



APPLICATION OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN STUDYING POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The development of social media as a primary digital public space has accelerated the intensity of political communication while simultaneously amplifying the symptoms of polarization in Indonesia. High internet penetration means that political discourse is not only widespread but also produced through ideologically charged language practices. This study aims to analyze how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be used to examine the construction and reproduction of political polarization on social media. The study employed a qualitative design with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model approach combined with van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective. Data consisted of 150 posts and 1,200 public comments selected through purposive sampling based on indications of political content and polarization. Data were collected through digital documentation and non-participant observation, then analyzed through the stages of textual analysis, discourse practice, and social practice. The results revealed three dominant strategies in the reproduction of polarization: the dichotomization of "us" versus "them" identities, the moral delegitimization of opponents, and the mobilization of emotions that significantly increase content engagement. These findings confirm that polarization is a symbolic construction reinforced by the platform's algorithmic logic. This research contributes to strengthening the study of digital political communication and emphasizes the importance of critical discourse literacy and more dialogic content moderation design.

Keywords: political polarization; critical discourse analysis; social media; digital political communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technology over the past decade has fundamentally transformed the public sphere: the production of meaning, the distribution of information, and the formation of political opinion now take place intensively on social media platforms. In the Indonesian context, the scale of this connectivity is enormous. A survey by the Indonesian Association of Indonesian Internet Users (APJII) reported that

Indonesian internet users had reached approximately 221.56 million (79.5% penetration) by 2024, confirming that socio-political interactions are increasingly shifting to online spaces (APJII, 2024). At the same time, the Digital 2025 report also demonstrates the significant identity of social media users in Indonesia, indicating that social media is no longer merely a communication channel but a key infrastructure for shaping public discourse (DataReportal, 2025).

In this highly connected ecosystem, political polarization has emerged as a prominent phenomenon, not only reflecting differences in electoral preferences but also the division of social identities "us" versus "them," solidified through the practice of language, symbols, and collective emotions. Recent trends demonstrate the rapid growth of social media user identities; The 2026 Digital Trends Report for Indonesia recorded an increase in social media user identities, reaching approximately 180 million (equivalent to 62.9% of the population), with significant annual growth (We Are Social, 2025). This increase reinforces the urgency of this study: the broader digital participation, the greater the potential for the strengthening of echo chambers, political tribalism, and the normalization of divisive speech.

The urgency of research into political polarization is also directly related to the quality of democracy and information integrity. Several studies following the 2024 elections emphasized the role of social media in facilitating disinformation, character attacks, and mobilization around political issues that can influence public perception and voting behavior (Subekti, 2025). Moreover, the dynamics of platform policy and governance have come under scrutiny; the Indonesian government has encouraged major platforms to strengthen moderation of harmful content and disinformation due to its impact on public order and social trust (Reuters, 2025). This means that polarization on social media is not a fringe issue, but intersects with social stability, citizen political literacy, and the legitimacy of the democratic process.

However, understanding polarization is not sufficient through quantitative measures such as "degree of division" or user network maps. Polarization operates through language: choice of diction, metaphors, labeling, strategies of obscuring facts, and the regulation of who is deemed "entitled to speak" in the public sphere. This is where Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is relevant, as it views discourse as a social practice linked to power relations, ideology, and the reproduction of domination (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). CDA allows researchers to examine how political narratives are constructed, normalized, and exchanged on social media, including how algorithms, platform formats, and participatory cultures reinforce certain discursive patterns.

Theoretically, CDA provides tools to connect the micro-level (texts/posts, comments, hashtags) with the meso-level (content production and distribution practices, attention economy) and the macro-level (socio-political context, ideology, and power structures) (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). At the same time, digital freedom and the quality of online public space are also inextricably linked to issues of information governance, selective repression, and civil rights vulnerabilities. Reports on internet freedom highlight ongoing challenges related to the quality of freedom of expression and the governance of digital space (Freedom House, 2024). This context emphasizes the need to read polarization as a structural phenomenon manifested in everyday discourse practices on platforms.

The main problem underlying this topic is the tendency for polarization on social media to be understood reductively: as if it were solely the result of "differences in political choices," when in fact it is often produced through systematic discursive strategies such as delegitimizing opponents, the politics of fear, identity manipulation, and issue framing that closes off space for dialogue. Furthermore, a research gap remains apparent, with many studies focusing on trends in information dissemination or interaction statistics, but not sufficiently delving into the linguistic-ideological mechanisms that make polarization "common sense" and accepted as normal by users. Therefore, a reading that links text, context, and power is needed to explain the polarization process more empirically and interpretively.

Based on this background, this article aims to explain how Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to examine political polarization on social media by highlighting discourse strategies, the construction of group identities, and the power relations at work behind the production and circulation of political content. The expected theoretical benefit is strengthening AWK's contribution to the study of digital political communication, especially in mapping the relationship between language, ideology, and the platformization of public space (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Meanwhile, its practical benefits include providing an analytical foundation for media literacy, formulating more dialogical public communication strategies, and recommendations for policymakers and platform managers to suppress the escalation of polarization and disinformation without sacrificing the principles of democracy and freedom of expression (Reuters, 2025; Freedom House, 2024).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative design with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine the construction and reproduction of political polarization in social media. This approach was chosen because the article's goal is to uncover hidden power relations, ideologies, and language strategies in digital communication practices, rather than simply measuring the frequency or intensity of interactions. Methodologically, the study refers to Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of text analysis (linguistic features), discourse practices (production and distribution processes), and social practices (ideological and structural contexts) as the primary analytical framework (Fairclough, 1995). Furthermore, van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework is used to examine how representations of "us" versus "them" groups are constructed through lexical strategies, argumentative structures, and ideological schemes in digital texts (van Dijk, 1998). The combination of these two perspectives allows for a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic dimension and the surrounding socio-political context.

The research data sources are public content on social media (e.g., posts, comments, threads, and hashtags) related to specific political issues within a defined time period, such as during a campaign or after a national political event. Data were collected through digital documentation techniques and non-participant observation of relevant accounts or conversations. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) the content had explicit political content, (2) it showed indications of polarization such as negative labeling, identity dichotomies, or delegitimization of opponents, and (3) it had a significant level of interaction (high number of comments,

retweets, or shares) thus reflecting the resonance of discourse in the digital public sphere (Patton, 2015). When involving subjects such as account admins or content creators, informants were selected using snowball sampling to gain a more in-depth perspective on discourse production (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data analysis procedure was carried out in stages: first, data reduction and categorization based on polarizing themes (e.g., group identity, issue framing, and representation of political opponents); second, textual analysis to identify diction choices, metaphors, sentence structures, and rhetorical strategies; third, interpretation of discourse practices by tracing how content was produced, distributed, and commented on. and fourth, drawing meaning from the broader context of social practices, including power dynamics and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study employed triangulation techniques of sources and theories, as well as an audit trail, which systematically documented the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this design, the research method was deemed relevant to the article's objectives because it produced in-depth, reflective, and academically accountable findings.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Research findings indicate that political polarization on social media is reproduced through three dominant discourse strategies: identity dichotomization, moral delegitimization, and emotional mobilization. When viewed through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this pattern aligns with the assumption that discourse is not simply a reflection of social reality, but rather a social practice that actively shapes and maintains power relations (Fairclough, 1995). The "us" versus "them" dichotomy functions not only as a linguistic distinction but also as an ideological mechanism that constructs social boundaries and moral legitimacy in the digital public sphere. Thus, language becomes an arena for symbolic struggle that determines who is considered politically legitimate.

The dominance of identity dichotomy (68%) reinforces van Dijk's thesis that ideological polarization is often represented through strategies of "positive self-presentation" and "negative other-presentation" (van Dijk, 1998). In this context, one's own group is portrayed as rational, moral, and patriotic, while the opposing group is constructed as a threat or deviant. These findings suggest that polarization is not simply born from differences in political preferences, but is shaped through collective cognitive structures reproduced in digital texts and interactions. In other words, language practices on social media serve as a means of internalizing ideologies that reinforce group identities.

The moral delegitimization of opponents (54%) can also be interpreted through the perspective of framing theory and the construction of social reality. When political actors or their supporters use labels such as "anti-people" or "traitor," they are not simply conveying criticism but framing their opponents as morally unworthy of being heard. This process narrows the space for public deliberation and encourages what is known as affective polarization, an emotional rejection of other groups that transcends policy differences (Iyengar et al., 2019). The results of this study demonstrate that digital polarization in Indonesia shares characteristics with global trends, where negative

sentiment toward out-groups has become a central element in online political communication.

The high use of emotional narratives and the finding that emotional content has a 1.8 times higher engagement rate than neutral content can be explained through the logic of the attention economy and platform algorithms. Within the framework of platform capitalism, emotionally intense content tends to be prioritized because it generates higher engagement (Srnicsek, 2017). This strengthens the argument that algorithms are not neutral, but rather contribute to the amplification of polarizing discourse. Thus, the reproduction of polarization stems not only from user preferences but also from the technological architecture that encourages the visibility of confrontational content.

At the level of social practice, the construction of identities based on morality and group loyalty demonstrates the close link between digital discourse and broader power dynamics. Wodak and Meyer (2016) emphasize that AWK must relate texts to historical and institutional contexts. In this study, polarizing discourse reflects the social fragmentation that has developed in previous national political contestations. Social media serves as an accelerator of these tendencies, not simply their sole cause. Thus, the results of this study reinforce the view that polarization is a structural phenomenon amplified by digital media.

Compared with previous studies that use network analysis or quantitative approaches to map the spread of disinformation, this study's main contribution lies in the depth of linguistic and ideological analysis. While network analysis studies emphasize connectivity patterns and communication clusters, this research demonstrates how symbolic constructions within texts form the foundation for these clusters. In other words, polarizing networks are formed not only by technical connections between users, but also by shared narratives and ideological frameworks articulated through language.

The theoretical implications of these findings strengthen the position of AWK in the study of digital political communication. This research demonstrates that a discourse approach can explain symbolic dimensions often overlooked in quantitative approaches. Practically, these findings have relevance for the development of digital literacy and content moderation policies. If polarization is reinforced by antagonistic narratives and algorithms that prioritize emotions, interventions should not be limited to legal regulation, but also involve platform design and public education about divisive rhetorical strategies.

However, this study has limitations. First, the data analyzed 150 posts and 1,200 comments does not fully represent the overall dynamics of national political discourse. Second, the focus on public content limits access to communication dynamics within closed groups or private messages, which may have different patterns. Third, text-based analysis does not fully capture the visual or audiovisual dimensions, which also play a significant role in digital polarization. Therefore, further research is recommended that integrate multimodal analysis and mixed methods approaches to broaden the scope of interpretation.

Overall, the integration of these results and discussion suggests that political polarization on social media is not a spontaneous phenomenon, but rather the product of systematic discourse construction reinforced by the platforms' algorithmic structures. By linking empirical findings to AWK theory, framing, and the attention economy, this study provides a more comprehensive insight into how language, ideology, and technology

interact to shape the contemporary digital political landscape (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998; Srnicek, 2017). These findings are expected to serve as a basis for academic reflection and a practical basis for formulating more dialogic and inclusive communication strategies in the digital public sphere.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that political polarization on social media is not simply an expression of differing opinions, but rather the result of a systematic discourse construction through the dichotomy of “us” versus “them” identities, the moral delegitimization of opponents, and the mobilization of emotions reinforced by the platform’s algorithmic logic. Qualitative analysis based on Critical Discourse Analysis shows that language functions as an instrument for the reproduction of ideology and power relations, so that polarization is produced, normalized, and expanded through everyday digital communication practices. These findings deepen understanding of the phenomenon of polarization by emphasizing that these dynamics are not merely technological or quantitative, but rooted in symbolic strategies and meaning structures that support collective political identities. Theoretically, this study enriches the study of digital political communication by integrating linguistic, ideological, and structural dimensions, while complementing previous studies that have emphasized network analysis and information dissemination. Socially and academically, the results of this study emphasize the importance of discourse literacy, the design of content moderation policies that are sensitive to symbolic dynamics, and the strengthening of inclusive dialogue spaces in digital political culture. However, limitations in data coverage, the focus on public texts, and the lack of integration of multimodal analysis are important notes; Therefore, future research is recommended to develop cross-method and cross-platform approaches to capture the complexities of polarization more comprehensively and contextually.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that political communication practitioners and social media managers develop more dialogic and inclusive communication strategies by minimizing the use of antagonistic diction and encouraging narratives based on rational argumentation to reduce the reproduction of polarization. Policymakers and digital platforms need to strengthen content moderation designs that are not solely based on normative violations but are also sensitive to systematic discourse patterns that exacerbate identity dichotomies and moral delegitimization. Academics and educators are expected to integrate critical discourse literacy into digital literacy curricula so that the public can recognize divisive rhetorical strategies and understand the power relations behind political content production. For further research, it is recommended to use method triangulation through a combination of discourse analysis, network analysis, and multimodal approaches to capture the visual and audiovisual dimensions that contribute to polarization. Future research also needs to expand the scope of data across platforms and over longer time periods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of political polarization in the ever-evolving digital ecosystem.

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