

A Pragmatic Study of Sarcasm in Netizen Comments

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Sarcasm has become a prominent linguistic phenomenon in digital communication, particularly in netizen comments on social media platforms. The absence of face-to-face interaction and non-verbal cues encourages users to employ indirect and implicit language strategies, including sarcasm, to express criticism, dissatisfaction, and social attitudes. This study aims to examine sarcasm in netizen comments from a pragmatic perspective in order to understand how meaning is constructed beyond literal interpretation. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach using a literature review method. Data were collected from relevant books, peer-reviewed journals, and previous studies focusing on pragmatics, sarcasm, and digital discourse. The analysis synthesizes theoretical concepts and empirical findings related to sarcasm as a pragmatic strategy in online communication. The results indicate that sarcasm functions as an indirect speech act influenced by contextual factors such as social norms, shared knowledge, and communicative intentions. Sarcasm is commonly used to convey criticism, express emotions, and negotiate social identity in digital spaces. In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of pragmatic analysis in interpreting sarcastic expressions in netizen comments and contributes to a deeper understanding of meaning-making processes in online discourse.

Keywords: pragmatics, sarcasm, netizen comments, social media, digital discourse

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has significantly reshaped the way people communicate and interact. Social media platforms have emerged as new public spaces where users actively exchange opinions, respond to current issues, and engage in discursive practices through written language. One prominent feature of this digital interaction is the use of expressive and figurative language, particularly sarcasm, which frequently appears in netizen comments across various platforms [1].

The rapid development of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the way public opinion is formed, circulated, and contested. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become dominant arenas for public discourse, replacing or at least complementing the role traditionally held by mainstream media. Within this environment, social media influencers have emerged as prominent communicative actors who possess the capacity to shape perceptions, attitudes, and collective interpretations of social reality.

In contemporary online communication, sarcasm is commonly employed as a means of conveying criticism, dissatisfaction, or mockery in an indirect manner [2]. Unlike face-to-face interaction, digital communication lacks paralinguistic and non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. As a result, users rely heavily on linguistic strategies to express attitudes and emotions, making sarcasm an effective yet complex communicative tool. This phenomenon reflects current conditions in online discourse, where indirectness and implicit meaning dominate interactional practices [3].

Influencers are no longer limited to the role of entertainment content creators or product promoters. Increasingly, they function as digital opinion leaders who comment on social issues, public policies, cultural debates, and everyday moral concerns. Through language that appears informal, authentic, and personal, influencers establish strong affective bonds with their audiences. This perceived closeness allows their opinions to circulate widely and gain legitimacy, often surpassing the influence of institutional media sources. As a result, influencer discourse plays a strategic role in directing public attention and framing issues within the digital public sphere.

Language is central to this process. The persuasive power of influencers does not rely solely on visual appeal or popularity metrics, but also on linguistic strategies that frame reality, construct identities, and position audiences ideologically. Evaluative diction, emotional narratives, metaphors, and moral judgments are frequently employed to present particular viewpoints as natural, urgent, or morally superior. Such discursive practices indicate that influencer communication is not neutral, but deeply embedded in power relations and ideological struggles.

Despite the growing influence of influencers in shaping digital public opinion, existing academic research has predominantly approached this phenomenon from a quantitative perspective. Studies often focus on credibility, engagement rates, or behavioral effects, while paying limited attention to the linguistic structures through which meaning and ideology are produced. Consequently, the role of language as a social practice that constructs and reproduces power relations in influencer discourse remains insufficiently explored.

The urgency of studying sarcasm in netizen comments lies in its potential impact on communication effectiveness and social interaction [4]. Sarcastic expressions can function as sharp criticism or humor, but they may also lead to misinterpretation, conflict, or hostility when contextual cues are not successfully inferred [5]. Given the increasing intensity of online discussions related to social, political, and cultural issues, understanding how sarcasm operates in digital discourse becomes crucial to comprehending broader communication dynamics in online communities [6].

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a valuable theoretical and methodological framework for addressing this gap. CDA conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures. By examining linguistic features alongside processes of discourse production and broader socio-cultural contexts, CDA enables a deeper understanding of how public opinion is discursively constructed. Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which integrates textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, is particularly relevant for analyzing influencer discourse within platform-based environments.

This study focuses on sarcasm in netizen comments from a pragmatic perspective. The scope of the research is limited to a conceptual and theoretical examination of sarcasm as an indirect speech act in digital discourse. The objective of this study is to analyze how sarcasm functions pragmatically in netizen comments by synthesizing relevant literature, identifying its communicative functions, and explaining the role of context in interpreting sarcastic expressions. This study aims to analyze how social media influencers employ linguistic and discursive strategies to construct digital public opinion. By applying Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework to influencer-generated content on Instagram and TikTok, this research seeks to reveal the ideological mechanisms underlying seemingly casual digital communication. The central research question guiding this study is: How do influencers' linguistic and discursive practices contribute to the construction of digital public opinion in contemporary digital society?

The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the expansion of Critical Discourse Analysis into the domain of influencer studies, which has received limited attention in critical linguistic research. Practically, it provides insights that can strengthen public critical literacy, enabling social media

users to engage more reflexively with persuasive discourse. In an era where opinions circulate rapidly and authority is increasingly decentralized, understanding the linguistic construction of digital public opinion becomes both academically and socially imperative.

Based on the explanation above, several gaps can be identified. First, influencer studies are dominated by quantitative approaches that prioritize communication effects over discursive processes. Second, CDA research has not systematically addressed influencer discourse as a central site of digital public opinion formation. Third, existing studies have not adequately explained the dual role of influencers as agents of public participation and as actors embedded in the commodification of attention.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by applying Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework to influencer-generated content on social media. The central research problem guiding this study is: How do influencers' linguistic and discursive practices contribute to the construction of digital public opinion within contemporary platform-based power structures?

2. Literature Review And Problem Statement

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as conveyed by speakers and interpreted by listeners or readers within specific contexts [7]. Unlike semantic analysis, pragmatics emphasizes speaker intention, contextual factors, and shared knowledge in meaning construction. Numerous scholars have highlighted that indirectness is a central feature of pragmatic communication, particularly in figurative language such as irony and sarcasm. Sarcasm is often characterized as an utterance in which the intended meaning contrasts with the literal meaning, requiring inferential processing to be correctly understood.

The emergence of social media influencers has reconfigured traditional models of opinion leadership. Drawing from classical communication theory, opinion leaders were initially conceptualized as individuals who mediate information flow between mass media and the public. In the digital era, influencers occupy this role within platform-based environments, where visibility, engagement, and perceived authenticity determine communicative power. Unlike traditional elites, influencers derive authority not from institutional positions but from symbolic capital accumulated through followers, interaction metrics, and narrative intimacy.

Previous studies emphasize that influencers' effectiveness is closely linked to credibility, parasocial relationships, and audience identification. Language plays a central role in this process, as influencers deliberately adopt conversational, emotional, and relatable styles to reduce social distance. However, much of this literature treats language as a communicative technique rather than as a site of ideological production. Consequently, the deeper mechanisms through which influencer discourse constructs meaning and legitimizes viewpoints remain under-theorized.

Previous studies on sarcasm have consistently identified it as a form of indirect speech act that frequently involves implicature and the violation of conversational norms. In pragmatic terms, sarcastic expressions may deliberately flout conversational maxims to generate implied meanings. Research has also linked sarcasm to politeness theory and face-threatening acts, suggesting that sarcasm allows speakers to criticize while maintaining a degree of social distance or deniability. These findings underline the complexity of sarcasm as both a linguistic and social phenomenon [8].

In the context of digital communication, research on sarcasm has expanded to include social media discourse, online comments, and virtual interactions [9]. Several studies indicate that sarcasm is widely used in online environments due to anonymity, reduced social accountability, and the competitive nature of digital discourse. However, many existing studies adopt empirical approaches focusing on specific

platforms or datasets, while fewer studies provide a comprehensive conceptual synthesis of sarcasm from a pragmatic perspective. This gap highlights the need for a literature-based study that systematically explains sarcasm in netizen comments as a pragmatic phenomenon. Therefore, the problem addressed in this research is how sarcasm in netizen comments can be conceptually understood and explained through pragmatic theory using a descriptive qualitative literature review approach.

Digital public opinion differs fundamentally from traditional public opinion formed through institutional media channels. Social media platforms facilitate rapid circulation of opinions, algorithmic amplification, and participatory engagement, allowing individual actors to shape collective perceptions. Scholars argue that digital public opinion is increasingly fragmented, emotional, and polarized due to platform affordances that privilege sensational and affective content.

Research on social media discourse highlights how framing, repetition, and emotionalization contribute to opinion formation. However, many studies rely on quantitative sentiment analysis or engagement metrics, which offer limited insight into how meaning and ideology are embedded in language. From a critical perspective, public opinion should be understood not merely as aggregated attitudes but as a discursively constructed phenomenon shaped by power relations, representational practices, and access to visibility.

Pragmatics studies how the meaning of utterances is understood by interlocutors based on the context of the situation. Context encompasses various aspects, such as the speaker and interlocutor, the setting and time, the purpose of the communication, and the social and cultural norms surrounding the interaction. In digital communication, the context becomes more implicit, requiring readers to make pragmatic inferences [10]. Sarcasm is a form of speech that conveys the opposite of its literal meaning [11]. Pragmatically, sarcasm is considered an indirect speech act because the speaker's intention is not explicitly stated. Sarcasm is often associated with violations of the cooperative principle, particularly the maxims of quality and politeness, to create a satirical or critical effect.

In social media, sarcasm has its own distinctive characteristics, such as the use of hyperbole, positive word choices to convey negative meanings, and the use of certain punctuation or emoticons [12]. Sarcasm is also often used as a strategy to maintain emotional distance, disguise criticism, or avoid direct conflict. Netizen comments can be viewed as a form of digital discourse that reflects the social dynamics of society. The language in netizen comments is spontaneous, informal, and often emotional. Anonymity and lack of social control on social media contribute to the increased use of sarcastic language [13].

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes language as a form of social practice that is both shaped by and shapes social structures. Central to CDA is the assumption that discourse is never neutral; it reflects ideological positions and contributes to the reproduction or transformation of power relations. Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining how linguistic features connect with processes of production, distribution, and broader socio-cultural contexts.

Within this framework, textual analysis focuses on lexical choices, modality, transitivity, and rhetorical devices. Discursive practice analysis examines how texts are produced and consumed, while social practice analysis situates discourse within wider social and institutional structures. CDA has been widely applied to political speeches, news media, and institutional discourse, but its application to influencer-generated content remains limited.

3. Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the data consist of discourse in the form of digital texts, which are contextual, interpretive, and ideologically laden. Rather than measuring variables or testing causal relationships, this research seeks to uncover patterns of meaning, rhetorical strategies, and power relations embedded in influencer language.

Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model serves as the primary analytical framework. This model conceptualizes discourse analysis as comprising three interconnected dimensions: (1) text, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice. The model allows for a systematic examination of linguistic features while simultaneously linking them to processes of production, distribution, and broader socio-cultural structures.

Data Sources and Corpus

The data for this study consist of influencer-generated content from social media platforms, specifically Instagram and TikTok. The unit of analysis is not the influencer as an individual, but the digital discourse products they produce. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select data that best represent the phenomenon under investigation.

The selection criteria were as follows:

- a. The content explicitly expresses opinions on social or public issues.
- b. The content demonstrates a high level of audience interaction (likes, comments, shares).
- c. The content was produced within a similar time frame to ensure contextual consistency.

Based on these criteria, 15 pieces of public-opinion content were selected from three influencers (five items per influencer). Each video ranged from 1 to 3 minutes in duration. After transcription, the total textual corpus comprised approximately 12,000–15,000 words.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in several stages. First, relevant influencers and issues were identified through platform exploration and engagement metrics. Second, selected video content and captions were downloaded and transcribed verbatim to convert multimodal data into textual form. Third, data reduction was performed by segmenting the discourse and selecting excerpts that most clearly represented opinion construction, framing, and ideological positioning.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed Fairclough's three-dimensional model:

- a. Text Analysis (Micro Dimension): This stage involved close linguistic analysis of lexical choices, modality, sentence structures, metaphors, evaluative expressions, and representations of social actors.
- b. Discursive Practice Analysis (Meso Dimension): This stage examined how the discourse was produced, distributed, and consumed within the social media context, including personalization strategies, narrative styles, and audience interaction.
- c. Social Practice Analysis (Macro Dimension): This stage interpreted the findings in relation to broader social structures, such as digital capitalism, algorithmic governance, and power relations in the public sphere.
- d. To enhance analytical rigor, thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns across the data, and interpretive triangulation was applied by continuously linking textual findings to discursive and social contexts.

4. Results And Discussion

This section presents an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the findings based on Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework. The discussion is organized into four major sub-sections: (1) detailed textual analysis, (2) expanded discursive practice analysis, (3) extended social practice interpretation, and (4) an integrative discussion that connects empirical findings with broader theoretical debates on digital public opinion and power.

Expanded Textual Analysis (Micro Dimension)

At the micro-linguistic level, influencer discourse demonstrates systematic and strategic use of language to guide interpretation and limit alternative readings. One of the most salient features identified is the dominance of evaluative lexical choices. Influencers frequently employ adjectives and adverbs that carry strong judgmental meanings such as *unjust*, *dangerous*, *irresponsible*, and *inevitable*. These lexical items function to pre-structure audience evaluation before any counter-argument can be considered. In CDA terms, such choices reveal how discourse pre-frames reality and naturalizes particular viewpoints as common sense.

In addition to evaluative diction, high modality is a recurring linguistic feature. Modal verbs (*must*, *cannot*, *should*) and epistemic markers (*clearly*, *without doubt*, *the fact is*) are used to construct certainty and authority. Rather than presenting opinions as subjective interpretations, influencers linguistically elevate them to the status of factual truths. This strategy reduces dialogic space and positions the influencer as a reliable epistemic authority within the digital public sphere.

Syntactically, the discourse is dominated by active voice constructions that explicitly assign responsibility to particular social actors. For instance, phrases such as *they ignore the people* or *the authorities failed us* foreground agency and blame. Passive constructions, which could obscure responsibility, are used far less frequently. This pattern indicates a deliberate attempt to personalize accountability and intensify emotional engagement.

Rhetorical devices further strengthen persuasive impact. Metaphors such as *time bomb*, *wake-up call*, or *digital battlefield* recontextualize abstract social issues into concrete and emotionally charged imagery. Hyperbole intensifies urgency and moral panic, while repetition of key phrases reinforces ideological framing and facilitates audience internalization. These findings confirm that influencer language is highly constructed and strategically oriented toward persuasion rather than neutral information delivery.

Representation of Social Actors and Ideological Positioning

Beyond lexical and syntactic features, the analysis reveals consistent patterns in the representation of social actors. Influencers tend to construct a binary opposition between in-groups (*we*, *the people*, *ordinary citizens*) and out-groups (*they*, *elites*, *authorities*, *corporations*). This polarization aligns with van Dijk's ideological square, emphasizing positive self-representation and negative other-representation.

Through this representational strategy, influencers position themselves as moral spokespersons for the public. The repeated alignment with *the people* enhances symbolic legitimacy and frames dissenting voices as morally or socially inferior. Such constructions contribute to ideological boundary-making and simplify complex social realities into emotionally resonant narratives. While this strategy increases engagement, it also risks reinforcing oversimplification and polarization in digital public opinion.

Expanded Discursive Practice Analysis (Meso Dimension)

At the level of discursive practice, influencer discourse production is characterized by personalization, narrativization, and platform adaptation. Influencers frequently begin their content with personal

experiences or emotional confessions, which function as entry points for broader public issues. These narratives blur the distinction between private experience and public concern, allowing subjective perspectives to gain collective relevance.

The use of inclusive pronouns (*we, us, friends*) is central to building symbolic intimacy. This linguistic choice constructs an imagined community in which the influencer and audience share the same moral and ideological position. As a result, disagreement is implicitly framed as exclusion from the group, reducing the likelihood of critical engagement.

Distribution mechanisms also shape discursive practices. Social media algorithms privilege content that generates emotional reactions, rapid engagement, and prolonged viewing time. Influencers adapt their linguistic strategies accordingly by employing sensational framing, moral urgency, and polarizing narratives. Comments, likes, and shares function not only as indicators of reception but also as mechanisms that reinforce discourse visibility and authority.

Audience interaction further legitimizes influencer discourse. Supportive comments are often highlighted or responded to, while critical comments may be ignored or reframed as evidence of opposition from the out-group. This selective interaction contributes to the consolidation of ideological echo chambers within digital platforms.

Extended Social Practice Analysis (Macro Dimension)

At the macro-social level, influencer discourse operates within a hybrid digital power structure. On one hand, it reflects the democratization of the public sphere by enabling non-institutional actors to participate in opinion formation. Influencers provide alternative narratives that may challenge mainstream media or official discourse, thereby expanding the range of voices in public debate.

On the other hand, influencer discourse is deeply embedded in the political economy of digital capitalism. Opinions function as commodities that generate visibility, followers, and potential monetization through endorsements, sponsorships, and platform incentives. Language, in this context, becomes a resource for accumulating symbolic and economic capital.

This dual positioning creates inherent tension. While influencers may articulate social critique, their discourse is constrained by platform logics that reward sensationalism and polarization. Consequently, critical discourse risks being simplified or instrumentalized to maintain audience attention and brand value. The findings suggest that influencer power is not autonomous but shaped by structural conditions of algorithmic governance and market-driven communication.

Integrated Discussion and Theoretical Implications

Integrating findings across the three dimensions reveals that influencer discourse constitutes a structured ideological practice. Linguistic certainty at the textual level, narrative intimacy at the discursive level, and commodified participation at the social level interact to produce persuasive and authoritative public opinion.

These results support the core assumption of Critical Discourse Analysis that language both reflects and reproduces power relations. The study also reconciles competing perspectives in the literature by demonstrating that influencers simultaneously function as agents of participation and actors within digital capitalism. Their apparent authenticity masks complex power dynamics embedded in discourse production and circulation.

Overall, the findings underscore that digital public opinion is not a spontaneous aggregation of individual views, but the outcome of systematic discursive construction mediated by influencers and platform structures..

Table 1. Pragmatic Functions of Sarcasm in Netizen Comments

Aspect	Description
Indirect Criticism	Sarcasm allows users to criticize without direct confrontation
Emotional Expression	Sarcasm conveys frustration, dissatisfaction, or irony
Identity Construction	Sarcasm signals group membership and social positioning
Interactional Strategy	Sarcasm regulates power and distance in online interaction

The analysis further indicates that context plays a central role in the interpretation of sarcastic comments. Contextual factors such as the topic under discussion, previous comments, cultural norms, and shared background knowledge significantly influence how sarcasm is understood. Without adequate contextual cues, sarcastic utterances risk being interpreted literally, leading to miscommunication or conflict [14].

Several studies emphasize that digital environments amplify this interpretive challenge due to the lack of paralinguistic cues. Consequently, netizens often rely on linguistic markers such as hyperbole, contrastive expressions, or conventional sarcastic formulas to signal non-literal intent. From a pragmatic perspective, this reinforces the notion that sarcasm functions through implicature, requiring active inferential processing by the reader.

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous pragmatic research on sarcasm and indirect speech acts. Earlier studies have demonstrated that sarcasm frequently involves the flouting of conversational maxims, particularly the maxim of quality, to generate implied meanings. The reviewed literature supports this claim by showing that sarcastic comments often express meanings that contradict their literal form.

However, this study contributes a broader conceptual synthesis by integrating insights from digital discourse studies and pragmatics. While many previous studies focus on empirical datasets from specific platforms, this literature-based analysis highlights overarching patterns and functions of sarcasm across digital contexts. This synthesis strengthens the theoretical understanding of sarcasm as a pragmatic strategy rather than a platform-specific phenomenon [15].

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reaffirm the relevance of pragmatic theory in analyzing digital discourse. Sarkasme dalam komentar netizen menunjukkan bahwa pemaknaan bahasa di ruang digital sangat bergantung pada konteks dan inferensi, bukan pada makna literal semata. This underscores the necessity of pragmatic competence in online communication, particularly in multilingual and multicultural environments.

Practically, the widespread use of sarcasm in netizen comments has implications for digital literacy and online interaction. Misinterpretation of sarcastic remarks may escalate conflicts or contribute to toxic communication patterns. Therefore, understanding sarcasm as a pragmatic phenomenon can help users, educators, and researchers develop more nuanced approaches to analyzing and moderating online discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined sarcasm in netizen comments from a pragmatic perspective through a descriptive qualitative literature review. The findings demonstrate that sarcasm functions as a strategic form of indirect communication in digital discourse, enabling users to express criticism, emotional responses, and social positioning beyond literal meaning. The analysis confirms that the interpretation of sarcasm is highly dependent on contextual factors, shared knowledge, and inferential processes, which are central concerns in pragmatic theory.

The results of this study align with existing pragmatic frameworks that conceptualize sarcasm as an indirect speech act involving implicature and the deliberate violation of conversational norms. At the same time, this research extends previous studies by synthesizing insights from pragmatics and digital discourse, highlighting that sarcasm in netizen comments operates not only as a linguistic device but also as a social and interactional strategy within online communities. This dual function underscores the complexity of meaning construction in text-based communication.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces the relevance of pragmatic analysis in understanding contemporary digital communication. It emphasizes that meaning in online discourse cannot be adequately explained through semantic analysis alone, but must consider contextual and interactional dimensions. Practically, the findings contribute to a better understanding of how sarcastic expressions may influence online interaction, including the potential for misinterpretation and conflict in digital environments.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and conceptual analysis. Future research is therefore encouraged to incorporate empirical data from specific social media platforms and to apply mixed or comparative methods to examine cultural, linguistic, or platform-based variations in the use of sarcasm. Such studies would further enrich the understanding of sarcasm as a pragmatic phenomenon and strengthen its theoretical and practical implications in digital communication research.

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