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Implicature, Politeness, And The Construction Of Power In Indonesian Digital Discourse: A Pragmatic-Critical Case Study Of Public Reactions To Viral Policy Debates On Instagram

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Abstract

This article examines how Indonesian Instagram users construct public criticism in response to viral policy debates. It focuses on three interconnected pragmatic and critical dimensions: conversational implicature, politeness and impoliteness strategies, and the construction of power between citizens and institutional authority. The study is positioned within digital literacy because public comments on social media are not merely emotional reactions; they are digital texts that require critical reading of implied meanings, source context, platform affordances, and power relations. Methodologically, the article uses a qualitative case-study design with pragmatic-critical discourse analysis. The preliminary data consist of anonymized public-comment examples and verified contextual data on Indonesian digital use and policy debates. The analysis shows that users frequently rely on sarcastic implicature, rhetorical questions, indirect criticism, contrastive statements, mock politeness, and bald-on-record criticism to question policy legitimacy. These strategies construct citizens as burdened subjects, resistant publics, and moral evaluators of authority. The article argues that Indonesian digital discourse should be read as a meaningful site of civic interpretation, where ordinary users negotiate trust, accountability, and symbolic resistance through short but powerful linguistic forms. The study contributes to pragmatics, critical discourse studies, and digital-literacy education by showing how Instagram comments can be used as authentic material for teaching critical interpretation of language and power in digital environments.

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Keywords: digital literacy; implicature; politeness; impoliteness; Instagram comments; Indonesian digital discourse; critical pragmatics; power construction

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Through reading comprehension, students are able to understand ideas, identify important information, interpret meanings, and develop critical thinking skills from written texts. Reading comprehension also supports students in achieving academic success because most learning materials in schools are presented in written forms such as textbooks, articles, and online resources. According to Sidik & Masek, (2021), reading comprehension is a fundamental skill needed to complete academic tasks and participate successfully in modern educational environments. Therefore, students need effective strategies and learning media to improve their reading comprehension abilities.

In EFL classrooms, reading is not only a process of recognizing words and sentences but also a process of understanding the meaning of texts. Students must be able to connect ideas, identify main points, and interpret information correctly. However, many EFL students still experience difficulties in understanding English texts because of limited vocabulary, lack of reading practice, low motivation, and inadequate reading strategies. Reading English texts can become more challenging when students are not interested in the learning materials or teaching methods used in classrooms. As a result, teachers need to apply effective and engaging learning media that can support students' reading comprehension development.

In recent years, technological development has significantly changed educational practices around the world. Technology has become an essential part of teaching and learning activities, including language learning. The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed traditional reading activities from printed texts into digital texts. Digital texts refer to reading materials presented in electronic formats such as e-books, PDF files, online articles, websites, and digital learning platforms accessed through smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers. (Rodríguez-Fuentes et al., 2025) explained that digital technologies are increasingly used as instructional tools in schools because they provide students with opportunities to access information quickly and efficiently.

The integration of digital texts into education offers several advantages for students and teachers. Digital reading materials are flexible because students can access them anytime and anywhere. Students are no longer limited to printed textbooks because they can use digital

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devices to read learning materials both inside and outside classrooms. In addition, digital texts often include multimedia features such as images, hyperlinks, audio, animations, and videos that can support students' understanding of texts. These features may help students become more interested and motivated in reading activities. Digital texts can also provide interactive learning experiences that encourage students to participate actively in learning processes.

The use of digital reading in EFL learning has become an important topic in educational research. Several studies have shown that digital texts can positively influence students' reading comprehension(Sidik & Masek, 2021) found that students who learned through digital reading achieved better reading comprehension scores than students who used conventional printed texts. The study also explained that digital reading increases students' motivation and creates more interactive learning environments because students are more familiar with technology-based activities. Moreover, the use of digital tools supports students' critical thinking and engagement during reading activities (Diprossimo & Cain, 2025).

Digital reading may also improve reading fluency and vocabulary mastery. Through digital platforms, students can practice reading independently and receive immediate feedback on their performance. (Rodríguez-Fuentes et al., 2025) stated that digital reading technologies provide structured reading activities that support the development of reading fluency and comprehension among EFL learners. In addition, digital reading platforms allow students to repeat reading exercises, improve reading speed, and strengthen vocabulary recognition. Such activities may help students become more confident and independent readers.

Furthermore, digital texts are considered suitable for modern students because many young learners are already familiar with smartphones, social media, and internet-based activities in their daily lives. Students today are often referred to as digital learners because they interact with technology regularly. Therefore, integrating digital texts into EFL classrooms may create learning environments that are more relevant to students' daily experiences. Digital learning media can also encourage students to develop autonomous learning habits because they can access materials independently without depending entirely on teachers.

In addition, digital reading requires students to possess different cognitive and metacognitive strategies compared to printed reading. Students must know how to navigate digital texts, manage distractions, and evaluate information critically. Without proper guidance, students may focus more on browsing information quickly rather than understanding the content deeply. Some studies also indicate that digital reading may encourage superficial reading habits because students tend to skim texts on screens instead of reading carefully. Therefore, teachers

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need to guide students in using digital texts effectively to achieve learning objectives.

In Indonesian EFL classrooms, reading comprehension remains a major challenge for many students, especially at the senior high school level. Based on researcher's observation, Many Grade X students at SMA N. 6 Pematang Siantar still struggle to identify main ideas, understand vocabulary, make inferences, and analyze information from English texts. Some students also show low interest in reading activities because traditional teaching methods often rely heavily on printed textbooks and teacher-centered instruction. As a result, students may become passive and less motivated during reading lessons.

Considering the increasing use of digital technology among students, digital texts may become an effective alternative medium for improving reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. Most students are already familiar with smartphones and internet-based applications, making digital learning more accessible and practical. The use of digital texts may help teachers create more interactive and engaging reading activities that support students' comprehension development. However, although many studies have investigated digital reading, the findings remain inconsistent because some studies report positive effects while others reveal challenges related to concentration and comprehension.

Based on the explanations above, it is important to investigate the effect of digital texts on students' reading comprehension, particularly among Grade X EFL students at Senior High School. This study aims to explore whether digital texts significantly influence students' reading comprehension achievement. The researcher expects that the findings of this study will provide useful contributions for teachers, students, schools, and future researchers. For teachers, this study may provide information about effective strategies for integrating digital texts into reading instruction. For students, digital texts may help improve motivation and comprehension skills. For schools, the findings may support the integration of technology into English language learning. Finally, for future researchers, this study may serve as a reference for conducting further research related to digital reading and EFL learning.

Digital communication has changed the way Indonesian citizens respond to public policy. Public reactions that were once mostly expressed through newspapers, television debates, demonstrations, or formal political forums now appear every day in comment sections, reposts, short videos, memes, hashtags, and visual responses. Instagram is no longer only a platform for personal photos and entertainment. It has become a public arena where citizens evaluate, support, mock, question, and resist policy narratives. For language and literature education, this phenomenon is important because social media comments are now part of everyday digital texts

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that students read, interpret, and reproduce.

The Indonesian context makes this issue especially relevant. The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association reported that Indonesia had 221.56 million internet users in 2024, equal to 79.5 percent of the population (APJII, 2024). DataReportal reported 212 million internet users and 143 million social media user identities in Indonesia at the beginning of 2025 (Kemp, 2025a). Its Digital 2026 Indonesia report later reported 230 million internet users by the end of 2025 and an estimated 108 million Instagram users in Indonesia in late 2025 (Kemp, 2025b). These figures show that digital platforms have become significant spaces for civic participation, public emotion, and political meaning-making.

In Indonesian digital discourse, public criticism is often not expressed in a direct sentence such as “I reject this policy” or “I disagree with the government.” Users frequently choose sarcasm, rhetorical questions, humour, emojis, short evaluative phrases, irony, and indirect comparison. A sentence such as “Katanya demi rakyat?” (“They said it was for the people?”) is short, but it may imply distrust toward policy justification. A statement such as “Terima kasih, hidup kami makin menantang” (“Thank you, our life is becoming more challenging”) appears polite at the surface level, but it can function as sarcastic criticism. These examples show that the literal form of digital language is often smaller than its social meaning.

Pragmatics provides an important lens for understanding this phenomenon. Grice (1975) explains that speakers can communicate more than what they explicitly say; meaning is shaped through context, shared assumptions, and inference. This hidden or inferred meaning is known as conversational implicature. In Instagram comments, implicature becomes central because users often criticise authority indirectly, either to create humour, reduce direct confrontation, signal solidarity with other users, or intensify criticism through irony. A short comment can therefore carry a strong political message when it is read together with the policy issue, the post caption, the comment thread, and the wider public debate.

Politeness is another key element. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that communication involves face needs, including the desire to be appreciated, respected, and not imposed upon. However, digital discourse complicates traditional politeness because users may intentionally use impoliteness, mock politeness, ridicule, sarcasm, or direct attack to challenge authority. Culpeper (2011) explains that impoliteness can be used strategically to cause offence, attack face, and express conflict. In policy debates, the target is often not an individual ordinary user, but a symbolic figure of power such as “pemerintah” (the government), “pejabat” (officials), or “yang bikin aturan” (those who make the rules).

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This study also connects pragmatics with power. From a critical discourse perspective, language is not neutral because it can reproduce, challenge, or transform social relations (Fairclough, 1995, 2003). Instagram users may not have formal political authority, but they can use language to question institutional legitimacy, expose inequality, and build collective resistance. A comment section can therefore become a micro-space where public trust, accountability, and symbolic power are negotiated. In this sense, the analysis of Instagram comments is also part of critical digital literacy: readers need to understand not only what a text says, but also what it implies, whose interests it serves, and how it positions citizens and authority.

Recent policy debates in Indonesia provide a strong context for this study. For example, the public discussion of the 12 percent value-added tax (PPN) became a significant digital debate when the government explained that the 12 percent rate would be applied selectively to luxury goods and services, while other goods and services would effectively remain at the 11 percent rate (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2024; Direktorat Jenderal Pajak, 2025). Another case is the "Indonesia Gelap" protests in February 2025, where students protested budget-efficiency policies and other concerns under a phrase that circulated widely across digital platforms (Reuters, 2025; Tempo.co, 2025). These cases are useful because they generated public reactions that were linguistic, emotional, political, and digitally mediated.

Although many studies have examined online public opinion, political communication, misinformation, and sentiment in social media, fewer studies connect micro-level pragmatic meanings with macro-level power construction in Indonesian Instagram comments. Studies of digital discourse sometimes describe what users think, but less often explain how users produce implied criticism through language and how these linguistic choices position citizens in relation to power. This gap is important because public comments are not only spontaneous reactions. They are structured digital practices that show how citizens interpret policies, negotiate trust, and participate in symbolic resistance.

Therefore, this article investigates public reactions to viral policy debates on Instagram through a pragmatic-critical perspective. The term pragmatic-critical is used because the analysis does not stop at identifying implicature and politeness strategies. It also interprets how those strategies construct power relations between citizens, government, public officials, and digital publics. By combining Grice's implicature theory, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Culpeper's impoliteness framework, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and cyberpragmatic insights from internet-mediated communication (Yus, 2011), the article offers an integrated reading of Indonesian digital discourse.

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The novelty of this study lies in three points. First, it connects conversational implicature with Indonesian digital-policy debates, especially in Instagram comments. Second, it examines politeness and impoliteness not as separate categories, but as strategies that can soften, disguise, intensify, or dramatize public criticism. Third, it interprets these pragmatic choices as part of power construction. In other words, the article shows how citizens who lack formal power can still produce symbolic power through humour, sarcasm, collective complaint, and moral evaluation.

Research Questions

1. What types of implicature are found in Indonesian Instagram comments responding to viral policy debates?
2. What politeness and impoliteness strategies are used by Instagram users in expressing their reactions?
3. How do implicature and politeness strategies contribute to the construction of power in Indonesian digital discourse?

METHOD

1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case-study design with a pragmatic-critical discourse analysis approach. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research aims to understand meaning, interpretation, context, and discourse practice rather than simply measure frequency. The case-study design is used because the research focuses on a specific phenomenon: public reactions to viral policy debates on Instagram in Indonesia. The study is pragmatic because it analyses implied meaning, contextual interpretation, politeness, and impoliteness. At the same time, it is critical because it examines how language reflects and constructs power relations.

2. Data Source and Research Object

The research object is Indonesian digital discourse in the form of public Instagram comments. The data source is limited to publicly accessible Instagram posts that discuss viral policy debates in Indonesia during 2024-2026. The study does not use private accounts, closed groups, or direct messages. The analysis focuses on comments related to policy issues, authority, public trust, public burden, resistance, and accountability. Because social media data are ethically sensitive, all comments are anonymized and usernames are replaced by codes.

For the revised article draft, verified contextual data are used to strengthen the background and discussion. These include APJII data on internet penetration, DataReportal data

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on social media and Instagram reach, official government explanations of the 12 percent PPN policy, and public reporting on the "Indonesia Gelap" protest. The comment examples in the findings section are treated as anonymized preliminary data from the research draft and should be cross-checked against screenshot documentation before final journal submission.

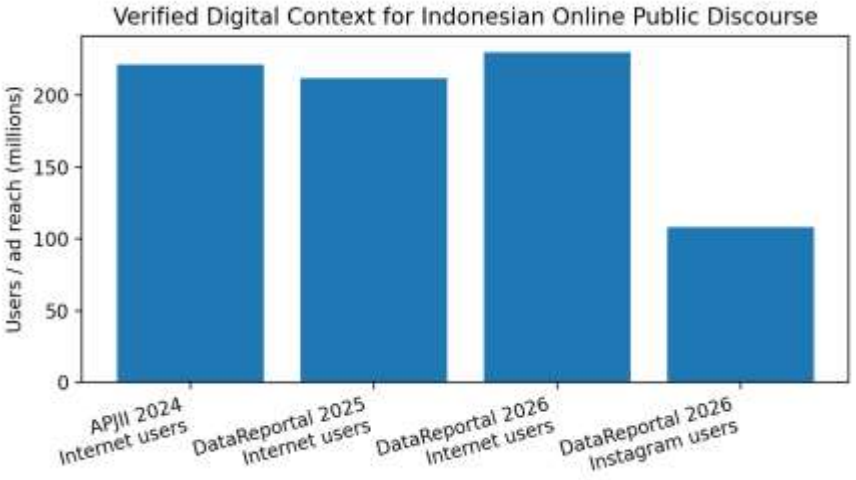


Figure 1. Verified digital context for Indonesian online public discourse

3. Case Selection

Two policy debate areas are recommended as the strongest cases for the final study. The first is the PPN 12 percent debate because it directly concerns economic burden, public welfare, and trust in government explanation. The second is the "Indonesia Gelap" debate because it links student protest, budget policy, social-media hashtags, and public anxiety about national direction. Both cases are suitable for pragmatic-critical analysis because they invite comments that combine humour, anger, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, and moral evaluation.

Case	Verified context	Relevance for pragmatic-critical analysis
PPN 12 percent debate	Government sources clarified that the one-percentage-point increase from 11% to 12% was applied selectively to luxury goods and services; official tax guidance also	Useful for analysing economic burden, distrust, accountability demands, sarcasm, and contrast between official policy

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Case	Verified context	Relevance for pragmatic-critical analysis
	explained the calculation mechanism for luxury and non-luxury goods.	language and citizens' lived experience.
"Indonesia Gelap" protest	Reuters and Tempo reported student protests in February 2025 related to budget-efficiency policies and broader concerns about national direction.	Useful for analysing symbolic resistance, collective anxiety, student-citizen positioning, and the construction of authority as distant from public needs.
Digital child-protection policy debate	Reuters reported Indonesia's plan and later regulation to restrict social-media access for children under 16, connecting digital governance with youth protection.	Useful as an optional extension because it connects digital literacy, platform control, children's rights, and public debate about regulation.

4. Corpus and Sampling

The planned corpus consists of 150-250 public Instagram comments selected from 5-8 public posts. Purposive sampling is used because the study seeks comments that are rich in implicature, politeness, impoliteness, and power construction. The unit of analysis is one comment, although replies may be considered when interactional context is necessary. Emojis, hashtags, repeated punctuation, capitalization, and slang are retained because they can contribute to pragmatic meaning.

The inclusion criteria are: (1) the post discusses a viral policy debate in Indonesia; (2) the post is publicly accessible; (3) the comment is mainly written in Indonesian, including informal Indonesian, slang, regional expressions, or Indonesian-English mixing; (4) the comment contains evaluation, implied meaning, criticism, support, sarcasm, politeness, or impoliteness; and (5) the comment relates to authority, public policy, or power relations. Spam, advertisements, bot-like repetition, unrelated comments, and comments that reveal sensitive personal information are excluded.

5. Data Collection Procedure

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Data collection follows five stages. First, the researcher identifies viral policy debates on Instagram by observing public posts from news media accounts, public discussion accounts, official government-related accounts, and verified public figures. Second, the researcher selects posts that have high engagement and contain active public discussion. Third, public comments are copied manually into a data table together with the date of post, topic, account type, and contextual notes. Fourth, duplicate comments, spam, advertisements, and irrelevant responses are removed. Fifth, all data are anonymized by replacing usernames with codes such as IG-C1, IG-C2, and IG-C3. Screenshots may be stored for research audit, but profile pictures and usernames should not be displayed in the article.

6. Data Analysis

The data are analysed through thematic-pragmatic coding supported by critical discourse interpretation. The first stage identifies implicature by asking whether a comment communicates more than its literal wording. The second stage analyses politeness and impoliteness by identifying whether the comment uses positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, bald-on-record criticism, mock politeness, or impoliteness. The third stage interprets power construction by examining how users position the government, public officials, citizens, and the broader digital public. The fourth stage synthesizes patterns across comments to explain how implicature and politeness strategies work together as forms of public criticism and symbolic resistance.

Analytical focus	Main codes	Operational meaning
Implicature	IMP-SAR; IMP-IRQ; IMP-IND; IMP-CON	Sarcastic implicature, rhetorical question, indirect criticism, and contrastive implicature.
Politeness / impoliteness	POL-POS; POL-NEG; POL-OFF; POL-BOR; POL-MOCK; IMPOL	Solidarity-building, indirectness, hints, direct criticism, mock politeness, and face attack.
Power construction	POW-RES; POW-ACC; POW-SOL; POW-DIS; POW-BUR	Resistance to authority, demand for accountability, public solidarity, institutional distrust, and representation of citizens as burdened subjects.

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7. Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness is maintained through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility is strengthened by reading comments together with the post context and policy issue. Dependability is supported by a clear coding procedure and coding table. Confirmability is supported by analytic memos that explain why each comment is coded as a certain type of implicature, politeness strategy, or power construction. Transferability is supported by thick description of the Indonesian digital context and selected policy cases. To improve inter-coder reliability, a peer coder should check at least 20 percent of the corpus and discuss differences until agreement is reached.

Ethically, the study treats public comments with care. Although the comments are publicly visible, users may not expect their words to be reproduced in academic writing. Therefore, usernames, profile pictures, and direct profile links are removed. Only relevant comment excerpts are displayed. Potentially harmful or highly personal expressions are paraphrased when necessary. The study does not use private messages, closed groups, or comments that identify vulnerable individuals. This ethical position follows the principle that public availability does not automatically remove the researcher's responsibility to protect participants from unnecessary exposure.

RESULTS

This section presents preliminary results based on the anonymized comment examples available in the research draft. The findings are not presented as a final quantitative measurement of Indonesian public opinion. Rather, they show the main pragmatic and critical patterns that can guide the full corpus analysis. Three dominant patterns appear: (1) indirect criticism through implicature; (2) strategic use of politeness and impoliteness; and (3) construction of power through burden, distrust, solidarity, and accountability.

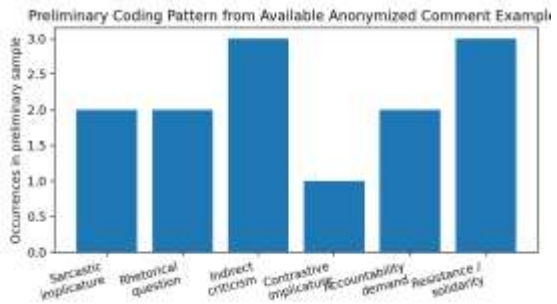


Figure 2. Preliminary coding pattern from available anonymized comment examples

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1. Implicature in Public Criticism

The first finding is that public criticism in Instagram comments is often carried through implicature rather than direct rejection. Users do not always state that a policy is wrong. Instead, they create implied meaning through rhetorical questions, ironic gratitude, contrastive statements, and indirect suggestions. For example, the comment "Ini membantu rakyat atau menambah beban rakyat?" literally asks whether a policy helps or burdens people. Pragmatically, however, it implies doubt toward the official claim that the policy benefits citizens. The question is not a neutral request for information; it is a criticism framed as inquiry.

Sarcastic implicature also appears strongly. A comment such as "Gaji katanya naik, tapi kenapa dompet terasa makin tipis?" uses everyday economic imagery to contrast official optimism with citizens' lived experience. The wallet becomes a symbol of practical reality. The user does not need to state "I reject the policy" because the implied meaning is already clear: the policy is experienced as an additional burden. This shows how digital discourse compresses political criticism into a short, memorable, and emotionally recognisable sentence.

Indirect criticism is also found in comments such as "Yang bikin aturan coba hidup sebulan pakai gaji UMR." The literal meaning is a suggestion that policy makers should live on a minimum wage for one month. The implied meaning is sharper: policy makers are represented as socially distant from ordinary workers. The comment therefore contains not only a complaint, but also an accusation of experiential disconnection between authority and citizens.

2. Politeness, Mock Politeness, and Impoliteness

The second finding is that politeness and impoliteness are used strategically. Some comments use off-record politeness by giving hints rather than direct accusations. Rhetorical questions such as "Kalau untuk rakyat, kenapa rakyat yang paling berat menanggung?" reduce explicit accusation but still communicate strong criticism. The question format allows the user to challenge policy fairness while maintaining a form that looks like public reasoning. This is important in Indonesian digital discourse, where indirectness can function as both politeness and resistance.

Mock politeness is another important pattern. Expressions of gratitude or praise may appear respectful, but the surrounding context makes them sarcastic. A statement such as "Terima kasih, hidup kami makin menantang" uses gratitude as a mask for dissatisfaction. The polite surface form increases the ironic effect because the reader can sense the gap between the positive expression and the negative public experience. In this case, politeness does not soften

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criticism; it makes the criticism sharper.

Impoliteness appears when users directly attack institutional credibility or policy makers' sensitivity. Comments that demand transparency, accuse policy makers of being distant from ordinary people, or ridicule official narratives are face-threatening acts. However, in the context of public-policy debate, impoliteness is not simply rudeness. It can function as a public strategy to challenge authority, mark moral anger, and invite other users to share the same evaluative position.

3. Power Construction in Instagram Comments

The third finding is that implicature and politeness strategies construct power relations in at least four ways. First, comments construct citizens as burdened subjects. Words such as "beban," "sesak," "dompet tipis," and "gaji UMR" represent policy impact through ordinary economic suffering. This language positions citizens not as passive recipients of policy, but as evaluators of whether policy language matches everyday life.

Second, comments construct government and public officials as actors who must be accountable. The comment "Transparansi dulu, baru minta percaya" implies that trust cannot be demanded without openness. This is a clear accountability frame. It reverses the direction of authority: instead of citizens being asked to obey policy narratives, institutions are asked to prove their credibility.

Third, comments construct solidarity among ordinary people. The use of "rakyat," "kita," and references to workers' wages create a shared identity among those who feel affected by policy. This solidarity is important because digital resistance is not built only through direct protest; it is also built through repeated small expressions that make users feel that their dissatisfaction is shared.

Fourth, comments construct symbolic resistance. Sarcasm, rhetorical questions, and mock politeness allow users to challenge authority without writing a formal political essay. In Instagram culture, shortness is not weakness. A short comment can circulate easily, receive likes, trigger replies, and become part of a larger public mood. This is why micro-comments should be treated as meaningful discourse data in critical digital literacy.

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Data code	Anonymized comment	Literal meaning	Implied meaning	Main code
IG-C1	"Gaji katanya naik, tapi kenapa dompet terasa makin tipis?"	The user talks about salary and a thinner wallet.	The policy is experienced as reducing economic security.	IMP-SAR; POW-BUR
IG-C2	"Ini membantu rakyat atau menambah beban rakyat?"	The user asks whether the policy helps or burdens people.	The user doubts that the policy truly benefits citizens.	IMP-IRQ; POW-ACC
IG-C3	"Yang bikin aturan coba hidup sebulan pakai gaji UMR."	Policy makers are asked to live on minimum wage.	Policy makers are seen as distant from ordinary workers.	IMP-IND; POW-DIS
IG-C4	"Katanya untuk kesejahteraan, tapi kok rasanya makin sesak."	The user contrasts welfare discourse with a feeling of pressure.	Official policy language is viewed as different from lived experience.	IMP-CON; POL-OFF
IG-C5	"Transparansi dulu, baru minta percaya."	Transparency should come before trust.	Government credibility depends on accountability.	IMP-IND; POW-ACC
IG-C6	"Kalau untuk rakyat, kenapa rakyat yang paling berat menanggung?"	The user asks why people bear the heaviest burden.	The policy is represented as unfair to ordinary citizens.	IMP-IRQ; POW-RES

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DISCUSSION

The findings show that Indonesian Instagram comments should not be dismissed as shallow, emotional, or merely informal language. From a pragmatic perspective, the comments show complex inferential work. Users often depend on shared context: they assume that other readers know the policy issue, the public debate, the economic pressure, and the reputation of public institutions. Because of this shared context, a short phrase can generate rich meaning. This supports Grice's (1975) view that communication often depends on what is implied rather than what is explicitly stated.

The findings also extend politeness theory into digital public discourse. Brown and Levinson's (1987) categories help explain why users often choose indirectness, questions, hints, and off-record strategies. However, digital comments also show that politeness is not always used to maintain harmony. Sometimes a polite form is used sarcastically to intensify criticism. This supports Culpeper's (2011) argument that impoliteness and mock politeness can be strategic. In the Indonesian context, where indirectness is culturally familiar, sarcasm and rhetorical questions can become powerful tools for expressing disagreement without always using explicit confrontation.

From a critical discourse perspective, the comments reveal a struggle over legitimacy. Government policy is often communicated through official language such as "for the people," "welfare," "efficiency," or "public interest." Users respond by testing those terms against everyday experience. When users write that their wallets feel thinner or that ordinary people carry the burden, they challenge official discourse with experiential discourse. This is what makes the comments politically meaningful. They are not only reactions; they are counter-readings of policy language.

The verified contextual data strengthen this interpretation. Indonesia's large digital population creates a wide public space where policy narratives can be quickly questioned. With more than 221 million internet users reported in 2024 and more than 100 million Instagram users estimated by late 2025, Instagram has become one of the visible spaces where policy is interpreted publicly (APJII, 2024; Kemp, 2025b). The PPN 12 percent debate and the "Indonesia Gelap" protest also show that economic and governance issues easily move into digital discourse. Official policy explanations, public protests, and social-media reactions are therefore interconnected, not separate events.

For the course "Critical Study of Digital Literacy in Language & Literature," the study has clear pedagogical relevance. Digital literacy is not only the ability to use technology or identify

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fake news. It also includes the ability to read implied meaning, recognise sarcasm, evaluate sources, understand context, and identify power relations in digital texts. Instagram comments can be used as authentic teaching materials to help students analyse how language works in contemporary public life. Students can learn that a comment is not only a sentence; it is a social act that may criticise, resist, align, mock, persuade, or build solidarity.

The findings also suggest that language and literature studies should take everyday digital texts seriously. Traditional literary and linguistic analysis often focuses on canonical texts, printed discourse, or formal speech. However, the digital era produces new forms of textuality: captions, comments, memes, hashtags, emojis, and multimodal posts. These forms may look simple, but they contain narrative, voice, irony, metaphor, and social positioning. A pragmatic-critical approach helps reveal this depth.

At the same time, the study must be careful not to romanticise all netizen comments as democratic resistance. Some comments may reproduce hate speech, misinformation, oversimplification, or personal attack. Critical digital literacy requires a balanced position: it recognises that public comments can express legitimate public anxiety, but it also asks whether the comment is evidence-based, ethical, and fair. Therefore, analysing Instagram comments should include both appreciation of citizen voice and critical awareness of platform risks.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Indonesian Instagram comments responding to viral policy debates contain meaningful pragmatic and critical patterns. Users often express public criticism through sarcastic implicature, rhetorical questions, indirect criticism, contrastive statements, mock politeness, and direct accountability demands. These strategies do not only communicate dissatisfaction; they also construct power relations. Citizens are positioned as burdened subjects, moral evaluators, resistant publics, and members of a shared community. Government and public officials are positioned as institutions that must justify policies, prove transparency, and respond to public trust.

The main contribution of the study is its integration of pragmatics, politeness theory, impoliteness, and critical discourse analysis in reading Indonesian digital discourse. The article argues that Instagram comments are not trivial data. They are micro-level digital texts that show how ordinary users negotiate authority, legitimacy, and public experience. For digital literacy education, this means that students need to learn not only how to access information, but also how to interpret implied meaning, detect sarcasm, evaluate policy discourse, and understand the

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power relations embedded in digital communication.

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