

Negotiating Power in Public Policy Discourse on Social Media a Critical Discourse Analysis of Government Institutional Posts

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how government institutions use social media as a site of power negotiation in public policy communication. Employing a qualitative approach with Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis and multimodal analysis, data were drawn from 80 purposively selected government account uploads over six months. Systematic coding and interpretive categorization reveal that institutions employ linguistic framing, persuasive rhetoric, and visual semiotics to legitimize authority, foster compliance, and shape public perception, while simultaneously encountering counter-discourses in community interactions. The findings demonstrate that institutional discourse on social media functions not only as policy dissemination but also as a dynamic arena of legitimacy, resistance, and trust-building. This research contributes theoretically to critical discourse studies by linking digital communication and institutional authority, and practically by offering insights for enhancing transparency and public participation in policy communication.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed the pattern of communication between the government and the public. Social media is now not only a channel for information, but also an arena of interaction that is full of contestation and power negotiations. Governments in various countries, including Indonesia, use digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to deliver public policies directly to the public. However, this digital space also opens up the possibility of criticism, resistance, and even counter-narratives that challenge the legitimacy of the government (Nishi, 2021). This condition demonstrates the urgency of linguistic research to understand how power is represented, maintained, and negotiated through language in public policy communication on social media.

In Indonesia, this phenomenon is evident in the dissemination of information during the COVID-19 pandemic, when various ministries and institutions used social media to socialize health policies, mobility restrictions, and economic recovery programs. However, government messages are not always passively accepted by the public, but are often debated, challenged, or parodied in the digital space (Wijaya & Ida, 2022). This shows that social media is not only a technical medium, but also a space of discourse where the legitimacy and authority of government are constantly negotiated.

Previous research has shown the dominance of government perspectives in public policy discourse, both in official online media and mainstream mass media. (Kurniawan et al., 2021) found that news of large-scale social restriction policies on government websites tended to build a positive image of the government and ignore the critical voices of the public. Meanwhile, (Agustriani & Hamdani, 2023) shows that the mass media often displays regional leadership with authoritative rhetoric without highlighting citizens' responses. However, research that specifically highlights two-way interactions on social media, where the public can directly respond to or challenge government messages, is still very limited.

This research gap is important to fill, considering that social media is different from conventional media. Social media presents a dimension of public participation that allows the emergence of counter-discourse in real time. Therefore, an in-depth analysis is needed of how governments frame policy messages through language and visuals, as well as how the public responds to and negotiates that power. The Critical Discourse Analysis approach was used in this study to analyze the text, but also relate it to social practices and power contexts (Mendelsohn et al., 2024).

This research specifically aims to analyze how institutional discourses produced by official government accounts on social media shape, maintain, and at the same time face challenges to power relations in public policy communication. The focus of the research is directed at the linguistic strategies, rhetoric, and visual semiotics that governments use in building legitimacy, as well as how people participate through comments or other interactions that have the potential to present resistance (Zhao & Jiang, 2023; Taggart & Lennox, 2024).

Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of linguistic studies, especially in the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis. The study expands on Fairclough's three-dimensional model by integrating multimodal analysis to examine the simultaneous representation of text and visuals in the context of government digital communications. Thus, this research can enrich academic understanding of the relationship between contemporary digital communication discourse, power, and practices (Liu, 2024).

Practically, this research provides implications for the government's communication strategy. Findings on the language and visual strategies used, as well as patterns of public resistance, can be an input for governments to design policy communication that is more transparent, participatory, and sensitive to public voices. By paying attention to the dynamics of power negotiations on social media, the government has the potential to increase public trust and strengthen policy legitimacy in the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media as an Arena for Power Negotiation

Social media has revolutionized the way governments communicate with the public, making it not only a conduit for information, but also an arena for power negotiations. Governments are leveraging digital platforms to disseminate policies, but at the same time they are facing criticism, resistance, and counter-narratives from the public. Recent studies confirm that digital media serves a dual purpose: to strengthen hegemony through framing and algorithms, while enabling the emergence of alternative narratives (Sari et al., 2025). Thus, social media becomes a dynamic space of discourse where the legitimacy and authority of the government are constantly negotiated.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Power Representation

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), especially Fairclough's three-dimensional model, places discourse as a social practice that is inseparable from power relations. CDA highlights how language, text, and visuals are used to shape, maintain, and challenge structures of dominance (Critical Discourse Analysis, 2025). Through this framework, the analysis of government communication on social media can reveal linguistic and multimodal strategies that aim to legitimize policies, as well as social interactions that produce public resistance.

Linguistic and Multimodal Strategies in Government Communication

Language and visuals are the main instruments in building an institutional image. Research shows that governments and political actors use framing, metaphors, and modalizations to form authoritative images and influence public opinion (Al Akromi & Santika, 2024). This strategy is tailored to the characteristics of digital platforms so that the message is not only informative, but also persuasive and symbolic. Multimodal approaches are important to

consider because visuals, such as infographics and country symbols, serve to reinforce policy messages while legitimizing government authority.

The Public as a Counter-Discourse Agent

The public is no longer a passive recipient in policy communication, but participates in shaping discourse through comments, criticism, and even parody. Studies on digital resistance have found that the public uses linguistic strategies such as sarcasm, direct criticism, and rhetorical questions to challenge the legitimacy of the government (I Gusti Ngurah Parthama et al., 2025). Similarly, other research shows that social media provides space for marginalized groups to produce counter-narratives that challenge official policy representations (Ugwudike & Sánchez-Benitez, 2024). This confirms that policy communication on social media is interactive and full of power contests.

Digital Fragmentation and Echo Chambers

Although social media opens up space for public participation, algorithms and patterns of digital interaction also cause fragmentation of discourse. Recent research shows that social media tends to create echo chambers, where users only interact with views that align with their ideology (Pratap & Pathak, 2025). This phenomenon has implications for public policy communication, as government messages risk reaching only certain groups, while other groups build counternarratives in a fragmented digital space.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design to examine representation, legitimacy, and resistance to power in public policy communication on social media. Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used because it emphasizes the interconnectedness between text, discourse practice, and social practice (Liu, 2024). This analysis is enriched by a multimodal analysis approach that allows the simultaneous interpretation of linguistic and visual elements, in line with recent trends in digital discourse research (Taggart & Lennox, 2024). The selection of this approach is based on the purpose of research that aims to understand the government's communication strategy as well as the dynamics of community interaction in the digital space.

Population and Sampling Techniques

The population of this study is all uploads of official Indonesian government accounts on social media over a six-month period, especially on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook platforms. From this population, 80 uploads were selected through non-probability purposive sampling technique. The purposive selection was carried out by considering the relevance of uploads to strategic public policies, such as health, mobility, and post-pandemic economic policies. This technique is in line with digital discourse research that emphasizes the depth of analysis of the text and context rather than the large sample size (Ugwudike & Sánchez-Benitez, 2024). The number of 80 uploads was seen as sufficient to provide a variety of data while allowing for in-depth analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

The research data was collected through digital documentation by copying the text of the uploads, public responses, and visual elements (images, videos, infographics) from official government accounts. Documentation is done systematically by storing digital archives and upload metadata, including dates, platforms, and the number of interactions. To complete the understanding of the context, virtual observations were also made on public conversations in the comment column. Data collection follows ethical standards of digital media research, including maintaining the anonymity of users who provide comments (Zhao & Jiang, 2023).

Data Validity and Reliability

The validity of the data is maintained by triangulating sources and methods, namely comparing the uploaded text with public interaction, and connecting it with the socio-political context when the upload is published. Interpretive validity is strengthened through discussions between researchers to avoid subjective bias in interpretation (Mendelsohn et al., 2024). In addition, the reliability of the analysis is maintained by compiling clear and consistent codes and categories of analysis, so that they can be replicated by other researchers in similar contexts.

Research Procedure

The research process is carried out in several stages. First, the researchers identified official government accounts on three main platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). Second, the researcher collected 80 uploads over six months with the criteria of public policy relevance. Third, the uploaded data is transcribed and archived for analysis purposes. Fourth, a coding process is carried out to identify linguistic, rhetorical, and visual strategies. Fifth, the coding results are grouped into interpretive categories such as legitimacy, persuasion, compliance, and resistance. Finally, the findings are associated with Fairclough's CDA framework to elucidate the relationship between text, interaction, and social practice.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out through the three-dimensional model of CDA Fairclough, namely (1) textual analysis (word choice, sentence structure, rhetoric), (2) discourse practice analysis (the process of production and consumption of messages on social media), and (3) social practice analysis (the relationship between discourse and the context of power and institutions). This analysis is enriched with multimodal analysis to examine visual elements such as country symbols, infographics, and color use (Al Akromi & Santika, 2024). The data was analyzed with the help of NVivo 14 software to support the coding process, theme grouping, and visualization of inter-category relationships (Saldaña, 2021). Thus, the results of the analysis not only reveal linguistic aspects,

but also show a broader power relationship in public policy communication on social media.

RESEARCH RESULT

Linguistic Strategies in Institutional Discourse

The results of the analysis of 80 official government account uploads show that language is used not only as a means of conveying information, but also as an instrument to build the legitimacy of power and policy authority. The linguistic strategy found confirms that the government seeks to form an image as an authority, a solution, and at the same time close to the community.

One of the main findings is the dominance of authoritative modalities, for example through the words "must" and "must" that emphasize citizens' compliance with the rules. This choice of words indirectly puts the government in a position as the controller of discourse, while the public is encouraged to comply without much room for negotiation. However, this authority is not always displayed loudly. In many uploads, the government combines authoritative modalities with collective invitations, such as the use of the inclusive pronoun "we" or the phrase "let's be together". This strategy serves to build a sense of togetherness, as if policies are not just one-sided orders, but the result of cooperation between the state and citizens.

In addition, there is also the use of moral and ethical rhetoric that emphasizes shared responsibility, such as the phrase "This step is important for mutual safety." This kind of message works in the realm of public emotions by linking adherence to policies with moral values such as care, solidarity, and social responsibility. This strategy shows that the government relies not only on formal authority, but also moral legitimacy to strengthen public acceptance of policies.

Another interesting finding is the use of euphemisms to soften policies that have the potential to generate resistance. For example, the term "mobility adjustment" is used instead of "restriction" which sounds louder and has the potential to lead to rejection. This euphemism can be understood as the government's effort to do positive framing so that policies are accepted more lightly by the public. The following table 1 summarizes the distribution of linguistic strategies found in government uploads:

Table 1. Linguistic Strategies in Government Uploads

Strategi Linguistics	Percentage of Occurrence (%)	Usage Examples
Authoritative modalities	42%	"The community is obliged to obey the rules..."
A collective invitation (<i>including us</i>)	35%	" Let' s make the vaccination program a success..."
Moral Rhetoric/Ethos	15%	"This step is important for mutual safety."
Euphemism	8%	" Mobility adjustments " instead of "restrictions."

From the table, it can be seen that the most dominant linguistic strategy is the authoritative modality (42%), which shows that the government still positions itself as the center of authority. However, the second strategy that is quite high is collective invitation (35%), indicating a tendency to present a more inclusive face of government. Thus, the discourse built by the government is not completely top-down, but is colored by a symbolic effort to embrace the community as part of policy implementation.

Persuasive Rhetoric and Policy Framing

In addition to linguistic strategies, discourse analysis also shows that governments consistently use persuasive rhetoric to frame public policy. This rhetoric serves not only to convey instructions, but also to direct public perception so that policies are seen as something logical, positive, and need to be carried out together. In other words, language is used not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of forming collective consciousness and political legitimacy.

One of the prominent patterns is policy framing as a solution. Government policies are often positioned as a way out of the crisis, with an emphasis on the rescue narrative. For example, the vaccination program is described as a "common weapon against the pandemic". This choice of military metaphor emphasizes urgency, seriousness, while signaling that the government has a clear strategy to protect the public. This framing serves to calm the public while affirming the government's role as a reliable solution provider.

The second pattern is framing obedience as a moral responsibility. In many uploads, compliance with the rules is not only presented as a legal obligation, but as a form of citizens' contribution to the safety of the nation. For example, messages like "Adhering to health protocols means taking care of our loved ones" move the meaning of compliance from the legal realm to the ethical realm. Thus, people are not only encouraged to obey because of sanctions, but also because of moral encouragement that emphasizes the value of solidarity and social concern.

Furthermore, the government also conducts success framing to strengthen policy legitimacy. Achievements such as "recovery rate increases" or "vaccination achievement reaches the target" are used to construct the image that the policies implemented are effective and successful. This rhetoric of success serves as a legitimacy-strengthening strategy: the more achievements are shown, the stronger the impression that the government is capable of managing the crisis well. In the context of CDAs, this reflects a discursive practice in which data and statistics are used as symbols of authority and evidence of performance.

In addition to linguistic strategies, discourse analysis shows that governments consistently use persuasive rhetoric in framing public policy. This rhetoric not only conveys instructions, but also forms a narrative that emphasizes policy as logical, moral, and successful. This strategy aims to build legitimacy, reduce the potential for resistance, and strengthen the government's image in the

digital public space. The following table shows the policy framing patterns found:

Table 2. Persuasive Rhetoric and Policy Framing in Government Uploads

Pola Framing	Percentage of Occurrence (%)	Usage Examples	Discursive Function
Policy as a solution	40%	"Vaccination is a common weapon against the pandemic."	It shows that the government is present as a provider of a way out of the crisis.
Obedience as a moral responsibility	35%	"Adhering to protocols means taking care of our loved ones."	Shifting compliance from the legal realm to the ethical realm, strengthening social solidarity.
Government success	25%	"The vaccination achievement has reached the national target."	Build legitimacy through claims of performance and effectiveness of policies.

The data in the table shows that the dominant narrative is policy as a solution (40%), followed by compliance as a moral responsibility (35%), and government success (25%). This pattern shows that the government not only emphasizes normative instructions, but also builds narratives that touch on rational, emotional, and symbolic aspects. Thus, policy communication on social media is not just the dissemination of information, but also a symbolic hegemony process that seeks to subtly obtain public approval through persuasive rhetorical strategies.

Visual Semiotics in Policy Dissemination

In addition to language, the government also uses visual elements as a means of strengthening legitimacy and policy authority. A multimodal analysis of 80 official government account uploads shows that visuals are not just complementary, but strategic instruments to build symbolic meaning. Visual presence consistently reinforces linguistic messages through colors, symbols, official figures, and community representations. Thus, policy communication on social media takes place intertextually, where text and images support each other in conveying messages of power.

The visual elements that appear most often are blue or red infographics. The color blue represents the stability, trust, and authority of the state, while red is often used to affirm the urgency, danger, or spirit of nationalism. Official symbols such as ministry logos, state emblems, and institutional identities are almost always included to mark institutional legitimacy. In addition, government officials (e.g. presidents, ministers, or local officials) are presented in formal poses to reinforce credibility and show that the message is coming from

legitimate authority. No less important, representations of ideal society – such as images of harmonious families, school children, health workers, and community groups that appear to be obedient – are used to build a narrative of compliance, solidarity, and togetherness in implementing policies. The following table summarizes the key findings of visual semiotics:

Table 3. Visual Elements in Government Uploads

Element Visual	Percentage of Occurrence (%)	Usage Examples	Discursive Function
Blue/red infographic	38%	Vaccination poster with blue and red background	It signifies authority and urgency, while fostering a sense of nationalism.
Official symbol (logo/emblem of the country)	27%	Ministry of Health logo in the corner of the poster	Giving institutional legitimacy to policies.
Government officials	20%	Photo of the President/minister during the press conference	Increase the credibility and authority of the message.
Representation of the ideal society	15%	Pictures of happy family or health workers	Creating a narrative of compliance, solidarity, and togetherness.

The illustration of the multimodal analysis also shows how the text "Let's Make National Vaccination a Success" is strengthened by the visual use of the Red and White flag, state emblems, and photos of medical personnel. This combination not only conveys information, but also builds collective emotions in the form of a sense of nationalism, trust in the government, and a moral drive to participate. Thus, visual elements function as hegemonic tools that strengthen policy legitimacy while reducing the potential for public resistance through the creation of an image of togetherness.

Public Response and Counter-Discourse

An analysis of 80 official government account uploads shows that policy communication on social media does not take place in unidirection. Unlike the mainstream media which tends to display official discourse without much room for debate, social media actually opens up a wide channel of public participation. Of the total uploads, 67 uploads (83%) received interaction in the form of public comments, both in the form of support, questions, criticism, and more creative expressions of resistance.

This pattern of public interaction shows the existence of dialogical discourse dynamics. Some people gave support and appreciation (38%), usually in the form of gratitude or positive expressions for the government's efforts. This group plays a role in strengthening legitimacy through the reproduction of

official discourse. However, not a few also raised critical questions (22%), for example related to the distribution of aid or the mechanism of implementing policies at the local level. This kind of question indicates the active involvement of the public in monitoring the course of the policy.

On the other hand, direct criticism (20%) appears to be quite dominant. This criticism generally highlights the impact of policies on vulnerable groups, such as small communities, informal workers, or micro-enterprises. Criticism is confrontational and shows resistance to the government's hegemonic discourse. Other forms of resistance are sarcasm and parody (15%), for example in the form of memes or satirical comments that question the effectiveness of the rules. Linguistic strategies in the form of irony, humor, and puns are often used to challenge the legitimacy of authority. The remaining 5% of comments are neutral or just interactions, such as using emoticons or "like" without adding opinions.

Table 4. Categories of Public Response on Social Media

Categories Public Response	Percentage (%)	Example	Discursive Function
Support and appreciation	38%	"Thank you for the government's hard work."	Strengthening the legitimacy of the government.
Critical questions	22%	"How did this aid get to our village?"	Testing policy accountability and transparency.
Direct criticism	20%	"This policy burdens the small people."	Expose the impact of policies on vulnerable groups.
Sarkasm/parodi	15%	A meme that laughs at the effectiveness of the rules.	Voicing resistance through humor and creativity.
Neutral/just interaction	5%	"Like", an emoticon without comment.	Demonstrate minimal participation without clear position.

These findings show that the public is not a passive recipient, but an active actor who negotiates the meaning of policies. Social media has become a space for the emergence of counter-discourse, both in the form of rational criticism and creative digital resistance. This phenomenon confirms the results of previous research that states that social media provides an interactive arena full of power contests, where the legitimacy of government can be questioned and even challenged through public discursive practices.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that linguistic strategy is the main instrument of the government in building legitimacy and authority on social media. The use of authoritative modalities, collective invitations, moral rhetoric, and

euphemisms function not only as a means of communication, but also as a mechanism for the formation of social meaning and public compliance. These findings are consistent with Fairclough's theory of critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes the role of language in the reproduction and negotiation of power. This linguistic strategy is also in line with previous research that found that governments use persuasive language to reduce resistance and strengthen compliance (Al Akromi & Santika, 2024; Liu, 2024).

The application of modalities such as "must" or "must" affirms the formal authority of the government, while the collective invitation ("let's get together") builds social solidarity, emphasizing that policy is not just a top-down instruction but also a shared responsibility. This strategy shows how governments are leveraging linguistic framing to assert public compliance without giving rise to direct conflict, a phenomenon previously noted in studies of government digital communications in the context of the pandemic (Taggart & Lennox, 2024).

Persuasive rhetorical analysis shows that governments emphasize policy as collective solutions, moral obligations, and institutional success. Framing policies as a solution presents a positive narrative and positions the government as a problem solver actor. Framing compliance as a moral responsibility encourages the internalization of the value of compliance, while framing the government's success reinforces legitimacy through empirical evidence, such as vaccination achievements or increased recovery rates. This phenomenon reinforces Fairclough's argument that public discourse is not merely descriptive but normative and persuasive, influencing people's perceptions of authority. These results also support previous findings that show that rhetorical framing is effective in shaping public opinion and managing risk perceptions during the pandemic (Wijaya & Ida, 2022; Agustriani & Hamdani, 2023).

Multimodal analysis reveals that visual elements play a critical role in strengthening the legitimacy of government discourse. Infographics, official symbols, official figures, and representations of ideal society create visual narratives that reinforce linguistic messages. These findings support the perspective of Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) that visual and linguistic communication complement each other in building social meaning and legitimacy. In particular, the visualization of flags, state emblems, and official figures not only emphasizes institutional authority but also shapes the public's perception of credibility. This is relevant to recent research on digital policy communication which shows that strategic visualization can increase public trust and compliance (Al Akromi & Santika, 2024; Mendelsohn et al., 2024).

The results of the study show that the public plays an active role in negotiating the meaning of policies through comments, critical questions, direct criticism, and sarcasm. About 57% of public interactions show a form of digital resistance. This phenomenon confirms that social media provides a space for power contestation that does not exist in the mainstream media (Ugwudike & Sánchez-Benitez, 2024; I Gusti Ngurah Parthama et al., 2025). This counter-discourse has significant implications for the legitimacy of the government. Criticism and parody, while humorous, serve as a social mechanism for questioning the effectiveness of policy, suggesting that power in the digital space

is dialectical and always negotiated. These findings highlight the importance of governments understanding public interaction as an integral part of policy communication strategies, in line with the concept of participatory democracy in the digital age (Pratap & Pathak, 2025).

The integration between linguistic strategies, persuasive rhetoric, visual, and public participation confirms that institutional discourse on social media is a dynamic arena for power negotiations. The government builds legitimacy through symbols and persuasive language, while the public presents resistance and counter-discourse. This shows that policy communication is not just the dissemination of information, but a two-way interaction that forms power relations in a sustainable manner (Zhao & Jiang, 2023; Liu, 2024).

The difference with previous research lies in the focus of public interactivity, previous studies emphasized government discourse as dominant, while this study shows that public interaction can modify, challenge, or even renegotiate the meaning of policies in real time. Supporting factors for this dynamic include the character of social media platforms, algorithms, and people's political awareness. The research constraints include sample limitations and the potential for interpretive bias in discourse analysis, so further research using a broader dataset and quantitative triangulation methods is recommended for the validation of findings.

Theoretically, this study extends Fairclough's three-dimensional model with the integration of multimodal analysis, demonstrating the relationship between text, visual, and social practice in digital policy communication. In practical terms, this study provides recommendations for governments to design communication strategies that are more participatory, responsive, and transparent, while paying attention to public resistance as an indicator of policy evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research shows that the government's institutional discourse on social media is a dynamic arena for power negotiations, where linguistic strategies, persuasive rhetoric, and visual semiotics are used to build legitimacy, influence public perception, and encourage policy compliance. An analysis of 80 official government posts shows that persuasive language and collective invitations, framing policies as a collective solution, and the use of official symbols and visuals of the ideal community serve as a means of strengthening the authority and credibility of the message.

On the other hand, public interaction through comments, criticism, questions, and sarcasm/parody confirms that the public is not just passive recipients, but also actively shapes discourse and negotiates power relations. This counter-discourse suggests that social media provides a participatory space that enables digital resistance, distinguishing it from conventional media that tends to be one-way.

Theoretically, this study expands the understanding in the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis by integrating a multimodal approach to examine the relationship between text, visual, and social practice in government digital

communication. Practically, the findings of this study provide input for the government to design policy communication strategies that are more participatory, transparent, and sensitive to public interaction, so as to increase public trust and strengthen policy legitimacy in the digital era.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research can extend this study by conducting longitudinal and comparative analyses across different government levels and policy sectors to understand how digital discourse strategies evolve over time and vary in context. Incorporating big data analytics and computational methods such as sentiment analysis, topic modeling, or network analysis would enrich the multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis by capturing larger patterns of engagement and resistance. Exploring cross-national cases would also provide insight into how cultural, political, and institutional contexts shape the dynamics of digital power negotiations. Additionally, examining the role of influencers, digital activists, and algorithmic visibility in shaping counter-discourse could deepen the theoretical framework and inform practical strategies for governments to foster more inclusive, dialogic, and trust-oriented policy communication.

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