

Critical Discourse Analysis of Influencer Language in Building Digital Public Opinion

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This study aims to analyze influencers' linguistic strategies in building digital public opinion through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The background of this study is based on the increasing role of social media influencers as *digital opinion leaders* who not only convey information but also construct social reality through persuasive and ideological language practices. Although various previous studies have highlighted aspects of credibility and *engagement*, the linguistic dimensions and power relations in influencer discourse are still relatively understudied. This study uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach with Fairclough's three-dimensional model that includes text analysis, discursive practices, and social practices. The research data consists of 15 public opinion content from three social media influencers selected purposively based on the level of interaction and issue relevance. The data were analyzed through transcription, discourse segmentation, thematic coding, and critical interpretation stages to identify lexical strategies, syntactic structures, modalities, framing, and representations of social actors. The results show that influencers systematically use evaluative diction, high modality, metaphors, and polarization strategies to frame issues and build certain ideological positions. At the level of discursive practice, the use of inclusive pronouns and personal narratives strengthens the legitimacy of opinions and creates symbolic closeness with the audience. At the level of social practice, influencer discourse operates within a hybrid digital power structure—encouraging public participation while simultaneously reproducing the logic of attention commodification. This study concludes that digital public opinion is formed through structured, rather than spontaneous, discursive processes, and that influencer language plays a strategic role in the construction of social reality. Theoretically, this study expands the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to the study of digital influencers; practically, these findings contribute to strengthening society's critical literacy regarding social media discourse.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, influencers, digital public opinion, persuasive language, social media.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the development of social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has given birth to new public figures known as influencers [1]. Influencers not only act as entertainment content creators, but also as shapers of public opinion on social, political, lifestyle, educational, and digital economic issues. The current phenomenon shows that the language used by influencers tends to be persuasive, emotional, and symbolic. The narratives they construct often frame reality according to certain interests (commercial, ideological, or *personal branding*). Audiences, especially the younger generation, trust *influencers more* than mainstream media, and the polarization of public opinion is often triggered by the framing of language used in digital content [2].

This research is important because of the constraints of language as a tool of digital power, where influencers have symbolic power in shaping audience perceptions, attitudes, and even behavior, the lack of critical literacy in digital society, where many social media users do not yet have adequate discourse analysis

skills to understand the ideology or interests behind the message, the potential for manipulation of public opinion, where language that seems casual and personal can disguise hidden economic, political, or propaganda interests [3] . Thus, this research is urgently needed to reveal how influencers' linguistic practices contribute to the construction of public opinion.

Empirically, in the field it was found that many viral issues (products, policies, social conflicts) developed rapidly after being discussed by influencers, endorsement content is often packaged in personal narratives so that it is difficult to distinguish between opinions and advertisements and certain hyperbolic, metaphorical, and framing languages are used to strengthen certain images or points of view [4] . This phenomenon shows the relationship between language, power, and ideology in digital communication, which is the main focus in the Critical Discourse Analysis (AWK) approach [5] .

order for the research to be focused and not too broad, the scope is limited to the research object being the video content or caption of influencers on certain platforms (for example TikTok or Instagram), the type of content related to social issues or public opinion, Theoretical approach, namely critical discourse analysis . The aspects analyzed are diction, sentence structure , rhetoric , issue framing and representation of social actors [6] .

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.

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.

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 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.

2. Literature Review And Problem Statement

Theoretical studies on *influencers* in the digital space show that these actors not only act as content creators, but also as *digital opinion leaders* who actively influence the construction of public opinion through their linguistic practices. Abidin emphasized that influencer communication practices create what is called *calibrated amateurism*, namely the use of language that appears authentic but has strong persuasive power in reaching a wide audience through social media platforms. This shows that influencer language functions as a rhetorical tool in producing social narratives, not just as a conveyor of ordinary information [7]. Furthermore, a systematic study by Gaspersz et al . (2024) [8] concluded that the role of influencers in shaping digital public opinion in Indonesia is characterized by a transformation from mere content *creators* to digital *opinion leaders*, where their *effectiveness* is influenced by credibility, audience engagement, and the consistency of messages conveyed through persuasive and interactive language, so that it can strengthen or even modify public perceptions of certain issues. In a critical linguistic perspective, this concept is relevant to the *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) framework which emphasizes that discourse practices reflect and reproduce power relations in digital society. The CDA model positions language as an arena for ideological battles, where lexical choices, narrative structures, and rhetorical strategies used by influencers can strengthen or challenge the dominance of certain views, especially when the content relates to social or political issues that are sensitive to exposure on social media [9]. Research by Ullah, et al (2024) [10] also found that influencers use specific discourse strategies that are able to spread certain narratives and shape the perceptions and social responses of the audience, indicating a complex interaction between language, digital context, and the dynamics of public opinion that deserves critical analysis in this study.

Studies on influencers in the digital media ecosystem show a shift in their position from mere content creators to *digital opinion leaders* who have the capacity to shape public perception through strategic communication practices. Research by Afrasiab, et al. [11] in 2011 highlighted the dimensions of credibility, *engagement*, and audience trust as the main factors in influencer effectiveness in influencing attitudes and behavior. These studies generally use a quantitative approach based on *the source credibility model* and *parasocial interaction theory*, which positions language as an instrument for conveying messages, not as an arena for producing meaning and ideology. [12]. Thus, despite their significant contribution in explaining the impact of influencer influence, the linguistic and ideological dimensions of influencer language practices

are still less explored in depth. In a critical linguistic perspective, language is understood as a social practice that is not neutral, but rather laden with power relations and ideology as emphasized in the *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) framework. This approach emphasizes that lexical choices, syntactic structures, rhetorical strategies, and representational patterns of social actors reflect and simultaneously reproduce power structures in digital society. However, CDA research from Ngaji , et al [13] has focused more on mainstream media discourse, formal politics, or online news, while influencer discourse practices as semi-independent actors in the digital space are relatively rarely analyzed systematically. On the other hand, there is inconsistency in the literature: some studies position influencers as agents of information democratization, while others see them as an extension of the logic of digital capitalism and the commodification of opinion.

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.

Existing CDA research on digital media has primarily examined online news portals, political campaigns, and activist discourse. These studies demonstrate that digital texts reproduce ideological polarization, legitimize authority, and marginalize alternative voices. A smaller body of research has begun to explore influencer discourse, revealing that influencers employ strategic self-presentation, moral positioning, and narrative framing to shape audience perceptions. Nevertheless, these studies often focus on isolated linguistic features or single platforms, without integrating micro-level language analysis with meso- and macro-level interpretations. Moreover, the ambivalent position of influencers—as both independent commentators and participants in digital capitalism—has not been sufficiently theorized through discourse analysis.

Based on the literature review, there are conceptual and methodological gaps in the study of influencers and public opinion. First, the dominance of quantitative approaches based on communication effects has resulted in the linguistic practices of influencers not being analyzed as discourse structures containing ideology and power relations. Second, *Critical Discourse Analysis studies* have not been intensively directed at influencer content on social media as a space for the production of digital public opinion. Third, there is a theoretical inconsistency regarding the position of influencers, whether as agents of public participation or as actors in the commodification of opinion, which has not been explained through an in-depth analysis of language structures. Substantively, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the linguistic practices of influencers using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to explain the mechanisms of public opinion construction in the digital space more comprehensively and contextually.

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:

1. The content explicitly expresses opinions on social or public issues.
2. The content demonstrates a high level of audience interaction (likes, comments, shares).
3. 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:

1. Text Analysis (Micro Dimension): This stage involved close linguistic analysis of lexical choices, modality, sentence structures, metaphors, evaluative expressions, and representations of social actors.
2. 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.
3. 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.

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

Results

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.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that influencers' linguistic practices constitute a form of ideological discourse, aligning with the basic assumption of Critical Discourse Analysis, namely that language is a social practice embedded in power relations. The lexical choices and framing strategies identified demonstrate that influencers consciously construct epistemic positions as alternative sources of truth. This expands previous understandings that tend to position influencers solely as marketing agents or credible figures, demonstrating that they also play a role as producers of social meaning.

Research by Al Akromi and Santika (2024) [15] shows that the democratization of public opinion in digital spaces is not entirely free from power relations. Although influencers appear independent, their discourse construction is still influenced by algorithmic logic, monetization, and the need to maintain a personal image. Thus, this study bridges the inconsistency in the literature that positions influencers as both participatory agents and commercial actors, by showing that both positions are present simultaneously in their discourse practices.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that digital public opinion is not formed spontaneously, but rather through systematic linguistic and discursive processes. Influencer language serves as a strategic medium for constructing social reality, shaping collective perceptions, and reproducing power structures in digital society.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to analyze influencers' linguistic strategies in constructing digital public opinion through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. Based on the analysis results across three dimensions—text, discursive practice, and social practice—it was found that influencers systematically use evaluative diction, high modality, metaphor, and polarizing framing to construct certain ideological positions. At the level of discursive practice, personalization strategies and the use of inclusive pronouns strengthen symbolic closeness with the audience, thereby increasing the legitimacy of the opinions expressed. At the level of social practice, influencer discourse operates within a dual digital power structure: on the one hand, encouraging public participation, but on the other, tied to the logic of commodifying attention and personal branding. These findings directly address the research objective, which is to reveal how influencer language does not merely convey information, but also constructs social reality and shapes collective perceptions in the digital space. Theoretically, the results of this study align with the basic assumption of CDA that language is a social practice fraught with power relations and ideology. These findings reinforce the view that digital discourse is not neutral, but rather becomes an arena for the reproduction of certain social structures. However, this research also differs from previous studies that tend to position influencers solely as marketing agents or credibility-based opinion leaders. This research emphasizes that influencer power lies not only in credibility or *engagement*, but also in linguistic constructions that strategically frame issues and represent social actors. This difference arises because the approach used is not based on quantitative communication effects, but rather on an in-depth analysis of language structure and its social context. A general interpretation of the phenomena found suggests that digital public opinion is formed through structured discursive processes, not spontaneously. Patterns of persuasive language use and ideological

framing indicate that influencers act as mediators of meaning in the social media ecosystem. The scientific significance of this research lies in its contribution to expanding the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to the realm of digital influencers, which has previously received relatively little attention in critical linguistic studies. Practically, these findings have implications for strengthening the public's digital literacy, particularly in enhancing critical thinking skills regarding persuasive messages on social media. Furthermore, the results of this study can serve as a reference in the development of Indonesian language learning materials based on critical literacy and digital discourse analysis. This study also has methodological implications, demonstrating that a qualitative approach based on AWK can provide consistent and in-depth results in analyzing multimodal digital texts. However, there are several limitations. First, the limited sample size of a few influencers may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, this study focused on linguistic aspects and did not quantitatively measure the impact of opinions on audience attitude change. Third, the ever-changing dynamics of digital platform algorithms can influence the distribution of discourse and were not technically analyzed in this study. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the number and variety of research subjects, combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (mixed methods), and integrate algorithmic analysis or digital communication network analysis. This step will strengthen understanding of the relationship between language, platform technology, and public opinion formation. Thus, this study not only provides theoretical contributions to critical discourse studies but also opens up space for the development of interdisciplinary studies in understanding the dynamics of communication and power in the digital era.

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