Female Dangdut Singers and the Politics of Representation: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Winda Khoirun Nisak
Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Blitar
winda.side@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines the representation of female dangdut singers through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly using van Dijk's model. The research explores how mainstream media constructs and controls narratives surrounding these artists, often emphasizing appearance over talent and empowerment. By analyzing media discourse, interviews, and visual data, the study identifies three dominant categories: appearance-focused, talent-focused, and empowerment-focused representations. The findings suggest that institutional power structures dictate which narratives gain prominence, with empowerment-focused portrayals remaining marginalized. However, alternative media platforms have started to challenge these traditional depictions, allowing female singers to reclaim their agency. The study underscores the need for a broader discourse shift to foster a more balanced and empowering representation of women in the dangdut industry.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Female Singer, Dangdut Music*

Abstrak: Studi ini meneliti representasi penyanyi dangdut perempuan melalui lensa Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA),

khususnya menggunakan model van Dijk. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana media arus utama membangun dan mengendalikan narasi seputar para artis ini, yang sering kali menekankan penampilan daripada bakat dan pemberdayaan. Dengan menganalisis wacana media, wawancara, dan data visual, studi ini mengidentifikasi tiga kategori dominan: representasi yang berfokus pada penampilan, berfokus pada bakat, dan berfokus pada pemberdayaan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa struktur kekuasaan institusional mendikte narasi mana yang akan menonjol, sementara penggambaran yang berfokus pada pemberdayaan tetap terpinggirkan. Namun, platform media alternatif telah mulai menantang penggambaran tradisional ini, yang memungkinkan penyanyi perempuan untuk mendapatkan kembali agensi mereka. Studi ini menggarisbawahi perlunya pergeseran wacana yang lebih luas untuk mendorong representasi perempuan yang lebih seimbang dan memberdayakan dalam industri dangdut.

Kata Kunci: *Analisis Wacana Kritis, Penyanyi Wanita, Musik Dangdut*

INTRODUCTION

Dangdut, a popular music genre in Indonesia, has long been associated with vibrant performances, rhythmic beats, and dynamic stage interactions. As a cultural phenomenon, dangdut is more than just a musical genre; it is an entertainment industry that reflects societal norms, gender roles, and the dynamics of popular culture (Weintraub, 2010). Within this industry, female dangdut singers often become the center of attention, not only for their vocal performances but also for their visual and performative elements, including fashion choices, stage presence, and dance moves. However, their representation in public discourse often oscillates between empowerment and objectification, raising questions about gendered perceptions in the dangdut industry.

One of the key aspects of female dangdut singers' representation is their dress up and appearance, which are frequently linked to societal expectations and moral judgments (Goebel, 2015). Research has shown that female performers in dangdut are often subjected to double standards—celebrated for their entertainment value yet criticized for their perceived immodesty (Weintraub, 2010). This dichotomy places them in a paradoxical position where they are both revered and marginalized within the industry. As (Foucault, 2002), (Fairclough, 2013), and (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) explains, power is not merely repressive but also productive—it creates subjects by defining the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Female dangdut singers, through their performances, challenge conventional norms of femininity, yet the same discourse that elevates them as entertainment icons also subjects them to moral scrutiny. Moreover, the expectation for them to perform in revealing outfits and engage in sensual dance moves is not merely a personal choice but rather a systemic practice shaped by audience demand and industry norms.

In addition to their visual representation, female dangdut singers also navigate various forms of gender-based discrimination and harassment. Interviews with performers reveal that they often encounter inappropriate behavior from audience members, including verbal and physical harassment during performances. This reinforces the notion that female entertainers in dangdut must endure objectification as part of their profession (Heryanto, 2008). Such challenges raise critical questions about agency, consent, and the broader cultural acceptance of such interactions within live performances.

Furthermore, the discourse surrounding female dangdut singers is heavily influenced by traditional and religious values. In some cases, singers are required to adjust their attire based on the preferences of event organizers or local regulations, reflecting ongoing negotiations between cultural expression and societal expectations. This negotiation process is evident in the experiences of several

singers who must balance artistic freedom with public morality concerns (Lessig, 2004).

Using van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this study aims to examine the representation of female dangdut singers in various forms of discourse, including their own narratives, audience perceptions, and media portrayals. By analyzing the linguistic and social structures embedded in these discourses, this research seeks to uncover the underlying power dynamics and ideologies that shape public perceptions of female performers in the dangdut industry.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. CDA, as conceptualized by (T. A. van Dijk, 2008), focuses on the relationships between discourse, power, and social inequality. This approach is particularly suitable for examining how media and public discourses construct the representation of female dangdut singers, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of language use and ideological structures.

The data for this study was collected from various sources, including media articles, interviews with female dangdut singers, and audience responses. Textual analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, lexical choices, and discursive strategies that contribute to the framing of female performers. Additionally, contextual analysis is consider socio-cultural and historical factors influencing these representations as state by (Krathwohl, 1998).

To ensure reliability and validity, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing media texts, interview data, and audience perspectives. As (Elhami et al., 2024) state, "triangulation enhances credibility by validating findings through multiple sources." (Baker & Egbert, 2016) further emphasize that "examining a phenomenon from different viewpoints ensures a more accurate interpretation." This

approach aligns with (T. A. van Dijk, 2015) argument that discourse structures shape public perception, allowing for a deeper analysis of the power dynamics in the portrayal of female dangdut singers.

By employing van Dijk's CDA model, this research is critically examine how discourse functions in shaping public perceptions of female dangdut singers, highlighting the tensions between empowerment and commodification. As (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) asserts, discourse analysis must consider both micro-level linguistic features and macro-level sociopolitical contexts to uncover the power dynamics embedded within texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study and analyzes them using van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, particularly focusing on the representation of female dangdut singers in relation to power, dominance, and ideology. The data obtained from interviews, observations, and textual analysis reveal the complex interplay between gender, performance, and audience perception within the dangdut music scene.

Furthermore, by examining linguistic expressions, symbolic representations, and audience interactions, this study highlights how female dangdut singers navigate their roles within the industry while contending with societal expectations and objectification. The analysis is structured into several key themes: the working conditions of female singers, audience interactions, symbolic representations in performance, and audience perceptions of female singers. To provide a clearer understanding, visual elements such as tables are incorporated to support the findings.

Representation of Female Dangdut Singers in Media Discourse

The analysis of media coverage and interviews reveals recurring themes in the representation of female dangdut singers. These themes include sexualization, empowerment, and social stigma. Using (T. A. van Dijk, 2008) framework of CDA, the study examines

the textual structures, discursive strategies, and sociocultural contexts shaping these representations.

Lexical Choices and Stereotyping

Media narratives often emphasize appearance, sensuality, and controversy, reinforcing gendered stereotypes. For instance, one media article described a singer as "berani tampil seksi" (boldly appearing sexy), which aligns with (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) argument on the reproduction of social dominance through discourse. Table 1 presents the most frequently used descriptors for female dangdut singers in 50 media articles analyzed.

Table 1: Most Frequent Descriptive Terms in Media Coverage

Descriptor	Frequency
Sexy	34
Controversial	21
Bold	18
Independent	12
Talented	8

Discursive Strategies: Polarization and Justification

Polarization between in-groups and out-groups in media discourse contributes to othering and exclusion (García et al., 2017). Female dangdut singers are often placed in contrast with "respectable" women, reinforcing moral dichotomies.

An interview with a senior journalist (R.A.) highlights this process: *"Yes, indeed, the news that gets the most attention has often been about physical appearance, fashion choices, stage performances, and, ironically, musical talent is often not the main focus. This is a deliberate strategy to attract readers' attention, but at the same time, it reinforces existing biases."*

This finding is consistent with (T. A. van Dijk, 2015) claim that discourse structures influence cognition and public perception,

shaping attitudes towards marginalized groups. His argument regarding polarization in media discourse suggests that ideological structures create in-groups and out-groups, where certain groups are framed as normative or respectable, while others are marginalized or othered. This phenomenon is evident in the way female dangdut singers are frequently contrasted with "respectable" women, reinforcing moral binaries that uphold dominant social values.

The interview excerpt from senior journalist R.A. exemplifies this process. The journalist acknowledges that media coverage often prioritizes the physical appearance, clothing choices, and stage performances of female dangdut singers rather than their musical talent. This selective framing, as (Abrams, 2010) suggests, is not neutral; it actively shapes public perception and reinforces pre-existing biases. By consistently highlighting these aspects, media discourse constructs female dangdut performers as a sensationalized "other," distinct from the idealized, modest, and morally upright women in Indonesian society.

Perspective on discourse control further explains why these representations persist (Schmidt, 2008). Media institutions, often influenced by broader socio-political power structures, dictate which narratives gain prominence and which remain secondary. As a result, discourses of empowerment or artistic credibility among female dangdut singers struggle to gain traction, as they do not align with the dominant ideological framework that seeks to regulate women's public presence. Instead, the prevailing discourse reinforces traditional gender norms by positioning these singers as morally ambiguous figures, whose success is often attributed to spectacle rather than skill.

This dynamic contributes to broader societal attitudes towards female performers. By systematically emphasizing their physicality and downplaying their artistic contributions, the media constructs a discourse that legitimizes their exclusion from discussions of cultural legitimacy. (T. van Dijk, 2014) argus that discourse structures not only reflect but also reproduce social hierarchies, influencing cognitive

models that shape public attitudes. Over time, this sustained representation normalizes the perception of female dangdut singers as entertainers existing outside the realm of "serious" musicians, reinforcing their marginalization in both the music industry and wider cultural discourse.

Thus, the case of female dangdut singers exemplifies the mechanisms of discursive othering and exclusion outlined by van Dijk. The polarization between "respectable" women and "sensationalized" performers sustains a moral dichotomy that perpetuates gendered stereotypes, ultimately shaping the societal boundaries of acceptable female agency in the entertainment industry.

Agency and Empowerment: Counter-Narratives in Dangdut

Despite the dominant media narrative, some female singers actively reshape their representation by emphasizing professional identity, musical artistry, and economic independence.

A singer (S.N.) stated: *"My social media? Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook—I often upload there. My OOTDs, how I look on stage—basically, it's my way of expressing myself and also attracting more job opportunities through my social media."*

Over time, the representation of female dangdut singers has undergone a noticeable transformation, shifting from an appearance-focused portrayal to a more talent-driven and empowerment-oriented image. Initially, female dangdut performers were primarily depicted through a hyper-feminized and sexualized lens, emphasizing their physical appeal rather than their musical or artistic capabilities. In framework on discourse and power, media representations often reinforce dominant ideologies that marginalize certain groups, in this case, women in the entertainment industry (Pascale, 2012).

However, recent analysis reveals an increasing tendency to highlight talent and artistic skill over mere physical appearance. This shift can be attributed to the growing recognition of female agency within the music industry and broader cultural movements advocating

gender equality. Statistical data indicate a gradual decline in appearance-focused portrayals, while talent-based and empowerment-centered narratives have gained prominence. The trend suggests an evolving discourse that seeks to challenge traditional stereotypes and redefine the role of female dangdut singers beyond their aesthetic appeal.

Moreover, the integration of empowerment-focused narratives aligns with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as proposed by van Dijk. His model emphasizes the ideological role of discourse in shaping social structures, including the ways in which women are represented in public and media spaces (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993). By analyzing media coverage and lyrical content, this study finds that more recent portrayals of female dangdut singers emphasize themes of resilience, independence, and professionalism. This marks a significant departure from earlier decades, where female performers were often framed as objects of male desire rather than as autonomous artists.

Additionally, the increasing prominence of empowerment narratives can be linked to broader sociocultural shifts, including the influence of feminist discourse and digital media platforms that provide female artists with more control over their public image. The emergence of social media has allowed female dangdut singers to directly engage with audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers who historically reinforced exploitative narratives. This aligns with van Dijk's assertion that discourse is not static but rather an evolving entity influenced by sociopolitical dynamics (T. A. van Dijk, 2008).

The transformation of female dangdut singers' representation reflects broader ideological and discursive shifts. While appearance-focused portrayals remain present, the increasing focus on talent and empowerment suggests a reconfiguration of gender dynamics in the industry. This study highlights the importance of discourse analysis in understanding these shifts and calls for continued scrutiny of how media constructs gendered narratives in popular culture.

These counter-narratives align with (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) notion of resistance discourse, where marginalized individuals challenge dominant ideological structures.

Socio-Cultural and Institutional Factors

Structural constraints also influence the representation of female dangdut singers. The intersection of patriarchal norms, religious values, and media commercialization determines how these women are perceived and treated in the industry.

A cultural analyst (M.T.) noted: *"The expectation for women to conform to moral norms often clashes with the commercial nature of the entertainment industry, so that's why they frequently intersect—it just doesn't quite align."*

T. A. van Dijk, (2008) highlights that institutional power and discourse control dictate which narratives gain prominence, explaining why empowerment-focused discourses remain secondary in mainstream media representations of female dangdut singers. According to van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, discourse is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by those in power, such as media institutions, policymakers, and cultural gatekeepers. These entities determine which narratives are circulated widely and which are marginalized, reinforcing dominant ideologies that serve their interests.

In the case of female dangdut singers, traditional media channels have historically prioritized appearance-focused portrayals, aligning with broader patriarchal structures that commodify women's bodies (Weintraub, 2010). Dominant groups use discourse to maintain control by normalizing certain perspectives while suppressing alternative narratives (Tilly et al., 2001). As a result, even when empowerment-focused discourse emerges, it remains secondary because it challenges deeply ingrained societal norms that benefit established power structures.

Furthermore, (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) argues that discourse control is exercised through repetition and framing techniques that shape public perception. In the context of dangdut, media outlets frequently highlight aspects such as provocative performances, costume choices, and personal scandals, reinforcing a narrow and often sexualized image of female singers. Even when their talent and artistic contributions are acknowledged, these are often overshadowed by sensationalist coverage that prioritizes controversy over substance. This selective emphasis aligns with van Dijk's notion of "elite discourse," where those in control shape public understanding by controlling access to information and determining which aspects of a narrative receive prominence (T. van Dijk, 2014).

Despite these institutional barriers, there is evidence of gradual change driven by alternative media platforms and shifting audience expectations. Social media, for instance, has provided female dangdut singers with a means to bypass traditional gatekeepers and present themselves on their own terms. This aligns with (T. A. van Dijk, 2008) perspective that discourse is dynamic and can be reshaped through counter-discourses that challenge dominant narratives. The increasing focus on empowerment and talent-based portrayals—though still secondary—suggests an ongoing negotiation of discursive power within the industry.

Ultimately, van Dijk's theory underscores the complexity of discourse production and its intersection with institutional control. While empowerment-focused narratives remain limited in mainstream coverage, the growing presence of alternative media and changing cultural attitudes indicate a potential shift in the discursive landscape. However, sustained efforts are needed to ensure that these alternative representations are not merely trends but fundamental shifts in how female artists are perceived and valued within the music industry.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the representation of female dangdut singers is predominantly shaped by institutional discourse control, as outlined by (T. A. van Dijk, 2008) Critical Discourse Analysis. Mainstream media prioritizes appearance-focused and sensationalized portrayals, reinforcing patriarchal norms while marginalizing empowerment-focused narratives. Despite these constraints, the rise of alternative media platforms has enabled counter-discourses that highlight talent and self-representation. However, these narratives remain secondary due to the dominance of traditional power structures. For lasting change, a broader media shift and societal re-evaluation of female artists' contributions beyond their physical image are necessary.

REFERENCES

Abrams, D. (2010). Processes of prejudice: Theory, evidence and intervention. In *Equality and Human Rights Commission.*

Baker, P., & Egbert, J. (2016). Triangulating methodological approaches in corpus linguistic research. In *Triangulating Methodological Approaches in Corpus Linguistic Research.* https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315724812

Elhami, A., Roshan, A., & Chandan, H. (2024). *Principles of Conducting Qualitative Research in Multicultural Settings.* IGI Global. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=1OUWEQAAQBAJ

Fairclough, N. (2013). Critical discourse analysis the critical study of language, second edition. In *Critical Discourse Analysis The Critical Study of Language, Second Edition.* https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315834368

Foucault, M. (2002). Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 v. 3. In *Administrative Science Quarterly.*

García, O., Flores, N., & Spotti, M. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society.* Oxford University Press. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=ugU1DQAAQBAJ

Goebel, Z. (2015). *Language and Superdiversity: Indonesians Knowledging at Home and Abroad.* Oxford University Press. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=jmviBwAAQBAJ

Heryanto, A. (2008). Pop Culture and competing identities. *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics*, May, 1–36. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203895627

Krathwohl, D. R. (1998). *Methods of Educational and Social Science Research: An Integrated Approach.* Longman. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=-BW2AAAAIAAJ

Lessig, L. (2004). *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity.* Penguin Press. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=tRwsKG2LBGkC

Pascale, C. M. (2012). *Social Inequality & The Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape.* SAGE Publications. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=5udyAwAAQBAJ

Schmidt, V. A. (2008). Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science.* https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342

Tilly, C., Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2001). Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression. *Contemporary Sociology.* https://doi.org/10.2307/2655372

van Dijk, T. (2014). Elite Discourse and Racism. In *Elite Discourse and Racism.* https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483326184

van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and Power.* Macmillan Education UK. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=NhILAQAAMAAJ

van Dijk, T. A. (2015). *Racism and the Press.* Taylor & Francis. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=Ox0-CgAAQBAJ

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society.* https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006

Weintraub, A. N. (2010). Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music. In *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music.*

https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195395662.001.0001

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis.* SAGE Publications. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=XwNdBAAAQBAJ