

Collective Response to the Student Reading Crisis: Hegemonic and Fatalistic Counter-narratives in the Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Indonesia's literacy crisis was constructed within digital public discourse following the viral circulation of a YouTube news segment depicting a junior high school student unable to read. Although literacy decline is commonly framed as a pedagogical issue, limited studies have explored how online publics negotiate responsibility for educational failure in digital spaces. Using a qualitative netnographic approach, this study analyzed 189 public comments extracted from the viral video "*Miris, Pelajar SMP Belum Bisa Membaca*" by tvOneNews. Data were analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis to identify dominant attribution patterns and processes of meaning construction. The findings reveal that digital public discourse surrounding literacy decline was shaped by fragmented and competing explanatory frameworks. Structural criticism directed toward curriculum reform, weakened evaluation systems, educational bureaucracy, and state governance frequently coexisted with individualized narratives emphasizing student discipline, parental responsibility, and excessive smartphone use. Public comments also reflected ambivalent perceptions toward teachers, who were simultaneously criticized for bureaucratic orientation and recognized as actors constrained by institutional regulation. Digital technology was framed as a symbolic threat to literacy culture, reflecting broader anxieties regarding educational decline. This study argues that online discourse surrounding literacy crises should not be interpreted as a coherent expression of collective critical consciousness, but rather as a dynamic arena of meaning negotiation shaped by emotional communication and competing interpretations of educational responsibility. The study contributes to digital discourse and critical literacy by extending literacy analysis beyond classroom-centered perspectives toward the sociocultural construction of educational crises within contemporary digital public.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's literacy crisis has become an increasingly urgent public issue following the circulation of a viral news report depicting a junior high school student who was reportedly unable to read. The case rapidly generated widespread reactions across digital platforms and reignited public debate regarding the quality of national education. Although concerns about literacy decline are not

new, the incident's virality transformed literacy from a primarily educational concern into a broader sociopolitical issue discussed publicly through digital media. This phenomenon is particularly significant considering that Indonesia has consistently recorded relatively low literacy performance in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Indonesian students continue to perform below the OECD average in reading literacy, indicating persistent structural challenges within the national educational system (OECD, 2023).

Previous studies on literacy in Indonesia have predominantly focused on pedagogical intervention, curriculum implementation, reading culture, and classroom-based literacy development (Abidin, 2015). Other studies have explored the influence of digital technology on students' literacy practices, particularly in relation to social media and declining reading habits (Kurnia et al., 2020). While these studies provide important insights into literacy education, they largely conceptualize literacy as an educational or technical issue situated within schools and learning environments. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how literacy crises are socially constructed, publicly interpreted, and discursively negotiated within digital public spaces. In particular, little research has examined how online publics attribute responsibility for literacy decline and how competing narratives emerge in response to viral educational incidents.

The expansion of digital media has transformed the nature of public discourse surrounding educational issues. Social media platforms and digital comment sections no longer function merely as spaces for opinion exchange, but also as arenas where meanings, moral judgments, and political anxieties are collectively produced and circulated (Papacharissi, 2015). Public responses to viral events are often shaped by affective intensity, emotional engagement, and rapid interaction rather than stable ideological reflection. Consequently, digital discourse surrounding literacy crises cannot simply be understood as transparent representations of public opinion, but should instead be approached as fragmented and performative communicative practices shaped by the dynamics of digital culture (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Within this context, the viral discourse surrounding students' inability to read becomes analytically important because it reveals competing patterns of attribution regarding educational failure. Some online participants framed literacy decline as the consequence of structural problems such as curriculum reform, weak educational governance, and declining assessment standards. Others, however, attributed responsibility to students, parents, teachers, or digital technology itself. These competing explanations demonstrate that literacy crises are publicly interpreted through fragmented and overlapping discursive frameworks rather than coherent collective understandings. Therefore, the issue extends beyond literacy competency itself and involves broader struggles over responsibility, morality, institutional legitimacy, and educational accountability.

To examine these dynamics, this study employs a netnographic approach combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze 189 public comments extracted from the viral YouTube news segment "*Miris, Pelajar SMP Belum Bisa Membaca*". Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluate literacy through pedagogical indicators, this study focuses on how literacy decline is discursively constructed within digital public discourse. The analysis does not aim to measure public consciousness in a definitive sense, but rather to identify patterns of meaning construction, attribution, and interpretive fragmentation emerging in online discussion. In this regard, Freire's concept of critical literacy is used cautiously as a sensitizing framework for understanding how participants connect personal experiences with broader structural explanations without assuming that online comments represent stable ideological positions.

This study argues that digital public discourse surrounding literacy decline reflects fragmented negotiations of educational responsibility shaped by structural criticism, moral judgment, emotional reaction, and individualized blame. By examining how literacy crises are publicly interpreted within digital spaces, the study contributes to broader discussions on digital discourse, educational governance, and the sociocultural construction of literacy problems in contemporary society.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative netnographic approach to examine digital public discourse surrounding Indonesia's literacy crisis. Netnography was selected because the research focused on naturally occurring online interactions and public meaning-making processes within digital

environments (Kozinets, 2020). Rather than treating online comments as direct representations of stable public opinion, this study approached digital discourse as contextual, affective, and performative communication shaped by the dynamics of virality and social media interaction.

The primary data consisted of 189 public comments collected from the YouTube news segment “*Miris, Pelajar SMP Belum Bisa Membaca*” uploaded by tvOneNews (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRBeD8w6L4c>). The video was selected purposively because it generated extensive public engagement and became a viral reference point in discussions concerning educational decline and literacy problems in Indonesia. Data collection focused exclusively on publicly accessible comments posted during the period of heightened online engagement following the video's circulation. To maintain ethical considerations in digital research, usernames and identifying personal information were anonymized. Each comment was coded sequentially (e.g., C1, C2, C3) to facilitate thematic organization and analytical referencing.

The study used purposive sampling to identify comments relevant to the research focus. Comments were included when they contained explicit statements regarding literacy decline, educational policy, teachers, students, parents, curriculum reform, assessment systems, or digital technology. Comments consisting solely of emojis, repetitive spam, unrelated political propaganda, or non-substantive responses were excluded from analysis. The final dataset was therefore intended not to represent statistical public opinion, but to capture dominant discursive tendencies emerging within the online discussion.

Data analysis was conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify patterns of attribution, framing, and meaning construction within public discourse. The analytical process involved several stages. First, all comments were repeatedly read to identify recurring themes and discursive tendencies. Second, comments were grouped into preliminary thematic categories, including educational policy, educational systems, teachers and institutions, students and families, and digital technology. Third, the analysis focused on identifying how responsibility for literacy decline was discursively constructed, particularly the distinction between structural explanations and individualized blame. Finally, the findings were interpreted through selected conceptual lenses from framing theory (Entman, 1993), affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), moral panic (Cohen, 2002), and critical literacy perspectives derived from Paulo Freire (Freire, 2000).

Importantly, Freire's concept of critical literacy was not applied as a rigid classificatory framework dividing comments into fixed categories such as “critical” or “naïve” consciousness. Instead, the concept was employed cautiously as a sensitizing framework to explore how participants connected individual experiences with broader structural explanations. This approach was intended to avoid overinterpretation and to acknowledge that online comments are often situational, emotional, and contradictory rather than stable indicators of ideological consciousness. To enhance analytical rigor, the study emphasized interpretive consistency between data excerpts, thematic categorization, and theoretical interpretation. Representative comments were selected to illustrate dominant discursive patterns, while contradictory comments were retained to preserve the fragmented nature of digital discourse. Consequently, the analysis did not aim to generalize public opinion statistically, but rather to understand how literacy decline was socially constructed and negotiated within contemporary digital public space.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Digital Public Discourse on the Literacy Crisis

The analysis of 189 public comments posted on the viral YouTube news segment “*Miris, Pelajar SMP Belum Bisa Membaca*” indicates that digital public discourse surrounding Indonesia's literacy crisis developed through multiple and competing patterns of interpretation. Public responses did not reflect a singular understanding of literacy decline; instead, the comments revealed diverse forms of criticism directed toward educational policy, institutional systems, teachers, students, families, and digital technology. These findings suggest that literacy decline was publicly interpreted not merely as a pedagogical issue, but also as a broader social and institutional problem involving educational governance, accountability, morality, and responsibility.

The findings further demonstrate that online discussions surrounding literacy decline operated across both structural and individual levels of attribution. Some participants associated literacy decline with curriculum reform, weakened evaluation systems, and institutional bureaucracy, while

others emphasized personal discipline, family responsibility, and excessive smartphone use among students. This variation indicates that digital public discourse surrounding literacy decline was characterized by fragmented and overlapping explanatory patterns rather than a coherent public consensus.

Table 1. Dominant patterns of digital public discourse on indonesia's literacy crisis

Number	Main Theme	Representative Narratives and Coding	Primary Discursive Pattern
1	Educational Policy	Criticism toward the <i>Merdeka Curriculum</i> , abolition of the National Examination, and perceived decline of educational standards. Examples include: "Since the National Examination was abolished, there is no longer any real academic standard" (C21); "The curriculum changes too often and students become the victims" (C108).	Structural criticism toward educational reform and governance
2	Educational System	Concerns regarding automatic promotion and weakened competency standards. Representative comments include: "Everyone gets promoted even if they cannot read" (C45); "Passing students has become more important than actual learning" (C52).	Institutional dissatisfaction with evaluation systems
3	Teachers and Institutions	Criticism toward bureaucratic orientation and administrative culture among teachers and schools. Examples include: "Teachers are busy with certification and paperwork, not teaching" (C56); "Teachers are trapped in too many regulations" (C70).	Ambivalent institutional discourse
4	Students and Families	Concerns regarding smartphone use, social media, and declining reading habits among students. Representative comments include: "Children spend all day on TikTok instead of reading books" (C82); "Students today are simply too lazy to read" (C90).	Individualized and moralistic attribution
5	Fatalistic Narratives	Literacy ability perceived as dependent on innate talent rather than educational structures. Representative comment: "Reading ability depends on talent, not the system" (C101).	Naturalization of educational inequality
6	Fragmented Attribution	Simultaneous emergence of structural criticism and individualized blame. Representative comments include: "The government failed education" (C140); "Students themselves are lazy" (C141).	Competing and contradictory attribution frameworks

Digital public discourse surrounding Indonesia's literacy crisis demonstrates that literacy decline is interpreted through multiple, often competing explanatory frameworks. The analysis of 189 comments posted on the viral YouTube video "*Miris, Pelajar SMP Belum Bisa Membaca*" indicates that public responses largely revolved around four dominant themes: criticism of educational policy, dissatisfaction with the educational system, evaluation of teachers and educational institutions, and moral judgments directed toward students and families. These patterns suggest that literacy problems are publicly negotiated not merely as pedagogical issues, but also as social, institutional, and moral concerns shaped through digital interaction.

A substantial portion of the comments framed literacy decline as a consequence of weakened educational accountability following recent policy reforms. Public criticism was particularly focused on the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the abolition of the National Examination

(Ujian Nasional). Several users explicitly associated literacy decline with the perceived disappearance of academic standards: "Since the National Examination was abolished, there is no longer any real academic standard" (C21). "Students continue to pass even though they still cannot read properly" (C34). "The education system now prioritizes administration over competence" (C40).

These comments indicate a tendency among participants to interpret literacy decline as evidence of institutional deterioration rather than isolated individual failure. From a framing perspective, such narratives position educational policy as the primary locus of the crisis by emphasizing systemic responsibility and state accountability (Entman, 1993). Rather than discussing literacy merely as a classroom issue, participants linked literacy decline to broader concerns regarding educational governance and policy legitimacy.

However, the emotional intensity of these comments also reflects the affective character of digital communication. According to Zizi Papacharissi, digital publics are often formed through emotionally connected expressions circulating within networked media environments. In this context, criticism toward educational policy should not automatically be interpreted as stable ideological consciousness, but rather as affective responses intensified by virality and public anxiety regarding educational decline (Papacharissi, 2015). It suggests that digital discourse operates simultaneously as emotional expression and public negotiation of institutional legitimacy.

Public criticism also focused on the educational system itself, particularly mechanisms of student evaluation and automatic grade promotion. Many comments argued that schools prioritize administrative progression over substantive learning achievement: "Everyone gets promoted even if they cannot read" (C45). "Schools are afraid to fail students because of policy pressure" (C49). "Passing students has become more important than actual learning" (C52). These narratives reflect public concerns regarding the perceived weakening of minimum competency standards. Similar concerns have been identified in studies suggesting that automatic promotion policies may generate perceptions of declining educational quality when not accompanied by adequate pedagogical intervention (Ahmed & Mihiretie, 2015). In the present study, participants framed literacy decline as the consequence of systems perceived as prioritizing bureaucratic efficiency over substantive competence.

These comments also reveal tendencies toward simplification of complex educational problems. Multidimensional issues such as educational inequality, pedagogical quality, and institutional capacity were frequently reduced to a single explanation centered on policy failure. Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that social media environments encourage rapid, simplified, and emotionally resonant forms of communication, making complex issues more likely to be interpreted through easily identifiable causes. Consequently, although these comments reflect genuine public concern, they do not necessarily represent comprehensive understandings of educational policy dynamics.

Public discourse about teachers and educational institutions showed more ambivalence. On the one hand, teachers were criticized for being overly focused on bureaucratic obligations and administrative incentives: "Teachers are busy with certification and paperwork, not teaching" (C56). "Attendance matters more than whether students actually learn" (C61). "Teachers only care about salary and allowances" (C63). These comments construct teachers as actors embedded within bureaucratic educational cultures perceived as detached from substantive pedagogical goals. Such narratives suggest that literacy decline is associated not only with student performance but also with broader dissatisfaction toward institutional professionalism within the educational sector.

From the perspective of professional agency, however, teachers' actions cannot be separated from the institutional structures that shape their professional space (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Some participants explicitly acknowledged these structural constraints: "Teachers cannot discipline students because they are afraid of being reported" (C66). "Teachers are trapped in too many regulations" (C70). These comments indicate that public discourse did not uniformly portray teachers as individual failures, but also recognized the institutional pressures constraining pedagogical authority. Dee and Wyckoff similarly demonstrate that bureaucratic incentive systems may encourage administrative compliance rather than pedagogical innovation. Therefore, discourse concerning teachers simultaneously reflected moral criticism and structural frustration regarding educational governance (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015).

In contrast to the relatively structural framing of educational policy and institutions, discourse on students and families was predominantly individualistic and moralistic. Many comments

associated literacy decline with smartphone use, TikTok, social media, and declining reading habits: “Children spend all day on TikTok instead of reading books” (C82). “Parents give smartphones but never supervise their children” (C87). “Students today are simply too lazy to read” (C90). These comments position students and families as morally responsible for the decline in literacy by framing digital technology as a disruptive force undermining educational discipline and reading culture. Such narratives display characteristics of *moral panic*, namely the tendency to construct particular media or technologies as threats to dominant social values (Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). In this context, smartphones and social media serve as symbolic explanations for broader anxieties about educational deterioration.

Nevertheless, scholarship on digital literacy suggests that the relationship between technology and literacy is considerably more complex than such narratives imply. Livingstone (2004) argues that digital literacy involves not only technological access, but also the capacity to critically evaluate and produce information. Likewise, [Buchan et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize that digital literacy competencies require adaptive pedagogical ecosystems that support meaningful engagement with digital media. Therefore, narratives solely blaming social media risk obscuring broader pedagogical and structural dimensions shaping literacy development.

The dominance of narratives blaming students and families also reflects broader processes of individualization. [Beck \(1992\)](#) explains that modern societies increasingly transfer responsibility for structural problems from institutions to individuals. Within the context of literacy decline, educational failure becomes interpreted primarily as the consequence of weak discipline, poor morality, or inadequate parental supervision rather than systemic inequality. Such tendencies simplify complex educational problems into individualized moral judgments.

This tendency became particularly evident in comments that expressed fatalistic assumptions about learning ability: “Some students are simply not academically capable” (C97). “Reading ability depends on talent, not the system” (C101). These statements normalize educational inequality by portraying literacy achievement as the product of natural ability rather than structural conditions. From the perspective of the sociology of education, [Bourdieu \(1986\)](#) argues that inequality often becomes naturalized when educational outcomes are perceived as individual capacities rather than socially produced conditions. Consequently, fatalistic discourse risks obscuring broader institutional disparities shaping literacy opportunities.

Digital public discourse surrounding literacy decline is characterized by competing and fragmented patterns of interpretation. Public comments simultaneously articulated structural criticism, institutional dissatisfaction, moral judgment, and individualized blame. Rather than producing a singular understanding of the literacy crisis, digital discourse functioned as a fragmented arena in which educational meaning, responsibility, and social anxiety were continuously negotiated through emotionally charged online interaction.

Fragmentation of Attribution and Meaning Construction in Literacy Discourse

While the previous section mapped the dominant thematic patterns emerging from the data, this section focuses on how responsibility for the literacy crisis was discursively constructed and negotiated within digital public discourse. The findings indicate that online discussions surrounding literacy decline were characterized by fragmented and competing attribution patterns. Structural explanations emphasizing educational policy, curriculum reform, and institutional governance frequently coexisted with individualized narratives blaming students, families, teachers, or digital technology. This coexistence suggests that digital public discourse did not develop within a single interpretive framework, but rather through overlapping and contradictory explanations of the causes of educational decline.

The findings further reveal that online discourse surrounding literacy problems operated across multiple levels of meaning construction. Some participants framed literacy decline as evidence of systemic educational failure and weakened institutional accountability, while others interpreted the issue primarily through moral and behavioral explanations such as laziness, weak parenting, and excessive smartphone use. These contrasting narratives indicate that literacy decline became a contested social issue in which educational responsibility was continuously negotiated within the digital public space.

The findings further demonstrate that digital public discourse surrounding literacy decline is characterized by fragmented and contradictory attribution patterns. Within the same discursive space, participants simultaneously blamed educational policy, institutional bureaucracy, teachers,

families, students, and digital technology. This coexistence of structural and individual explanations suggests that digital discourse does not develop through a unified interpretive framework but rather through competing narratives that negotiate the causes and meanings of the educational crisis. This fragmentation reflects the operation of framing processes within digital communication.

Table 2. Fragmentation of attribution in digital public discourse on literacy decline

Number	Attribution Orientation	Representative Comments and Coding	Dominant Meaning Construction
1	Structural Attribution	"Since the National Examination was abolished, there is no longer any real academic standard" (C21); "The government removed educational standards" (C112).	Literacy decline framed as the consequence of institutional failure and weakened educational governance
2	Institutional Attribution	"Teachers are trapped in too many regulations" (C70); "Schools are afraid to fail students because of policy pressure" (C49).	Educational bureaucracy perceived as constraining pedagogical authority and competency standards
3	Individual Attribution	"Students today are simply too lazy to read" (C90); "Students today do not want to study seriously" (C117).	Literacy decline interpreted as personal failure, weak discipline, and declining morality
4	Familial Attribution	"Parents give smartphones but never supervise their children" (C87); "Families are failing to educate their children properly" (C122).	Families positioned as morally responsible for educational decline
5	Technological Attribution	"Children spend all day on TikTok instead of reading books" (C82); "TikTok is destroying children's brains" (C131).	Digital technology framed as a cultural and educational threat
6	Fatalistic Attribution	"Reading ability depends on talent, not the system" (C101).	Educational inequality naturalized as innate individual difference
7	Contradictory Attribution	"The government failed education" (C140); "Students themselves are lazy" (C141).	Structural criticism and individualized blame coexisted simultaneously within the same discursive space

According to [Entman \(1993\)](#), framing shapes how social problems are defined, how responsibility is attributed, and how solutions become legitimized. In the present study, structural framing emerged when literacy decline was associated with curriculum reform, educational bureaucracy, and the abolition of national assessment systems: "The curriculum changes too often, and students become the victims" (C108). "The government removed educational standards" (C112). These opinions framed literacy decline as evidence of systemic failure and as a weakening of institutional accountability. Through this framing, educational problems were interpreted not merely as failures of individual students, but as consequences of broader governance problems within national education policy.

However, structural framing coexisted with highly individualized narratives emphasizing morality, discipline, and personal responsibility: "Students today do not want to study seriously" (C117). "Families are failing to educate their children properly" (C122). "Teachers only care about salary and administration" (C126). These comments reflect processes of individualization in which structurally complex social problems are reduced to matters of individual behavior and morality. [Beck \(1992\)](#) argues that modern societies increasingly shift responsibility for systemic problems from institutions toward individuals. In this context, literacy decline is interpreted through personalized

narratives that emphasize laziness, moral decline, or inadequate parental supervision rather than structural educational inequality.

The simultaneous emergence of structural and individualized explanations demonstrates the fragmented nature of digital public discourse. In several instances, contradictory narratives appeared side by side: “The government failed education” (C140). “Students themselves are lazy” (C141). This contradiction indicates that digital discourse does not evolve toward a coherent collective understanding, but instead develops through overlapping and competing interpretive frameworks. Digital spaces, therefore, function less as arenas of consensus formation and more as sites of discursive contestation where competing meanings circulate simultaneously. This fragmentation is closely related to the affective and performative nature of online communication. [Papacharissi \(2015\)](#) explains that digital publics are organized through emotional connectivity rather than stable ideological coherence. Public responses to viral educational issues are therefore often shaped by affective intensity, immediacy, and participation dynamics. Consequently, online comments should not automatically be interpreted as stable indicators of political or ideological consciousness, but rather as situational and emotionally mediated forms of communication. Similarly, [Marwick and boyd \(2011\)](#) argue that social media environments encourage rapid, performative, and simplified interaction. Within such environments, complex educational problems are condensed into emotionally resonant narratives that circulate quickly through digital networks. This explains why public discourse frequently oscillates between structural criticism and individualized blame without resolving the contradiction between the two.

It demonstrates that moralization played a significant role in shaping literacy discourse. Digital technology, particularly smartphones and TikTok, was repeatedly framed as a threat to reading culture and educational values: “TikTok is destroying children’s brains” (C131). “Smartphones have replaced books” (C135). These narratives illustrate characteristics of moral panic in which visible cultural objects become symbolic representations of broader social anxiety ([Cohen, 2002](#)). Through this process, technology was positioned as the primary explanation for literacy decline despite the multidimensional nature of educational inequality and literacy development. However, such moralized explanations oversimplify the complexity of digital literacy. [Livingstone \(2004\)](#) emphasizes that digital literacy requires critical engagement with information rather than merely limiting technological access. Likewise, [Buchan et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that effective literacy development depends on adaptive educational ecosystems that meaningfully integrate digital technology. Consequently, narratives framing social media solely as educational threats risk obscuring the institutional and pedagogical dimensions of literacy transformation.

Within this fragmented discursive environment, the critical literacy perspective of Paulo Freire may be employed cautiously as a sensitizing concept for interpreting discursive orientations. [Freire \(2000\)](#) emphasizes the importance of connecting individual experiences with broader social structures in understanding oppression and inequality. Nevertheless, within digital discourse, public comments should not be interpreted as fixed indicators of critical consciousness. Instead, they should be understood as fluid and situational expressions shaped by emotional intensity, virality, and participatory communication. This approach is important for avoiding overinterpretation of digital data. Online discourse is inherently unstable, affective, and context-dependent. Consequently, contradictory statements, emotional reactions, and simplified narratives should be understood as characteristics of digital communication itself rather than coherent ideological positions. The fragmented nature of attribution observed in this study, therefore, reflects not only public anxieties about literacy decline but also the communicative logic of contemporary digital culture. It demonstrates that literacy decline in digital public discourse is socially constructed through competing patterns of attribution that oscillate between structural explanations and individualized blame. Digital discourse simultaneously expresses dissatisfaction with educational governance, anxiety toward technological transformation, frustration regarding institutional professionalism, and moral concern about family responsibility. Consequently, digital public discourse on literacy should be understood as a dynamic arena of meaning negotiation shaped by affective communication, fragmented interpretation, and ongoing struggles over educational responsibility and legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital public discourse surrounding Indonesia’s literacy crisis is characterized by fragmented and competing patterns of attribution rather than a singular collective understanding. Public responses to the viral case of a junior high school student unable to read

revealed diverse explanatory frameworks directed toward educational policy, institutional systems, teachers, students, families, and digital technology. Structural criticism toward curriculum reform, weakened evaluation systems, and educational governance frequently coexisted with individualized and moralistic narratives emphasizing student discipline, parental responsibility, and excessive smartphone use. These findings indicate that literacy decline is publicly constructed not merely as a pedagogical issue but also as a contested social problem that involves broader anxieties about educational accountability, morality, and institutional legitimacy within contemporary digital culture.

The findings further suggest that digital discourse operates through affective, situational, and often contradictory forms of meaning construction. Online comments did not consistently reflect stable ideological positions or coherent critical consciousness; instead, they revealed emotionally mediated and fragmented negotiations of educational responsibility. Within this context, Freire's concept of critical literacy remains useful as a sensitizing framework for examining how structural and individual explanations intersect within public discourse, although digital comments should not be interpreted as direct indicators of fixed political awareness. Overall, the study contributes to discussions on digital discourse and literacy by demonstrating that online public reactions to educational crises are shaped simultaneously by structural criticism, moral judgment, emotional expression, and performative communication.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study extends literacy research beyond classroom-centered approaches by emphasizing the need to examine literacy crises as socially and discursively constructed phenomena in digital public spaces. The findings also contribute to discussions on digital discourse by illustrating how fragmented attribution patterns emerge through online interaction and affective communication. Practically, the study suggests that responses to literacy decline should not rely solely on individualized moral explanations targeting students or families. Instead, literacy policy should address broader structural dimensions, including evaluation systems, teacher support, educational governance, and the development of digital literacy. Furthermore, policymakers and educators should recognize that digital platforms increasingly function as influential arenas for shaping public perceptions of educational legitimacy and crisis.

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