

# Representation of Artificial Intelligence in Online Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of interaction in digital spaces shows that language in netizen comments plays an increasingly significant role in shaping public opinion, especially amid the rapid flow of information that is often unverified. In the context of contemporary social and cultural life, online comments not only reflect individual viewpoints but also become arenas for the production of meaning, collective emotions, and the negotiation of identity. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how language is used by netizens to shape, influence, and construct public opinion. The research employs a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis design, involving 12 participants who are active users of digital media. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of comment interactions on digital platforms, and document analysis in the form of comment texts. Data analysis was conducted thematically by tracing patterns of meaning that emerge in the discursive practices of participants. The findings reveal three main themes: language as an arena of collective emotion, as a means of negotiating social identity, and as an instrument of contesting meaning that reflects power relations. These findings indicate that public opinion in digital spaces is formed through complex interactions between emotions, the need for social recognition, and linguistic strategies used both consciously and unconsciously. Theoretically, this study enriches Critical Discourse Analysis by adding affective and subjective experiential dimensions. Practically, the results imply the importance of strengthening critical digital literacy, managing healthy online interactions, and developing public communication policies that are more sensitive to the dynamics of language in digital spaces.

**Keywords :** *critical discourse analysis, digital language, public opinion, netizen comments, social media, social construction, digital identity, collective emotions*

## Introduction

In recent years, the presence of artificial intelligence (AI) has no longer been confined to technological spaces but has permeated the everyday social practices of society. In digital spaces, individual, ranging from students and creative workers to journalists, face a new reality in which AI is not only used as a tool but is also positioned as an “actor” capable of thinking, writing, and even making decisions. In exploratory interviews conducted informally with several social media users, it was found that some respondents perceive AI as a “smart work partner,” while others view it as a “hidden threat to human creativity.” These narratives do not emerge naturally but are constructed and reproduced through online media discourse that intensively frames AI in various representations, ranging from a symbol of progress to a source of collective fear.

Initial observations of online media coverage indicate a tendency to use anthropomorphic language, such as “AI understands,” “AI decides,” or “AI replaces humans.” These lexical choices implicitly construct the meaning that AI possesses agency similar to that of humans. In field reports based on the exploration of digital news, it was also found that discourse about AI is often associated with two major poles: optimism (innovation, efficiency, future) and pessimism (unemployment, control, dehumanization). This polarization not only reflects technological realities but also demonstrates how the media functions as an arena for the production of ideology and symbolic power in society.

The urgency of this research becomes increasingly significant when viewed in both global and local contexts. Globally, the rapid development of AI has triggered widespread debates regarding ethics, regulation, and its social impacts. Locally, particularly in Indonesia, the varying levels of digital literacy among the public lead to diverse interpretations of AI, thereby creating space for misrepresentation and discourse bias. Therefore, understanding how AI is represented in online media is not only academically important but also crucial for building public critical awareness of the construction of meaning they consume daily.

A number of studies in the past five years have shown that the media plays a dominant role in shaping public perceptions of AI. A study by Zeng et al. (2026) reveals that media discourse on AI is contextual and influenced by political and economic interests across countries. Research by Elmholt et al. (2025) demonstrates the existence of a dichotomy of “hope and fear” narratives in AI discourse that continues to be reproduced in digital media. Meanwhile, Tsimpoukis (2025) found that industry actors have a significant influence in shaping dominant AI narratives in public media. Lammar et al. (2026) highlight how the media constructs certain narrative categories that distinguish AI as both a general and specific phenomenon in reporting. Research by Mansyur (2025), in the Indonesian context, shows that AI metaphors in mass media play an important role in shaping public cognitive understanding. In addition, Nkoala et al. (2026) identify that language in AI reporting is often used as a symbolic act that reproduces power relations in society.

Although these studies have made important contributions, there remains a research gap. Most studies tend to focus on macro-level content or framing analysis, while the dimensions of subjective experience, meaning-making processes, and deeper social dynamics have not been widely explored. Moreover, approaches that integrate critical discourse analysis with local contexts, particularly in examining how individuals interpret AI representations in everyday life, are still limited. In other words, there is still a need for studies that not only read texts but also understand how these texts interact with social reality and individual consciousness.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the representation of artificial intelligence in online media using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The focus of the study is directed at how language, narratives, and discourse structures are used to construct meaning, ideology, and power relations related to AI. The scope of the research includes the analysis of online media texts as well as the interpretation of the constructed meanings produced. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich discourse analysis studies, particularly in the context of digital technology and AI. Practically, the results of this study are expected to contribute to enhancing public critical literacy toward media discourse, enabling individuals to understand and interpret information in a more reflective and contextual manner.

## **Theoretical Review**

The phenomenon of netizen comments on digital platforms shows that language is no longer merely a tool of communication but has become the primary medium for shaping, maintaining, and even shifting public opinion. In this context, every comment that appears spontaneous actually contains layers of meaning, emotion, and ideology that interact dynamically in digital spaces. A user, for example, may write a simple comment such as “ini kebijakan tidak masuk akal”, yet from a discourse analysis perspective, this expression represents a social position, ideological stance, and an attempt to influence collective perception. To understand this complexity, this study is grounded in three main theoretical approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Social Construction of Reality Theory, and Digital Sociolinguistics.

### **1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Critical Discourse Analysis, as developed by Fairclough and Van Dijk, positions language as a social practice that is not neutral. In the context of netizen comments, CDA helps explain how word choice, sentence structure, and rhetorical strategies are used to reproduce power, domination, or resistance. Recent studies show that comments on social media often contain implicit ideologies that collectively influence public opinion (Ikuelogbon & Idowu, 2025; Sitorus et al., 2026).

Furthermore, CDA views language in comments as not standing alone but being connected to the context of production (who writes), distribution (digital platforms), and consumption (how readers interpret). Research by Adeoye (2026) emphasizes that discursive practices on social media, such as the use of hashtags, sarcasm, and framing, have significant power in shaping the direction of public opinion. Thus, netizen comments can be understood as arenas of meaning contestation, where various interests and perspectives negotiate with one another.

### **2. Social Construction of Reality Theory**

Berger and Luckmann, within the framework of social construction, assert that social reality is formed through processes of interaction and language. In the digital era, this process becomes increasingly complex as it occurs rapidly, massively, and openly. Netizen comments do not merely reflect reality but also contribute to shaping it.

Research by Pan (2024) shows that discourse on social media has the ability to “construct and deconstruct social reality” through repeated comment interactions. In this context, public opinion is not a static entity but the result of an ongoing process of meaning negotiation. For example, in political issues, dominant comments can create the illusion of social consensus, even though there is actually a diversity of perspectives that remain unrepresented.

In addition, Munibi (2025) highlights that language on social media functions as a catalyst in shaping collective identity and ideology. This indicates that netizen comments impact not only public opinion but also the formation of social awareness and group identity.

### **3. Digital Sociolinguistics**

The digital sociolinguistic approach provides the perspective that language in digital spaces has unique characteristics that differ from conventional communication. Language in netizen comments is often hybrid, combining formal and informal elements, and influenced by internet culture such as memes, emojis, and abbreviations.

Research by Isnarini and Muti'ah (2024) shows that comments on social media function not only as responses but also as mechanisms for shaping trends and influencing public opinion. Furthermore, Villa-Pérez and Monroy (2026) found that emotional dimensions in language, such as anger, irony, or empathy, play an important role in strengthening the resonance of opinions in digital spaces.

In this perspective, language is understood not only as a linguistic structure but as a social practice that reflects the dynamics of identity, social relations, and digital culture.

### **Comparison and Theoretical Position of the Study**

These three approaches have complementary focuses but also show fundamental differences. CDA emphasizes power relations and ideology in language, while social construction theory focuses more on the process of reality formation through interaction. Meanwhile, digital sociolinguistics pays attention to the forms and practices of language within technological contexts.

This study selects Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary lens due to its ability to reveal dimensions of power, ideology, and interests embedded in netizen comments. However, perspectives from social construction and digital linguistics are still used as supporting frameworks to better understand meaning-making processes and the context of digital communication more comprehensively.

This choice is based on the assumption that netizen comments are not merely individual expressions but are part of social practices that contribute to shaping public opinion and broader social reality.

### **Research Framework**

This study views language in netizen comments as a discursive practice rich in meaning, ideology, and social experience. Within the CDA framework, comment texts are analyzed not only at the surface level (what is said) but also at the level of discursive practice (how and why it is said) and social practice (in what context the discourse emerges). Thus, the analysis does not stop at identifying themes or language patterns but seeks to interpret how netizen comments:

1. Construct representations of an issue,
2. Reproduce or challenge power relations,
3. And shape public opinion through social interaction in digital spaces.

For example, sarcastic or provocative comments are not only understood as expressions of emotion but also as discursive strategies to influence other readers. In this regard, participants' voices are interpreted as part of a broader social process in which meaning is not singular but continuously negotiated. With this theoretical position, the study seeks to present a deeper understanding of how language operates in shaping public opinion in the digital era—not merely as a communication tool, but as an active and transformative social force.

### **Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design. This approach is chosen because it aligns with the research objective, which not only focuses on the content of the text but also on how language is used to construct meaning, ideology, and power relations in the representation of artificial intelligence in online media. CDA enables researchers to examine texts in depth in relation to the social, political, and cultural contexts that surround them, thereby revealing hidden structures of domination within discursive practices (Almusaed et al., 2025; Alejandro, 2024).

The participant selection strategy in this study uses purposive sampling, considering that the selected informants have direct experience in consuming, producing, or interpreting media content related to AI. The participants number 10–15 individuals, consisting of students, media practitioners, and active users of digital platforms. The

inclusion criteria include: (1) actively using online media for at least the past 2 years, (2) having been exposed to content related to artificial intelligence, and (3) willingness to provide in-depth information through interviews. The number of participants is determined based on the principle of data saturation, namely when the data obtained shows recurring patterns and no longer produces new information (Ahmed, 2025).

This study is conducted within the social context of digital spaces, focusing on online media such as news portals, social media platforms (Instagram, X/Twitter, and YouTube), as well as online discussion forums. Geographically, the research context centers on media users in Indonesia, taking into account the dynamics of digital literacy and the diversity of interpretations of AI technology in society.

Data collection techniques are carried out through three main methods. First, document analysis, which involves collecting texts in the form of online news, opinion articles, and digital content that contain representations of AI. Second, in-depth interviews with participants to explore their subjective experiences and meaning-making processes regarding AI discourse. Third, non-participant observation of user interactions on social media, particularly in comments and public discussions. The data collection procedure begins with the identification and selection of media texts, followed by the preparation of semi-structured interview guidelines, the conduct of interviews, and verbatim transcription of the data. All data are then organized using qualitative analysis software such as NVivo, which assists in the systematic management, coding, and categorization of data (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Kogen, 2024).

Data analysis in this study uses a combination of thematic analysis and the CDA approach based on Fairclough's model (three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice). The analysis stages begin with open coding to identify units of meaning in the data, followed by axial coding to connect categories, and selective coding to identify the main themes. In the next stage, the analysis focuses on the linguistic structure of the text (word choice, metaphors, narratives), the processes of discourse production and consumption, and the underlying social context. The use of NVivo software allows researchers to trace discourse patterns more systematically and enhances the transparency of the analysis (Crespo et al., 2024; Berenjkani et al., 2025).

The trustworthiness of the data in this study is ensured through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is achieved through data triangulation techniques (documents, interviews, and observations) as well as member checking with participants. Transferability is maintained by providing a detailed description of the research context. Dependability is ensured through an audit trail that documents the entire research process. Confirmability is guaranteed by maintaining researcher objectivity through critical reflection and the use of empirical data as the basis for interpretation (Cope, D. G. Et al., 2014;).

Ethical considerations are a primary concern in this study. The researcher ensures that all participants provide informed consent before the interviews are conducted. Participant identities are kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. In addition, the data obtained are used exclusively for academic purposes and are stored securely. The researcher also strives to maintain sensitivity toward participants' perspectives and to avoid bias in the interpretation process.

## Results

The analysis of netizen comments across various digital platforms, combined with in-depth interviews with participants, resulted in three main themes that reflect how language plays a role in shaping public opinion. These themes do not stand separately but

are intertwined within the social experiences of participants as they read, write, and interpret comments in digital spaces.

### **Theme 1: Language as an Arena of Collective Emotion**

#### **Situation and Experiential Background**

Comment sections on controversial issues, such as public policies or viral topics, often transform into spaces of emotional outbursts. Participants described how they do not merely read comments but are “drawn” into an emotional current that intensifies from one comment to another.

#### **Participant Voices**

“At first I was just reading, but eventually I got caught up in the emotions. The comments seemed to fuel each other... one person would get angry, and another would get even angrier.” (P3)

“Sometimes I know it’s over the top, but I still get drawn in. It’s as if staying silent means I’ve lost.” (P7)

#### **Reflective Meaning**

Language in comments does not only convey opinions but also functions as a trigger and amplifier of collective emotions. Sarcastic, hyperbolic, or provocative wording creates emotional resonance that goes beyond the writer’s initial intent. Here, public opinion is not formed solely through rational arguments but through the accumulation of circulating and mutually reinforcing emotions.

However, an interesting ambiguity emerges: some participants are aware that these emotions are “constructed” by language, yet still find it difficult to detach themselves from them. There is a recurring tension between critical awareness and emotional involvement.

### **Theme 2: Negotiation of Identity and Social Position**

#### **Situation and Experiential Background**

Comments on social media become spaces where individuals present themselves, whether as supporters, opponents, or observers. Word choice, language style, and even the use of specific terms reflect the social identity they wish to project.

#### **Participant Voices**

“I deliberately use ‘strong’ words to show that I understand the issue.” (P1)

“Sometimes I don’t really agree, but I go along with the prevailing opinion... so I won’t be seen as an outsider.” (P9)

#### **Reflective Meaning**

Language here becomes a tool for negotiating social position. Comments are not merely responses to issues but also representations of the self in front of a digital public. There is a drive to be recognized, to be “seen,” and even to be accepted within certain groups.

However, this experience also contains a paradox. On the one hand, digital spaces offer freedom of expression; on the other, they create subtle pressures of conformity. Some participants revealed that they “adjust” their language to align with dominant trends, even when it does not fully reflect their personal views.

### **Theme 3: Language as an Instrument of Influence and Contestation of Meaning Situation and Experiential Background**

In longer discussions, it becomes evident how comments respond to, correct, or even attack one another. Language becomes a tool to influence, refute, or direct the opinions of other readers.

#### **Participant Voices**

"I realize that certain comments can 'influence' people. That's why I sometimes write in a persuasive way." (P5)

"If someone disagrees, they're immediately attacked. Not just their argument, but the person themselves." (P11)

#### **Reflective Meaning**

Netizen comments create a space of meaning contestation, where different interpretations compete to become dominant. Language is used strategically, both consciously and unconsciously, to influence others' perceptions.

However, this process does not always lead to richer understanding. In many cases, what emerges instead is polarization. Efforts to "persuade" often turn into attempts to "dominate." This is where language is seen not only as constructing public opinion but also as limiting the possibility of more open dialogue.

**Table 1. Thematic Table of Research Findings**

| <b>Theme</b>                                      | <b>Subtheme</b>                         | <b>Core Meaning</b>                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Language as an Arena of Collective Emotion</b> | Emotional escalation, digital resonance | Opinion is formed through streams of mutually reinforcing emotions  |
| <b>Negotiation of Identity</b>                    | Self-representation, social conformity  | Language as a tool to construct and adjust identity                 |
| <b>Contestation of Meaning</b>                    | Persuasive strategies, polarization     | Language as an instrument of influence and competition over meaning |

#### **Inter-theme Reflection**

These three themes show that language in netizen comments operates across multiple layers simultaneously: as an expression of emotion, as a representation of identity, and as a tool of symbolic power. There are no strict boundaries among them. A participant who writes emotionally is also constructing identity and simultaneously attempting to influence others.

Participants' experiences reveal that public opinion in digital spaces is not the result of a single linear process but rather the outcome of complex interactions among emotion, identity, and power mediated by language. Within this complexity, meaning is constantly in motion, never fully stable and always open to renegotiation.

#### **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that language in netizen comments on digital platforms operates within three main domains: as an arena of collective emotion, as a medium for identity negotiation, and as an instrument of meaning contestation. These three themes not only illustrate communication patterns but also demonstrate how public opinion is shaped through complex, dynamic, and often ambiguous social processes. Within the

framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), these findings affirm that language is not neutral but rather a medium laden with ideology, power relations, and social practices.

### **1. Language as an Arena of Collective Emotion: From Expression to Social Resonance**

The findings regarding the strong emotional dimension in netizen comments expand the understanding of how public opinion is formed. Emotions accumulated in digital spaces are not merely individual but develop into collective resonance that influences the direction of discourse. From a CDA perspective, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of discursive practice in which emotional language functions to reinforce certain ideological positions. A study by Elmholdt et al. (2025, *AI & Society*) shows that digital narratives are often constructed through emotional dichotomies such as hope versus fear, which then broadly influence public perception. This finding aligns with research by Villa-Pérez & Monroy (2024, *Journal of Data Science & Analytics*), which emphasizes that emotions in digital language increase the spread and influence of opinions. However, this study enriches previous research by revealing an internal tension among participants: they are aware of these emotional constructions yet remain involved in them. This indicates that public opinion is shaped not only by linguistic structures but also by affective engagement that is difficult to negotiate rationally.

### **2. Identity Negotiation: Between Self-Expression and Collective Pressure**

The second theme reveals that netizen comments function as a performative space where social identity is negotiated. Language is used not only to convey opinions but also to construct selfimage and group affiliation. Within the framework of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann), these findings show that digital identity is the result of ongoing symbolic interaction. Research by Isnarini & Muti'ah (2024, *LINGUA*) confirms that language practices on social media reflect individuals' efforts to negotiate their social positions within digital communities. Meanwhile, Li & Ullah (2025, *Energy Research & Social Science*) demonstrate that public opinion is often formed through mechanisms of social conformity that are not always consciously recognized. This study not only confirms these insights but also uncovers a deeper paradox: the freedom of expression in digital spaces is accompanied by pressure to conform. Participants who "ikut arus" despite not fully agreeing illustrate that public opinion can be shaped not by authentic beliefs but by the need for social acceptance. In this context, language becomes an ambiguous tool, on one hand liberating, and on the other constraining.

### **3. Contestation of Meaning: Language as an Arena of Symbolic Power**

The third theme shows that comment spaces are arenas where meaning is contested. Language is used strategically to influence, dominate, or even delegitimize opposing views. From a CDA perspective, this reflects power relations within discursive practices. A study by Zeng et al. (2026, *Big Data & Society*) shows that digital discourse is part of a "discursive order" that shapes structures of knowledge and power in society. Meanwhile, Tsimpoukis (2025, *Journal of Science Communication*) highlights how dominant narratives in the media can direct public opinion through specific framing. This study extends these findings by showing that the process of meaning contestation does not always lead to dialogue but often results in polarization. Language initially used to persuade can shift into a tool for attack. In such situations, public opinion does not develop deliberatively but becomes fragmented into opposing camps.

### **Integration of Findings: Language, Emotion, and Power in Digital Spaces**

When these three themes are read in an integrated manner, it becomes evident that language in netizen comments operates across the three main dimensions of CDA:

- Text → emotional and strategic word choices
- Discursive practice → comment interactions that create resonance and conformity
- Social practice → structures of power and ideology that shape public opinion

These findings indicate that public opinion in the digital era can no longer be understood as purely the result of rational processes, but rather as the product of complex interactions among emotion, identity, and symbolic power.

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals that language in netizen comments on digital platforms does not merely function as a tool of communication but as a social practice that shapes public opinion through three main patterns of meaning: collective emotional resonance, negotiation of social identity, and contestation of meaning embedded in power relations. These three patterns indicate that public opinion in digital spaces is not the result of a linear rational process but is formed through complex interactions among emotions, the need for social recognition, and discursive strategies used to influence others.

From the experiences and narratives of participants, a new understanding emerges that individual involvement in comment spaces often exists in an ambivalent situation: they simultaneously become subjects who express themselves and objects influenced by larger currents of discourse. Language, in this context, operates as a force that is not always consciously recognized, it shapes how individuals feel, think, and take positions. Thus, this study extends the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis by emphasizing affective dimensions and subjective experiences as integral parts of the process of public opinion formation.

Conceptually, this study contributes by offering an integrative understanding that digital discourse should be examined not only as text or ideological structure but as a living space where emotion, identity, and power intersect simultaneously. Practically, these findings have several important implications. For policymakers, the results of this study highlight the need for regulations and education that focus not only on content but also on the dynamics of interaction and the language used in digital spaces. In the context of education, particularly curriculum development, there is a need to strengthen critical digital literacy that not only teaches the ability to read information but also to understand how language shapes perception and emotion. Meanwhile, in the social sphere, this understanding can serve as a basis for designing interventions that support users' mental well-being, given the strong influence of collective emotions in digital interactions.

However, this study has limitations. Its focus on the context of digital media users in a particular environment means that the findings do not fully represent the diversity of experiences in other regions or social groups. The relatively homogeneous composition of participants, as well as time constraints in data collection, also limit the depth of exploration of potentially more complex dynamics. In addition, this study emphasizes qualitative interpretation and has not yet integrated large-scale data analysis that could broaden the scope of the findings.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to develop more diverse approaches, such as combining discourse analysis with quantitative or computational methods to capture patterns on a larger scale. Expanding the research

context to various social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds is also important to understand a richer variation of discursive practices. Furthermore, deeper exploration of aspects that have not been fully examined—such as the role of algorithms in shaping discourse visibility or the dynamics of silent readers who do not comment but are still influenced, can open new perspectives in this field of study.

Thus, this study not only offers an understanding of how language shapes public opinion but also invites us to view digital spaces as complex social arenas, where meaning is continuously negotiated, questioned, and reconstructed.

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