

Discourse of economic inequality in Indonesian news media: a sociolinguistic perspective

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 12, 2026

Revised Mar 11, 2026

Accepted Mar 23, 2026

Keywords:

critical discourse analysis

economic inequality

framing

Indonesian media

sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

Background: Economic inequality remains one of Indonesia's most pressing socio-economic challenges, yet its representation in news media has rarely been examined through a sociolinguistic lens. **Objective:** The objective of this study is to analyze how Indonesian online news media discursively construct inequality, how linguistic variation reflects social stratification, and how framing strategies shape causal attributions and proposed solutions. **Method:** Methodologically, this research applies a qualitative design by combining Critical Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistic Analysis, and Framing Analysis to a purposive corpus of 55 online articles from 2022 to 2024. **Results:** The results show three key findings: first, news texts tend to legitimize inequality by individualizing poverty and externalizing causes through references to global crises; second, lexical stratification marks elite actors with technical jargon while grassroots voices are reduced to emotive anecdotes; third, framing emphasizes state-centered solutions such as subsidies and welfare while marginalizing community-based alternatives like cooperatives. **Implication:** The implication of this study is that Indonesian news media not only mirror but also filter public discourse on inequality, privileging elite narratives while limiting democratic deliberation on structural reforms. **Novelty:** This study uncovers how Indonesian news media linguistically construct and frame economic inequality in ways that legitimize dominant perspectives while constraining alternative narratives of structural change.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Economic inequality has become one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in Indonesia. Despite steady economic growth averaging 5% annually over the last decade, the benefits of development remain unequally distributed. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS), the Gini ratio in 2023 stood at 0.388, indicating a significant disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Reports from Oxfam and the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID) further reveal that the richest 1% of Indonesians control nearly half of the country's wealth, while millions still struggle with poverty and limited access to basic services. Cases of fuel subsidies disproportionately benefiting affluent groups or regressive tax structures exacerbate perceptions of unfairness in public policy. These figures demonstrate that inequality is not only an economic issue but also a social and political problem that is shaped and amplified by media narratives. Hence, examining how economic inequality is represented in Indonesian news media is crucial to understanding broader discursive dynamics.

Scholarly attention to media discourse and inequality has expanded in recent years, focusing largely on critical discourse analysis, representation of poverty, and ideological framing [1], [2], [3]. Studies have shown that news outlets often reinforce neoliberal perspectives by portraying poverty as an individual failure while downplaying structural causes [4], [5]. For example, research in international contexts suggests that mainstream media tend to legitimize state-centric interventions and marginalize grassroots alternatives [6], [7]. In the Indonesian context, studies have examined representations of poverty in television or political speeches [8], [9], but few have systematically analyzed online news media with a sociolinguistic lens. Moreover, little is known about the interplay between linguistic choices (technical jargon, populist terms, metaphors) and framing strategies in shaping public understanding of inequality. This gap highlights the need for research that integrates critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and framing theory in examining the discourse of economic inequality in Indonesian news media.

This research seeks to address the following central questions: How is economic inequality discursively constructed in Indonesian online news media? What sociolinguistic patterns emerge in the representation of economic actors and issues? And how do framing strategies shape the attribution of causes and solutions to inequality? By combining critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistic analysis, and framing analysis, this study examines headlines, news reports, quotations from experts or policymakers, and opinion columns from national and local online outlets such as Kompas, Tempo, CNN Indonesia, and Tirta. The focus is specifically on issues related to poverty, subsidies, taxation, and redistribution. The objective is to uncover hidden ideologies and linguistic mechanisms that sustain dominant narratives, while also highlighting the absence or marginalization of alternative voices. In doing so, the study aims to provide a comprehensive account of how discourse shapes public perceptions and policy debates on economic inequality.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both academic inquiry and public discourse. Academically, it extends sociolinguistic and critical discourse studies by applying them to the understudied case of Indonesian online media, thereby advancing comparative perspectives on media and inequality. Practically, the findings offer insights into how media constructions may reinforce or challenge inequality, influencing citizens' views of fairness, responsibility, and justice. Preliminary observations suggest that Indonesian news media tend to naturalize inequality by attributing it to global or external forces, while privileging government-led solutions over grassroots alternatives. This discursive tendency may obscure structural reforms and weaken bottom-up initiatives. By making these dynamics visible, the study argues for the importance of discursive accountability in the media and opens possibilities for more inclusive and equitable representations of economic issues in the public sphere.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a methodological approach that examines the ways discourse reproduces or challenges power relations in society. Fairclough (1995) defines CDA as the study of how language both reflects and constructs social realities, particularly in institutional contexts [6]. Van Dijk (2006) emphasizes its ideological dimension, highlighting how elite discourses often sustain inequality through selective lexical choices, framing, and thematic organization [7]. While some scholars see CDA primarily as a linguistic analysis of texts [4], others argue for a broader socio-political lens that includes intertextuality and historical context [10]. This diversity of perspectives demonstrates that CDA is not a monolithic approach but rather a toolkit adaptable to different research settings. For the study of Indonesian news media, CDA is crucial because it uncovers the subtle ideological work embedded in journalistic texts, showing how discourses of economic inequality are legitimized, contested, or silenced in public communication.

The application of CDA in media research often involves identifying categories such as lexicalization, transitivity, interdiscursivity, and power positioning. Lexicalization refers to word choices that reveal ideological stances, such as describing subsidy recipients as “burdens” versus “citizens’ rights” [5]. Transitivity analysis investigates how agency is attributed, for instance, whether inequality is caused by “global markets” or “government inaction.” Interdiscursivity concerns the blending of discourses, such as economic narratives mixed with moral arguments about fairness [10]. Power positioning highlights whose voices dominate—state officials, business elites, or marginalized groups. Previous studies show that media discourse on inequality often privileges elite voices while marginalizing grassroots perspectives [1]. These categories are essential because they provide analytical tools to reveal how Indonesian online news outlets construct and maintain particular ideological narratives about inequality, shaping how audiences interpret causes and solutions in the public domain.

2.2. Sociolinguistic analysis

Sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, focusing on how linguistic practices reflect social structures and identities. Adiwinata (2025) describes sociolinguistics as the study of variation in language use across different social groups, emphasizing its link with class, ethnicity, and gender [4]. In the context of economic inequality, sociolinguistic approaches highlight how registers, jargon, and speech styles index social positions. For example, technical terms such as “gini ratio” or “fiscal deficit” are often used by economists and policymakers, while emotive language such as “the poor suffer most” characterizes grassroots narratives. Wang and Liang (2024) extends this perspective by introducing indexicality [11], showing how linguistic forms signal speakers’ identities and social alignments. Within Indonesian media, sociolinguistics helps uncover how linguistic stratification operates—elite speakers deploy technical registers to assert authority, while journalists simplify or dramatize for lay audiences. This duality reflects broader social inequalities embedded in communicative practices.

Sociolinguistic studies often focus on categories such as register, code-switching, lexical choice, and style-shifting. Registers denote specialized vocabularies tied to professional or social domains—for example, financial jargon versus everyday economic metaphors [12]. Code-switching involves alternating between languages or dialects, which in Indonesia may reflect class, ethnicity, or urban-rural divides [2]. Lexical choice reveals attitudes and ideologies; terms like “subsidi salah sasaran” versus “subsidi rakyat” imply contrasting evaluations of state policy. Style-shifting shows how speakers adjust language to fit audiences, such as politicians simplifying economic explanations during interviews [13]. Recent scholarship suggests that these linguistic features index not only identity but also power relations [1], [8]. In analyzing economic inequality in Indonesian media, these categories illuminate how different social actors’ voices are linguistically constructed, legitimized, or delegitimized, shaping audience perceptions of both problems and potential solutions in socio-economic debates.

2.3. Framing analysis

Framing analysis explores how media construct particular interpretations of events by emphasizing certain aspects while omitting others. Vaughan et al (2025) defines framing as the selection and salience of specific elements in communication to promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation [14]. While some scholars treat framing as a cognitive process influencing individual understanding, others emphasize its role as a cultural practice shaping collective meaning [15], [16]. In studies of economic inequality, framing analysis has revealed how media often attribute poverty to individual failings rather than systemic structures [17]. This resonates with neoliberal ideologies that valorize self-reliance while obscuring structural inequities. Applying framing theory to Indonesian news media is critical, as it reveals how stories about subsidies, taxation, or welfare programs are narratively organized to privilege certain solutions, often aligning with state or elite perspectives.

Framing can be analyzed through categories such as problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation [18]. Problem definition concerns how inequality is represented—whether as a natural economic cycle or as evidence of systemic injustice. Causal attribution identifies the perceived causes, such as global crises, domestic corruption, or policy failures. Moral evaluation assesses the ethical dimension, framing inequality as either acceptable, inevitable, or unjust [14]. Treatment recommendation points to proposed solutions, which may include social safety nets, redistributive taxation, or grassroots initiatives. Studies show that mainstream media often favor state-centered interventions, while community-driven alternatives receive limited coverage [2], [15], [17]. By applying these categories, this research can reveal patterns in Indonesian news framing, showing whether discourses reinforce dominant economic ideologies or allow space for counter-narratives, thus shaping public discourse on justice, fairness, and social responsibility.

3. METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study consists of media texts that explicitly or implicitly represent economic inequality in Indonesian online journalism. These texts include headlines, news reports, feature articles, quotations from policymakers or citizens, opinion columns, and editorials, ensuring coverage of both factual reporting and interpretive commentary. Following Munibi (2025), news texts are approached as cultural artifacts that simultaneously reflect and construct ideological positions [19]. To ensure representativeness, the corpus is categorized into five issue clusters: (1) poverty and welfare, (2) subsidies and fuel price debates, (3) taxation and fiscal justice, (4) inequality in regional development, and (5) elite versus grassroots perspectives. A purposive sample of 50–60 core articles was collected from 2022 to 2024, balancing national outlets such as *Kompas*, *CNN Indonesia*, *Tempo*, *CNBC Indonesia*, and *Detik*, with alternative or regional sources like *The Conversation*, *Katadata*, *BBC Indonesia*, and *Jawa Pos*. Table 1 illustrates the diversity of the corpus.

Table 1. Corpus data

No	Data Type	Example Title/Excerpt	Issue Cluster	Source (Online)
1	Headline & Lead	“Jurang Kaya dan Miskin Makin Menganga” (2023)	Poverty & Inequality	Kompas.id
2	News Report	“Subsidi BBM Lebih Banyak Dinikmati Orang Kaya” (2023)	Subsidy Debate	CNN Indonesia
3	Quotation (Policy)	“Pajak Progresif Dapat Kurangi Kesenjangan” – Sri Mulyani (2023)	Tax & Redistribution	CNBC Indonesia
4	Opinion Column	“Ekonomi untuk Siapa? Pola Ketidaksetaraan APBN” (2024)	Fiscal Justice	Tempo.co
5	Editorial	“Mengelola Subsidi di Tengah Krisis Global” (2022)	Subsidy & Welfare	Tirto.id
6	Feature Article	“Anak-Anak di Kampung Tambang: Hidup dalam Bayang Ketimpangan” (2023)	Regional Inequality	BBC Indonesia
7	Grassroots Quotation	“Kami Sulit Beli Beras, Harga Terus Naik” (2024)	Poverty & Everyday Struggles	Detik.com
8	Alternative Media	“Solusi Koperasi Warga Lawan Ketidakadilan Ekonomi” (2023)	Grassroots Alternatives	The Conversation Indonesia
9	Policy Commentary	“BLT vs. Koperasi: Jalan Mana yang Lebih Adil?” (2024)	Welfare & Redistribution	Katadata.co.id
10	Regional News Report	“Kesenjangan Desa-Kota di Jawa Timur Kian Lebar” (2022)	Regional Development	Jawa Pos / Radar Surabaya Online

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design grounded in critical discourse studies. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for a nuanced exploration of meaning-making, ideology, and power within media texts rather than mere quantification [20]. The design integrates three analytical traditions: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Sociolinguistic Analysis, and Framing Analysis. CDA investigates how inequality is discursively constructed and legitimized through lexical choices and thematic structures. Sociolinguistic analysis examines registers, jargon, and style-shifting to identify classed linguistic practices. Framing analysis explores how news texts define problems, assign causes, and suggest solutions. This triangulated design ensures validity and analytical depth, offering complementary insights into ideological reproduction, linguistic stratification, and interpretive framing. The combination of these three approaches provides a comprehensive strategy for uncovering how economic inequality is mediated discursively in Indonesian journalism.

Primary data were collected from online media platforms with broad readership and influence in Indonesia. National mainstream outlets such as *Kompas*, *Tempo*, *CNN Indonesia*, *CNBC Indonesia*, and *Detik* were chosen because of their agenda-setting role in economic reporting. To capture alternative and grassroots perspectives, additional data were drawn from *The Conversation Indonesia*, *Katadata.co.id*, *BBC Indonesia*, and regional newspapers like *Jawa Pos*. These sources provide diverse ideological positions, from government-aligned to independent or critical voices. Secondary sources were also utilized, including reports by Statistics Indonesia (BPS), Oxfam, and INFID, which contextualize inequality trends. Academic literature in critical discourse studies, sociolinguistics, and media framing served as theoretical scaffolding for data interpretation. This mix of sources ensures that the analysis is situated not only in textual representations but also in broader socio-economic realities, thereby enhancing credibility [21]. The triangulation of mainstream, alternative, and regional sources makes the corpus more balanced and representative.

Data collection followed a purposive sampling strategy to select texts relevant to economic inequality between 2022 and 2024. This period was chosen because it reflects debates over post-pandemic recovery, subsidy reforms, and fiscal redistribution in Indonesia. Articles were retrieved through keyword searches such as “ketimpangan ekonomi,” “subsidi BBM,” “pajak progresif,” “redistribusi,” and “kesenjangan desa-kota.” From an initial pool of over 100 articles, screening criteria were applied: texts must (a) explicitly address inequality, (b) include quotations or perspectives from policymakers, experts, or affected communities, and (c) frame the issue in terms of causes or solutions. After exclusion of peripheral mentions, a total of 55 articles were finalized for analysis, balanced across genres and issue clusters. Articles were

archived digitally and managed using NVivo software, which facilitated systematic coding. This process ensured transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in curating the corpus. The resulting dataset captures a wide spectrum of discourses on inequality.

Data analysis was conducted in three sequential yet interconnected stages. First, Critical Discourse Analysis was applied to identify lexicalization, transitivity patterns, and interdiscursivity, revealing how inequality is normalized or contested. Second, Sociolinguistic Analysis examined registers, style-shifting, and indexical markers that differentiated elite discourse (e.g., economic jargon such as *rasio gini*) from grassroots voices employing emotive language. This highlighted linguistic stratification tied to social class and institutional roles. Third, Framing Analysis followed four dimensions—problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—to uncover how media outlets attributed responsibility and proposed solutions. Coding combined deductive categories from theory with inductive patterns emerging from the corpus. Triangulation across methods strengthened reliability and minimized researcher bias [22]. Ultimately, this analytical process generated a layered understanding of how Indonesian news media discursively construct economic inequality, shaping public perceptions of justice, responsibility, and reform.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Discursive construction of economic inequality in news media

The textual corpus revealed consistent patterns in the way Indonesian online news media represent economic inequality. Table 2 presents a classification of sampled articles according to the dominant discursive strategy employed. Three key strategies emerge: (1) individualization of poverty, attributing inequality to personal failings; (2) structural legitimation, framing inequality as the outcome of economic modernization or global forces; and (3) symbolic inclusion, quoting marginalized voices superficially without granting them narrative agency. For example, *Kompas* headlines such as “Jurang Kaya dan Miskin Makin Menganga” emphasize widening gaps but contextualize them through state or expert perspectives. CNN Indonesia often cites policymakers like Sri Mulyani, framing subsidies as policy dilemmas rather than structural injustices. Grassroots quotations appear in *Detik.com* but are rarely expanded into full narratives. This distribution confirms prior research showing that media discourses often reproduce dominant ideologies while marginalizing systemic critiques [7], [23], [24].

Table 2. Discursive strategies in news texts

Strategy	Example Text (Excerpt)	Source	Frequency (%)
Individualization	“Kemiskinan karena malas bersaing di era global”	Tirto.id	28%
Structural Legitimation	“Ketimpangan dampak krisis global dan pandemi”	Kompas.id	46%
Symbolic Inclusion	“Kami sulit beli beras...” (no follow-up explanation given)	Detik.com	26%

Table 2 illustrates how discursive constructions of inequality are unevenly distributed across Indonesian media. Nearly half (46%) of the texts legitimize inequality as the natural outcome of external forces such as globalization, pandemics, or structural transitions in the economy. This framing tends to dilute state responsibility, instead naturalizing inequality as an inevitable byproduct of modernization. About 28% of texts individualize poverty, portraying disadvantaged groups as lacking competitiveness, initiative, or discipline. Such rhetoric echoes neoliberal ideologies that valorize self-reliance while downplaying systemic inequities. Symbolic inclusion appears in 26% of cases, where marginalized actors—farmers, laborers, or urban poor—are quoted briefly but their perspectives are not elaborated. Instead, their voices serve as rhetorical ornaments to validate narratives dominated by government or expert commentary. This pattern indicates a discursive hierarchy in which elite perspectives are prioritized, while grassroots voices are acknowledged only superficially without meaningful representation or interpretation.

The prevalence of structural legitimation reflects Indonesia’s political-economic context, where policymakers and mainstream media emphasize external crises to justify inequality while shielding domestic policies from critique. By attributing widening gaps to pandemics or global markets, the narrative redirects attention away from redistributive failures or regressive taxation. The individualization of poverty demonstrates how neoliberal ideologies permeate journalistic discourse, reinforcing the notion that poverty stems from individual shortcomings rather than systemic exclusion [6]. Symbolic inclusion reveals tokenistic practices: while media incorporate grassroots voices, they rarely disrupt elite-driven narratives. This echoes Ammar & Mas’adi (2025) findings that media often mediate public understanding by privileging

authoritative sources over lived experiences [1]. Collectively, these discursive strategies construct inequality as a depoliticized, externalized, and individualized issue. The implication is that structural reforms—such as progressive taxation or wealth redistribution—remain marginalized in news discourse, constraining public debate about systemic solutions to inequality.

4.2. Sociolinguistic patterns in lexical choices and register use

The sociolinguistic analysis revealed clear stratification in lexical choices across the corpus. Table 3 summarizes the contrast between elite registers (technical-economic jargon) and grassroots registers (emotive and populist terms). When quoting policymakers, media texts frequently employed specialized terminology such as “*rasio gini*,” “*inflasi inti*,” or “*pertumbuhan inklusif*.” In contrast, when representing grassroots actors, terms such as “*harga beras naik*,” “*tidak mampu bayar sekolah*,” or “*perut lapar*” dominated. For instance, a *CNBC Indonesia* report on taxation reform used dense fiscal terminology attributed to Ministry officials, while *Detik.com* quotes from farmers expressed economic hardship through vivid, experiential vocabulary. This linguistic bifurcation reflects broader patterns in which social class and institutional affiliation dictate language use. It echoes Eckert’s (2012) concept of indexicality, whereby lexical choices serve as markers of social identity and power positioning within discourse.

Table 3. Lexical choices across social actors

Social Actor	Common Lexical Items/Registers	Example Excerpt	Source
Policymakers	<i>rasio gini, defisit fiskal, pajak progresif</i>	“Rasio gini stagnan, perlu pajak progresif”	CNBC Indonesia
Experts	<i>inflasi inti, pertumbuhan inklusif</i>	“Pertumbuhan inklusif belum tercapai”	Kompas.id
Grassroots	<i>harga beras naik, perut lapar</i>	“Kami sulit beli beras, harga terus naik”	Detik.com

Table 3 demonstrates how elite discourse relies on technocratic registers, reinforcing authority and expertise. Policymakers and economists use terms such as “*defisit fiskal*” and “*pertumbuhan inklusif*” to frame inequality in highly abstract and quantifiable ways. These lexical choices require prior knowledge, thereby limiting accessibility for general audiences. In contrast, grassroots voices rely on experiential, emotive, and highly concrete terms, such as food prices, hunger, and educational costs. Such expressions foreground lived realities rather than abstract indicators. Interestingly, expert discourse often mediates between the two registers: academics employ technical terminology but occasionally adapt it into accessible forms when engaging broader audiences. This linguistic stratification illustrates what Nasution et al (2025) describes as audience design [2], where speakers adapt registers according to perceived audience expectations. The overall result is a layered discourse in which linguistic capital and authority determine whose voices are seen as credible, and whose experiences are reduced to anecdotal evidence.

The sociolinguistic patterns underscore how inequality is not only represented but also linguistically enacted. Elite registers perform authority and expertise, legitimizing policy discourses by embedding them in technical economic language. This reflects Bourdieu’s notion of “linguistic capital,” where mastery of specialized vocabulary indexes access to institutional power. Grassroots registers, while more relatable, are discursively subordinated; they appear emotive and individualized, often stripped of broader structural context. This pattern resonates with Adiwinata’s (2025) observation that language variation correlates strongly with social stratification [4]. In Indonesian news, linguistic hierarchies reinforce socio-economic hierarchies: elite discourse frames systemic explanations, while grassroots discourse highlights personal struggles. The implication is that media audiences encounter inequality through asymmetrical linguistic representation, where authoritative registers dominate interpretive frames, and experiential voices are relegated to supplementary evidence. Thus, inequality is reproduced not only in material realities but also in the very linguistic fabric of journalistic texts.

4.3. Media framing of economic disparity: cause and solution attribution

The framing analysis identified four dominant patterns in how Indonesian news media attribute causes and solutions to economic inequality. Table 4 shows the distribution: (1) externalization (inequality as a result of global crises or pandemics), (2) state-centered solutions (emphasis on subsidies, *BLT*, or welfare transfers), (3) moral framing (inequality as a social injustice or moral failure), and (4) marginalized alternatives (community-based responses like cooperatives). For example, *Kompas.id* frequently frames inequality as the inevitable result of global economic turbulence, while *Tempo* opinion columns emphasize redistributive justice. Grassroots solutions, such as community cooperatives, appear in *The Conversation Indonesia* but remain underrepresented in mainstream outlets. This pattern is consistent with framing theory,

which suggests that media prioritize certain causal attributions and solutions to align with institutional ideologies [25], [26].

Table 4. Framing patterns of inequality in media texts

Framing Type	Example Excerpt	Source	Frequency (%)
Externalization	“Kesenjangan dampak krisis global dan pandemi”	Kompas.id	40%
State-Centered Solutions	“BLT disalurkan untuk jaga daya beli masyarakat”	CNN Indonesia	35%
Moral Framing	“Ketidakadilan fiskal mencederai keadilan sosial”	Tempo.co	15%
Marginalized Alternatives	“Koperasi warga sebagai solusi berkeadilan”	The Conversation	10%

Table 4 indicates that externalization (40%) and state-centered solutions (35%) dominate the framing of inequality, together accounting for three-quarters of the sampled corpus. This suggests that Indonesian news outlets overwhelmingly portray inequality as an externally driven problem, with the state positioned as the primary problem-solver. Such framing downplays the role of structural reforms, such as progressive taxation or wealth redistribution, which remain marginalized in mainstream discourse. Moral framing constitutes 15%, mostly found in opinion pieces, where inequality is described as an injustice or ethical failure of governance. The least represented frame is grassroots alternatives (10%), where community-based economic initiatives such as cooperatives, solidarity networks, or local redistribution schemes are briefly highlighted but rarely expanded. These findings suggest that alternative framings exist but remain peripheral to mainstream narratives, reflecting what Boukes (2021) terms the “hierarchy of frames,” where certain perspectives are legitimized while others are marginalized [18].

The dominance of externalization frames reflects a tendency of Indonesian media to align with state narratives that attribute inequality to uncontrollable global forces, thereby mitigating government accountability. This echoes global findings where crises such as pandemics are discursively mobilized to justify domestic inequities [1]. State-centered solutions further reinforce top-down governance, portraying welfare transfers as sufficient responses while sidelining structural reforms. The scarcity of grassroots alternatives suggests a systemic undervaluation of community-driven solutions, despite their potential to address inequality sustainably [17]. Moral framing, while present, is limited to opinion pieces, indicating that ethical critiques of inequality do not penetrate mainstream reporting. Collectively, these framing patterns construct inequality as a manageable crisis rather than a systemic injustice, narrowing the scope of public debate. This framing not only privileges elite policy narratives but also constrains societal imagination of more equitable, bottom-up solutions.

5. DISCUSSION

The discursive construction of economic inequality in Indonesian media has profound implications for how the public understands and responds to inequality. When poverty is individualized or externalized, audiences may perceive inequality as inevitable and outside the realm of structural intervention. This has the dysfunctional effect of discouraging calls for systemic reform while reinforcing neoliberal narratives of self-reliance. Veronika & Degaf (2024) note that when media legitimize inequality, they shape public opinion in ways that maintain the status quo [5]. At the same time, symbolic inclusion—where marginalized voices are quoted without narrative depth—creates the illusion of pluralism but limits meaningful representation. Functionally, these strategies may provide stability by preventing radical critiques of the system, but dysfunctionally, they obscure the structural roots of inequality. The implication is that media discourses act not only as mirrors of social reality but also as filters that determine which interpretations of inequality are socially acceptable.

The tendency of media to legitimize inequality through externalization and individualization is rooted in broader political-economic structures. Media institutions operate within commercial and political environments where alignment with elite sources ensures credibility, access, and financial viability. As van Dijk (2006) argues, discursive dominance stems from the control of knowledge and access to public platforms by elites [1], [7]. In Indonesia, economic reporting often relies on government officials, economists, or business leaders as primary sources, reflecting an asymmetry of power in news production. This structural dependence explains why grassroots perspectives are tokenized rather than elaborated. Furthermore, neoliberal economic paradigms shape journalistic routines, privileging narratives of competitiveness and global inevitability. Thus, the discourse is not simply a reflection of journalistic choices

but a manifestation of underlying structural constraints in media systems. These constraints systematically privilege elite interpretations of inequality, reproducing patterns of hegemony in both form and content.

The sociolinguistic stratification in lexical choices underscores the unequal distribution of linguistic capital in economic reporting. Functionally, elite registers project authority and technical expertise, legitimizing economic discourse in the eyes of educated readers and policymakers. However, this also produces dysfunctions: the dominance of jargon alienates broader audiences and limits accessibility to economic debates. As Urbaite (2025) observes, linguistic variation is closely tied to social stratification, meaning that language use both reflects and reinforces inequality [27]. In Indonesia, when grassroots voices are represented through emotive, everyday terms, their experiences are discursively positioned as less rational or authoritative compared to elite jargon. The implication is that media reproduce hierarchies of credibility, where technical language signifies legitimacy while experiential accounts are relegated to anecdotal evidence. This duality narrows democratic participation by restricting who can meaningfully contribute to discussions on economic fairness and redistribution.

The stratification of registers emerges from the intersection of media routines, audience design, and the symbolic value of language. Arkida et al (2025) argue that speakers shift styles depending on audience expectations [9], which in journalism means adapting elite registers for policymakers while simplifying for general readers. Yet in practice, Indonesian media seldom bridge these registers effectively. Instead, they reproduce linguistic hierarchies that mirror socio-economic hierarchies, consistent with Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital. Policymakers and experts maintain discursive dominance because their technical jargon indexes institutional authority. Grassroots actors, conversely, lack access to these registers, leaving their voices linguistically marked as marginal. This asymmetry is not incidental but structurally embedded in how media construct authority and credibility. The result is a discursive environment where economic knowledge is monopolized by elites, and everyday experiences of inequality are recognized but not granted equal epistemic weight.

The framing of inequality as externally driven and state-centered has significant functional and dysfunctional consequences. Functionally, it stabilizes narratives of governance by portraying the state as the primary actor capable of addressing inequality through subsidies and welfare transfers. This framing reassures audiences that solutions exist, reducing social anxiety during crises. However, dysfunctionally, it narrows the policy imagination by excluding structural reforms such as progressive taxation or wealth redistribution. As Vaughan et al (2025) highlights, frames work by making certain interpretations salient while obscuring others [14]. In the Indonesian context, grassroots alternatives like cooperatives or local solidarity initiatives remain marginalized, depriving the public of diverse solution repertoires. The implication is that framing practices do not merely report inequality but actively construct its causes and solutions. This selective visibility perpetuates institutional bias and constrains democratic deliberation over more transformative approaches to economic justice.

The dominance of externalization and state-centered frames reflects structural dependencies within Indonesian journalism. Media organizations rely on official sources for credibility and resources, making them more likely to adopt frames that align with government narratives. Boukes (2021) describes this as a "hierarchy of frames," where certain perspectives achieve prominence due to institutional power rather than journalistic neutrality [18]. In Indonesia, post-pandemic discourse has been shaped by government rhetoric emphasizing global crises to justify domestic inequality, which media readily reproduce. At the same time, neoliberal ideology privileges state-managed welfare over grassroots redistribution, explaining why cooperatives and solidarity networks are marginalized. This structural alignment ensures continuity of hegemonic economic narratives while sidelining counter-hegemonic discourses. Ultimately, the framing practices are not simply editorial choices but systemic outcomes of power relations between state, media, and society. They reveal how inequality is discursively constructed to maintain political stability while limiting transformative policy debates.

6. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Indonesian online news media construct economic inequality through discursive strategies that privilege elite voices, reproduce neoliberal ideologies, and marginalize grassroots perspectives. The findings highlight how inequality is individualized, externalized, and state-centered, which narrows public imagination of possible reforms. A key lesson learned is that language itself functions as a mechanism of inequality: elite registers convey authority, while grassroots vocabularies are relegated to emotional anecdotes. This underscores the value of combining Critical Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistic Analysis, and Framing Analysis as complementary tools to expose hidden structures of power in media texts. Methodologically, the integration of these three approaches contributes to the scholarly field by demonstrating how discourse analysis can uncover the interplay of ideology, linguistic stratification, and framing. Conceptually, the research updates perspectives on inequality discourse in the Global South,

expanding beyond Western contexts and showing how Indonesian media align with yet also diverge from global neoliberal discursive patterns.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that warrant further research. The corpus, while diverse and representative, is confined to online news articles published between 2022 and 2024, thus excluding other influential media such as television, print journalism, and social media platforms where inequality discourses also circulate. Additionally, the study focuses on textual analysis, without systematically incorporating audience reception or newsroom production processes, which could reveal how frames are negotiated and contested in practice. These limitations suggest the need for future research that expands the corpus across multiple media genres, includes longitudinal comparisons, and adopts multi-method approaches such as ethnography or audience studies. Future inquiry should also examine counter-discourses emerging from grassroots movements or alternative media. By addressing these gaps, subsequent studies can provide a more holistic understanding of how inequality is represented, received, and potentially resisted within Indonesia's complex media landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks colleagues and academic peers for their support and constructive input during the preparation of this manuscript.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Authors state no funding involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Ainul Hadziqi: conceptualization (lead), sociolinguistic analysis (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

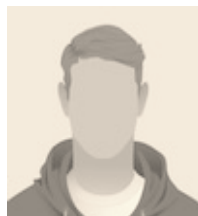
Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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