

# Comparative Analysis of Media Coverage on the R.G. Kar Medical College Rape Case: A Study of Traditional and Digital-Only News Platforms

**Dr. Bichitrananda Panda**

**Adrika Kumari**

**Prarthana Gupta**

Amity School of Communication

Amity University Chhattisgarh, Raipur

Email Id: bnpanda20@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The media's portrayal of gender-based violence significantly influences public understanding, institutional accountability, and the broader socio-political discourse surrounding such incidents. The R.G. Kar Medical College rape case (August 2024) generated extensive national attention, prompting varied responses across traditional and digital-only news platforms. This study presents a comparative content analysis of media coverage by traditional newspapers (The Hindustan Times, The Indian Express) and digital-only news portals (The Print, Scroll) between 9 August and 9 September 2024. A systematic sample of 100 news headlines was analysed to examine keyword frequency, thematic emphasis, tone, and framing patterns related to the victim, accused, protests, and institutional responses. The findings highlight clear differences in representational approaches between traditional and digital media, revealing how each platform shapes narrative construction, public sentiment, and issue salience. This analysis contributes to understanding contemporary media practices in reporting sensitive criminal cases and their implications for public discourse.

**Keywords:** Media coverage, R.G. Kar rape case, digital media, traditional media, media framing

## Introduction

The rape and murder of a 31-year-old postgraduate trainee doctor at R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata, on 9 August 2024, triggered one of the most intense national debates on gender safety, institutional accountability, and media responsibility in recent years. What began as a departmental report of an alleged suicide quickly unfolded into a major criminal investigation after the autopsy confirmed rape, assault, and homicide. The arrest of a civic volunteer and the subsequent transfer of the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation intensified public attention, further amplified by a 42-day strike by junior doctors demanding justice and stronger security measures in hospitals. The gravity of the incident, coupled with widespread public outrage, positioned the case at the centre of India's news ecosystem, prompting extensive media coverage across traditional platforms such as television and print, as well as digital-only news outlets. This divergence of platforms offers a unique lens to study how different media ecosystems frame sensitive crimes, shape public perception, and influence policy discourse. The present study conducts a comparative analysis of this coverage, examining variations in tone, depth, sourcing practices, narrative framing, and agenda-setting between legacy media and emerging digital-first news organisations.

## Theoretical Framework

**Framing Theory:** Framing Theory examines how media organisations select, emphasise, and present specific aspects of an event to shape public interpretation. In the context of the R.G. Kar Medical College rape case, framing becomes critical for understanding how traditional newspapers and digital-only portals portrayed the victim, accused, protests, and institutional actions. By analysing headline choices, tone, and thematic focus, this framework helps reveal how different platforms construct meaning, assign responsibility, and influence public sentiment through strategic narrative structures.

**Narrative Theory:** Narrative Theory explores how stories are constructed through sequencing, characterisation, and thematic coherence. Applying this lens to media coverage of the R.G. Kar case allows an examination of how various

news platforms craft distinct storylines-whether emphasising institutional failure, gender violence, or public protest. Traditional and digital-only media differ in how they build narrative arcs, create protagonists and antagonists, and guide audience emotions. This framework helps identify how narrative choices shape public understanding and long-term discourse on gender-based violence.

### Research Problem

Media representations of sexual violence significantly shape public opinion, perceptions of justice, and discussions on institutional accountability. However, traditional and digital-only news platforms often differ in how they frame sensitive incidents, influencing audience understanding in distinct ways. This study examines these variations through a comparative analysis of media coverage of the R.G. Kar Medical College rape case.

### Objectives

1. To compare the framing patterns used in headlines across traditional newspapers and digital-only news platforms while reporting the R.G. Kar rape case.
2. To analyse the frequency and prominence of key terms related to the victim, accused, protests, and institutional responses in the selected media headlines.
3. To identify differences in thematic emphasis and representational styles between traditional and digital-only platforms and assess how these influence public interpretation of the incident.

### Hypothesis

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference in the framing patterns used in headlines between traditional newspapers and digital-only news platforms when reporting the R.G. Kar rape case.

H<sub>a1</sub>: There is a significant difference in the framing patterns used in headlines between traditional newspapers and digital-only news platforms when reporting the R.G. Kar rape case.

H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant difference in the frequency and prominence of key terms related to the victim, accused, protests, or institutional responses between traditional and digital-only platforms.

H<sub>a2</sub>: There is a significant difference in the frequency and prominence of key terms related to the victim, accused, protests, or institutional responses between traditional and digital-only platforms.

H<sub>03</sub>: There is no significant difference in thematic emphasis or representational styles between traditional and digital-only news platforms, and these differences do not influence public interpretation.

H<sub>a3</sub>: There is a significant difference in thematic emphasis or representational styles between traditional and digital-only news platforms, and these differences influence public interpretation.

### Literature Review

Ahmad, A., & Shukla, S. (2020), in their study “Coverage of Rape Cases in Media with Special Reference to Nirbhaya Gangrape” (Dialogue), emphasises that public attention is crucial for agenda-setting and significantly shapes legal and policy responses. Manisha, L. and Rawat, M. (2021), in their research paper “Trial by Media in India: Undermining of the Indian Judiciary,” explain that media trials arise when news outlets-both traditional and social media-portray an accused person as guilty before the judicial process is complete. This premature framing amplifies the media’s influence in sensitive criminal cases. Their study argues that excessive media involvement across press, television, newspapers, and social media undermines the very principle of a fair trial and severely compromises the privacy and dignity of the individuals involved. Gravelin, C. R., Biernat, M., & Kerl, E. (2024). in their research paper “Assessing the Impact of Media on Blaming the Victim of Acquaintance Rape” highlight how media narratives influence public perceptions of rape victims and argue that journalists and policymakers can challenge harmful stereotypes through responsible reporting. Johnson (2003), in his work on media and social movements, discusses how the presentation of controversial issues can mobilise public emotions and, if biased, may fuel agitation, protest, and social unrest.

Entman, R. M. (1993), in his seminal paper “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” explains that framing involves selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient to promote specific

interpretations. His work provides a foundational understanding of how media shape meaning, which is essential for analysing headline framing in sensitive crime reporting. McCombs, M., and Shaw, D. (1972), in their landmark study “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” demonstrate that media outlets influence public priorities by determining which issues receive prominence. This framework is crucial to understanding how traditional and digital news platforms differentially highlight elements of rape cases to shape public attention. Tuchman, G. (1978), in “Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality,” argues that news is not merely reported but actively constructed through routine practices and narrative choices. Her work aligns with narrative theory and helps explain how different media platforms craft storylines that influence public perception during high-profile crime cases. Greer, C. (2007), in “News Media, Victims and Crime,” discusses how victims of violence are represented in news narratives and how these portrayals shape social attitudes and policy debates. His findings are particularly relevant for analysing how the victim in the R.G. Kar case is framed across platforms.

Easteal, P., Holland, K., & Judd, K. (2015), in their study “How Newspapers Portray Sexual Violence: A Study of Framing and Language,” reveal that media often rely on sensationalism or victim-blaming narratives, which can distort public understanding of sexual violence. Their work directly supports examining differences in representational styles between traditional and digital-only media outlets. Previous studies further indicate that media platforms prioritise specific angles based on editorial goals and audience expectations: traditional media often adopt authoritative and institutional perspectives, while digital platforms emphasise human-interest storytelling to maximise engagement. Building on these insights, the present study analyses keyword frequency in headlines to identify framing differences in the coverage of the R.G. Kar rape case.

## Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis approach to examine framing and narrative patterns in media coverage of the R.G. Kar Medical College rape case, aligning with Framing Theory and Narrative Theory outlined in the theoretical framework. Four news platforms, two traditional to digital (Hindustan Times, The Indian Express) and two digital-only (The Print, Scroll) were purposively selected based on their high online reach and engagement across websites and social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X. Using systematic sampling, 25 headlines were collected from each platform, generating a dataset of 100 headlines published between 9 August and 9 September 2024. The headlines were analysed for the presence and frequency of specific keywords (“strike,” “protest,” “rape,” “murder,” “R G Kar,” “doctor,” “politics,” and “none”) to identify dominant frames and thematic emphases. Keyword frequency patterns were compared across platforms to fulfil the study’s objectives of assessing framing differences and representational variations between traditional and digital-only media.

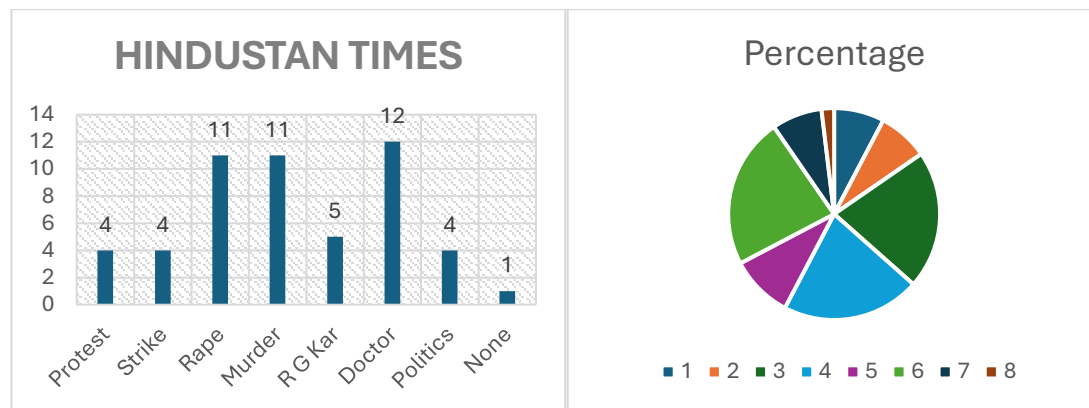
## Data Analysis

### *Analysis of News of the Hindustan Times*

Keywords	Frequency	Percentage
Protest	4	7.69
Strike	4	7.69
Rape	11	21.15
Murder	11	21.15
R G Kar	5	9.61
Doctor	12	23.07
Politics	4	7.69
None	1	1.92

The analysis of headline keywords reveals distinct patterns in the framing of the R.G. Kar rape case. Among the selected headlines, the most frequently occurring keyword was “Doctor” (23.07%), indicating a strong focus on the victim’s

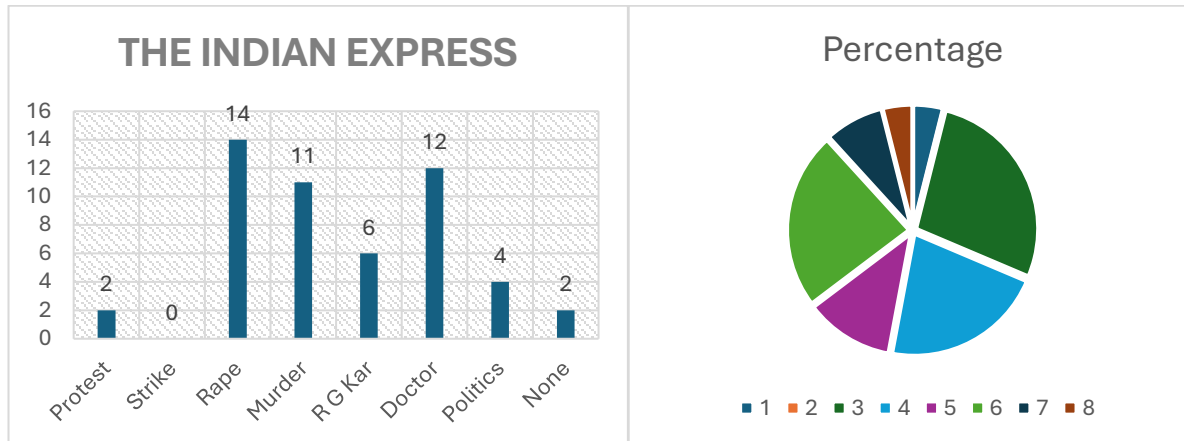
professional identity. This was followed by “Rape” and “Murder,” each appearing in 21.15% of headlines, reflecting the centrality of the crime narrative. The keyword “R G Kar” appeared in 9.61% of headlines, signalling moderate emphasis on the institutional setting. Keywords related to public action “Protest” and “Strike” each constituted 7.69%, suggesting limited but notable framing around collective mobilisation. Similarly, “Politics” appeared in 7.69% of headlines, highlighting the political undertones linked to the incident. Only 1.92% of headlines contained none of the identified keywords. Overall, the frequency distribution demonstrates how media platforms foreground specific elements of the case, aligning with framing theory by emphasising particular aspects to shape audience perception.



### Analysis of News of the Indian Express

Keywords	Frequency	Percentage
Protest	2	3.92
Strike	0	0
Rape	14	27.45
Murder	11	21.56
R G Kar	6	11.76
Doctor	12	23.52
Politics	4	7.84
None	2	3.92

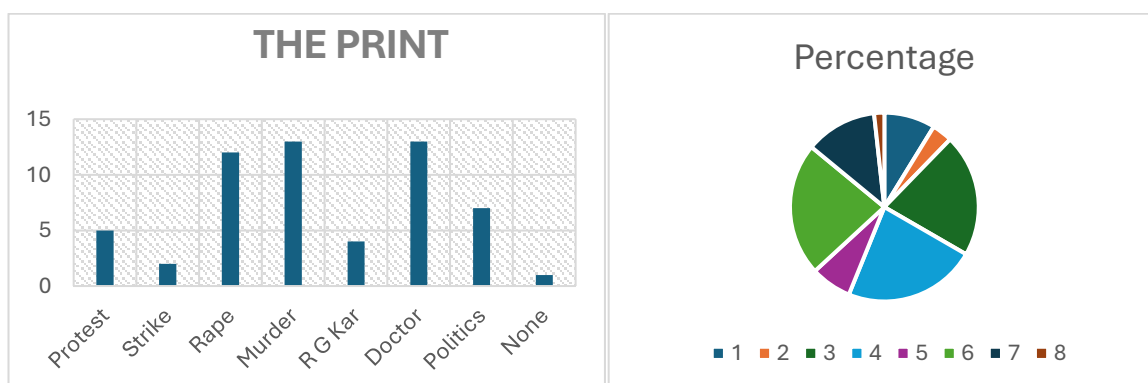
The analysis of headlines from The Indian Express indicates distinct keyword patterns that reflect the platform’s framing of the R.G. Kar rape case. The most prominent keyword was “Rape,” appearing in 27.45% of headlines, followed by “Doctor” at 23.52%, underscoring a strong emphasis on both the nature of the crime and the victim’s professional identity. “Murder” appeared in 21.56% of headlines, showing consistent attention to the severity of the incident. Institutional references through the keyword “R G Kar” accounted for 11.76%, indicating moderate focus on the location and institutional context. Public action framing was relatively low, with “Protest” appearing in only 3.92% of headlines and “Strike” absent entirely. Political framing remained limited at 7.84%. Headlines without any targeted keywords constituted 3.92%. Overall, the keyword distribution suggests that The Indian Express prioritised crime-focused and victim-centred framing, aligning with broader media tendencies highlighted in framing theory.



### Analysis of News of the Print

Keywords	Frequency	Percentage
Protest	5	8.77
Strike	2	3.5
Rape	12	21.05
Murder	13	22.8
R G Kar	4	7.01
Doctor	13	22.8
Politics	7	12.28
None	1	1.75

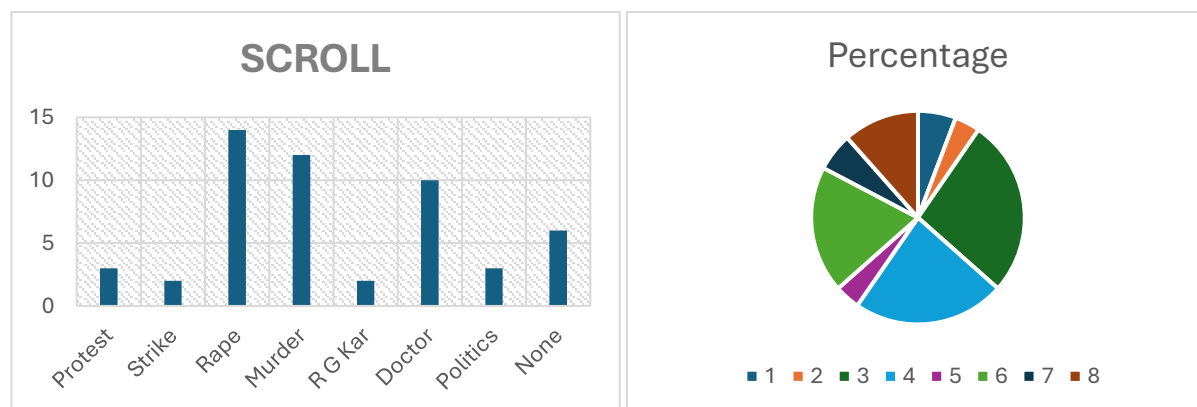
The analysis of headlines from The Print reveals a diverse range of framing patterns related to the R.G. Kar rape case. The most frequently occurring keywords were “Murder” and “Doctor,” each appearing in 22.8% of headlines, indicating a strong emphasis on both the criminal severity and the victim’s professional identity. “Rape” was also prominent at 21.05%, reinforcing focus on the sexual violence aspect of the case. Political framing was comparatively notable, with “Politics” appearing in 12.28% of headlines higher than in many traditional outlets suggesting that The Print linked the incident to broader governance debates. Public mobilisation was reflected through “Protest” (8.77%) and “Strike” (3.5%), highlighting some attention to collective responses. Institutional references via “R G Kar” appeared in 7.01% of headlines, while only 1.75% contained none of the targeted keywords. Overall, the distribution demonstrates The Print’s tendency to integrate crime, victim identity, and political angles, consistent with framing theory’s emphasis on selective highlighting to shape audience perception.



### Analysis of News of the Scroll

Keywords	Frequency	Percentage
Protest	3	5.76
Strike	2	3.84
Rape	14	26.92
Murder	12	23.07
R G Kar	2	3.84
Doctor	10	19.23
Politics	3	5.76
None	6	11.53

The analysis of headlines from Scroll shows a distinct pattern in how the platform frames the R.G. Kar rape case. The most frequently used keyword was “Rape,” appearing in 26.92% of headlines, indicating strong emphasis on the sexual violence aspect. This was followed by “Murder” at 23.07%, reflecting sustained attention to the severity of the crime. The keyword “Doctor” appeared in 19.23% of headlines, suggesting a moderate focus on the victim’s professional identity. Public action keywords “Protest” (5.76%) and “Strike” (3.84%) were present but limited, indicating comparatively lower emphasis on collective responses. Likewise, “Politics” appeared in 5.76% of headlines, demonstrating minimal political framing. Institutional reference through “R G Kar” was also low at 3.84%. Notably, Scroll had the highest percentage of headlines categorized as “None” (11.53%), suggesting more diverse or indirect headline constructions. Overall, the keyword distribution indicates that Scroll prioritised crime-centric framing, consistent with digital platforms’ tendency to highlight core incident details to shape audience perception.



### Conclusion

The comparative analysis of headline framing across traditional newspapers and digital-only platforms reveals meaningful variations that directly inform the study’s hypotheses. Traditional outlets such as The Hindustan Times and The Indian Express exhibit a relatively balanced focus on the victim’s professional identity (“Doctor”) and the core crime elements (“Rape” and “Murder”), with moderate reference to institutional context and limited emphasis on protests or political responses. In contrast, digital platforms such as The Print and Scroll display more differentiated patterns: The Print integrates political framing more prominently, while Scroll adopts a crime-centric approach with the highest proportion of headlines containing none of the predefined keywords, indicating more varied narrative constructions.

These differences demonstrate that framing choices are neither uniform nor incidental. The prominence of certain keywords over others supports the rejection of  $H_{01}$  and  $H_{02}$ , confirming significant variation in framing patterns and



keyword frequency between traditional and digital platforms. Furthermore, the thematic emphasis ranging from victim identity to political contexts reflects representational styles that likely shape audience interpretation, leading to the rejection of  $H_{03}$ . Overall, the findings affirm that digital and traditional news media employ distinct framing strategies that influence how the R.G. Kar rape case is understood by the public.

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