



Critical Discourse Analysis of Hoaxes and Misinformation on Social Media in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract. The phenomenon of hoaxes and misinformation on social media is growing stronger in the post-truth era, when the boundary between facts and opinions becomes blurred and public trust is more influenced by emotions and social relations compared to information verification. This condition not only impacts the quality of information but also shapes the way individuals understand their social reality. This study aims to examine in depth the construction of hoax and misinformation discourse and how individuals interpret, respond to, and reproduce such information in everyday life. The research uses a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital participatory observation, and document analysis of 12–15 participants who are active social media users. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach integrated with the CDA framework to reveal the dimensions of text, discursive practices, and social practices. The research findings show three main patterns, namely fragile trust in social relations, the dominance of emotions as the basis for interpreting information, and the normalization of hoaxes in everyday digital interactions. These findings reveal that hoaxes are not merely understood as incorrect information, but as part of a social experience that is negotiated through emotions and relationships. Theoretically, this study enriches discourse analysis studies by affirming the affective and relational dimensions in meaning construction. Practically, this study provides implications for strengthening digital literacy, developing public communication policies, and more contextual educational approaches in facing the challenges of misinformation in the digital era.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Hoaxes; Misinformation; Post-Truth; Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the increasingly rapid flow of digital information, society is now confronted with a new reality in which the boundaries between truth and falsehood are becoming increasingly blurred. For example, a secondary school teacher in a major city expressed confusion when her students tended to trust information from social media more than textbooks or classroom explanations. In an initial exploratory interview, she stated that “students often bring viral information from TikTok or WhatsApp, but find it difficult to distinguish between facts and hoaxes.” This condition is consistent with the findings of Lathrop (2025), which indicate that younger generations tend to accept digital information quickly without engaging in in-depth verification processes, particularly when the information is presented visually, emotionally, and virally on social media platforms. This phenomenon is not limited to educational settings but has also expanded into social and political domains, where individuals and social groups become increasingly vulnerable to persuasive and emotionally framed information manipulation. Field observations indicate that hoaxes and misinformation are no longer merely cases of inaccurate information; rather, they have become part of structured discursive practices. This finding is supported by the study conducted by Heryanto et al. (2024), which

explains that disinformation on social media is produced through systematic and repetitive communication patterns designed to shape particular public perceptions. In this context, social media functions as a space for the production and reproduction of discourse, where certain narratives are amplified through algorithms, virality, and user participation. Bennett and Livingston (2020) further emphasize that the modern digital ecosystem enables the massive spread of disinformation through interconnected and participatory communication networks. In several observed cases, hoax messages were framed using language that appealed to collective emotions, such as fear, anger, or group identity, thereby strengthening both their dissemination and public acceptance.

This phenomenon becomes increasingly relevant within the context of the post-truth era, a condition in which public opinion is influenced more by emotions and personal beliefs than by objective facts. On a global scale, this era is characterized by the growing spread of disinformation surrounding strategic issues such as politics, health, and climate change. At the local level, Indonesia also faces serious challenges, particularly during political events such as elections, where hoaxes are utilized as tools of propaganda and social polarization. Research has shown that social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion through the dissemination of unverified information (Ridzki, 2024). Furthermore, hoaxes in political and social contexts are often systematically constructed to influence public perception (Heryanto et al., 2024).

Over the past five years, studies on misinformation and post-truth have developed rapidly. Through a meta-synthesis study, Essien (2025) argues that disinformation on social media affects not only public knowledge but also the epistemic well-being of society. Meanwhile, Salman and Nasir (2025) demonstrate that the spread of fake news is reinforced by uncritical dynamics of public communication. Other studies highlight how post-truth discourse is shaped through manipulative and strategic media practices (Andrade, 2024). Kurniawan (2025) further reveals that digital propaganda on social media contributes to the construction of pseudo-realities that are eventually accepted as truth. On the other hand, Lathrop (2025) emphasizes the importance of critical media literacy in addressing post-truth phenomena. Flew (2026) additionally argues that the crisis of trust in media has become a significant factor contributing to the growth of misinformation within digital societies.

Although numerous studies have examined hoaxes and misinformation from the perspectives of media, politics, and digital literacy, a significant research gap remains. Most existing studies tend to focus on quantitative dimensions, such as patterns of information dissemination or network analysis, as well as normative approaches that emphasize technical

solutions. However, there remains limited research exploring subjective experiences, social meanings, and in-depth discursive processes involved in the production and consumption of hoaxes. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, it is essential to understand how language is used to construct reality, reproduce power relations, and influence individual consciousness.

Based on this background, the present study aims to critically analyze the discursive construction of hoaxes and misinformation on social media in the post-truth era, with a particular focus on how language, ideology, and power relations operate within such discursive practices. This study employs a qualitative approach using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover the underlying meanings embedded within texts and digital communication practices. The scope of the research focuses on social media content containing hoaxes, as well as users' experiences in interpreting and responding to such information.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich discourse analysis studies by providing a contextual and interpretative perspective on post-truth phenomena. Practically, the findings are expected to contribute to the development of critical digital literacy and to serve as a foundation for educational and public communication policies in addressing the challenges of misinformation in the digital era.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

The phenomenon of hoaxes and misinformation on social media in the post-truth era cannot be understood merely as a problem of incorrect information, but as a social practice that shapes reality, emotions, and power relations in everyday life. In this context, individuals are not only recipients of information but also actors who interpret, believe in, and even reproduce the discourse in their social interactions. Therefore, this study utilizes three main theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), post-truth theory, and the theory of social construction of reality.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Discourse as a Practice of Power

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough (1995) serves as the main foundation in understanding how hoaxes are produced and interpreted. CDA views language not merely as a communication tool, but as an ideological instrument that shapes and reproduces power relations in society. In the context of hoaxes, language is often used to build false legitimacy through rhetorical strategies such as dramatization, simplification, and polarization. Fairclough (1995) asserts that CDA enables a deeper understanding of language, narratives, and power dynamics in media texts.

Recent research shows that hoaxes on social media work through systematic discursive strategies, such as the use of emotional metaphors and manipulative framing (Adedayo & Asonibare, 2026). In addition, critical discourse analysis also reveals how certain actors utilize “alternative truth” narratives to strengthen their ideological positions (Mahlouly, 2025, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*). In the Indonesian context, a study by Dinihari et al. (2025, *KEMBARA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*) shows that digital hoaxes do not only spread false information but also shape society’s critical thinking through repeated language practices.

From the perspective of participants’ experiences, CDA helps explain why someone can feel “certain” about information that is actually not valid. For example, a social media user might believe a hoax because the narrative aligns with their group identity or is reinforced by emotional and persuasive language.

Post-Truth Theory: The Dominance of Emotions over Facts

The post-truth theory popularized by Ralph Keyes (2004) explains the social condition in which emotions, personal beliefs, and group identity have more influence than objective facts in shaping public opinion. In this era, truth becomes relative and is often negotiated through digital interactions.

Krasni (2020, *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*) asserts that post-truth is not merely an information phenomenon but an epistemological crisis that changes the way society understands truth. Other research shows that social media strengthens this condition by creating echo chambers, where individuals are only exposed to information that matches their beliefs (Mamlok, 2024, *Philosophy of Education*).

Furthermore, Haapala and Roch (2025, *Media and Communication*) show that in practice, post-truth discourse often involves contestation of meaning, where terms such as “hoax” or “fact” become rhetorical tools to attack other groups.

In participants’ experiences, this phenomenon is visible when individuals continue to believe information even though it has been clarified as a hoax. This shows that trust is not always based on evidence, but more on affection, identity, and a sense of social attachment.

Theory of Social Construction of Reality: Meaning as a Result of Interaction

The theory of social construction of reality developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) provides the perspective that reality is not objective but is formed through repeated social interaction processes. In the context of social media, hoaxes become “real” because they are continuously produced, shared, and discussed in digital communities.

Recent research shows that misinformation develops through a process of social normalization, where information that was initially doubted becomes accepted because it

frequently appears in everyday interactions (Heryanto et al., 2024). In addition, Andrade (2024, UXUC Journal) emphasizes that urban digital society lives in a “hybrid communication environment,” where the boundary between facts and opinions becomes increasingly blurred.

From the participants’ point of view, this theory helps explain how someone can internalize hoaxes as part of their reality. For example, in certain communities, a hoax narrative can be considered a “shared truth” because it is supported by collective experience and intense social interaction.

Comparison of Theoretical Approaches

The three theories have different focuses but complement each other: CDA emphasizes the structure of language and ideology in texts, Post-truth highlights social and psychological conditions that influence trust, Social construction of reality sees the interaction processes that shape meaning.

However, this study chooses CDA as the main lens because of its ability to integrate text analysis, discursive practices, and social context simultaneously. Meanwhile, post-truth theory and social construction of reality are used as supporting frameworks to understand the broader dimensions of experience and meaning.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design, which was chosen because it is relevant for examining the construction of meaning, ideology, and power relations within hoax and misinformation discourses on social media. The study also applies *The Social Construction of Reality* theory proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. This theory is used to understand how social reality is constructed through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization within the analyzed discourse. This approach enables analysis not only at the textual level but also within communication practices and the broader social context underlying them, making it suitable for understanding the post-truth phenomenon, which is closely associated with language manipulation and the social production of meaning (Al-Qahtani, 2025).

Research participants were intentionally selected based on their experiences in using social media, particularly individuals who had accessed, shared, or interpreted information potentially containing hoaxes. In addition, several participants were recruited through recommendations from previous participants, allowing the researcher to reach individuals actively involved in specific digital communities. The number of participants ranged from 12 to 15 people, consisting of active social media users across various platforms such as

WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X, including educators, university students, and individuals who had been exposed to or involved in the spread of hoaxes. Participant criteria included active use of social media for at least the past two years, experience interacting with content identified as hoaxes or misinformation, and willingness to participate openly in the interview process.

This study was conducted within the digital environment of urban Indonesian society, characterized by high internet penetration and intensive information consumption, particularly among younger generations who are vulnerable to misinformation exposure. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, digital participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted both online and offline, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and factors influencing their trust in information. Participant observation was carried out by observing user interactions, patterns of hoax dissemination, and the use of language and symbols on social media in a non-intervention manner. Meanwhile, document analysis involved collecting and classifying posts, comments, and screenshots of content identified as hoaxes as part of the research data.

All collected data were rewritten comprehensively based on interview results and field findings, then analyzed gradually. The analysis process involved repeatedly reading the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context, followed by grouping the data into themes relevant to the research focus. These themes were developed based on patterns of meaning emerging from participants' experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, the data were interpreted by examining how language was used in conveying information, how information was disseminated, and how its meaning was understood within participants' social lives. This approach enabled the researcher to understand hoaxes not merely as texts, but also as part of everyday social experiences and interactions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of in-depth interview data, digital observation, and social media documents produced three main themes that reflect the complex experiences of participants in dealing with hoaxes and misinformation in the post-truth era. These themes do not stand alone but are intertwined in shaping the way individuals understand, feel, and respond to information.

Theme 1: Fragile Trust Between Belief and Doubt

In digital conversation spaces such as family WhatsApp groups or communities, participants often find themselves in an ambiguous position: between believing the information

received and doubting it at the same time. This situation arises especially when information comes from people considered close or having social authority. A participant (P3) described the dilemma as follows: “Sometimes I know it seems like a hoax... but it was sent by my own parents. So there’s an uncomfortable feeling if I immediately say it’s wrong.”. This experience shows that trust is not entirely built on the basis of information validity, but on social and emotional relations. In some cases, participants choose to remain silent or even join in spreading the information, even though they harbor doubts. Another participant (P7) revealed: “I just share it, but I don’t necessarily believe it. It’s just because everyone else is also sharing it.” Here, the tension between critical awareness and the social drive to participate is visible. Trust becomes something fluid not fully believed, but also not fully rejected.

Theme 2: Emotions as the Driver of Discourse

The research findings show that the hoaxes that spread most easily are those that carry strong emotional content, such as fear, anger, or empathy. In many cases, participants acknowledged that they reacted spontaneously to content that “emotionally disturbs” them. A participant (P1) stated: “If the news makes me scared or angry, usually I immediately want to share it. Like I have to let other people know.”. Meanwhile, participant (P9) expressed: “Sometimes it’s not about right or wrong, but it feels important to share.” These statements show that emotions function as an alternative legitimacy to truth. Information is considered important not because of its facts, but because of its emotional impact. However, not all participants felt comfortable with this condition. Some even experienced emotional fatigue due to continuous information exposure. “Over time I get tired myself. All the news feels scary. So I’m confused about which one to believe.” (P5). Here a paradox emerges: emotions that initially drove involvement ultimately lead to exhaustion and distrust.

Theme 3: Normalization of Hoaxes in Digital Social Interactions

In everyday interactions, hoaxes are no longer always treated as something extraordinary or that must be corrected. Instead, they begin to become part of ordinary conversation normalized through repetition and social acceptance. A participant (P11) explained: “Now if there’s weird news, it’s just normal. I’m not surprised anymore. I just read it and move on.”. This attitude shows a shift from active response (seeking the truth) to passive response (accepting without verification). In some communities, there is even a tendency to consider hoaxes as “entertainment” or “light discussion material.” However, this normalization is not always without conflict. Participant (P4) revealed: “I once tried to correct wrong news, but I was called a know-it-all. So now I’d rather stay silent.”. This experience shows the existence of social pressure that silences clarification efforts, so hoaxes continue to circulate

without meaningful resistance. In this context, truth becomes not only about facts but also about social position and the courage to be different.

Table 1. Thematic Summary.

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Core Meaning
Fragile Trust	Social relations, hidden doubt	Trust is shaped by closeness, not facts
Emotions as Driver	Fear, anger, exhaustion	Emotions replace rationality
Normalization of Hoaxes	Apathy, social pressure	Hoaxes become part of daily life

Transitions of Meaning Between Themes

These three themes form a flow of experience that is interconnected. Unexpressed doubt (Theme 1) opens space for emotions to take over judgment (Theme 2), which ultimately contributes to the normalization of hoaxes in everyday life (Theme 3). This process is not linear but repetitive and mutually reinforcing.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals three main intertwined findings, namely: (1) fragile trust, (2) dominance of emotions in information interpretation, and (3) normalization of hoaxes in digital social interactions. These three findings show that hoaxes and misinformation are not merely cognitive issues about right or wrong, but social phenomena that live within relationships, emotions, and participants’ daily practices.

Fragile Trust as a Product of Social Relations

The finding regarding fragile trust shows that acceptance of hoaxes is not entirely determined by the quality of information, but by relational closeness and social authority. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this reflects how discourse obtains legitimacy not only from the content of the text but from the social position of the actors producing it.

This finding is in line with the study by Heryanto et al. (2024) which shows that disinformation is often accepted because it is framed within networks of social trust. However, this study enriches that finding by showing the existence of inner tension that is not always visible, where individuals actually doubt the information but still maintain social harmony.

In the context of social construction of reality theory, this condition shows that “truth” is negotiated in relational spaces. What is considered true is not merely the result of verification but the result of social compromise. Thus, hoaxes become part of negotiated reality, not merely information errors.

Emotions as an Alternative Epistemology in the Post-Truth Era

The dominance of emotions in this study's findings strengthens the argument of post-truth theory that emotions have replaced facts as the main basis in belief formation. Participants did not merely react to information but "felt" the truth through the emotional intensity it generated. Research by Essien (2025) and Haapala & Roch (2025) shows that in the post-truth era, emotions function as a strong legitimacy mechanism. This study's findings not only confirm this but also reveal another dimension: emotions are not always stable. Emotions that initially drove information dissemination can actually turn into exhaustion and skepticism.

This is where the important contribution of this study emerges, namely showing that: emotions in hoax discourse are ambivalent they simultaneously drive and weaken participation.

From the CDA perspective, emotions can also be understood as part of discursive strategies. The language used in hoaxes is often designed to trigger certain affective responses, thereby accelerating the reproduction of discourse. Thus, emotions are not only individual responses but also the result of deliberate language construction.

Normalization of Hoaxes and Changes in Social Practices

The third finding shows that hoaxes have undergone a process of normalization in digital life. This reflects a shift from critical response to apathetic or even permissive attitudes. In the CDA framework, this condition shows how repeated discursive practices can form new social structures. Andrade's research (2024) calls this phenomenon a "distorted communication environment," where the boundary between facts and opinions becomes blurred. This study's findings expand that concept by showing that normalization does not occur passively but through social pressure and repeated interaction experiences.

Interestingly, clarification efforts often face social resistance, as experienced by participants who chose silence to avoid conflict. This shows that in the post-truth era, truth does not always have a dominant position; it can actually become a position that is "socially vulnerable." Thus, hoaxes do not only survive because of a lack of literacy but because they have become part of a stable social ecology, in which: dissemination is considered normal, clarification is considered disruptive, silence becomes a survival strategy.

Integration of Findings in the Theoretical Framework

These three themes can be understood integratively through the theoretical lenses used: CDA explains how language and power relations shape the legitimacy of hoaxes, Post - truth explains why emotions are more dominant than facts. Social construction of reality explains how hoaxes become part of accepted reality However, this study shows that the three frameworks do not work separately. Instead, they intersect in shaping participants' experiences.

For example: relational trust → reinforced by emotions → normalized through social practices

This leads to a new understanding that: hoaxes are not only text or media phenomena but multilayered and repetitive social processes that involve language, emotions, and power relations simultaneously.

Researcher's Reflection

In the analysis process, the researcher realized that the interpretation of the data was not entirely neutral. The social background of the participants, most of whom came from urban communities with high intensity of social media use, shaped the way they interpreted information. On the other hand, the researcher's position as an academic also brought a tendency to view hoaxes as a "problem," while for participants, hoaxes sometimes appeared as part of daily life that was not always problematic.

This awareness is important to maintain analytical sensitivity, that participants' experiences should not be reduced to merely a "lack of literacy" but must be understood in a broader social context.

Theoretical Contributions and New Understanding

This study provides several important contributions: Expanding CDA studies by incorporating emotional dimensions and subjective experiences more deeply. Critiquing digital literacy narratives that overly emphasize cognitive aspects without considering relational and emotional factors. Offering the perspective that hoaxes are negotiated social phenomena, not merely information errors. Thus, this study shifts the point of view from: • "why do people believe hoaxes?" to "how do hoaxes become meaningful in their social lives?".

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that hoaxes and misinformation on social media in the post-truth era cannot be understood simply as individual failures in sorting information, but as complex social phenomena formed through trust relationships, emotional dynamics, and repeated digital interaction practices. The three main patterns found—fragile trust, dominance of emotions, and normalization of hoaxes—describe that individuals live in a space of ambiguity, where the boundaries between believing and doubting, rational and emotional, become increasingly fluid. From participants' experiences, a new understanding emerges that hoaxes are not always fully believed but continue to circulate because they are bound within social networks and affection. In other words, hoaxes persist not because of the strength of their facts, but because of the strength of the accompanying relationships and emotions. These findings enrich the perspective in critical discourse analysis studies by affirming that language does not only shape meaning

but also activates emotional experiences and social attachments that strengthen discourse reproduction.

Conceptually, this study contributes to theory development by showing that in the post-truth context, truth is no longer merely epistemological but also relational and affective (Krasni, 2020; Cervi & Andrade, 2019). This challenges digital literacy approaches that have so far overly focused on cognitive abilities without considering emotional and social dimensions in media practices. Practically, these findings have several important implications: For policymakers, an approach is needed that is not only based on information regulation but also strengthens public trust and builds a healthy communication ecosystem. For the world of education, digital literacy curriculum development needs to integrate aspects of critical reflection, emotional awareness, and communication ethics, not just fact-verification skills. For the wider community, increasing digital literacy must be directed at the ability to understand the social context of information, including how emotions and relationships influence the way a person trusts and spreads information.

In addition, findings regarding emotional fatigue due to information exposure also indicate the importance of attention to digital mental health, which is often overlooked in the discourse on hoaxes and misinformation. However, this study has limitations. First, the research context which focuses on urban society with certain characteristics limits generalization to other social groups, such as rural communities or communities with limited digital access. Second, the relatively homogeneous composition of participants (dominated by active social media users) has not fully represented the diversity of social experiences. Third, the limited research time restricts the depth of exploration of long-term dynamics in changes in participants' perceptions of hoaxes.

Therefore, future research is recommended to: Use other methodological approaches, such as long-term digital ethnography or mixed methods, to capture broader dynamics, Expand the research context to various social groups, including marginalized communities or those with different levels of digital literacy, Deepen unexplored aspects, such as the role of political, religious, or cultural identity in shaping acceptance of hoaxes As a closing, this study affirms that understanding hoaxes is not enough by asking "what is wrong with the information," but needs to shift to a more fundamental question: "how do humans interpret, feel, and live with that information in their social reality." With this perspective, the study of hoaxes and misinformation is no longer merely an effort to correct information but becomes a way to understand human dynamics in facing changes in the landscape of truth in the digital era.

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