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Research Article

Digital Public Criticism, Collective Emotions, and Social Trust: Instagram Memes on the 2025 Sumatra Disasters

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Abstract

Social media has become a digital public sphere where citizens express criticism and evaluate government responses to disaster situations. However, existing studies on memes, disaster communication, and collective emotions tend to examine these aspects separately, leaving limited explanation of how memes articulate collective emotional expressions and relate to social trust in disaster communication. This study analyzes how Instagram memes represent digital public criticism, articulate collective emotions, and construct discursive associations with institutional legitimacy and social trust in the management of the 2025 Sumatra disasters. Using a qualitative approach, the study applies Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis at the textual (micro), discourse-practice (meso), and sociocultural-practice (macro) levels. The corpus consists of 10 Instagram memes purposively selected based on explicit engagement thresholds and contextual relevance to the 2025 Sumatra disasters. The data were analyzed using NVivo 15 through qualitative thematic coding. The findings identify four recurring themes: government response, aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, and disaster governance. Criticism is constructed through satire, irony, metaphor, and visual representations, while its circulation on Instagram provides a context for audience interaction and the articulation of critical discourse. Recurring affective patterns include anger, disappointment, empathy, and cynicism, which are discursively associated with evaluations of institutional legitimacy and perceptions of social trust. The study contributes an interpretive conceptual model linking Instagram memes, digital public criticism, collective emotional expressions, institutional legitimacy, and social trust, positioning memes as arenas for negotiating public meanings and evaluating institutional responses in disaster communication.

Keywords: Collective Emotions; Social Trust; Disaster Communication; Digital Public Criticism; Instagram Memes.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technological transformation has fundamentally changed the ways in which society constructs, distributes, and discusses information in the public sphere. The development of social media has enabled citizens to participate not only as information consumers but also as producers and distributors of public discourse. From the perspective of the public sphere, social media provides a communication arena in which people can express opinions, monitor government policies, exchange interpretations of public issues, and participate in the negotiation of public meanings through relatively open and participatory communication processes (Alam, 2021; Damayanti et al., 2023; Sari & Basit, 2020). This development indicates that the digital public sphere has become an important context for contemporary communication, particularly when society responds to issues concerning the public interest.

The Digital 2025 Global Overview Report published by We Are Social and Meltwater reports that social media use has reached a significant global scale, with 5.24 billion active social media user identities worldwide, equivalent to 63.9% of the global population. This figure increased by 4.1%, or approximately 206 million user identities, compared with the previous year, while internet users spent an average of 2 hours and 21 minutes per day on social media. The report also indicates that finding information remains one of the primary motivations for internet use, with 62.8% of adult internet users identifying it as a key reason for going online. In this context, social media functions not merely as a platform for interpersonal interaction but also as a space for accessing information, following current issues, and participating in public discourse. Instagram is particularly relevant to this development, with an advertising reach of 1.74 billion users globally in January 2025. These developments illustrate how social media can provide a digital environment in which users express criticism, exchange interpretations, and negotiate meanings concerning government policies and events affecting the public interest.

In the context of disaster communication, social media plays an important role because disaster-related information is no longer communicated exclusively through government institutions or mainstream media. Information, experiences, interpretations, and responses can be produced, exchanged, and discussed by users through various forms of digital content. During crises, the digital public sphere provides opportunities for citizens to share experiences, evaluate government responses, and articulate alternative interpretations of disaster management. This condition is relevant to Habermas's conception of the public sphere as a communicative arena in which citizens participate in discussions concerning matters of common concern, although digital communication introduces distinctive characteristics related to speed, visibility, participation, and platform-mediated interaction.

One form of citizen participation that has developed extensively on social media is digital public criticism. Criticism is no longer expressed exclusively through formal institutional mechanisms but can also be articulated through digital content that is relatively easy to produce, circulate, and reinterpret. Among these forms, memes have become a distinctive communication format because they combine images, text, humor, satire, and cultural symbols to communicate evaluations of social and political issues (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Highfield, 2016). Memes therefore function not only as entertainment but also as digital cultural artifacts through which experiences, interpretations, criticism, and social meanings can be represented and circulated (Purwaningrum, 2020; Darlius et al., 2024).

This phenomenon can be observed in the digital discourse surrounding the hydrometeorological disasters that affected several parts of Sumatra in late November and December 2025. The disaster primarily affected Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra, involving floods, flash floods, and landslides following periods of intense rainfall on 24–26 November 2025, with the peak occurring on 25–26 November. The scale of the disaster rapidly escalated, with BNPB reporting 604 deaths and 464 missing persons across the three provinces as of 1 December 2025. In Aceh, 479,300 people were reported displaced, while several major roads and transportation links were disrupted, complicating emergency response and aid distribution. The emergency response subsequently involved evacuation, search and rescue operations, logistical distribution, restoration of transportation access, and infrastructure recovery. BNPB also reported damage to roads and bridges in West Sumatra that affected emergency response and aid distribution, including damage recorded at 321 points on district and municipal roads, 172 points on provincial roads, and 62 points on national roads (BNPB, 2025). These conditions generated public discussion concerning the adequacy, speed, and distribution of disaster assistance and the broader management of the crisis.

Against this backdrop, memes circulating on Instagram became part of the broader digital discourse surrounding the disaster. The selected memes addressed issues including aid distribution, damaged infrastructure, government responsiveness, and disaster governance. Through combinations of visual elements, textual statements, irony, satire, humor, and cultural references, these memes constructed particular interpretations of governmental responsibility and the experiences of disaster-affected communities. The circulation of such content through likes, comments, and reposts also provided contexts in which users could encounter, respond to, and reinterpret critical representations. In this study, however, these interactions are examined as characteristics of the selected digital discourse rather than as direct evidence of changes in public opinion or social trust.

Studies of memes, disaster communication, and collective emotions have developed considerably in recent years, but important conceptual and empirical gaps remain. Research on memes has examined visual representation, political satire, participatory culture, and digital communication, including the use of memes on Instagram as a form of social criticism (Milner, 2016; Darlius et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2025). For example, Rahma et al. (2022) applied Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to examine ten Instagram memes containing criticism during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how meme texts can represent and contest social conditions. However, this line of research has primarily focused on the construction of critical discourse and has not specifically examined how meme-based criticism operates within disaster communication or how emotional expressions embedded in such discourse are associated with evaluations of institutional legitimacy and social trust.

Research on disaster communication, meanwhile, has largely focused on crisis information dissemination, government communication, disaster mitigation, and the effectiveness of institutional communication through social media (Aziz, 2024; Ismail & Suldani, 2024; Khatami & Nurjanah, 2022). These studies provide important insights into how authorities communicate during crises, but social media can also be examined as a space where citizens construct criticism, negotiate interpretations of responsibility, and evaluate institutional responses. Similarly, research on collective emotions has demonstrated that social media can become an arena for the expression and circulation of emotions during crises (Papacharissi, 2016; Kramer et al., 2014). Studies of digital traces following collective trauma, for instance, indicate that emotional responses expressed

through social media can be associated with solidarity and social resilience. Nevertheless, relatively limited attention has been given to memes as a multimodal form through which emotional expressions are articulated alongside evaluations of institutional performance and social trust.

The research gap therefore lies not simply in the separate study of memes, Instagram, disaster communication, or collective emotions, but in the limited integration of these dimensions within a single analytical framework. Existing research has insufficiently explained how memes can simultaneously function as multimodal practices of digital public criticism, spaces for articulating and circulating emotional expressions, and symbolic resources through which citizens negotiate meanings concerning institutional legitimacy and social trust during disaster situations. In particular, the discursive relationship between meme-based criticism, collective emotional expressions, institutional evaluation, and perceptions of social trust in disaster management remains underexplored. Although Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to Instagram-based critical memes, its application to the 2025 Sumatra disaster has not yet been connected to an analysis of collective emotional expressions and social trust within disaster communication.

This study addresses this gap by examining Instagram memes related to the 2025 Sumatra disasters through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The study focuses on how textual and visual elements construct digital public criticism concerning disaster governance, how emotional expressions are articulated through these multimodal representations and selected audience comments, and how such discourse is associated with evaluations of institutional legitimacy and perceptions of social trust. By bringing together meme studies, disaster communication, collective emotional expressions, institutional legitimacy, and social trust, the study proposes an integrated perspective for understanding digital public criticism during disaster situations.

This integrated perspective is grounded in the concept of the digital public sphere, which positions social media as a space for citizen communication, public participation, and the circulation of interpretations concerning social and political issues (Castells, 2015; Highfield, 2016; Milner, 2016; Papacharissi, 2016). Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis is used as the primary analytical framework to examine how visual and linguistic representations are produced, circulated, and interpreted within broader social contexts (Fairclough, 2003; Ismail et al., 2023). The study also draws on perspectives concerning collective emotions and social trust to interpret how emotional expressions and institutional evaluations are articulated within digital communication practices (Kramer et al., 2014; Coleman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2016). These perspectives are used interpretively rather than as instruments for statistically measuring emotional intensity, public opinion, or actual levels of social trust.

To organize the analytical perspective of the study, Figure 1 presents an interpretive framework linking Instagram memes, digital public criticism, collective emotional expressions, evaluations of institutional legitimacy, and perceptions of social trust. The framework does not represent a statistically validated causal model. Instead, it maps the discursive relationships examined in the study, beginning with the visual and linguistic representations contained in memes, continuing through the articulation and circulation of digital public criticism and emotional expressions, and extending to the ways institutional legitimacy and social trust are represented and evaluated within the selected discourse. The four thematic domains examined in the study are government response, aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, and disaster governance.

Within this framework, collective emotional expressions are identified through textual, visual, and symbolic indicators appearing in the selected memes and audience comments. Anger is

represented through negative evaluative diction, condemnation, or expressions of dissatisfaction with perceived shortcomings in disaster management. Disappointment is represented through expressions of unmet expectations, frustration, or dissatisfaction with conditions associated with disaster response and recovery. Empathy is represented through supportive expressions toward affected communities and calls for horizontal solidarity. Cynicism is represented through satire, irony, dark humor, and skeptical references to institutional responses. These expressions are interpreted as discursive and affective patterns within the selected corpus rather than as psychological measurements of the broader population.

Institutional legitimacy is examined through recurring evaluations concerning accountability, responsiveness, and government capacity. Accountability concerns representations of responsibility, transparency, and resource management; responsiveness concerns representations of the speed and adequacy of institutional responses; and government capacity concerns representations of the ability to respond to disaster conditions and support recovery. Social trust is approached as a perception and discursive theme rather than as an objectively measured outcome. Accordingly, the study examines how perceptions of institutional legitimacy and social trust are articulated in relation to digital public criticism and emotional expressions, without claiming that the selected memes directly caused changes in trust.

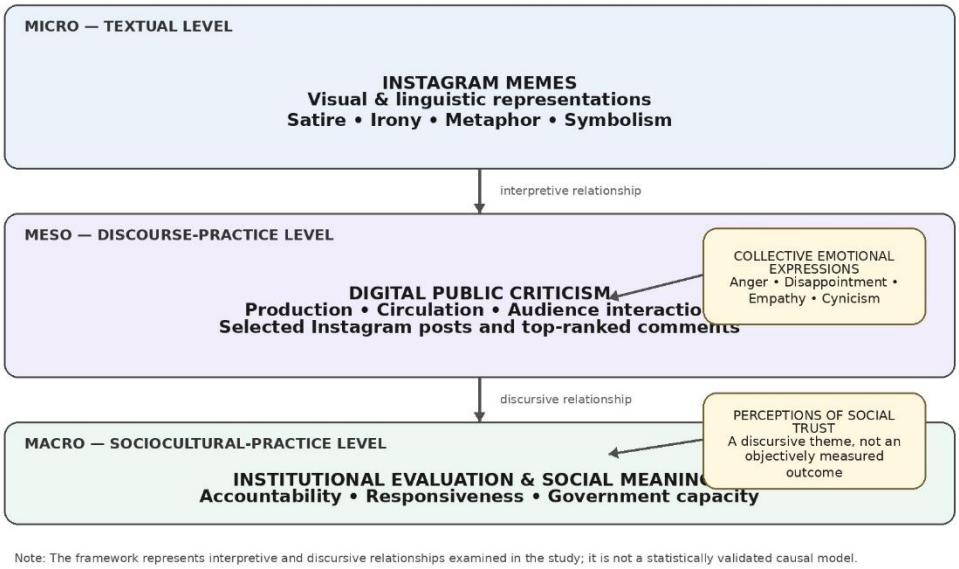


Figure 1. Interpretive analytical framework linking Instagram memes, digital public criticism, collective emotional expressions, institutional legitimacy, and perceptions of social trust.

Based on this framework, the study aims to analyze the representation of digital public criticism in Instagram memes concerning the management of the 2025 Sumatra disasters, examine how collective emotional expressions are constructed through digital discourse practices, and interpret how these expressions are discursively associated with evaluations of institutional legitimacy and perceptions of social trust. The main contribution of this study lies in integrating digital public criticism, collective emotional expressions, institutional legitimacy, and social trust within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Rather than claiming a causal mechanism through which memes produce changes in public trust, the study offers an interpretive account of how these dimensions are interconnected within the selected Instagram discourse.

METHODS

Research Approach and Analytical Framework

This study employs a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm to understand how digital public criticism is constructed through Instagram memes in the context of the management of the 2025 Sumatra disasters. This approach was selected because the study focuses on processes of meaning-making, representation, and discursive practices that develop in the digital public sphere (Fuchs, 2014; Highfield, 2016; Papacharissi, 2016). The constructivist paradigm views social reality as being formed through interactions, experiences, and interpretive processes that take place within social environments, including communication practices on social media (Fuchs, 2014; Papacharissi, 2016).

The research method used is Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach enables analysis of the relationship among text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice in the construction of meaning (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough views discourse as a social practice that not only represents reality but is also related to the formation of power relations, ideology, and legitimacy in society (Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, the analysis was conducted through three dimensions: the textual (micro), discourse practice (meso), and sociocultural practice (macro) dimensions (Fairclough, 2003).

Data Selection and Sampling Criteria

The research object consists of Instagram memes containing criticism of the management of the 2025 Sumatra disasters. The research data comprise ten memes published between 28 November and 23 December 2025. The data were selected using purposive criterion sampling based on four operational criteria.

First, the platform and temporal boundary required the memes to be publicly published on Instagram during the active disaster and immediate recovery phase from 28 November to 23 December 2025. Second, contextual relevance required the visual elements, captions, or embedded text to explicitly address the 2025 Sumatra floods or landslides, affected regions, or government responses related to the disasters.

Third, an engagement threshold for public interaction was applied to identify posts with relatively high levels of public interaction. Selected posts were required to meet at least one of the following thresholds: a minimum of 5,000 likes, 100 comments, or 500 reposts/shares. This criterion was used to identify posts with relatively high public visibility and interaction for the purposes of qualitative discourse analysis.

Fourth, thematic diversity and account selection were considered to ensure variation across four areas of digital public criticism: government response, aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, and disaster governance. The final corpus consisted of posts from five distinct Instagram accounts: @memecomic.id, @politicalmemes.id, @bemkmunand, @satya.bumi, and @kokbisa.

The sampling strategy was criterion-driven rather than based on predetermined account quotas. Although the final corpus includes five distinct Instagram accounts, six of the ten selected memes originated from @memecomic.id. This concentration occurred because several posts from the account met the predefined criteria simultaneously, including relevance to the 2025 Sumatra disasters, the presence of satirical or critical discourse, relatively high engagement, and alignment with the research focus. Other accounts were included when their posts met the same criteria.

Because the engagement threshold was used to identify posts with relatively high public visibility and interaction, the sampling strategy may privilege memes that had already achieved greater

visibility or resonance on Instagram. The resulting corpus therefore does not represent the wider universe of Instagram discourse concerning the 2025 Sumatra disasters. Low-engagement, supportive, neutral, or pro-government content may be underrepresented or absent from the corpus. Accordingly, the study treats the ten selected memes as a focused corpus of highly visible critical discourse rather than as a representative sample of all disaster-related communication on Instagram.

Comment Corpus and Comment Sampling

Audience responses were examined through the comments associated with the ten selected Instagram memes. Because the selected posts contained varying numbers of visible comments, the study did not analyze the complete comment sections. Instead, the researchers analyzed the ten top-ranked comments displayed by Instagram for each selected meme, resulting in a total corpus of 100 comments.

The selection followed Instagram's displayed ranking at the time of data collection. Comments were not selected by the researchers according to positive, negative, supportive, or critical sentiment. The top-ranked comments were therefore treated as the most visible audience responses presented by the platform at the time of data collection.

The stopping rule for the comment corpus was determined a priori: ten top-ranked comments were analyzed for each of the ten selected memes. The 100-comment corpus was examined for recurring patterns of audience response, including emotional expressions, evaluations of government response, perceptions of accountability and responsiveness, and references to institutional trust.

The study does not claim saturation across the complete Instagram comment sections. Rather, the fixed corpus was used to identify recurring patterns within the selected top-ranked audience responses. The total number of visible comments associated with each post is distinguished from the number of comments included in the qualitative analysis.

Units of Analysis

The primary units of analysis are the visual and linguistic elements contained in each selected meme. Visual elements include illustrations, photographs, character expressions, layout, composition, and other visual representations. Linguistic elements include captions, dialogue, slogans, satire, irony, metaphor, and evaluative diction. Symbols are examined as visual and cultural signs that contribute to the construction of meanings related to disaster management. Narratives are analyzed through the relationships among visual and linguistic elements and the broader social context in which the memes were produced and circulated.

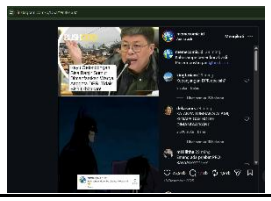
Audience comments constitute a separate textual corpus used to examine audience responses to the selected memes. These comments were analyzed in relation to expressions of agreement or disagreement, emotional responses, evaluations of government responsibility and responsiveness, and references to institutional legitimacy and trust.

Research Corpus and Data Collection

Table 1. Research Corpus

No.	Account	Upload Date	URL Link	Criticism Classification	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of Reposts
1.	@memecomic.id	23 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSmLeSMkh4G/ 	Criticism of disaster-management policy (Responsibility Deflection / Scapegoating)	69.500	410	3.700

2.	@politicalmemes.id	2 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DRwkLXcgdTq/?img_index=1 	Criticism of aid distribution (Satire of Officials' Performance vs. Citizen Solidarity)	72.900	516	4.500
3.	@bemkmunand	28 Nov 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DRlt2oHk7kV/?img_index=2 	Criticism of disaster-status determination (Delay and Rejection by the Central Government)	42.000	1.500	7.000
4.	@satya.bumi	13 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSMCwZxCdMH/ 	Criticism of aid distribution (State Absence & Strengthening Civil Solidarity)	6.100	46	1.000
5.	@kokbisa	11 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSHqOUvE9md/?img_index=2 	Criticism of aid distribution (Logistical Failure and Hunger)	25.300	132	2.900
6.	@memecomic.id	11 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSHwW_JEtpQ/ 	Criticism of Infrastructure Improvement and Recovery (Distrust in Budget Governance)	26.500	674	731
7.	@memecomic.id	16 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSUfPdIEqtg/ 	Criticism of Infrastructure Improvement and Recovery (Slow Restoration of Vital Facilities & Fact Gaps)	20.000	247	585
8.	@memecomic.id	19 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/p/DSbZGzlkvK6/ 	Criticism of Aid Distribution (Inadequacy of Aid Amounts & Class Inequality)	9.300	151	509
9.	@memecomic.id	18 Dec 2025	https://www.instagram.com/memecomic.id/reel/DSY7LYoEpUG/	Criticism of Infrastructure Improvement (Performative	32.900	966	1.400

				**Visits vs. Field Reality)**			
10.	**@memecomic.id**	**18 Dec 2025**	**https://www.instagram.com/p/DSZY9nBksuB/** 	**Criticism of Post-Disaster Recovery (Criminalization of Citizen Initiatives vs. Antagonistic Elite Attitudes)**	**25.900**	**1.100**	**1.900**

Source: Research corpus, 2026.

Based on Table 1, the research corpus consists of ten Instagram memes published between 28 November and 23 December 2025. The corpus represents variations in digital public criticism concerning disaster management, covering four main thematic areas: government response, aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, and disaster governance. The variation in themes and levels of post engagement provides a focused corpus for examining how criticism, emotional expressions, and evaluations of institutional legitimacy are represented and discussed within the selected Instagram discourse.

Data collection was conducted through digital documentation of Instagram posts that met the predetermined research criteria. Each selected meme was documented along with supporting information, including the posting account, publication date, visible engagement levels (likes, comments, and reposts/shares), the relevant disaster context, and the narrative accompanying the post. The documented materials were compiled into the research corpus and subsequently used for qualitative coding and discourse analysis.

Analytical Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 15 to organize the qualitative data through open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding was used to identify recurring visual, linguistic, emotional, and discursive elements in the memes and selected audience comments. Axial coding was then used to group related codes and identify relationships among emerging concepts. Selective coding was subsequently used to integrate the recurring codes into four main thematic categories: (1) Government Response, (2) Aid Distribution, (3) Infrastructure Recovery, and (4) Disaster Governance.

The coding procedure was used as a systematic means of organizing the empirical material, while Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis served as the primary analytical framework for interpretation. The coded material was examined through Fairclough's three analytical dimensions: text at the micro level, discourse practice at the meso level, and sociocultural practice at the macro level (Fairclough, 2003).

At the micro level, the analysis focused on visual and linguistic representations in the memes, including the use of satire, irony, metaphor, symbols, and evaluative language. Barthesian semiotics was used as a complementary interpretive perspective to examine denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings in selected visual elements. At the meso level, the analysis considered the production, circulation, and audience interaction surrounding the memes on Instagram. At the macro level, the analysis examined how the discourse reflected broader issues of government

responsibility, institutional legitimacy, collective emotional expressions, and social trust in the context of disaster communication.

The analysis was conducted by the researcher through iterative examination of the corpus. Codes were refined during the analytical process when recurring patterns and relationships became apparent in the data. The resulting thematic structure was then interpreted in relation to the research objectives and the Critical Discourse Analysis framework.

Table 2. Sample Codebook for Critical Discourse Analysis of Instagram Memes

Theme / Node	Sub-Themes / Axial Codes	Unit of Analysis (Exemplar Text / Visual)	Analytical Focus
Government Response	Responsibility Deflection / Scapegoating	**Visual:** SpongeBob holding a walkie-talkie next to a "WANTED" poster. **Text:** "Semua elemen pemerintah sibuk mencari kambing hitam..."	Examines how responsibility for disaster management is represented, including attribution of blame and the positioning of government actors.
Aid Distribution	Logistical Failure / Inequality	**Visual:** Anime character comparing coins with stacks of cash. **Text:** "Buat gaji pejabat vs buat korban bencana (Rp 10 ribu/hari)"	Examines representations of unequal resource allocation, adequacy of assistance, and perceived disparities between institutional and public needs.
Infrastructure Recovery	Slow Restoration / Performative Visits	**Visual:** Mr. Krabs under "Mati Lampu Hari Ke-21." **Text:** "Kunjungan presiden cuma seminggu sekali, internet tiba-tiba cepat."	Examines representations of delayed recovery, infrastructure conditions, and perceived differences between official visits and conditions experienced by affected communities.
Disaster Governance	Centralization / Criminalization	**Visual:** News headline referring to an official warning concerning citizen initiatives. **Text:** "Penolakan status bencana nasional & kriminalisasi inisiatif warga."	Examines representations of institutional decision-making, citizen participation, administrative authority, and tensions between government institutions and civil society.

Source: Research analysis, 2026.

The coded themes were subsequently interpreted using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework through three analytical dimensions: text (micro), discourse practice (meso), and sociocultural practice (macro) (Fairclough, 2003). At the micro level, the analysis focused on visual and linguistic representations in the memes, including satire, irony, metaphor, symbols, and evaluative language. The micro-level analysis was further complemented by Roland Barthes's visual semiotic perspective to examine the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings of selected visual elements in the memes (Rahmawati et al., 2024; Sari & Ganiem, 2021).

At the meso level, the analysis considered the production, circulation, and audience interaction surrounding the memes on Instagram as part of digital communication and public participation practices (Highfield, 2016; Shifman, 2014). At the macro level, the analysis examined the

relationships between meme discourse, recurring emotional expressions, power relations, institutional legitimacy, and perceptions of social trust in the context of disaster communication (Fairclough, 2003; Papacharissi, 2016; Coleman, 2012). The disaster communication perspective was used to contextualize Instagram as a digital space for the circulation of information, public responses, and discourse concerning disaster management (Aziz, 2024; Iqbal et al., 2021; Ismail & Suldani, 2024).

The interpretation also drew on perspectives concerning the digital public sphere, disaster communication, collective emotions, and social trust to contextualize the findings (Castells, 2015; Aziz, 2024; Papacharissi, 2016; Coleman, 2012). These perspectives enabled the analysis to consider not only the textual and visual features of the memes, but also the social context, digital communication practices, emotional expressions, and audience evaluations of institutional responsibility and legitimacy.

The interpretation was conducted iteratively by examining the NVivo coding results in relation to the characteristics of each selected meme, the associated audience comments, and the theoretical perspectives used in the study. This process enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and interpret how digital public criticism, emotional expressions, and evaluations of institutions were constructed within the selected Instagram discourse.

Ethical Considerations

This study analyzed publicly accessible Instagram posts and comments and did not involve direct interaction with social media users, private messages, restricted groups, or non-public data. No formal institutional ethical approval was obtained for this study, as the research relied exclusively on publicly accessible social media content and did not involve recruitment, intervention, or direct interaction with human participants. User comments included in the analysis were anonymized to protect individual privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Map of Digital Public Criticism Based on NVivo Analysis

NVivo 15 coding identified four main thematic nodes in the selected corpus of Instagram memes: Government Response, Aid Distribution, Infrastructure Recovery, and Disaster Governance. The NVivo treemap in Figure 2 visualizes the relative coding intensity associated with these themes. In this qualitative study, however, coding intensity is not interpreted as a statistical measure of public opinion or as a direct measure of the prevalence of these concerns in society. Rather, it indicates the relative emphasis given to particular issues within the selected research corpus.

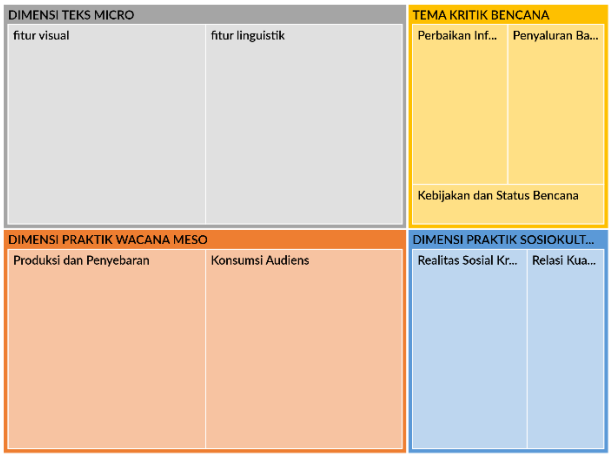


Figure 2. Treemap visualization of digital public criticism themes based on NVivo coding results

The themes of Aid Distribution and Infrastructure Recovery showed the highest coding intensity in the corpus. This indicates that these two areas received greater analytical emphasis within the selected memes than the other thematic categories. The corresponding representations focused on issues such as delays in aid distribution, perceived inequality in assistance, infrastructure damage, and the pace of post-disaster recovery. These representations construct disaster management not only as an emergency-response issue but also as a matter of institutional responsibility and public accountability.

From the perspective of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, these representations can be examined as discursive constructions through which institutional performance is evaluated. At the textual level, satire, irony, metaphor, and visual contrasts were used to represent government responses and disaster-management conditions. At the level of discourse practice, the circulation of these representations on Instagram provided a context in which criticism could be reproduced, interpreted, and discussed by audiences. At the sociocultural level, the discourse was situated within broader concerns about government responsibility, institutional capacity, and the relationship between state institutions and affected communities (Fairclough, 2003).

The themes of Government Response and Disaster Governance further indicate that the criticism in the selected corpus was not limited to operational problems. The memes also addressed questions concerning responsibility, accountability, policy decisions, administrative authority, and relationships between government institutions and citizens. In this sense, operational issues such as aid distribution and infrastructure recovery were discursively connected to broader evaluations of institutional performance and legitimacy.

The thematic relationships also show that individual memes may address more than one dimension of disaster management. A meme concerning aid distribution, for example, may simultaneously contain references to government coordination, institutional responsibility, resource allocation, or policy decisions. This overlap suggests that digital public criticism in the selected corpus was constructed through interconnected evaluative narratives rather than through isolated issue categories. The multimodal and concise characteristics of memes allow complex social and political issues to be combined through visual symbols, short textual statements, satire, and culturally recognizable references (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019).

From Fairclough's perspective, these findings indicate that Instagram memes can function as discursive practices through which relationships between state institutions and citizens are represented and evaluated (Fairclough, 2003). Visual and linguistic representations in the selected corpus frequently positioned government institutions as responsible actors in disaster management, while affected communities were represented as recipients of government services and as parties experiencing the consequences of disaster-management decisions. The memes therefore provided a discursive space for articulating criticism concerning institutional responsibility and legitimacy through participatory digital communication (Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019).

These findings are consistent with the view of social media as a space in which citizens can participate in public discourse, circulate interpretations of social events, and express evaluations of institutional performance (Castells, 2015; Highfield, 2016). In the present study, the NVivo thematic map indicates that the selected meme corpus was particularly concerned with government capacity in relation to aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, institutional response, and disaster governance. The thematic structure therefore provides an empirical basis for examining how

criticism and emotional expressions were articulated in relation to institutional legitimacy and social trust within the selected digital discourse.

Importantly, the coding intensity should not be interpreted as evidence that these issues constituted the most important concerns for Indonesian society as a whole. Similarly, the thematic map does not establish that the memes caused changes in public opinion or social trust. Rather, it demonstrates how the selected corpus emphasized particular aspects of disaster management and how these aspects were discursively connected to evaluations of government performance and institutional legitimacy.

Representation of Digital Public Criticism in Instagram Meme Texts

Analysis at the textual dimension shows that digital public criticism in the selected Instagram memes was constructed through combinations of visual and linguistic elements that represented evaluations of the management of the 2025 Sumatra disasters. Based on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, text is understood not merely as a transmitter of information but as a form of representation through which actors, events, and institutions are positioned and evaluated (Fairclough, 2003). In the research corpus, critical representations were constructed through illustrations, symbols, character expressions, visual contrasts, satire, irony, hyperbole, and visual metaphors. These elements were frequently used to construct evaluations of government performance and disaster-management practices.

Visually, several memes presented contrasts between representations of disaster-affected communities and representations of officials or state institutions. Floods, damaged infrastructure, aid distribution, and representations of affected communities were used to construct visual accounts of crisis and vulnerability. In contrast, representations of officials, government symbols, or institutional actions were frequently positioned in ways that invited critical evaluation. From a semiotic perspective, the relationship between visual signs, the objects represented, and the meanings constructed enables meme visuals to generate both denotative and connotative meanings related to social and political issues (Rahmawati et al., 2024; Nizar & Aesthetika, 2024). The visual contrasts therefore contributed to the construction of an oppositional relationship between affected communities and institutions responsible for disaster management.

At the linguistic level, criticism was frequently expressed through satire, irony, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and evaluative diction. The language used in the selected memes often created contrasts between representations of official actions and representations of conditions experienced by affected communities. Short statements, satirical slogans, and rhetorical formulations enabled complex political and social evaluations to be communicated in concise and easily circulated forms (Nizar & Aesthetika, 2024; Shifman, 2014). From a Faircloughian perspective, these linguistic choices can be understood as discursive resources through which institutional responsibility and performance are evaluated (Fairclough, 2003). The combination of linguistic and visual elements therefore positioned the memes as spaces for articulating criticism concerning government responsibility and disaster-management practices (Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019).



Figure 3. Meme M1 from @memecomic.id

A detailed micro-level analysis can be seen in meme M1 from @memecomic.id (Figure 3), which addresses government response through the representation of responsibility deflection or scapegoating. The meme uses a familiar pop-culture scene from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, showing SpongeBob holding a walkie-talkie beside a "WANTED MANIAC" poster containing his own image. At the denotative level, the image represents a character searching for a culprit while unknowingly appearing as the person depicted on the wanted poster. At the connotative level, this visual arrangement can be interpreted as an ironic representation of responsibility being directed toward other actors. The visual metaphor therefore constructs a critical association between the search for external blame and the responsibility of the actor represented within the meme.

The linguistic component reinforces this interpretation through the statement, "Semua elemen pemerintah sibuk mencari kambing hitam penyebab banjir Sumatera" ("All government elements are busy looking for a scapegoat for the cause of the Sumatra floods"). The accompanying caption, "Waduh siapa ya?" ("Oops, who could it be?"), adds an ironic rhetorical element. The phrase "sibuk mencari" ("busy searching") creates a contrast between the activity represented in the meme and the urgent needs associated with disaster management. Rather than treating the statement as an independently verified description of government behavior, the analysis understands it as a discursive representation constructed by the meme creator to criticize perceived responsibility deflection.

Selected top-ranked comments associated with M1 also extended aspects of this critical framing. For example, one comment referred to "pengalihan isu" (issue diversion), while another used a meme response to express distress concerning land and displacement. These responses indicate that some highly visible audience comments recognized or extended the critical and satirical framing of the meme. However, because the analysis was limited to ten Instagram top-ranked comments for each selected meme, these responses are not treated as representative of all audience reactions to M1.

From a Barthesian perspective, the myth constructed through the combination of visual and linguistic signs can be interpreted as a representation of the state as an actor that directs attention toward external blame while remaining implicated in the problem being criticized. From Fairclough's CDA perspective, the arrangement of visual and linguistic elements constructs a particular position toward institutional responsibility and invites audiences to evaluate government performance. The finding therefore concerns the discursive construction of accountability within the meme, rather than establishing that government actors objectively engaged in blame shifting.

A similar representational pattern appears in meme M3 from @bemkmunand, which criticizes the determination of disaster status. The meme uses visual and linguistic contrasts to represent tension between administrative decision-making and the urgency experienced by disaster-affected communities. Administrative symbols and representations of affected communities contribute to an oppositional framing between bureaucratic procedures and humanitarian concerns. The use of metaphor and visual opposition enables complex institutional issues to be condensed into concise critical messages (Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019). At the mythological level, the representation constructs an image of institutional priorities being positioned in tension with the needs of affected communities (Rahmawati et al., 2024). Within Fairclough's framework, this representation can be understood as a discursive construction concerning the relationship among state institutions, bureaucratic decision-making, and citizens affected by disasters (Fairclough, 2003; Shifman, 2014).
The theme of Aid Distribution, represented in memes M2, M4, M5, and M8, focuses on representations of inequality, adequacy, and accessibility in the distribution of assistance. Visualizations of uneven aid distribution, queues, resource comparisons, and community solidarity are combined with textual criticism of institutional responses. These representations position aid distribution not only as a logistical issue but also as a basis for evaluating government responsibility and responsiveness. The interpretation concerns how the memes construct these evaluations rather than establishing the objective adequacy or inadequacy of government assistance.
The Infrastructure Recovery theme, represented in memes M6, M7, and M9, focuses on representations of delayed restoration and perceived differences between official activities and conditions experienced by affected communities. Images of damaged roads, broken bridges, affected facilities, and official visits are combined with satirical or ironic textual elements. From a semiotic perspective, these combinations construct meanings concerning the relationship between symbolic governmental presence and perceived recovery conditions. Within the selected corpus, the representations invite evaluations of government capacity and responsiveness in post-disaster recovery.
Overall, the textual analysis shows that Instagram memes in the selected corpus constructed digital public criticism through recurring visual and linguistic strategies. Satire, irony, metaphor, visual contrast, and evaluative language were used to represent issues of government responsibility, aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, and disaster governance. These representations positioned institutional performance as an object of public evaluation and created discursive associations between disaster-management practices, institutional legitimacy, and social trust. The findings should nevertheless be understood as interpretations of the selected meme corpus rather than as direct evidence of public opinion or of the actual performance of government institutions as a whole.

Discourse Practices and the Circulation of Memes on Instagram

At the discourse-practice dimension, digital public criticism in Instagram memes is understood in relation to the processes through which memes are produced, circulated, and interpreted within the digital public sphere. Within Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, discourse practice concerns the processes through which texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within particular social contexts (Fairclough, 2003). In the present study, these processes are examined through the characteristics of the selected Instagram posts, their visible engagement, and the selected audience comments associated with the memes. The participatory characteristics of digital media

allow users to encounter, respond to, and recirculate content, potentially extending the contexts in which meme-based criticism is interpreted (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016).

The relationships among the categories resulting from the coding process are visualized through the NVivo coding map in **Figure 4**. The visualization shows relationships among the meme corpus, criticism themes, production and dissemination practices, audience responses, and the sociocultural context represented in the analytical framework. These relationships indicate that the selected memes cannot be interpreted solely through their textual and visual structures, but also need to be situated within the digital communication practices surrounding their circulation and audience interaction (Fairclough, 2003; Highfield, 2016). In this context, interaction through comments and other visible engagement mechanisms provides a context in which interpretations and emotional expressions concerning disaster management can be articulated and connected to broader digital discussions (Papacharissi, 2016).

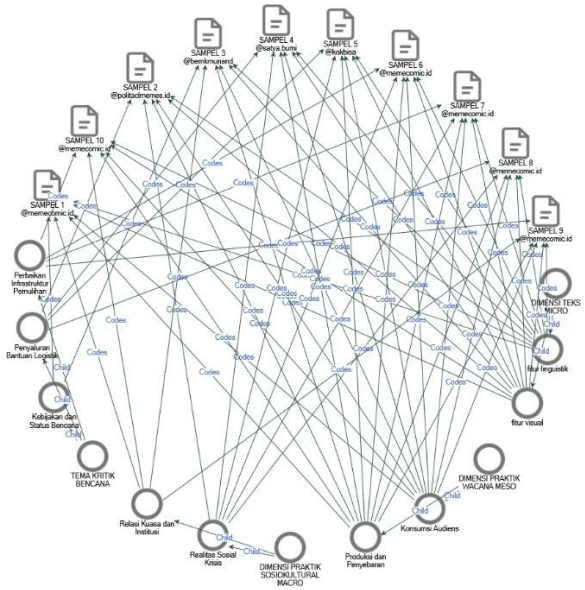


Figure 4. Visualization of relationships among digital public criticism themes based on the NVivo coding map

Based on Figure 4, individual memes are connected to more than one thematic category. This indicates that the selected instances of digital public criticism were not limited to isolated issues but frequently connected several dimensions of disaster management. For example, representations of aid distribution were also associated with government response, disaster governance, and evaluations of institutional responsibility. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, these relationships illustrate how meanings are constructed through connections among textual representations, discourse practices, and broader social contexts (Fairclough, 2003).

The network visualization also shows relationships between the meme corpus and categories related to production, dissemination, and audience interaction. These relationships suggest that the circulation of memes is an important part of the discourse-practice dimension because meanings can be encountered and discussed through participatory platform activities. A meme produced by one account may receive comments, reposts, or other forms of engagement that provide additional contexts for interpretation. This characteristic is consistent with the concept of spreadable media, in which digital content can circulate through user participation and acquire additional meanings as it moves across networks (Jenkins et al., 2013). In the context of memes, such circulation may involve adaptation, repetition, commentary, and reinterpretation by users (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016).

The engagement data in the research corpus provide additional contextual information about the visibility and interaction associated with the selected posts. For example, meme M2 (@politicalmemes.id) received 72,900 likes, 516 comments, and 4,500 reposts, while meme M3 (@bemkmunand) received 1,500 comments and 7,000 reposts. These figures indicate substantial visible interaction with the two selected posts at the time of data collection. However, engagement figures should not be interpreted as direct evidence that users shared the same attitudes or interpretations of the criticism. Rather, they provide contextual information about the level of interaction associated with the selected posts. Research on digital content engagement suggests that characteristics of a message may influence attention and sharing behavior (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

The comment section provides an additional space for examining audience responses within the selected corpus. In this study, the analysis was limited to the ten top-ranked comments displayed by Instagram for each meme, resulting in 100 comments in total. These comments were not selected according to positive, negative, supportive, or critical sentiment. Instead, they were taken according to Instagram's displayed ranking at the time of data collection. The comments therefore provide evidence of selected visible audience responses rather than a representative account of all responses to the memes.

Several recurring patterns were identified within the selected comments. The first involved experiential accounts and counter-perspectives, in which commenters referred to conditions they associated with their own communities or experiences. For example, a selected comment responding to M7 referred to prolonged electricity disruption despite reports of recovery. Such a comment can be interpreted as an audience response that introduces an alternative account of disaster conditions into the discussion. Because the researchers did not independently verify the factual accuracy of individual commenters' accounts, these statements are treated as audience representations rather than verified evidence of conditions on the ground.

The second pattern involved cynicism and institutional criticism. Selected comments associated with memes concerning budget governance used sarcasm, exaggeration, and references to alleged misuse of resources. These comments extended the critical tone of the memes by expressing distrust or skepticism toward institutional actors. They are interpreted as recurring expressions of institutional skepticism within the selected comment corpus rather than as evidence of generalized public cynicism.

The third pattern involved horizontal solidarity and calls for community-based assistance. Some selected comments shifted attention from formal government assistance toward mutual support among citizens. Such responses indicate that audience discourse could extend beyond criticism of government institutions to expressions of solidarity and community responsibility. Within the selected corpus, these comments illustrate how discussions surrounding disaster management may incorporate both institutional criticism and horizontal forms of support.

These patterns indicate that selected audience comments could extend and reinterpret the critical meanings established by the memes. The meme can therefore function as a discursive starting point around which users articulate experiences, emotional responses, evaluations, and additional interpretations. However, because the analysis was restricted to ten top-ranked comments per meme, these findings should be understood as recurring patterns within the selected visible comments rather than as evidence that all audiences interpreted the memes in the same way.

From the perspective of the digital public sphere, these discourse practices illustrate how social media can provide a space for citizens to articulate and circulate evaluations of public issues outside formal institutional communication channels (Castells, 2015; Highfield, 2016). In the selected corpus, memes provided a format through which issues concerning state responsibility, resource distribution, disaster policy, and recovery could be presented in concise and participatory forms. Audience comments subsequently provided additional spaces for agreement, disagreement, emotional expression, personal accounts, and alternative interpretations.

These findings are also relevant to the concept of affective publics, which emphasizes how emotions and expressions can become connected through digital circulation and interaction (Papacharissi, 2016). The use of satire, irony, and visual metaphor in the selected memes provided emotionally expressive forms through which disaster-management issues were discussed. The engagement associated with the selected posts indicates that these messages generated visible interaction, but the study does not interpret engagement as a direct measure of emotional intensity or collective agreement.

Overall, analysis at the discourse-practice dimension indicates that the significance of digital public criticism lies not only in the content of individual memes but also in the ways the selected memes were circulated and discussed on Instagram. Production, circulation, and audience interaction provided contexts in which critical representations could be extended through comments and other forms of visible engagement. Within the selected corpus, these practices were associated with recurring evaluations of government responsibility, institutional legitimacy, emotional expressions, and perceptions of social trust. The findings therefore demonstrate a discursive association among meme circulation, audience responses, and institutional evaluation rather than establishing a causal process of public-opinion or social-trust formation.

Collective Emotions, Power Relations, and Social Trust

At the sociocultural-practice dimension, Instagram memes in the selected corpus can be understood not only as representations of disaster-management criticism but also as discursive constructions of relationships between state institutions and society. Within Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, sociocultural practice concerns the relationship between discourse and broader social structures, power relations, ideology, and historical contexts (Fairclough, 2003). In the context of the 2025 Sumatra disasters, the selected memes connected representations of crisis experiences with evaluations of government responsibility, institutional capacity, and legitimacy. Social media provides a space in which individual experiences and institutional criticism can be articulated and circulated within broader public discourse (Castells, 2015; Highfield, 2016). In disaster communication, digital spaces similarly provide contexts for information circulation, public response, and evaluation of institutional performance during crisis situations (Aziz, 2024; Ismail & Suldani, 2024).

The dominance of particular themes in the corpus can also be observed through the NVivo Word Frequency visualization in Figure 5. The visualization provides an overview of frequently occurring words in the selected meme corpus. Word frequency is used as a supporting analytical tool for identifying recurring vocabulary and areas of thematic emphasis, rather than as a direct measure of public attention or public opinion. The frequently occurring vocabulary was therefore interpreted in relation to the textual context of the memes, the discourse practices surrounding their circulation, and the broader social issues represented in the corpus (Fairclough, 2003).



Figure 5. Word Frequency visualization based on the NVivo analysis results

Based on Figure 5, frequently occurring words relate to government, aid, floods, victims, society, infrastructure, and disaster management. This vocabulary indicates that the selected meme corpus focused substantially on institutional responses to disaster conditions rather than representing the disasters solely as natural events. The recurring vocabulary was therefore interpreted as an indication of the thematic emphasis within the selected corpus, particularly concerning government response, assistance, affected communities, infrastructure, and disaster management. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, recurring lexical patterns can provide indications of the actors, issues, and social relations emphasized within a discourse (Fairclough, 2003).

The qualitative analysis also identified recurring affective patterns within the selected meme and comment corpus, particularly anger, disappointment, empathy, and cynicism. These patterns were identified through recurring textual, visual, and symbolic expressions associated with the four thematic categories. Anger was associated with expressions of dissatisfaction, criticism, and perceived shortcomings in disaster management. Disappointment was associated with expressions of unmet expectations, delayed recovery, and perceived institutional shortcomings. Empathy was associated with representations of concern for disaster-affected communities and expressions of horizontal solidarity. Cynicism was associated with satire, irony, dark humor, and skeptical representations of government actions.

These affective patterns were identified through the characteristics of the texts and visual materials rather than through psychological measurement of participants' emotional states. Accordingly, the findings refer to recurring affective expressions within the selected digital discourse, rather than to the emotional condition of society as a whole.

Anger primarily appeared in memes addressing delays in government responses and concerns about aid distribution. The expression of anger was frequently directed toward institutional responsibility rather than exclusively toward individual officials. Within the selected corpus, such expressions can be interpreted as discursive evaluations of perceived government responsiveness and responsibility

in disaster management (Aziz, 2024; Ismail & Suldani, 2024). From a critical discourse perspective, the construction of anger provides a way of articulating criticism concerning institutional performance and power relations (Fairclough, 2003).

Disappointment appeared in representations of slow infrastructure recovery, damaged public facilities, and perceived weaknesses in institutional coordination. In the selected corpus, disappointment was associated with evaluations of institutional capacity and the perceived gap between expectations and representations of recovery conditions. Such evaluations are relevant to discussions of institutional legitimacy and social trust because perceptions of institutional consistency, capacity, and responsiveness are theoretically related to public trust (Coleman, 2012). However, the present study does not measure changes in trust or establish that disappointment directly reduces social trust. Rather, the findings indicate that expressions of disappointment were discursively associated with negative evaluations of institutional capacity.

Empathy was expressed through representations of disaster victims and forms of civil-society solidarity. Within the selected corpus, empathy was frequently directed toward affected communities and citizens assisting one another rather than toward formal institutions. This pattern suggests that the discourse included horizontal forms of solidarity that operated alongside criticism of government institutions. In the context of the digital public sphere, such expressions can connect individual experiences with broader narratives of collective concern and community support (Castells, 2015; Papacharissi, 2016). However, these expressions should not be interpreted as evidence of a general shift in public trust from formal institutions to communities.

Cynicism emerged through satire, irony, dark humor, and rhetorical questioning. These forms of expression enabled users to articulate skepticism toward institutional actions and official narratives through concise and culturally recognizable forms of communication (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019). Within the selected corpus, cynicism therefore functioned as a discursive resource through which institutional performance could be questioned and evaluated.

Taken together, these affective patterns were associated with the ways in which institutional legitimacy and social trust were discussed within the selected corpus. Anger, disappointment, and cynicism frequently accompanied critical evaluations of government responsibility and institutional capacity, while empathy was more closely associated with solidarity among affected communities. These patterns indicate that emotional expressions and institutional evaluations were interconnected within the discourse analyzed. However, the study does not claim that these emotions caused changes in social trust or that they represent the emotional attitudes of society as a whole.

From the perspective of the digital public sphere, Instagram memes provide a participatory space in which public issues can be discussed outside formal institutional communication channels. In the selected corpus, meme-based criticism connected individual and community experiences with broader discussions of government responsibility, resource distribution, recovery, and disaster governance (Castells, 2015; Highfield, 2016). The concept of affective publics is also useful for understanding how emotional expressions can become connected through digital circulation and interaction (Papacharissi, 2016). In this study, however, affective expressions are interpreted as characteristics of the selected discourse rather than as evidence of the formation of a society-wide emotional public.

The findings further indicate that social trust was discussed indirectly through evaluations of institutional performance, responsiveness, accountability, and legitimacy. Within the selected corpus, representations of institutional shortcomings were frequently accompanied by expressions

of skepticism or reduced confidence in institutions, while expressions of empathy were more closely associated with horizontal community solidarity. These patterns are interpreted as discursive associations within the selected digital discourse rather than as evidence of changes in actual levels of social trust. The study therefore shows how perceptions of institutional performance, emotional expressions, and perceptions of trust were articulated together, without establishing a causal relationship among them.

Interpretive Conceptual Model

Based on the qualitative findings, this study proposes an interpretive conceptual model linking Instagram memes, digital public criticism, recurring affective expressions, evaluations of institutional legitimacy, and perceptions of social trust (Figure 6). The model is derived from the relationships identified through Critical Discourse Analysis and qualitative thematic coding of the selected memes and audience comments.

The model should not be interpreted as a statistically validated causal framework. Rather, it provides an interpretive representation of the discursive relationships identified in the corpus. Instagram memes provide multimodal representations of digital public criticism; audience interactions articulate recurring affective expressions; these expressions are associated with evaluations of institutional legitimacy; and such evaluations are related, within the discourse examined, to perceptions of social trust.

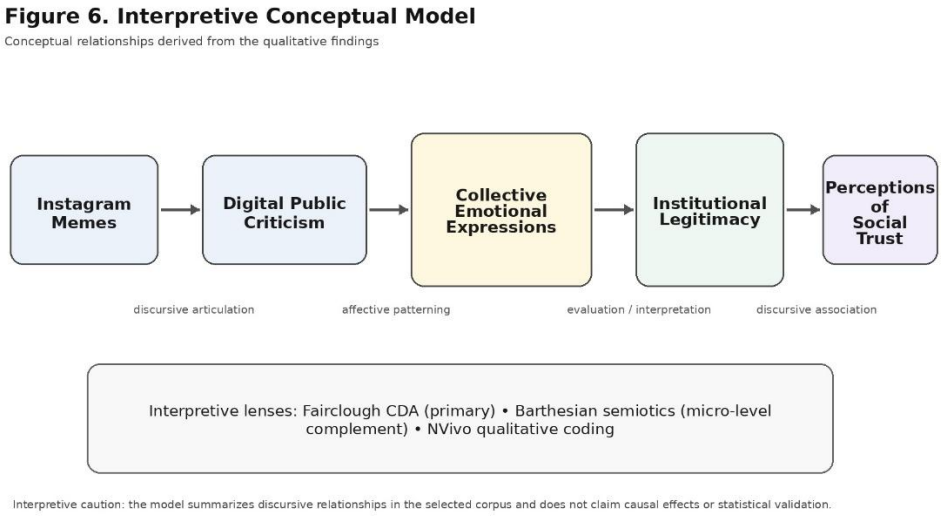


Figure 6. Interpretive conceptual model of discursive relationships among Instagram memes, digital public criticism, collective emotional expressions, institutional legitimacy, and perceptions of social trust

The model therefore maps the interpretive and discursive relationships identified within the selected corpus rather than establishing causal effects among its components. Its qualitative boundary means that it cannot determine the magnitude, direction, or statistical significance of relationships among emotional expressions, institutional legitimacy, and social trust. Future research may examine these relationships using broader samples and quantitative or mixed-method approaches, including surveys, longitudinal studies, computational analysis, or experimental designs.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Instagram memes function as a form of digital public criticism through which evaluations of the management of the 2025 Sumatra disasters are constructed and circulated. Using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, supported by Barthesian semiotic analysis at the micro-textual level, the study identifies four recurring themes: government response, aid distribution, infrastructure recovery, and disaster governance. These themes are articulated through visual and linguistic strategies involving satire, irony, metaphor, symbolism, and evaluative language. At the textual level, memes construct representations of institutional responsibility, responsiveness, and capacity. At the discourse-practice level, criticism is circulated through the production, dissemination, and audience interaction surrounding Instagram posts. At the sociocultural-practice level, these representations are connected to broader issues of power relations, institutional legitimacy, and public evaluation during a crisis.

The findings also identify recurring affective patterns expressed through anger, disappointment, empathy, and cynicism. These emotional expressions are embedded in the ways meme creators and selected audience comments evaluate government responses and the conditions experienced by affected communities. Rather than demonstrating a direct effect of memes on public trust, the findings indicate a discursive association between digital public criticism, collective emotional expressions, evaluations of institutional legitimacy, and perceptions related to social trust. The study therefore suggests that memes provide a communicative space in which emotional responses and institutional evaluations can be articulated and negotiated, while the extent to which such discourse affects actual levels of social trust requires further empirical investigation.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in bringing together digital public criticism, collective emotions, institutional legitimacy, and social trust within the context of disaster communication. The proposed conceptual model positions Instagram memes as a site of meaning construction and negotiation in which criticism, emotional expressions, and evaluations of institutions become interconnected. The model should be understood as an interpretive framework derived from the qualitative findings rather than as a statistically validated causal model. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of transparent, responsive, and participatory public communication in disaster management, particularly when institutional responses are subject to public scrutiny in digital spaces.

This study has several limitations. First, the qualitative corpus was limited to ten purposively selected Instagram memes and therefore does not represent the broader population of digital content or audiences. The use of an engagement threshold may also have favored relatively visible content and underrepresented low-engagement, neutral, supportive, or pro-government expressions. In addition, six of the ten selected memes originated from the same Instagram account, @memecomic.id. Although this concentration resulted from the application of the predefined selection criteria, it may have introduced a particular editorial or stylistic orientation into the corpus. Second, the study analyzed only Instagram and therefore did not capture the different communication dynamics of platforms such as TikTok, X, or Facebook. Third, the temporal boundary was limited to the November–December 2025 crisis period and did not examine discourse during the longer-term recovery phase. Fourth, the audience-response analysis was restricted to ten top-ranked comments displayed by Instagram for each selected meme, resulting in 100 comments; these comments should not be interpreted as representative of all audience responses. Finally, the study did not directly measure audience perceptions or actual levels of social trust through

interviews, focus groups, or surveys, and it did not examine Instagram's proprietary algorithmic curation mechanisms.

Future research could address these limitations through cross-platform comparative studies, longitudinal research covering both crisis and recovery phases, broader and more diverse audience-response datasets, and mixed-method approaches incorporating interviews, surveys, or computational analysis. Such approaches could further test the interpretive relationships identified in this study and empirically examine whether and how digital public criticism and collective emotional expressions are associated with changes in institutional legitimacy and social trust.

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