

A Critical Analysis of the Devotee Phenomenon and the Vulnerability of Persons with Physical Disabilities in Digital Spaces

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Abstrak

Data from CATAHU (the Annual Record on Violence Against Women) reveal a rising trend of gender-based violence affecting persons with disabilities. Within this spectrum, the phenomenon of *devotees*, or individuals who fetishize disabled bodies, reflects a digital form of exploitation that transforms the bodies of persons with disabilities into sexualized objects within virtual spaces. This dynamic often erases the boundaries between desire, control, and dehumanization. Despite its growing visibility, this issue has yet to be adequately addressed in legal frameworks or gender-based violence discourses. This study explores how the *devotee* phenomenon functions as a form of virtual violence and how persons with disabilities interpret their experiences within such relationships. Employing a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and a literature study, this study involves disability advocates and service organizations, such as the Rifka Annisa Women's Crisis Center, the Society for Assistance and Protection Disability Activists (SAPDA; Women, Disability, and Child Advocacy Center), and the Disability Advocacy and Inclusion Network (SIGAB). The findings are expected to enrich our understanding of how fetishization intersects with ableism and gendered power relations and contribute to the development of inclusive digital protection frameworks that uphold the sexual rights of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: *Disability, Devotee, Digital Space, Body Objectification*

1. Introduction

The vulnerability of friends with disabilities in sexual violence cases is often overlooked. In the Annual Report: Gender-Based Violence by the SAPDA Foundation (2022), it is mentioned that the data found 81 cases from 26 institutions across 12 provinces in Indonesia. The report states that the number of female victims is larger, with 76 people (96%) and male victims amounting to five (6%). Meanwhile, the age range is between 15-29 years. Recently, the online world was shocked by what is called a "devotee." This term became widely discussed in the public after an anonymous message was sent to Kirana's Instagram account (a person with a disability), such as, "Do you have a female paraplegic friend? I am a devotee, ready to treat her like a princess," wrote the sender. This became a topic of discussion. On her X account, Kirana (@kirarance) shared about the term "devotee."

The term devotee is not a medical term but a social term used for people who have a specific attraction, particularly sexual, to people with disabilities, especially wheelchair users, crutch users, and other medical aid users. Phenomena such as these are often overlooked by the public, and persons with disabilities are seen merely as objects of eroticism. The case brought by Kirana on her social media account proves that gender-based violence (GBV) also targets people with disabilities.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

The phenomenon of specific sexual attraction to the disabled body, or what is known in the literature as devoteeism, has long been a subject of complex study at the intersection of disability studies, sexuality, and gender. Initially documented in the realm of health sciences, which was somewhat pathological (Bruno, 1997), in his seminal article "Devotees, Pretenders, and Wannabes," Bruno introduced the terms devotees, pretenders, and wannabes (DPW) as manifestations of what he called fictitious disability disorder. Bruno argued that the compulsive attraction to disabilities, whether to be near them (devotee), mimic them (pretender), or have them (wannabe), stems from a deprivation of parental affection during childhood.

In this framework, disability is perceived as a means to obtain attention and affection that was previously unmet (Bruno, 1997, p. 12). While Bruno's approach provides psychological insight, this perspective is considered to overly focus on individual pathology and less on broader social power dimensions such as ableism and patriarchy. In the Indonesian local context, as reported by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, 2020) in the "Disability Study Brief Report," women with disabilities face layered vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of sexual violence. Data from CATAHU show a consistent increase in cases of sexual violence against women with disabilities, from 34 cases (2017) to 69 cases (2019) (Komnas Perempuan, 2020, pp. 16–18).

This report identifies social barriers, such as stigma, layered discrimination, and an inaccessible justice system, which exacerbate their vulnerability. Although the Komnas Perempuan report (2020) does not specifically mention the term "devotee," findings regarding objectification, dependency on caregivers, and difficulty accessing justice reflect the dynamics of power exploited by devotees, as illustrated by Bruno (1997). This suggests that the phenomenon of devoteeism is not an isolated issue but part of the broader spectrum of gender-based and disability-based violence. García-Santesmases, Sammiquel-Molinero, and Ruiz Terol (2025) developed Bruno's pathological approach further in their article "Desiring Disability?" by using the lens of critical and feminist disability studies, marking a significant paradigm shift.. by using the lens of critical and feminist disability studies, marking a significant paradigm shift.

They argue that devoteeism is not merely an individual disorder but rather a product of the intersection between ableism and heterosexuality (García-Santesmases et al., 2025, p. 2). In an ableist society, the disabled body is trapped in a dichotomy of "undesired" or "desired precisely because of its disability," and devoteeism represents the latter. Their qualitative study of amputees in Spain reveals that, while the attraction to disability may be consensual, in practice, devoteeism is often manifested through objectifying behaviors, such as asking for photos of stumps (amputated limbs) without consent, which female participants felt was a form of dehumanization equivalent to being asked for pictures of breasts (García-Santesmases et al., 2025, p. 7). These findings highlight the strong gender dimension, where devoteeism is predominantly practiced by men towards disabled women, thus reproducing patriarchal logic that fragments and dominates the female body.

Furthermore, Pratiwi, Budiharto, and Fauzan 's(n.d.) literature review, which discusses emotional intelligence and juvenile delinquency, although not directly addressing devoteeism, has indirect implications regarding the importance of emotional regulation and psychological resilience. Adolescents with low emotional intelligence are more vulnerable to impulsive behavior and the search for external validation (Pratiwi et al., n.d., p. 10). This framework, while needing to be applied cautiously, opens a perspective to question whether compulsive attraction to disability in devotees is also related to maladaptive coping mechanisms in dealing with the complexities of desire and identity, a dynamic also mentioned by Bruno (1997) in the context of unfulfilled emotional needs.

The integration of these four references constructs a comprehensive problem map. Bruno (1997) provides the initial descriptive foundation of the DPW phenomenon, Komnas Perempuan (2020) offers empirical context on vulnerabilities in Indonesia, and García-Santesmases et al. (2025) provide critical analytical tools to unravel the ableist and heterosexist power relations behind it. The digital space, which was both mentioned by Bruno (1997) in the context of the emergence of online forums for devotees and by García-Santesmases et al. (2025) in their analysis of harassment on social media, becomes an amplifier and a new field in which this objectification occurs. The Internet facilitates anonymity, allowing the desires of devotees to be expressed, forming devotee communities, and creating new vulnerabilities for people with disabilities, who become targets of unsolicited attention, stalking, and visual exploitation.

Thus, the existing literature has paved the way to understanding devoteeism not merely as a paraphilia, but as a complex social construct. However, there remains a research gap, particularly in the Indonesian context, regarding how this phenomenon is experienced and interpreted by people with physical disabilities themselves, and how legal frameworks and protection services, as mandated by Law No. 8

of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, which underpins the Komnas Perempuan (2020) Report, can be adapted to address these new forms of virtual violence.

Based on the literature review, several hypotheses emerge, including the idea that devoteeism operates as a form of virtual violence that reinforces ableism and the objectification of disabled bodies, particularly women. People with physical disabilities, especially amputees, have limited awareness of devoteeism as a form of violence and tend to perceive it as a form of "normal" attention or attraction. Digital spaces are the main medium for the reproduction and normalization of disability fetishization, creating new vulnerabilities that have not been fully recognized within legal frameworks and protection services.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to deeply understand the experiences of people with physical disabilities in encountering the devotee phenomenon in digital spaces. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to explore the meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences of research subjects holistically (Creswell, 2014), which aligns with the study's goal of understanding the complexity of the devotee phenomenon from the perspective of persons with disabilities. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: persons with physical disabilities with various types of impairments (amputation, paraplegia, and cerebral palsy) who are willing to participate in the study. The sample also includes representatives from violence victim services organizations, namely, the Rifka Annisa Women's Crisis Center, SAPDA, and SIGAB, selected based on the following criteria: having direct experience handling cases of violence against persons with disabilities.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with flexible interview guides. Interviews with persons with disabilities focused on their experiences interacting with devotees, the meanings they attached to those interactions, and the psychological impacts they experienced. Interviews with representatives from organizations focused on case patterns encountered and the challenges in handling them. Document analysis was conducted on the annual reports of partner organizations and relevant social media from persons with disabilities regarding the devotee phenomenon. However, the researcher acknowledges the limitations of this study, including the limited generalizability of findings due to the qualitative nature of the research, the potential recall bias among participants in remembering interactions with devotees, and limited access to the devotee community itself to obtain a more comprehensive perspective.

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