporters towards victims. One of the ways victims blaming occurred more explicitly was based on the assumptions about victims by journalists without any cited evidence (i.e., no reference to police reports or interviews). In an article for the *JoongAng Ilbo*, reporter J.

Jeong (2019a) uses their own opinion to suggest that Seungri is not guilty of sex trafficking. They state:

In order to apply Seungri's charges of arranging prostitution, there must be evidence that the women who went to Palawan Island at the time received money for sex... Seungri's side has never given money in exchange for sex, so they will argue that it is not prostitution. In fact, it is possible that the women working for these prostitution establishments received money in exchange for acting as a guide or a bridesmaid rather than having sex. (J. Jeong 2019a)

At the time the article was written, Seungri and his business partners had not been fully investigated and prosecutors were waiting for financial documents to be disclosed to them. This opinion was published making it seem like there had to have been evidence to support this claim to the public, but there was none, and this was not published as an opinion or editorial piece. Instead, this perspective was used to minimize and trivialize the accusations against Seungri.

Phrases like “the drunk woman” (G. Lee 2019; K. Oh 2019b; S. Hao 2019a; S. Kim 2019b; Seo 2019), “the woman took drugs” (S. Hao 2019a; S. Hao 2019b), “the woman was drunk” (E. Kim 2019b; S. Hao 2019a; H. Park 2019a), and “intoxicated woman” (H. Kim 2019a; S. Hao 2019a; S. Hao 2019b; S-J. Park 2019) were also used as explicit blaming tactics against sexual assault victims. The use of these phrases indicates that the journalist believed that victims were somehow deserving of responsibility for the attacks, active participants, or dishonest. The articles qualify the victim’s existence with words that exploit them as drug or alcohol users by directing attention to the possibility that the victims were substance abusers. It also appeals to misogynistic beliefs that women are unable to control their own bodies or be trusted in social spaces where drugs or alcohol are present. This implies women need male supervision and creates a double standard for drug and alcohol use. Specifically, by drawing attention to their gender and drug or alcohol use, their existence as a victim is excluded and they are framed without empathy (Anastasio and Costa 2004; DiBernardo 2018). This draws attention to socially constructed beliefs of ideal victimhood that suggest that these women were not blameless because of substance use (Christie 1986; Matoesian 1993).

Another example from a report in the *JoongAng Ilbo* stated, "... a woman who seems to be intoxicated had sex with a man in a naked state" (S. Hao 2019b). This sentence questions the

condition, actions, and physical state of this woman. S. Hao (2019b) describes the woman as intoxicated which brings into question if her alcohol consumption and behavior is to blame for the resulting sexual assault accusation. By assigning blame to her use of alcohol and presuming that she was drunk, S. Hao (2019b) frames her as an untrustworthy accuser and deviant. Then they state she had sex with a man. As discussed previously, the word sex implies the presence of consent and removes the possibility of her being viewed as a victim of sexual assault (Christie 1986; Matoesian 1993). Then, S. Hao (2019b) brings in her physical appearance and nudity. By discussing the woman's body, they objectify and sexualize her which frames her as promiscuous and consenting. Similar to findings by researchers investigating sexual assault in the United States, the victim's experience was overtly sexualized and misrepresented to the public (Collins 2011; DiBernardo 2018; Schwartz 2011; Wood 1994; Zoch et al. 1998). This discourse also indicates that S. Hao (2019b) viewed this victim's testimony as questionable.

Additionally, by using a quote from a perpetrator or person implicated in the case, journalists frame accusations as questionable or baseless. Quotes were taken out of context and/or appeared in articles to dismiss victim testimony. According to framing theory, the use of these testimonies shape reader's understanding of the issues and determines whose perspective (the perpetrator's) is more important to understanding (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990). The comments made by Moon-ho Lee, former CEO of Burning Sun and friend of Seungri, serve as example:

The reason for the national anger is that they [the public] think victims were fed GHB and forcefully raped... [If there are such victims,] why would the victims not sue with police but just spill it to the media? If you sue right now, the perpetrator will be arrested, you can get settlement money, and you can get all legal penalties. Why not?... [When asked if he denied the allegations of sexual assault at Burning Sun] Is there anyone that the police have investigated as a rape victim? ... If Seungri's KakaoTalk messages from three years ago are a crime, aren't all Korean men criminals? ... it's really an amazing witch hunt. (Bae 2019; U. Kim 2019a; Y. Jang 2019a)

This testimony accuses victims of lying about the incidents. He chastises the allegations and victims for not coming forward with allegations immediately after being sexually abused; this conforms to ideal victim standards as outlined in extant literature (Christie 1986; DiBernardo 2018). The statement, "If Seungri's KakaoTalk messages from three years ago are a crime, aren't all Korean men

criminals?” also suggests that he believes men are entitled to freely assault women or that all men act the ways these men do. Feminist and framing theories explain these comments as a performance of hypermasculinity and male privilege that dehumanizes female victims (Englehart 2014; Rothman et al. 2012; Wood 1994). Additionally, they use the gendered phrase “witch hunt” to describe the investigations as false and question victim testimony (Kunst et al. 2018; Lanius 2019). The speaker implies that rape is not being investigated and that the claims are false because no one had been arrested in connection to the investigation of the club (at the time they stated this). By amplifying this voice over the voices of victims, blame is deflected and the criminal acts themselves are both minimized and trivialized as common male behaviors. This promotes a normalization of sexual abuse of women, victim blaming, and perpetuates rape myths (Englehart 2014; Wood 1994).

### **Questioning Victim Credibility**

Articles questioned victim credibility in 59% ( $n = 163$ ) of the sample through defamation tactics that objectified the victim’s character and justifying the actions of the guilty parties. Journalists diminished the credibility of victims by emphasizing their stigmatized personal histories. In an example by J. Jeong (2019b) from the *JoongAng Ilbo*, a victim who was trafficked for sexual exploitation by Seungri and seven of his foreign investors was referred to as both, “a woman who is suspected of having sex with Seungri” and a “prostitute woman.” The trafficker who exploited her was found to have been paid with a wire transaction that included Seungri’s name in the article, but J. Jeong (2019b) questioned the validity of her trafficking experience by using the term “prostitute.” This is a derogatory word to describe a sex worker and is inappropriately used to describe women who have been sex trafficked in which there is an implication that they are sex workers by choice. With the use of this word, they classify this victim as working within an illegal industry in South Korea, criminalize her, and dehumanize her. Additionally, J. Jeong (2019b), frames the victim they are writing about as if they are guilty of a crime. They state she is “suspected of having sex” as if the victim is on trial for being sexually active or that they were consenting to the sexual abuse, which is inconsistent with evidence surrounding this sex trafficking case. It revokes her victimhood and places

responsibility upon her. This also criminalizes the victim and frames her as untrustworthy or less deserving of justice for her experience.

These statements question or challenge victim credibility and implies this woman consented to sexual acts. All examples delegitimize victim experiences and frame them negatively. By directing reader attention to how these victims do not fit the ideal victim model and do not fit societal norms for young women in the country, they are vilified by society (Christie 1986; DiBernardo 2018). This, again, points to who can or cannot be a victim of sexual violence and stigmatizes women.

To support views that victims are untrustworthy, journalists also framed testimony and reporting as if their experiences were subjective or unbelievable. The words “allegedly” (E. Kim 2019a; H. Chae 2019a; H. Chae 2019c; H. Kim 2019d; M. Kim 2019; Y. Kwon 2019d) and “claiming” (G. Lee 2019; H. Kim 2019e; H. Kwon 2019b; J. Hong 2019; S. Hao 2019d) were used to question the reports filed by victims. These words were paired with passive verbs and additional context that stigmatized the women. After K-pop Idols Choi and Jung were found guilty for molka and multiple perpetrator rape, H. Kim (2019d) wrote: “Allegedly, she was lying in a hotel bed with her clothes removed... [she was] known to have stated in the investigation that she had drank alcohol and lost her memory.” In this example, the journalist first mentioned the word “allegedly” which subjects the entire sentence and claim to being questionable despite both men already being convicted for the charges. Then, they mention her physical state of being nude in a hotel bed which sexualizes her and the sexual assault. Finally, H. Kim (2019d) mentioned her use of alcohol and loss of memory. By bringing up the possibility that she cannot recall or at one point could not recall all the details, they position her as an unreliable source of information and discredit the entire testimony.

Victims were largely referred to as “accuser” (D. Hong 2019; H. Chae 2019c; S-H. Park 2019; Y. Kwon 2019e) and perpetrators were called the “accused” (E. Kim 2019c; H. Choi 2019b; J. Jeong 2019b; J. Lee 2019; K. Oh 2019b; Seo 2019). The word accuser frames victims as responsible for the claim and blame of the accused in a crime or harmful action. When journalists use the word accused, they make the perpetrator a victim of the accuser’s claim. It displaces and defers blame. The word

accused was frequently paired with statements that were passive and questioning the legitimacy of victim claims. An article for the *JoongAng Ilbo* states, “Seungri is accused of arranging prostitution to a group of foreign investors... However, it is said that they have not been able to secure direct evidence... Whether Seungri knew the details of transactions [he claims not to know he did anything wrong]” (J. Jeong 2019b). They acknowledge the indictment of sex solicitation, but then provide an explanation of the defense for the perpetrator despite not having any additional information to discredit the investigation.

Another way journalist engaged in tactics to question victim credibility is the ways in which they referred to them. When discussing a specific victim, they used dehumanizing labels like “A” and “Mr. A” (H. Chae 2019c; S. Hao 2019e; S. Hao 2019f). No pseudonyms and/or female identifying titles and honorifics were used throughout the sample. Victim sexual assault experiences and characteristics were often juxtaposed with their abuser’s professional image and social presence. If the suspect or indicted individual happened to be a celebrity or a public figure, the media recognized them with formal credentials and honorifics (i.e., Award-winning artist and co-CEO of Yuri Holdings and Club Burning Sun, Seungri of the group Big Bang). This credentialing process framed a lack of trust in victim testimony and greater emphasis on celebrity perpetrator’s perspectives. Contrasting with these titles and honorifics, victims were characterized by qualifying statements that assigned blame as previously mentioned. Additionally, in the case of Ana, her Chinese nationality, and the accusations against her as a drug trafficker were mentioned each time she was brought up by journalists. This assigns guilt to women, regardless of their victim status and deflects or reduces the responsibility from male perpetrators who are recognized by their social status and fame. The overall criticism and negative characterizations of female victims throughout these articles could affirm social beliefs that these women are not victims and are attempting to retaliate against successful men of the entertainment industry (Leung and Williams 2019; Rothman et al. 2012).

## Male Privilege and Power

Analysis of the perspectives used throughout the article sample demonstrated a greater male standpoint. Every article featured a dominant male voice, whereas very few voices of women were presented or quoted at all. The most frequently quoted male voices came from celebrity perpetrators ( $n = 202$ ), followed by police and investigators ( $n = 165$ ), non-celebrity perpetrators ( $n = 108$ ), government officials ( $n = 22$ ), and implicated celebrities (not indicted) ( $n = 19$ ). Celebrities were the subject of approximately 97% ( $n = 271$ ) of the articles. The large proportion of male celebrity perpetrators were quoted in direct reference to the claims made against them and most journalists used passive verbs to reiterate what crimes they had committed or were being accused of. Their quotes consisted of statements that indicated that the allegations were false and that they, themselves, had become victims.

Seungri, the most prolific voice, regularly scheduled media conferences<sup>10</sup> to discuss his position and cooperation with investigating authorities and was quoted on his social media posts. One such post was presented by O. Kwon (2019) to *Chosun Ilbo* readers stating:

Seungri announced his intention to ‘retire’... He said, ‘The case has caused social controversy so great that I decided to retire... The case under investigation will be sincerely investigated and the accumulated suspicions will be resolved... I have been scolded and hated by people for the past month and a half.’

Seungri’s comments quoted in the example above demonstrates disregard for victims. He gaslights victims and blames them for him being “scolded and hated by people for the past month and a half” without considering victim trauma and revictimization (O. Kwon 2019). By using this quote in an article without reasonable criticism, this article is framed to generate sympathy for Seungri. His voice is used to silence victim claims that intend to hold him accountable for the accusations surrounding him, his business, and male celebrity peers.

Social conflict and feminist theories guided my understanding of this phenomenon. To further illustrate, I will analyze this example further. In O. Kwon’s (2019) article, Seungri is presented as an

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<sup>10</sup> Media sources disclosed when meetings were scheduled by the celebrity’s agency or by police agencies and courts.



authority figure because of his gender, wealth, and social status as a celebrity (Mooney et al. 2007; Smith 1974). By claiming he is being “sincerely investigated” he is suggesting that he is not only participating in the investigation, but also believes his actions are reasonable and without blame (MacKinnon 1987; Smith 1974). He then goes on to claim that the “accumulated suspicions will be resolved.” Seungri discredits victims claims by categorizing the accusations as “suspicions.” This implies that he acknowledges that his status as a celebrity, male privilege, wealth, and relative power will allow him to be unaffected by claims. Similar to the way other celebrities and high-status men have been given platforms to discuss allegations against them in the United States, his comments are an exploitative performance of his masculinity and dominion which is being condoned by the media (Maas et al. 2018; Mooney et al. 2007; Sykes and Matza 1957). The use of his voice by the media also signifies that the consequences of these allegations on beloved celebrities are perceived to be more important than the victim’s experience and accountability of men who abuse women (Leung and Williams 2019; Maas et al. 2018; Rothman et al. 2012).

Journalists that took this framing approach provided a platform for indicted and convicted celebrities to present themselves as victims and defend their innocence. It draws attention away from the actual crimes they have been indicted for by focusing on the emotional and professional impact of being indicted for sexual violence against women. Additionally, using these tactics, journalists position the article as sympathetic to these abusers and frames public perceptions of the crimes as insignificant.

In approximately 3% of articles ( $n = 9$ ) guilty celebrities used the platform to apologize to victims; however, these statements also contained appeals for a reduction of their sentences, of which many were approved while data collection for this research occurred<sup>11</sup>. In an example from the *Dong-A Ilbo*, Jung is quoted as saying, “I deny some charges, but I am very sorry that I humiliated them through KaKaoTalk and feel bad... I was never able to say that I apologize to the victims. I want

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<sup>11</sup> Not all appeals and trials have been finalized.

to apologize... I regret my stupidity and am deeply reflecting on my actions” (Y. Jang 2019b). Choi, who was also present for his own involvement in the crimes stated, “I gained popularity at a young age, but I have lived modestly, and I am embarrassed to apologize for immoral behavior now. It is true that I like alcohol, but I have never committed adultery or harassment by forcing a woman to take drugs” (Y. Jang 2019b). On this same day, Jung and Choi both submitted appeals to reduce their prison sentences which were later approved<sup>12</sup>. The journalist knew these sex offenders would be submitting appeals and chose to quote these apologies despite Jung never saying he was sorry for anything other than embarrassing the women he abused and Choi refusing to accept responsibility for his crimes. Y. Jang’s (2019b) decision to publicly share these quotes could imply that they view these criminals as somewhat regretful of their actions or as attempting to manipulate the public’s perceptions about the incidents. There was no significant additional context, criticism, or voice from the author to analyze these quotes further. This media coverage demonstrates domineering male privilege in South Korean media which focuses on the experiences of men rather than the female victims or the implications of the case on society (Smith 1974; Wood 1994). Feminist theory also explains that this focus on male standpoints could lead to greater victim stigma and revictimization (Smith 1974).

Sexual assault victim testimonies were not quoted anywhere in the articles analyzed. The only victim who was given a voice was Mr. Kim, the man who was physically abused for protecting a woman being sexually victimized in the club. However, his experience does not speak for any of the female victims who were sexually abused and/or exploited at Club Burning Sun. Contrary to my initial belief that this could have been done to protect victim identities, several victims participated in television media and reputable magazine interviews with appropriate protections. Rather than quote from those interviews, these three newspapers silenced victims by not including their perspective on

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<sup>12</sup> This first set of appeals were approved. A second trial was held six months later that resulted in reduced sentences for both celebrity sex offenders. Jung’s sentence was reduced by one year to 5 years while Choi’s was cut in half to 2 years and 6 months. Following this reduction in May 2020, they both filed an additional appeal to further reduce their sentences.

their experiences. There was an erasure of their experience and lack of female standpoints providing analysis about these issues to the public. Media framing and feminist theory suggests that this relays a particular message about perceptions of gender by these journalists—that the standpoints of women and girls, both as victims and as experts to analyze the investigation, are less valuable than the protection of male standpoints (Gillespie et al. 2013; Smith 1974; Steiner 2014; Wood 1994).

The few instances where a female was the subject of an article was when journalists discussed Ana ( $n = 23$ ), an employee of Club Burning Sun of Chinese nationality that was found guilty of distributing drugs. Ana was framed as a perpetrator in which she supplied drugs to patrons inside the club as an employee and was, thus, portrayed as responsible for the sexual violence occurring at Burning Sun. In an article for the *Dong-A Ilbo*, H. Kim (2019d) states, “A Chinese woman named 'Ana' was in charge of attracting Chinese VIP customers at Burning Sun. ‘Ana’ has been recommending drugs to these VIP club customers.” H. Kim (2019d) makes accusations about Ana without police evidence being available at the time the article was published to support the claim. In this claim, they suggest that Ana, who is Chinese, is responsible for attracting Chinese customers. Additionally, they say she recommended drugs to Chinese customers. Whether or not Ana only recommended drugs to Chinese customers, the special attention H. Kim (2019d) gives to Ana’s Chinese identity speaks to possible biases this reporter has about migrants and tourists in South Korea. Unlike the experiences of male perpetrators, none of Ana’s testimony, defense team, or employers at Burning Sun are quoted and she is not given public defense. In some respects, Ana was victimized by media portrayal that framed her as the sole drug distributor for Burning Sun. Her Chinese national identity was associated with drug and sex trafficking despite it having little to do with the actual case (H. Kim 2019b; H. Kim 2019c; H. Kwon 2019a; S. Kim 2019a). None of the Korean male perpetrators responsible for drug trafficking had any news articles written solely about them which I interpret as a form of privilege stemming from both their male identity and Korean nationality.

All trials and public celebrity appearances were thoroughly noted by the press (see Figure 1). Photos embedded in articles added to the male dominion and celebrity centric aspect of these news

articles. They were more likely to include either an editorialized photo of these celebrities or ones that generated sympathy. The media frame influences public perceptions of who is at fault and who is innocent by publishing images where a celebrity looks confident or apologetic (Wood 1994). When paired with quotes from these celebrities, the articles read as protective of them and defensive of the crimes they committed.



*Figure 1.* Seungri attends trial in Seoul to dispute sex trafficking allegations (J. Jeong 2019b).

The ways in which a photo was angled and whether they showed any restraints (i.e., handcuffs or ropes) demonstrated symbolic trust of the male perpetrators. Celebrity perpetrators were not photographed in restraints, unless they were cropped out, and were not escorted or surrounded by police or security making it appear as if they were not a threat to society. Articles that seemed to attempt to appeal innocence to audiences all included photos of perpetrators with their heads and shoulders leaning forward and angled down with hands clasped over each other (see Figure 2). A

total of 59 articles included old, editorialized photos of celebrities before trials had begun. An additional 102 articles featured photos of the male celebrities without any visual restraint or security in frame despite it being normal procedure in South Korea for those indicted for crimes. These two choices symbolically demonstrate perceptions of innocence based on gender and social status.



*Figure 2.* Jun-young Jung holding a conference before a scheduled court date for molka and aggravated rape charges (Y. Baek 2019a).

To illustrate the differences between indicted men of high social-status and lower-status women further, I applied social conflict theory in my analysis of the ways in which Ana and Lee (former Burning Sun CEO) were photographed and portrayed by the media in Figure 3. Both tested positive for drug use and were being indicted for the same crimes; however, Lee was also being indicted for bribery and collusion at the time. In the article in which this photo appears, Y. Kwon (2019c) mentioned the dismissal of previous warrants for Lee because of “disputes over the crime

charges.” They then proceed to talk about Ana and claim, “In the case of Ana, a Chinese woman investigated for drug administration and distribution in Burning Sun, although narcotics such as ecstasy and ketamine were detected in a previous hair test, she has no history of being punished for narcotics crime... [police have] collected evidence and inspected the current status of the suspect's residence” (Y. Kwon 2019c). Both the photos and comments about both indicted individuals differ.



*Figure 3.* Moon-ho Lee (left), CEO of Burning Sun, and Ana (right) are both seen being escorted to an interrogation by police on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019 regarding their involvement of drug and sex trafficking (Y. Kwon 2019c).

Lee, as a male, wealthy investor, and CEO of Burning Sun, is presented as less threatening than Ana to the public despite having more criminal indictments than her. In Figure 3, Lee is not

restrained or being directly touched while being escorted to the police station. He appears to be walking casually and is unrestricted in his movement. Police and security are fully cropped out of the photo as well. When discussing Lee, Y. Kwon (2019c) does not specify which drugs or how many substances he tested positive for and goes on to claim that the previous warrant was dismissed because there were “disputes” about the charges. I believe this portrayal demonstrates innocence to the public and deepened when juxtaposed with Ana in this same article.

Y. Kwon (2019c), like all other authors who talked about Ana, identified her first by her Chinese nationality and assumed role at Burning Sun. Then, they specifically lay out the specific drugs that she tested positive for which is highly stigmatized in South Korea. By doing so, they present her as deviant to the public. While Y. Kwon (2019c) does make it clear she has no history of drug charges, they then go on to discuss how her home has been inspected and evidence was collected. There is no mention of evidence or inspection in relation to Lee’s indictment. In *Figure 3*, we can also see that Ana is wearing physical restraints (ropes) which have not been fully blurred out. Her mobility is restricted, and she is being physically directed by a security officer who is not cropped out and appears to be holding her arm to guide her to the police station. Other individuals are in the photo as well; however, it is unclear if they are investigators on the case, police officers, or security<sup>13</sup>.

Additionally, celebrities had their hair and full professional makeup done before conferences or attending court. As previously mentioned, many press conferences were scheduled by the celebrity or their entertainment agents who sought to discredit the claims with written scripts and voluntary visits to police stations. According to Lew (2019), several makeup artists were requested to make these celebrities look more innocent for their news conferences or while on their way to court:

I was surprised to see him [Seungri] in full makeup as if he were going on ‘Big Show<sup>14</sup>’... when Seungri was on his way out after getting his makeup done, he asked, ‘Please go a bit heavier on the eye makeup’... his attitude wasn’t that of someone who felt he had done something

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<sup>13</sup> Note that it is not uncommon for casual attire to be worn by both police officers and investigators in South Korea.

<sup>14</sup> Big Show is the title of the last major global tour Big Bang had.

wrong... The fact that he got heavy eye makeup can be an expression of his confidence or a symbolic protest saying, 'I haven't done anything wrong.'

The appearance mentioned is seen in Figure 4. In this photo Seungri is posing in apologetic stance previously mentioned to attempt to appeal his innocence to the public. Make up, which is associated with confidence and saving face, is a refusal by Seungri to accept his indictment and a desire to show the public that he does not believe he has done anything wrong. This is representation of male entitlement, hypermasculinity, privilege, and presumed innocence.



*Figure 4.* Seungri Holding a Press Conference Outside Police Station (O. Kwon 2019).



## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to understand how South Korean newspaper media represent and frame sexual violence against women by male perpetrators of high societal status. By analyzing the Burning Sun investigation as a case study, I found that there are various ways in which male perpetrators are presented and framed with more consideration than their victims. Consistent with findings from previous research on historical patriarchal bias in South Korea and media studies in the United States on sexual violence, journalists in South Korean newspapers frame and portray female victims of sexual abuse negatively (DiBennardo 2018; Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Gillespie et al. 2013; M. Lee 2019; Wood 1994). Employing the lenses of framing, feminist, and conflict theories as well as drawing on existing literature as a guide, I will discuss the significance of my research and the implications of the findings.

Guided by framing theory, I sought to understand the South Korean news media as a socializing institution that is constantly shaping public beliefs about social issues (DiBennardo 2018; Ferrell and Websdale 1999; Fischel 2016; Gillespie et al. 2013; Stack 2003). This theory influenced the way I looked for the inclusion or exclusion of details reported by the media which relayed the journalist's beliefs about what should be considered important by the public (DiBennardo 2018; Gillespie et al. 2013). Additionally, I looked at the specific framing of these incidents as codable into two main categories: episodic, which presents information as singular incidents, or thematic, which explains broader social issues (Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Iyengar 1990).

Using this theory and previous literature as a model, I initially found some consistent patterns that shaped my entire analysis. First, approximately 95% of these articles were framed episodically ( $n = 264$ ), which failed to account for larger systemic issues around sexual violence in South Korea. The few articles that were framed episodically ( $n = 14$ ), used the Burning Sun investigation to discuss the dark web and ease of obtaining molka ( $n = 2$ ), drug trafficking ( $n = 3$ ), and women's rights protests occurring in Seoul ( $n = 9$ ). These results mirrored those of media framing studies on sexual violence

in the United States by Englehart (2014), Feezell et al. (2019), and Iyengar (1990). The effects of this framing indicate that the journalists do not consider the crimes to be related to larger social problems in the country or that they are trivial when compared to other social issues (Anastasio and Costa 2004; DiBennardo 2018; Englehart 2014; Feezell et al. 2019; Gillespie et al. 2013; Wood 1994). Yet, these are not singular incidents and reflect a domineering male hegemonic culture which reduces females to sexual commodities to exploit (DiBennardo 2018; Englehart 2014; Gerassi 2015; Smith 1974; Wood 1994). Notably, regardless of whether journalists framed articles thematically or episodically, none of the articles supplied readers with additional resources for readers to educate themselves with or encourage help seeking behaviors. This reiterates the way journalist's framing and linguistic decisions presented these issues as individual disputes and isolated incidents. They assume that readers will not encounter such problems in their lifetimes and further stigmatizes seeking help and minimizes the long-term effects and trauma sexual violence has on victims (Wood 1994).

Media framing and feminist theory shaped my analysis of the linguistic choices made by journalists. The linguistic representation of these crimes in the articles was composed of language that was sensationalized, passive in tone, implied consent, varied in description, and diverted blame onto the victims. Consistent with literature on the media's portrayal of sexual violence in the United States by DiBennardo (2018), Englehart (2014), Frazer and Miller (2009), Henley et al. (1995), Maas et al. (2019), and Wood (1994), journalist's biased gender perceptions indicated they were more accepting of the behaviors of indicted male celebrities than the testimonies made by female victims. This was alluded to in the way journalists framed victim accusations as deserving of blame.

Furthermore, in analyzing the ways victims were portrayed, I found that in 59% of the total sample, journalists engaged in tactics that questioned victim credibility. The personal histories and use of alcohol and drugs by victims were used to vilify and discredit victim testimony. Journalists also provided indicted celebrities with a platform to voice their stance on the crimes and juxtaposed their status, wealth, and fame with victim testimonies. This action makes victims appear to be less

trustworthy because their claims are not backed up by years of public attention and are assumed to be of lower socio-economic status than the celebrities that sexually abused them. This tactic, according to social conflict theory, exploits the social categories of dominion and subordination that exists between different classes and genders (Mooney et al. 2007). Consequently, perpetrators who are successful or attractive are less likely to be viewed as sexual predators because of rape myths and ideal victim models (Alexandra 2019; Knight et al. 2001; Matoesian 1993; Nyúl et al. 2018). Similar to findings by Maas et al. (2018), this minimized the accusations against these perpetrators and presented their actions as a reasonable characteristic of masculinity and gender performance.

This negative discourse normalizes victim-blaming, creates a rationalization of sexual abuse against women, and justifies social inaction to help victims (Edgar 2014; Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Lee and Webster 2018; Leung and Williams 2019). Sexual violence becomes another aspect of womanhood that women are expected to accept when they are treated like sexual conquests and undeserving of protections (An et al. 2019; DiBennardo 2018; Englehart 2014; Gerassi 2015; Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Rothman et al. 2012; Smith 1974; Wood 1994).

The dominant perspectives and voices of each article were evaluated by applying Smith's (1974) feminist standpoint theory. In this theory, Smith (1974) claims that social relationships and beliefs about gender norms derive from dominant male perspectives and experiences that devalue women. Male standpoints were reflected in all articles which reduced the visibility of women's perspectives and the experiences of sexual assault victims (Mackinnon 1987; Smith 1974). This implies that the journalists believed men were authority figures in discussing these sexually violent crimes against women, rather than the victims themselves. Not providing readers with the full context of these crimes and a woman's standpoint leaves room for misinterpretations of the events, victim stigma, deters help seeking behaviors, and leads to a general unawareness of how these crimes affect society (DiBennardo 2018; Englehart 2014; Gillespie et al. 2013; Mackinnon 1987; Smith 1974; Wood 1994). According to media framing, the absence of these victim experiences also relays a lack of importance to readers (Gillespie et al. 2013). Criticism and questioning of victim's character and

personal histories by the media fuels beliefs that it is appropriate to not believe victim experiences and treat them like liars seeking to exploit the fame and wealth of high-status offenders (Leung and Williams 2019; Rothman et al. 2012). These actions maintain rape myth acceptance.

The information conveyed about incidents of sexual assault within these newspapers was extremely limited and focused more on the experiences of celebrity perpetrators. Supported by both feminist and social conflict theories, this focus demonstrates and contributes to existing gender discrimination in South Korea by upholding perspectives about male privilege and status, revictimizing and exploiting victims by questioning the validity of their accusations, and perpetuating rape culture by framing victims as actors harming the reputation of the male perpetrators (DiBennardo 2018; Englehart 2014; Gillespie et al. 2013; Leung and Williams 2019; Wood 1994).

Overall, I found that the tactics of minimization, trivialization, victim blaming, questioning of victim credibility, and overuse of male standpoints by journalists contribute to a stigmatized portrayal of victims and sexual assault. Accounting for these findings, the media is not covering stories about sexual violence with a frame that seeks social change in South Korea when high-status perpetrators are involved. The media could be doing more to seek justice for victims or be representing them in a way that does not stigmatize them or subject them to revictimization. Social relationships will continue to suffer unless the frame is adjusted to present readers with new perspectives that treat women and girls as deserving of respect and trust. Because molka and sexual violence continue to be significant issues in South Korea country, it is my hope that social changes within media reporting and greater legal adjustments to sex crimes be implemented to deter criminal activity and change the stigma surrounding victim reporting and help seeking behaviors.

### **Recommendations**

Considering that South Korea has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, the media should consider adjusting the ways in which they report on sexual violence to support social change in the country (Chen et al. 2011; Lauber and Rossler 2007). By adding victim resources and police contact information to on-going investigations they would ensure that the right support is in place for

readers. This also has the potential of destigmatizing these topics and encourage help seeking behaviors which may contribute to a higher reporting rate and greater attention to victim mental health.

Journalists should also consider using consistent pseudo-names for victims with the correct pronouns (if known). Victims are dehumanized by generic number or letter labels and masculine pronouns. The erasure of their experience should be monitored as well. If there is victim or survivor testimony, it should be used instead of repeating the claims and perspectives of perpetrators who are seeking an opportunity to defend their crimes publicly (Steiner 2014). While everyone involved in the case is innocent until proven guilty, details that blame victims or target their character should be completely avoided. The current use of primarily male standpoints by journalists supports gender inequality and rape myth acceptance in the country. Women are excluded and devalued by their absence in these articles making it appear that their experiences are not worth reporting. Because the media can shape perceptions about social problems, news media and journalists should lead the way for change in the country by adapting new gender inclusive policies for their publications.

Applying the findings of this research to other social institutions, the South Korean government should consider taking greater measures to reduce gender inequality, underreporting of crimes against women, mental health stigma, and sexual violence in the country. Victims are highly stigmatized by gender norms and stigma perpetuated by the media and criminal legal system that treat them as undeserving and unimportant. The South Korean government could fund local programs that support victims of sexual violence and run campaigns that target the stigmas that discourage victims from seeking help. They could also develop more trauma-informed counseling, therapy, and rehabilitation centers and advertise these locations as important to a healthy wellbeing. This would likely require changes to the training for mental health care in the country, but it could stimulate the economy as well.

Educational institutions should also implement a reoccurring annual lesson plan that discusses physical and mental abuse to varying degrees based on the education level and how to seek help.

This would encourage future generations, and the families of these children, to get involved in advocating for victims and addressing gender inequality. Government campaigns that target stigma could run simultaneously with these annual education plans around the United Nation's International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women or International Women's Day. This would encourage the entire country to be involved in some capacity.

Additionally, law enforcement could implement new procedures and a dedicated team to handling sexually violent crimes as the current methods are ineffective and resulting in a distrust of police (Yi et al. 2014). Although sexual violence is likely to remain stigmatized while gender inequality continues to be an issue, creating a team of experts trained in trauma-informed care and mental health counseling would be beneficial. This team would be responsible for the initial interview, taking the victim to the hospital (when necessary), providing them with direct contact information for resources in their area, and checking in on the victim periodically for a period of time after the initial report. Despite this being the most expensive recommendation, it would likely result in a greater public trust of police and encourage future reporting.

### **Limitations**

As a graduate student, I faced some limitations to completing this study within a timely manner. I believe I could have benefitted from some changes to my research resources and having slight changes to my research design. The first limitation to note is my inability to fluently understand Korean. The journalist's translation of pronouns, names, and use of specific non-translated words did not always provide clear details on aspects of the investigation. Suspects and company names were translated differently across articles as well leading to some confusion. An example of this is the dozens of ways Yoochun Park's name was written: 박유천, Park Yoochun, Yoo Chun, Yuchun, Yuchun, Yu Chun, Yucheon, Yu-Cheon, Yutian, Micky, Mickey, etc. Future researchers should be fluent in Korean or partner with a professional translator who has lived in Korea to provide perspective on the comprehension of these articles. This would also provide a greater understanding of how the public may interpret these articles while reading them.

Additionally, because there is no comparative measure on previous sexual violence cases in South Korea due to a lack of research available, it is impossible to know whether all males or just male celebrities were given differential treatment by the media. Although I investigated this issue in similar countries, like the United States, in my literature review, I am unable to claim that there is a significant difference because the majority of my research focused on well-known celebrities, politicians, and media executives. If I were able, I would investigate an additional well-known, recent case on sexual assault that does not involve a public figure to provide a comparative aspect in my research design.

Lastly, this research was not analyzed by any other researchers and is based on my own interpretation of the meanings for these articles. This means that my intercoder reliability was a limitation which could have affected my validity. Because I am not Korean, there is a possibility that I misunderstood the journalist's framing of these social issues despite all of my efforts to ensure this research was conducted as culturally relative as possible.

### **Future Research**

There are several ways in which the Burning Sun case demands further research in the future. First, the case is on-going. One of the main perpetrators, Seungri, is awaiting judicial deliberation and punishment in military court. Cases like these can take several years in the criminal legal system. Once the case is finalized, additional newspaper articles should be analyzed to see if journalist framing and depictions of the crimes, victims, and perpetrators changed as more celebrities were proven guilty and sentenced to prison.

Second, several newspapers deflected blame to other countries and the national identity of suspects. I believe this may indicate stigma towards citizens of nearby Asian countries, most specifically China. It would be beneficial to understand how, or if, this stigma is reflected in other criminal cases related to sexual violence and trafficking. There could be a recent case or social problem that explains the presence of social stigma and negative claims made by newspaper

journalists. However, these opinions may contribute to antagonism toward foreigners in the country and greater threats to the safety of migrants with Chinese national identities.

Third, an analysis of South Korean public interpretations of these articles and their beliefs about the case could help researchers better understand how media framing affects readers' understanding of sexual violence. It could be beneficial to understand if fans of these celebrities have different perspectives about the investigation and victims than those who are not fans as well. As demonstrated in the study by Rothman, et al. (2012), positive opinions of attractive male celebrities convicted of physically harming women do not typically depreciate even after physical evidence has been made public. Additionally, the effectiveness of semantics in South Korea also requires deeper analysis as to which word choices are considered to be more serious by the public. If fan culture is more prone to victim disbelief when a celebrity is involved, the tone and linguistic representation should be adjusted appropriately to address this social bias.

Lastly, future research on the power and privileges of K-pop celebrities in South Korea should be investigated. The South Korean government is financially invested in the K-pop industry as a gross domestic product (GDP) which contributes to their growing soft power. It is unclear how these relationships between the government and entertainment industry are regulated or if the country will introduce additional restrictions to prevent abuse of power issues in the future. Had the initial footage from the Burning Sun not been released, it is likely that the celebrities and public officials who were caught could have continued to sexually abuse women with the use of drugs, manipulated victims through blackmail, leaked footage, and contributed to growing sex trafficking rates in the country. Accountability, legislation offering greater protections, and social changes are important to preventing these issues from continuing to occur. Much like the Weinstein and Epstein sex trafficking cases in the United States, people with significant wealth, political pull, and high social capital can get away with criminal acts for long periods of time. There is much to learn about cases like these and the ways in which power, wealth, and capital must be regulated to protect our most vulnerable populations.



## APPENDIX: NEWS ARTICLES ANALYZED

- Ahn, Byul. 2019. "[Exclusive] Dark Web, 12,000 people access in Korea a day." *Chosun Ilbo*, June 24. Retrieved June 6th, 2020 ([http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2019/06/24/201906240169](http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2019/06/24/201906240169)).
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- Chae, Hye-Seon. 2019. "[Breaking News] Police apply for arrest warrant for 'sexual hidden camera' of Jung Jun-young." *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 18. Retrieved June 6th, 2020 (<https://news.joins.com/article/olink/2300624>).
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