

The Discourse of COVID-19 Variants on COVID-19 News on The Jakarta Post

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ABSTRACT (10PT)

News always implies ideological background and social condition that produces it. News as popular media continuously constructs reality which is then believed to be the truth by the audience or readers. In time of COVID-19 pandemic, this disease had become an issue that attracted media as well as newspaper. The infection rate of COVID-19 kept increasing due to the variants that continued to emerge. This research aims to investigate how COVID-19 variants, especially Delta and Omicron variants were constructed on The Jakarta Post. The data used in this paper were the headline news about COVID-19 variants (Delta and Omicron) on The Jakarta Post during 2021-2022. The Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis was employed to analyze the data in this research. The analysis confirms that Delta Variant was constructed as deadly virus that caused so many problems in Indonesia, while Omicron Variant was represented as virus that was less harmful than Delta Variant. These findings imply the ideological background and social condition in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The media emphasized the government's and society's role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I. Introduction

In late 2019, the COVID-19 virus was initially identified in Wuhan, China. Indonesian government reported its first case of COVID-19 in early March 2020, which happened to coincide with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it a pandemic in the same month. The number of infected patients had been increasing since the first case. The number of patients who died had also continued to increase, although it had fluctuated [1]–[3].

On February 01, 2022, based on data released by WHO, 376 million people were infected with this virus and 5 million people in 227 countries in the world were declared dead after being exposed to the SARS COV2 virus [4]. Meanwhile, from 2020 to 2023, more than 6 million people in Indonesia were infected with this virus and 160 thousand people were declared dead after being exposed to this virus [5]. This infection rate was increasing due to the variants that continued to emerge.

Due to the high rate of COVID-19 infection. The Jakarta Post and all Indonesian newspapers covered COVID-19 as a news story. The Jakarta Post is a newspaper published in Indonesia that is written in English. This newspaper has a higher price than other newspapers. In addition, this newspaper cannot be easily found in any place. The Jakarta Post is usually found in hotel lobbies frequented by foreign guests. Moreover, this newspaper is also not sold in just any place like other newspapers. The Jakarta Post is usually sold in bookstores or obtained by subscription. In other words, this newspaper does have a different segment of readers, namely upper middle-class people or foreigners visiting Indonesia. However, aligned with the technology development, The Jakarta Post can be accessed by various groups wherever they are. The Jakarta Post can be accessed through the website or through the application. Nevertheless, considering that The Jakarta Post uses English, The Jakarta Post still has a distinctive segment of readers from other newspapers.

News always implies ideological background and social condition that produces it [6]. News as popular media continuously constructs reality which is then believed to be the truth by the audience or readers. Critical Discourse Analysis views that reality is never neutral, instead, a result of social construction, and through language, various realities are constructed as a form of power practice [7].

In a news production, journalists are inseparable from certain values and ideologies in society. On the other hand, journalists also play a role as participants of a group in society. In other words, it cannot be denied that news coverage and writing will be oriented towards a particular group [8]. This is also supported by other powers such as corporations, market mechanisms, political classes or groups, and institutions benefited by strengthening their position [9].

Fairclough combined social theory with linguistics which then lead to critical linguistics. This combination is very useful in determining the power relations behind the text and the articulation of ideological power. Fairclough believes that analyzing the text is not enough because it cannot reveal further and deeper socio-cultural conditions behind the emergence of the text [10].

Discourse has three functions, those are identity, relational, and ideational. Discourse plays a role in constructing the community members' social identities; creating social relations that are adjusted to their social identity; and constructing knowledge and beliefs that serve as a framework for people to interpret the world, social identity, and social relations [10].

Research related to the discourse of COVID-19 has previously been conducted. [11] studied how the COVID-19 discourse was constructed, whether it was an enemy or a friend that we must live with. This research stated that when COVID-19 was constructed as a friend, a positive image was built and this image had a positive impact on the new normal.

Meanwhile, [12] tried to investigate the meaning embodied in memes discussing COVID-19. Using van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, this study found that there were 4 subthemes in memes portrayed COVID-19 in relation to the macro structure: the naming of Corona virus, the use of masks, the disobedience of social distancing, and activities at home. Furthermore, there were 4 schemes related to superstructure: the main idea followed by supported idea, supporting ideas followed by the main idea, ideas without supported idea and titles, and visual schemes. The microstructure itself consisted of syntax, semantic, stylistics, and graphics. Lastly, within the realm of social cognition, memes encompassed the cognitive aspects and knowledge pertaining to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by both meme creators and consumers. Conversely, in the social context dimension, COVID-19 memes were situated within a moral framework, highlighting a lack of adherence to health protocols and a disregard for fair business practices, all stemming from repercussions and sway of the COVID-19 pandemic. \.

Critical discourse analysis related to COVID-19 in the media was also investigated by [13]. They examined the social media landscape and analyzed its contents related to COVID-19. Using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, the research discovered that COVID-19 was portrayed in social media platforms, like Facebook and YouTube, as a hazardous and deadly disease as a result of human error. In addition, COVID-19 was constructed as a predator that was very hungry and searching for its prey, and was ready to eat humans greedily without chew them properly.

COVID-19 discourse in the news has also been conducted by [14]. The research data for this study was obtained from China Daily and The Guardian. The findings of this study indicated that China Daily exhibited a higher level of objectivity by using neutral words and demonstrating a proactive approach in fighting COVID-19. In contrast, The Guardian utilized negative words when discussing the pandemic and less assertive words in conveying policies aimed at controlling and preventing COVID-19.

Critical discourse analysis was also carried out on newspapers in Indonesia, that is The Jakarta Post. [3] analyzed how the government issued policies in preventing and dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Using the Appraisal System approach, this study stated that the government was the target of poor appraisal. In addition, this research led to a critique of news texts related to the position of the reader. Because of the lack of representation, the meaning that was raised tended to be dynamic and negative to the target reader.

This research attempts to investigate the COVID-19 variant discourse in COVID-19 news on The Jakarta Post.

II. Method

Descriptive qualitative was used in this study. The news of COVID-19 variants on electronic daily newspaper of The Jakarta Post was the focus of this study. The news used was obtained from 2021-2022. While the object of this research were the titles or the headlines of the COVID-19 news on The Jakarta Post electronic newspaper which construct the COVID-19 variants, especially on Delta and Omicron variants. The search was conducted by typing the keywords such as COVID-19 variant, delta variant, and omicron variant on The Jakarta Post website.

This research was a textual research so that this research focused on the text. This research was conducted by doing close reading on the text and collecting data related to the COVID-19 variants. Primary data and secondary data were used in this research. The Jakarta Post headline news about COVID-19 variants served as the major source of data, while documents, articles, and other material addressing COVID-19, particularly COVID-19 variants, served as the secondary data.

Data analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis approach by Fairclough. Fairclough put forward a 3-dimensional model that represents 3 domains that necessitate examination: text, discursive practice, and social practice. When analyzing the first dimension, the text must be analyzed using a linguistic approach which encompasses formal forms such as vocabulary, grammar and textual structure. Text analysis serves the purpose of identifying three values, namely experiential, relational, and expressive. The text analysis to determine those values are explained further as following [6] [10] [15].

Experiential values explore how the world is portrayed from the perspective of text producers. Experiential values are represented in the text and manifested in the vocabulary employed. In terms of grammar, experiential value can be analyzed by examining the type of sentence used, the use of nouns to represent process and the potential loss or elimination meaning due to specific ideological interests. Relational values focus on the social relations that are conveyed through the text in the discourse. These values center on how the word choice used in the text plays a role and contributes to the establishment of social relations between participants. In the grammatical aspect, relational value can be observed through various grammatical elements used, namely the sentence form which consists of 3 forms: declarative, grammatical question, and imperative. Lastly, expressive value reflects the text producer's evaluation of the relevant reality. These values are often linked to subjects and social identities. In terms of vocabulary, each different discourse carries an ideologically significant meaning associated with the expressive value conveyed through the word choice. Writers typically employ classification systems to express their assessment system which automatically represents their choices and ideological alignments.

III. Results and Discussion

To analyze the discourse of the COVID-19 variants on The Jakarta Post, several news headlines were taken randomly. As explained above, to conduct a critical discourse analysis by Fairclough, there are 3 things that need to be analyzed in depth: text, discursive practices, and social practices. In order to analyze the text thoroughly, one needs to consider three essential elements: vocabulary, grammar, and textual structure. These elements contribute to the experiential value, relational value, and expressive value of the text.

A. *Experiential Value*

Experiential values that appear in vocabulary can be observed from the classification or grouping scheme constructed in a discourse. On the news related to the COVID-19 variants, especially the Delta and Omicron variants, there are ideas contrasted which are fear and hope. They can be identified by the vocabulary selection in the headlines of the COVID-19 variant news. In COVID-19 news, headlines are displayed by presenting 2 conflicting ideas, namely fear and courage.

The Delta variant news shows the fear of the Delta variant, while the Omicron variant news shows the courage of the community in facing the Omicron variant. It is reflected by the choice of vocabulary in the news headlines as followed.

100,000 and counting: Delta-fueled deaths reach grim record

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/08/04/100000-and-counting-delta-fueled-deaths-reach-grim-record.html>)

WHO says no Omicron deaths yet, as variant spreads worldwide

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/culture/2021/12/04/who-says-no-omicron-deaths-yet-as-variant-spreads-worldwide.html>)

Both headlines above show that there is fear in dealing with the Delta variant as it caused thousand deaths, however, it is different when dealing with the Omicron variant where people have hope that this variant is not more dangerous than the Delta variant. There have been no deaths caused by this virus.

There are differences in the representation of the Omicron and Delta variants. The Omicron variant appeared at the end of 2021 where people in Indonesia started to live with new normal. In the new normal life, people have started to "live with" COVID-19. [11] believes that presenting fear or war to COVID-19 will give rise to negative effect to society. On the other hand, the economy must continue. Therefore, it would be better to present COVID-19 as a "friend" in the new normal or new habit.

Considering the grammar, the use of subject in the existing headlines also reveals experiential value. On several headlines reporting on the Delta variant, text producers chose to put the subject at the end of the sentence, especially when the subject being reported is the Indonesian government. Here are some examples where headlines put the subject at the end of the sentence.

Delta variant behind Indonesia's recent COVID-19 surge, officials say

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/06/15/delta-variant-behind-indonesias-recent-covid-19-surge-officials-say.html>)

Delta variant behind Kudus COVID-19 spike, officials say

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/06/14/delta-variant-behind-kudus-covid-19-spike-officials-say.html>)

Headlines above show that the text producer put the subject "government" at the end of the sentence. In other words, the producer focused on the news instead of the government. In contrast, some news placed the subject at the beginning of news on Delta variant, however, the subject is neither the Indonesian government nor Indonesian people. The headline below depicts global economic conditions.

World Bank says Delta variant slowing economic growth in East Asia and Pacific

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/09/28/world-bank-says-delta-variant-slowing-economic-growth-in-east-asia-and-pacific.html>.)

The reduced subject can also mark the experiential value in a text. One of them is the use of positive sentences where the subject or perpetrator of the action is omitted. The following headline depicts that.

People asked to raise awareness to tackle Delta variant

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/adv/2021/08/03/people-asked-to-raise-awareness-to-tackle-delta-variant.html>.)

In the headline above, the subject of the action is not visible even though the public generally knew that the government asked the public to increase vigilance in dealing with the Delta variant. The government as the subject was not displayed in the headline.

Contrary to the headlines of the Delta variant news, on the Omicron variant news, the headlines that reported the Omicron variant featured many subjects at the beginning of the sentence, especially in the headlines with the government as the subject. Some are reflected in the following headlines.

Indonesia detects first locally transmitted Omicron case.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2021/12/28/indonesia-detects-first-locally-transmitted-omicron-case.html>.)

Govt confident in Omicron response, urges discipline

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2022/01/10/govt-confident-in-omicron-response-urges-discipline.html>)

Indonesia on high alert for community transmission as Omicron cases jump to 46

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2021/12/26/indonesia-on-high-alert-for-community-transmission-as-omicron-cases-jump-to-46.html>)

BREAKING: Indonesia reports first case of Omicron variant

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2021/12/16/breaking-indonesia-reports-first-case-of-omicron-variant-.html>)

The headline above focused on the actions taken by the subject, that is the Indonesian government. In other words, the news above shows the movements or actions taken by the Indonesian government in dealing with the Omicron variant. Indonesia was arguably more prepared to deal with the Omicron variant than the Delta variant and took a role in dealing with the wave of Omicron variants.

The subject position in several of the news headlines above implies that the spike in COVID-19 cases, especially the Delta variant, was not caused by the government's incompetence, but rather by the hazardous of Delta variant. Apart from that, the government also attempted to say that to overcome COVID-19, the community must also be involved. Overcoming the COVID-19 problem was not solely the government's responsibility. This idea was also supported by [16] who stated that on media, during the pandemic, the government was constructed as a regulator and supervisor of the policy while the community was constructed as the person who had to be responsible for implementing the policy. The government often seemed to be neglecting its responsibilities, one of which is the lockdown policy.

B. Relational Value

To investigate the relational value in a text, the form of sentences, such as interrogative sentences or declarative sentences, can be the clue. In the news headline related to the COVID-19 variant, the text producer raised many interrogative sentences as followed.

Has Delta killed the herd immunity dream?

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2021/08/27/has-delta-killed-the-herd-immunity-dream-.html>.)

Has Indonesia's Delta peak passed? Experts say not yet

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/08/20/has-indonesias-delta-peak-passed-experts-say-not-yet.html>)

How the Delta variant upends assumptions COVID-19

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2021/07/26/how-the-delta-variant-upends-assumptions-covid-19-.html>.)

COVID-19: How to keep the Delta variant away

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/06/30/covid-19-how-to-keep-the-delta-variant-away.html>.)

Contrary to omicron variant news, the headlines seldom feature interrogative sentences. It can be claimed that the text producer left it to the reader to find the answer to the question. In other words, the text producer found many doubts in dealing with the Delta variant. However, it is different when dealing with the Omicron variant where the text producer seemed not to find many doubts or questions yet was more confident in dealing with the Omicron variant as most headlines in Omicron news did not use interrogative sentences.

Indonesia imposes travel ban over Omicron threat. But experts say more needs to be done

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2021/11/28/indonesia-imposes-travel-ban-over-omicron-threat-but-experts-say-more-needs-to-be-done.html>)

Experts warns of upcoming third wave as Omicron spreads

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2022/01/07/experts-warns-of-upcoming-third-wave-as-omicron-spreads.html>)

Interrogative headlines that invited people to wonder and search for answers shows the relationship between community and the government. The relationship constructed is that community became an independent party and was also responsible for themselves, while government as the policy maker as shown headline news of Omicron variants.

C. *Expressive Values*

The expressive value appears in the text in form of the use of excessive vocabulary. In the headline news, it was found that the use of superlative adjectives was mostly used in describing the Delta variant. In addition, the superlative words used were mostly negative. Some examples found are as following where text producers used superlative adjectives with negative values, those are scariest and worst.

Sydney faces 'scariest period' in pandemic amid Delta outbreak.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/06/24/sydney-faces-scariest-period-in-pandemic-amid-delta-outbreak-.html>)

Sydney sees worst day of 2021 as Delta COVID-19 outbreak spreads.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/07/08/sydney-sees-worst-day-of-2021-as-delta-covid-19-outbreak-spreads.html>)

Furthermore, the news about the Delta variant also used negative verbs as following.

Delta variant raging in Papua as hospitals near capacity.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/07/22/delta-variant-raging-in-papua-as-hospitals-near-capacity.html>)

Has Delta killed the herd immunity dream?

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2021/08/27/has-delta-killed-the-herd-immunity-dream-.html>)

Delta variant overwhelms Indonesia's beleaguered Puskesmas.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/07/15/delta-variant-overwhelms-indonesias-beleaguered-puskesmas.html>)

100,000 and counting: Delta-fueled deaths reach grim record.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/08/04/100000-and-counting-delta-fueled-deaths-reach-grim-record.html>)

World Bank says Delta variant slowing economic growth in East Asia and Pacific.

(<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/09/28/world-bank-says-delta-variant-slowing-economic-growth-in-east-asia-and-pacific.html>)

In the headlines above, the text producers chose to use negative verbs such as killed, raging, grim, and slowing. The use of those negative words, both adjectives and verbs, emphasized that Delta variant was very dangerous as it caused suffering. In other words, the existing knowledge in society related to the Delta variant is that it was deadly and had a bad impact on the wider community.

This finding confirms that all loss that happened during pandemic were caused by the virus, especially Delta variant and somehow, society believed that as the truth or the reality. Society stopped accusing government for being incompetent as they believed that Delta variant was the cause of all the loss. The solution to this problem was to live with this virus.

IV. Conclusion

In a news story, ideologies and power relations govern society. It is also portrayed on COVID-19 news during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Jakarta Post as an English-language newspaper in

Indonesia also reported on this pandemic. There are several discourses constructed on the COVID-19 news, one of which is the COVID-19 variant discourse.

Based on the critical discourse analysis conducted through text (vocabulary and grammar), it can be concluded that the discourse constructed on the news of the COVID-19 delta variant was a frightening and deadly variant and had many adverse effects on society widely. Lots of deaths had been caused by the delta variant so that people must be aware of this variant. Meanwhile, the discourse constructed on news related to the Omicron variant was that this variant was not as scary as the Delta variant. The news of Omicron variant constructed a hope that this variant will not be as terrible as the Delta variant.

The discourse in COVID-19 news indirectly represents the power relations that occur in our society. News related to the COVID-19 variant represents how the government's attitude in dealing with the COVID-19 variant. The government appeared to shift the responsibility to the COVID-19 Delta variant when there was a surge in COVID-19 cases caused by the delta variant. By doing so, the government aimed to portray that the increase in cases was not a result of their inability to manage the situation, but rather due to the severity of this variant. People had their own responsibility in protecting themselves from this COVID-19 variant. On the other hand, on news related to the Omicron variant, the government appeared as a leader who was ready to face the onslaught of this variant. The government seemed more confident in dealing with Omicron variant.

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