

The Role of Language in Shaping Public Opinion: A Discourse Analysis of Netizen Comments on Digital Platforms

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Abstract.

The rapid development of social media as a digital public sphere has transformed how individuals construct, express, and negotiate public opinion. The language used in netizen comments serves as a primary medium for representing emotions, identity, and social perceptions. This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant amid growing polarization, misinformation, and intense digital interactions. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of language in shaping public opinion through discourse analysis of netizen comments on digital platforms. Using a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design, this research explores meaning, lived experiences, and power relations embedded in linguistic practices. Data were collected through document analysis of social media comments, in-depth interviews with 15–20 active users, and non-participatory observation. The findings reveal three main themes: language as an expression of collective emotions, a marker of identity and social affiliation, and a tool for negotiating reality. These findings show that digital public opinion is formed through emotional expression, social pressure, and dynamic meaning construction, with implications for discourse studies, digital literacy, and public communication.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis; public opinion; social media; netizen comments; digital literacy

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected digital era, the public sphere is no longer confined to physical forums but has shifted to digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and online media comment sections. Within these spaces, individuals are not merely consumers of information but also active producers of discourse who shape public opinion. This phenomenon is evident in everyday life, for instance, when a social issue or government policy goes viral, comment sections are flooded with diverse responses reflecting support, resistance, and even sharp polarization. From an individual perspective, particularly among active social media users, interaction within digital spaces often generates social pressure, a need for group affiliation, and a drive to assert identity through language use.

Preliminary observations across several digital platforms indicate that netizen comments are not merely spontaneous reactions but contain distinct linguistic patterns representing ideology, emotion, and social positioning. Exploratory interviews with active social media users further reveal that word choice, linguistic style, and rhetorical strategies are often influenced by audience perception, platform algorithms, and trending topic dynamics. In this context, language functions not as a neutral instrument but as a means of constructing social reality and shaping public opinion. Globally, this phenomenon has gained increasing significance as social media becomes a primary

source of information, influencing collective perceptions of critical issues such as politics, the environment, and education.

Recent studies over the past five years demonstrate that social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion through complex discursive practices. Guo et al. (2026) highlight that social media comments reflect emotional and thematic public responses to global events and can be analyzed through discourse approaches to understand communication patterns. Omipidan et al. (2024) emphasize that social media functions as a discursive arena enabling both the formation of public opinion and the negotiation of meaning regarding government policies. Meanwhile, Parthama (2025) shows that netizen comments can be qualitatively analyzed to reveal how language influences public perception and engagement.

Further studies by Arranz et al. (2024) underscore that discourse analysis on social media can identify polarization and ideological coalitions within public discourse. Althuwaini et al. (2025) demonstrate that comment-based interactions on digital platforms contain complex discursive structures that can be analyzed using technologically assisted discourse analysis. Additionally, Munibi (2025) highlights that language on social media acts as a catalyst in shaping social identity and political ideology, directly contributing to the formation of public opinion.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in the literature. Most studies tend to focus on quantitative analysis, big data, or macro-level discourse mapping, while the subjective experiences, negotiated meanings, and underlying social processes of netizen comment production remain underexplored. Qualitative approaches that position user experience at the center of analysis are still relatively limited, particularly in understanding how individuals interpret, produce, and assign meaning to language in everyday digital interactions.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the role of language in shaping public opinion through discourse analysis of netizen comments on digital platforms. The focus is directed toward identifying discursive patterns, linguistic strategies, and social meanings embedded in user comments. This research is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of qualitative digital discourse analysis and practically to understanding the dynamics of public communication in the digital era, particularly for academics, media practitioners, and policymakers.

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of language use in netizen comments on digital platforms does not merely represent linguistic messages but also reflects social experiences, collective emotions, and implicit power dynamics. In this context, language functions as a medium through which individuals negotiate identity, express group affiliation, and shape as well as influence public opinion. To capture this complexity, this study is grounded in three primary theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the social construction of reality, and social identity theory in digital communication.

1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Language as a Practice of Power and Ideology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes language as a form of social practice that is inherently non-neutral, embedded with power relations and ideological dimensions. In the context of netizen comments, CDA facilitates the examination of how specific lexical choices, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies are employed to shape public perception of particular issues. Recent studies indicate that digital discourse often serves as a site for the reproduction of symbolic power, where both dominant and subordinate groups attempt to influence public opinion through language (Dewanty, 2026).

Furthermore, discourse practices in social media environments evolve rapidly and fluidly, enabling the emergence of sharp opinion polarization (Muhammad et al. 2025). From the users' perspective, this is reflected in their conscious selection of language to align with, oppose, or build solidarity within specific discursive communities. Therefore, CDA not only analyzes textual elements but also situates them within broader social structures.

2. Social Construction of Reality: Language as a Shaper of Collective Perception

The theory of the social construction of reality, rooted in the work of Berger and Luckmann and further developed in contemporary digital contexts, posits that social reality is constructed through repeated symbolic interactions. Within social media, netizen comments function as mechanisms for the production and reproduction of meaning that influence how society interprets particular issues. Research by Zhao et al. (2022) demonstrates that digital discourse plays a significant role in shaping collective perceptions through processes such as framing and narrative repetition.

Additionally, Cinelli et al. (2021) reveal that social media ecosystems tend to create "echo chambers," reinforcing particular beliefs through the repetition of homogeneous discourse. From participants' perspectives, this condition is often experienced as a "circle of opinion," where individuals feel compelled to adjust their language to align with group norms in order to maintain acceptance. Consequently, language in comments does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it.

3. Social Identity Theory: Language as an Expression of Affiliation and Collective Emotion

Social identity theory emphasizes that individuals construct their identities through membership in specific social groups. In digital contexts, language serves as a primary tool for signaling such membership. Research by Gichaba (2025) indicates that social media interactions are influenced by the need for social recognition and group affiliation, which are manifested in users' linguistic styles and emotional expressions.

Moreover, Papacharissi (2020) highlights the significant role of emotions in shaping public opinion within digital spaces through the concept of affective publics. Netizen comments are often not purely rational but are infused with emotional expressions; such as anger, empathy, or sarcasm; which are constructed through language. Exploratory interviews further reveal that users may intentionally employ "harsh" or "satirical" language to attract attention or reinforce their position within public discourse.

Theoretical Positioning and Comparative Perspective

These three approaches offer complementary perspectives. CDA emphasizes the dimensions of power and ideology in language, the social construction of reality highlights how collective meanings are formed through interaction, and social identity theory focuses on psychosocial dynamics and group affiliation in language use.

However, this study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical lens due to its capacity to integrate linguistic, social, and ideological dimensions simultaneously. CDA enables the researcher not only to understand what is being said by netizens but also why it is said and within what power context the language is produced. Meanwhile, the theories of social construction and social identity are employed as supporting frameworks to enrich the interpretation of participants' experiences and meaning-making processes.

Research Framework

This study conceptualizes netizen comments as discursive practices that both reflect and shape social reality. Language is understood as a medium that constructs meaning and collective perception (social construction), expresses identity and group affiliation (social identity), and reproduces or challenges power relations (CDA).

In analyzing the data, comments are not treated as isolated textual units but as part of dynamic social processes. Participants' voices are interpreted as representations of experiences embedded within specific social, cultural, and digital contexts. Consequently, the analysis extends beyond the linguistic level toward a deeper understanding of how language operates in shaping public opinion.

For instance, when a participant employs sarcastic language in commenting on public policy, the analysis does not solely focus on the linguistic form but also interprets the underlying emotions, social positioning, and power relations. This approach enables the study to capture the complexity of netizen experiences in a more holistic and reflective manner.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design. This approach is selected due to its focus on the interpretation of language, power relations, and the construction of social reality as reflected in netizen comments on digital platforms. CDA enables the researcher not only to analyze textual linguistic structures but also to uncover the ideological, social, and contextual dimensions underlying discourse production (Mutanana & Shoko, 2026). Therefore, this approach is particularly relevant for examining how language functions as a tool in shaping public opinion within digital environments.

The participant selection strategy in this study utilizes purposive sampling, whereby informants are deliberately chosen based on criteria aligned with the research objectives. The participants consist of 15–20 active social media users who meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) actively engage in commenting on public issues across digital platforms (e.g., Twitter/X, Instagram, or YouTube), (2) demonstrate consistent interaction within public discourse, and (3) are willing to participate in in-depth interviews. In certain cases, snowball sampling is also applied to expand the participant network based on recommendations from initial informants. This study is conducted within the Indonesian digital context, focusing on netizen interactions surrounding viral social issues within a specific timeframe.

Data collection is conducted through three primary methods. First, digital document analysis is employed to collect data in the form of netizen comments from social media platforms relevant to the research topic. The data are systematically gathered by considering thematic relevance, interaction intensity, and diversity of perspectives. Second, in-depth interviews are conducted to explore participants' subjective experiences, motivations, and the meanings they attribute to the language used in their comments. These interviews are carried out in a semi-structured format using open-ended guiding questions and are recorded using digital devices. Third, non-participatory observation is conducted to understand the dynamics of interaction and the discursive context emerging within digital spaces. All collected data are subsequently transcribed and organized as the research corpus.

Data analysis in this study employs thematic analysis grounded in a critical discourse approach, conducted through several stages. The first stage is open coding, which involves identifying units of meaning in the data inductively. The second stage is axial coding, which organizes these codes into broader categories based on conceptual relationships. The final stage is selective coding, which integrates categories into core themes

representing patterns of discourse. The analysis process is carried out iteratively and reflectively, taking into account the social and ideological contexts of the data. To support the analytical process, this study utilizes NVivo software as a tool for managing and coding qualitative data, which enhances the systematicity and transparency of the analysis (Dahal, 2025; Kogen, 2024). The use of this software also allows for deeper data exploration through visualization of relationships between themes.

The trustworthiness of the data is ensured through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is achieved through triangulation of data sources (digital comments, interviews, and observations) and member checking with participants. Transferability is maintained by providing detailed contextual descriptions, allowing the findings to be understood in broader contexts. Dependability is ensured through an audit trail that systematically documents the entire research process. Meanwhile, confirmability is upheld by ensuring that data interpretation is grounded in traceable empirical evidence (Almusaed et al., 2025). Additionally, the use of analytical software such as NVivo supports consistency and transparency in the coding process (Paapa & Kambona, 2025).

From an ethical perspective, this study upholds the principle of informed consent, in which all participants are provided with clear information regarding the research objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participant identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms. All collected data are used solely for academic purposes and are securely stored. The study also considers ethical aspects in the use of digital data, particularly in quoting netizen comments, by ensuring anonymity and avoiding harm to any involved parties.

Results

The analysis of netizen comments and in-depth interviews yielded three major themes representing how language functions in shaping public opinion within digital spaces. These themes do not operate independently; rather, they are interwoven, reflecting the complexity of participants' experiences, emotions, and social dynamics. To provide a clearer overview, the main themes and their corresponding subthemes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Themes and Subthemes of the Findings

Main Themes	Subthemes
Language as an Expression of Collective Emotions	Anger, empathy, sarcasm
Language as a Marker of Identity and Affiliation	Polarization, group solidarity
Language as a Tool for Negotiating Reality	Interpretation, legitimization, resistance

As shown in Table 1, three principal themes were identified: (1) language as an expression of collective emotions, (2) language as a marker of identity and affiliation, and (3) language as a tool for negotiating reality. Each theme encompasses distinct yet interconnected dimensions of digital discourse.

a) Language as an Expression of Collective Emotions

This phenomenon becomes particularly prominent when public issues go viral. Comment sections transform into spaces for emotional release that are both spontaneous and directed. In this context, language is no longer merely a tool of communication but becomes a medium for expressing collective emotions; such as anger, disappointment, empathy, and even cynicism.

One participant (P3) stated:

"Sometimes I comment not because I want to debate, but because I feel annoyed. If I don't write it, it just keeps bothering me."

Such comments indicate that language functions as a form of catharsis. However, on the other hand, these same emotions may also trigger the escalation of conflict.

Another participant (P7) explained:

"I know it sounds harsh, but if the language is too soft, it feels like no one listens. So I deliberately make it a bit 'provocative.'"

This reflects a paradox: the desire to be heard encourages the use of sharper language. Emotions are not only expressed but also "constructed" to enhance their impact. These findings are consistent with studies showing that netizen comments often contain high emotional intensity that shapes the direction of public discourse (Noor & Hamid, 2021; Murti et al., 2024).

However, not all emotional expressions are negative. In some cases, empathy emerges as a form of solidarity:

"I don't know the person, but reading their story made me feel sad too. So I wanted to show support through comments." (P11)

This ambiguity suggests that digital spaces are not only arenas of conflict but also spaces of empathy, although both often coexist.

b) Language as a Marker of Identity and Affiliation

The second theme illustrates how language is used to signal social positioning and group affiliation. Within digital discourse, netizens do not merely speak as individuals but as representatives of particular groups, whether political, ideological, or social communities.

One participant (P5) explained:

"I usually read the comments first. If most people support it, I follow that direction so I don't get attacked."

This statement reveals the presence of social pressure influencing language choices. Language becomes a tool for "survival" within a conflict-prone digital ecosystem.

In contrast, another participant (P9) demonstrated a more resistant stance:

"I intentionally take a different position so there's someone representing another perspective. But I'm ready to face criticism."

Here, language becomes both a symbol of courage and a source of risk. Polarization is evident, as the use of certain terms implicitly signals alignment with particular groups.

This phenomenon is reinforced by research findings indicating that netizen comments often reflect ideology and group identity through specific discursive strategies (Tussa'diah & Kartika, 2023; Mogot et al., 2026). In practice, the boundary between self-expression and group pressure becomes blurred.

Interestingly, some participants demonstrate awareness of this dynamic:

"Sometimes I write not because it's my opinion, but because it's the 'safe' one." (P2)

This statement highlights that identity negotiation is not always authentic but often adaptive to the digital social environment.

c) Language as a Tool for Negotiating Reality

The third theme demonstrates that language does not merely reflect opinions but actively shapes the reality perceived by the public. Netizens engage in interpreting, framing, and even manipulating meaning through their comments.

In one context, a participant (P1) stated:

"The news isn't always accurate. Sometimes, through the comments, I can see other perspectives."

This suggests that netizen comments function as alternative sources for understanding reality. However, this condition also creates opportunities for the spread of misinformation.

Another participant (P12) noted:

"Sometimes I end up believing the comments with the most likes, even though they might not be true."

This illustrates how legitimacy is constructed not through factual accuracy but through discursive popularity. Persuasive or provocative language tends to be more easily accepted and disseminated.

In other instances, language is used as a form of resistance:

"I comment to challenge narratives that I think are wrong. Even if it's small, at least there's another voice." (P6)

These findings indicate that comment sections function as arenas for negotiating reality, between domination, resistance, and interpretation. Previous studies also emphasize that netizen comments play a role in shaping and challenging dominant narratives in digital public spaces (Gao & Zeng, 2021; Arafah et al., 2025).

However, this negotiation does not always lead to clarity. Instead, it often generates ambiguity:

"The more comments I read, the more confused I get about what's actually true." (P14)

This ambiguity becomes an inherent part of the digital experience, where language is constantly evolving and meaning is never entirely stable.

Interrelation of Themes

These three themes demonstrate that language in netizen comments operates simultaneously as an emotional expression, an identity marker, and a tool for constructing reality. Emotions drive individuals to speak, identity shapes how they articulate their views, and ultimately, language influences how the public understands an issue.

Thus, the findings do not present a linear pattern but rather a complex landscape of experience characterized by ongoing negotiation and occasional contradiction, an authentic reflection of the dynamics of public opinion in the digital era.

Discussion

This study reveals three principal findings: (1) language as an expression of collective emotions, (2) language as a marker of identity and affiliation, and (3) language as a tool for negotiating reality. These three themes demonstrate that netizen comments are not merely spontaneous responses but constitute complex discursive practices in which emotions, identity, and power interact in shaping public opinion within digital spaces.

Language, Collective Emotions, and the Intensity of Digital Discourse

The first finding indicates that language functions as a medium for expressing collective emotions, often manifested in forms such as anger, empathy, and sarcasm. Conceptually, this supports the notion of affective publics, which posits that emotions serve as a primary driving force in digital communication (Papacharissi, 2020). However, this study extends that understanding by demonstrating that emotions are not only expressed but are also strategically constructed through language to generate social resonance.

In this context, the findings align with studies by Dewanty (2020) and Muhammad et al. (2025), which highlight the emotional intensity present in social media discourse. Nevertheless, this study contributes an additional reflective dimension, showing that participants consciously acknowledge “designing” their language to be more provocative or engaging. This suggests that emotions in digital discourse are not entirely spontaneous but exist at the intersection of authenticity and performativity.

A key implication of this finding is that language does not merely reflect emotional states but actively shapes how those emotions are perceived by others. In this regard, language becomes a tool for managing emotional visibility and influence within public discourse. This insight enriches the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework by incorporating the affective dimension as an integral component of discursive practice.

Identity, Affiliation, and Social Pressure in Digital Spaces

The second theme demonstrates that language functions as a marker of identity and group affiliation. This finding is consistent with social identity theory, which posits that individuals construct their identities through group membership (Gichaba et al., 2025). In digital contexts, language becomes both a symbol of belonging and a mechanism for social positioning.

However, this study reveals a more nuanced dynamic: the identities expressed in netizen comments are not always authentic but are often shaped by digital social pressures. This finding expands upon the concept of echo chambers proposed by Cinelli et al. (2021), by showing that individuals are not merely confined within homogeneous discursive environments but actively adjust their language to avoid conflict or exclusion.

From a CDA perspective, this phenomenon reflects subtle power relations operating within digital spaces. Netizens are not explicitly coerced; rather, they are implicitly encouraged to adopt particular linguistic patterns to remain socially accepted. Consequently, language becomes a site of negotiation between self-expression and social conformity.

This finding also offers a broader perspective on digital polarization. Rather than being solely the result of ideological differences, polarization may also emerge from social mechanisms that pressure individuals to align with dominant positions. This is particularly relevant in understanding the experiences of marginalized groups, who may feel compelled to suppress or modify their voices to avoid digital backlash.

Language as an Arena for Negotiating Reality and Truth

The third theme emphasizes that language in netizen comments plays a crucial role in constructing and negotiating social reality. This finding aligns with the theory of the social construction of reality (Zhao et al., 2022), which asserts that meaning is produced through symbolic interaction. However, within digital contexts, this process becomes more complex due to the influence of algorithms, visibility metrics, and the rapid circulation of information.

The findings indicate that the legitimacy of information is often determined not by factual accuracy but by discursive visibility and resonance, such as the number of “likes”

or supportive responses. This observation is consistent with Gao and Zeng (2021), yet this study deepens the analysis by demonstrating that individuals are aware of and sometimes consciously follow this logic.

At the same time, comment sections function as spaces of resistance. Netizens use language to challenge dominant narratives, even when such actions involve the risk of marginalization. From a CDA perspective, this suggests that digital discourse not only reproduces power structures but also provides opportunities for contestation and counter-discourse.

However, the negotiation of reality does not always result in clarity or consensus. As indicated by participants, exposure to multiple and often conflicting perspectives can lead to confusion and ambiguity. This finding contributes to the literature by highlighting that meaning-making in the digital era is often fragmented and unstable rather than linear or coherent.

Theoretical Reflection and Researcher Positioning

Overall, the findings reinforce the relevance of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework while also indicating the need for greater sensitivity to affective and experiential dimensions. Language in netizen comments reflects not only broader social structures but also the emotional experiences and social pressures encountered by individuals in digital environments.

The researcher's reflection suggests that the Indonesian socio-cultural context—characterized by strong collectivist values alongside increasing digital polarization—shapes how participants use language. Furthermore, the researcher's position as both an observer and a participant within the digital ecosystem influences the interpretation of data, particularly in understanding nuances such as sarcasm, irony, and local cultural expressions.

Contribution to Scholarly Discourse

This study offers several important contributions. First, it demonstrates that language in social media operates as a multidimensional practice encompassing emotional, identity-related, and ideological aspects simultaneously. Second, it extends the CDA framework by incorporating subjective and reflective participant experiences into the analysis. Third, it proposes that digital public opinion is not formed through linear processes but through ongoing negotiation characterized by ambiguity, tension, and complexity. Therefore, this study not only confirms existing theoretical perspectives but also provides an alternative lens for understanding digital public opinion, emphasizing the need for approaches that are more reflective, contextual, and grounded in human experience.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that language in netizen comments on digital platforms functions simultaneously as an expression of collective emotions, a marker of social identity, and a tool for negotiating reality. These three dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing in shaping public opinion that is dynamic, fluid, and often contradictory. The findings confirm that language practices in digital spaces are not merely acts of communication but constitute complex social processes embedded with meaning, interests, and power relations.

Furthermore, this study offers a deeper understanding that public opinion in the digital era is not formed solely through linear or rational processes, but through ongoing negotiations involving emotions, social pressures, and strategies of self-representation.

Language does not merely reflect what individuals think; it also reflects how individuals seek to be perceived, accepted, or even protected within a digital ecosystem characterized by social risks. In this context, participants' experiences reveal a tension between authentic self-expression and the need to adapt to group norms, ultimately shaping a form of public opinion that is complex and ambivalent.

Conceptually, this study contributes to strengthening the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach by incorporating subjective and affective dimensions as integral components of digital discursive practices. It also enriches previous studies that highlight the role of social media in shaping public opinion (Omipidan et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024), by demonstrating that such processes occur not only at the structural level of discourse but also at the level of individual lived experience.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study carry several important implications. For policymakers, the results underscore the need for regulations and public communication strategies that are not only informative but also sensitive to emotional dynamics and polarization in digital spaces. For the field of education, particularly in digital literacy development, the study highlights the importance of equipping individuals with the ability to understand language as a form of social construction rather than merely a communication tool. Meanwhile, in the context of mental health and social relations, the findings suggest that social pressures in digital environments may influence how individuals express themselves, thereby necessitating educational approaches that promote more reflective and empathetic communication.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, the research context, which focuses on the Indonesian digital space with a limited number of participants, restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the relatively homogeneous composition of participants in terms of social background and digital literacy may limit the diversity of perspectives captured. Third, the limited timeframe of the study constrains the exploration of long-term dynamics in digital discourse.

Therefore, future research is recommended to adopt more diverse approaches, such as mixed-method designs or big data-based analyses, in order to integrate qualitative depth with broader digital data coverage. Expanding the research context across different social groups, regions, and digital platforms would also provide more comprehensive insights. Additionally, further investigation into underexplored aspects; such as the role of algorithms or the experiences of marginalized groups, remains an important agenda for advancing digital discourse analysis.

In conclusion, this study not only synthesizes the research findings but also opens a broader space for reflection: understanding language in the digital era ultimately means understanding human beings in the full complexity of their social experiences—a process that continues to evolve and invites further scholarly inquiry.

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