A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Insulting Language in Indonesian Online Media

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how insulting language is used in Indonesian online media and how it reflects social context through the lens of register theory. The research aims to examine how the use of offensive terms such as bodoh, tolol, goblok, and dungu varies according to field, tenor, and mode, and how these variations relate to the speaker's role and communicative purpose. The study analyzed 20 utterances containing insulting language, quoted in news articles published on detik.com between January and June 2025. The data were purposively sampled to include diverse speakers, netizens, religious leaders, political figures, and commentators, allowing the study to capture linguistic variation across social roles. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study employed manual content analysis based on Halliday's (1978) theory of register. Each utterance was examined in relation to its field, tenor, and mode. The results show that netizens tend to use insults as spontaneous expressions of emotion and group alignment, while public figures use similar language more strategically, either to persuade, criticize, or assert authority. Religious and political leaders, for example, use offensive terms rhetorically within moral or ideological discourse, revealing that insulting language is not always intended to harm but can also serve as a tool for emphasis, contrast, or resistance. The study concludes that offensive language in digital media is deeply shaped by social context and communicative intent. These findings contribute to sociolinguistics and applied communication by demonstrating how language, especially in its harshest forms; constructs identity, authority, and meaning in contemporary digital interaction.

Keywords: *Digital Discourse; Insulting Language; Online Media; Register Theory; Sociolinguistics.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication that represents social identity, ideology, and power relations in society Money & Evans, (2018). In the context of online media, the use of language has expanded in function and style, including in the use of profanity Nugroho et al., 2023. Profanity, which was once considered taboo, now frequently appears in digital public spaces such as online news (Song et al., 2021). Online media such as Detik.com has become a space where profanity is not only found

in netizen comments but also in quotes from public figures and political elites Gathmyr & Surenggo, (2022).

Online media has become the primary space for the exchange of information, opinions, and self-expression among society Balkin, (2017). One phenomenon that is increasingly prominent in online communication is the widespread use of profanity or language that tends to be impolite, whether in news articles, comment sections, or discussion forums Rega et al., (2023). This phenomenon reflects complex socio-linguistic dynamics, where the form and function of language undergo adaptation according to the context and communicative purposes of its users Weirich, (2021).

Profanity, as part of informal or even offensive register, not only reflects the emotions or attitudes of the speaker, but can also represent ideology, power, and resistance in public discourse Mclntosh, (2021). Online media such as Detik.com provide an interactive space where harsh language often appears, whether in news headlines, quotes from sources, or in reader comment columns Purwaningrum & Harmoko, (2023). Although Detik.com is a mainstream media outlet, the use of harsh words can still be found implicitly or explicitly, depending on the context and reporting strategy.

The rise of digital communication has brought about a significant shift in the way people use language, particularly in public and semi-public forums such as online news portals and social media Gnach, (2017). In Indonesia, this shift is especially visible in the increasing prevalence of insulting language; terms such as bodoh (stupid), goblok (idiot), bego (dumb), tolol (foolish), and even more extreme expressions like bangsat (bastard) or anjing (dog), circulating freely across platforms. These terms appear not only in anonymous comment sections but also in formal contexts, including political speeches, news quotations, and public statements Wu & Atkin, (2018). This raises important sociolinguistic questions about the role of language variation, appropriateness, and identity in digital discourse.

In sociolinguistic studies, the phenomenon of language variation in certain social situations can be examined through the concept of register. Register refers to the variety of language used in a particular social context or situation, encompassing lexical choices, syntactic structures, and distinctive communication styles. According to Halliday (1978), register is formed by three main dimensions: field, tenor, and mode, all of which influence how language is shaped and used in a particular context. This study adopts Halliday's theory of register as a framework to understand how insulting language functions in relation to context. Halliday (1978) proposed that language variation can be systematically described through the concept of register, which consists of three components: field (the social activity or topic), tenor (the relationship between participants), and mode (the channel or format of communication). Insulting language may carry different meanings and functions depending on who uses it, to whom it is addressed, in what social setting, and through what medium. For example, an insult uttered by a political figure during a press conference may differ significantly in register from an insult typed by a netizen in a comment thread, even if the words are lexically identical.

The use of insults in Indonesian online media is particularly interesting to analyze because it occurs across a wide range of registers. From formal to informal, spoken to written, and from institutional to personal Ayomi et al., (2025). Public figures may use insults as rhetorical strategies to assert dominance or appeal to populist sentiments, while netizens might use them to vent frustration, signal group membership, or provoke reactions Sakki & Martikaien, (2021). Despite their seemingly coarse nature, such linguistic choices are not random. They are shaped by communicative goals, social identities, and relationships between speakers and audiences, all of which are reflected in their register Swann, (2019). This research is grounded in the idea that language choices, especially the use of offensive language, are socially meaningful and context-dependent.

Several academic journals address the use of language, particularly offensive or harsh language, within social media in Indonesia. Setyaningtias et al. (2023) investigates the types and functions of swearing words used by multicultural students in an Indonesian dormitory. The study identifies five types of swearing words (obscenity, abusive, blasphemy, expletive, and humorous) and three functions (expressing anger/annoyance, and showing intimacy). While it provides a sociolinguistic analysis of swearing words among a specific group of young people, its focus is not on online media, presenting a gap in how these types and functions of swearing words manifest and are used as insulting language specifically in Indonesian online media.

Mubarok et al. (2024) explores abusive comments, specifically hate speech, on Indonesian social media (Instagram) using a forensic linguistics approach. The findings indicate that hate speech expresses negative attitudes, often implicitly, and can constitute criminal acts, potentially inciting communal anger. This study directly addresses hate speech on Indonesian social media and its legal implications, which aligns closely with the user's article title. The gap it hints at is the need for a deeper comprehension of the potential legal implications and the significance of courteous language adherence to established norms and laws within the online sphere. It provides a strong foundation for examining insulting language in this context.

Tahir and Ramadhan (2024) investigates Indonesian netizens' hate comments on YouTube presidential talk shows. The study found that "early warning" (43%), dehumanization and demonization (21%), violence and incitement (19%), and offensive language (17%) were the most common forms of hate comments, with anonymity and personality traits being contributing factors. This research explicitly states that hate speech in the form of hate comments on social media, nevertheless, has received little attention in the Indonesian context, primarily focusing on such political discourse aspects. This directly supports the need for a broader sociolinguistic analysis of insulting language beyond just political discourse, aligning perfectly with the user's article title.

Aditya et al. (2024) uses a forensic linguistic approach to investigate insulting language in Labrak Pelakor viral videos on YouTube. It identifies 60 utterances containing insulting language and proves the speakers' intent to insult. This study

closely aligns with the user's topic by analyzing insulting language in Indonesian online media (YouTube videos). Its forensic linguistics focus provides a detailed lexicogrammatical analysis, but a broader sociolinguistic analysis could explore the social implications, audience reception, and wider societal impact of such language beyond just identifying the perpetrators and their intent.

Mardikantoro et al. (2023) investigates types and forms of Indonesian language varieties on social media, finding that non-standard varieties and code-switching/mixing are common. The study concludes that it is necessary to research the use of codes, politeness, or hate speech on social media. Dara et al. (2023) uses a corpus-based approach to study offensive words, focusing on changes across gender, time, and register. It found that certain words are used more frequently by men and vary across different periods and contexts. This study acknowledges a gap concerning corpus-based studies of offensive language, particularly regarding equal scores in swearing between men and women reported in some studies versus theories claiming men are more aggressive. While sociolinguistic, its general English focus highlights the need for similar corpus-based studies specifically on insulting language in Indonesian online media.

These studies highlight the growing scholarly interest in offensive and abusive language but also reveal a significant gap: the lack of systematic analysis on how insulting language varies by register in Indonesian online media. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how field, tenor, and mode influence the way insults are constructed and interpreted across different types of speakers (politicians, public figures, netizens), platforms (news portals, comment sections), and communicative purposes (persuasion, criticism, mockery).

To address this gap, this study examines how insulting language is shaped by register variation in Indonesian online media, particularly as found in detik.com, a widely read digital news platform that frequently quotes both elite and ordinary speakers. The research focuses on the linguistic forms of insults used and explores how social context defined through field, tenor, and mode affects their use, meaning, and function. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of insulting language not simply as aggression, but as part of socially situated communicative strategies. This study aims to identify the types of insulting expressions used by different actors in digital discourse and to analyze how register variables shape their social implications. It asks how the social roles and relationships between speakers and audiences influence the use of insults, and how media platforms mediate and even amplify these expressions. The goal is to contribute to the understanding of insulting language as a patterned, context-sensitive form of communication rather than merely deviant or emotional outbursts.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within the framework of sociolinguistics, specifically drawing on M.A.K. Halliday's theory of register Matthiessen, (2019). The qualitative method is used to explore and describe how

insulting language is shaped by contextual variables; field, tenor, and mode in the discourse of Indonesian online media. Rather than measuring the frequency of insults or testing hypotheses statistically, this approach aims to interpret language as a socially situated phenomenon. Through in-depth analysis of utterances quoted in digital media, the study investigates how different social actors (e.g., politicians, public figures, netizens) use and frame insulting expressions, and how these reflect the communicative goals and social relationships embedded in various online contexts. In sum, the qualitative method adopted in this study enables an in-depth exploration of insulting language as a context-sensitive linguistic practice, revealing not only the forms of such language but also the social meanings and communicative strategies underlying its use in contemporary Indonesian online media.

The data were collected from detik.com, one of Indonesia's most widely accessed digital news portals, known for its extensive coverage of political, social, and entertainment events and for quoting direct speech from public figures and ordinary netizens alike Lisnawati, (2024). The data set includes spoken or quoted utterances containing insulting language, which were published between January 1, 2025 and June 15, 2025. These utterances were selected based on the presence of explicit insulting terms (such as bodoh, goblok, tolol, bego, kampret, anjing, and bangsat) in public discourse, with attention to who said them, to whom, in what situation, and through what media format (e.g., in a speech, social media post, or interview). A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the selection of utterances that are rich in social meaning and relevant to the research objectives Al-Hamzi et al., (2024).

The primary data collection method involved manually extracting and transcribing direct quotations from online news articles. These quotations were organized in a format, categorized according to speaker identity (e.g., political figure, religious leader, celebrity, netizen), communicative context, and media type. This allowed the researcher to systematically examine the linguistic forms of the insults in relation to register variables. The instrument of the study was a table designed by the researcher to record information about the three dimensions of register: field (topic or activity being discussed), tenor (social relationship between speaker and audience), and mode (spoken/written, formal/informal, mediated/unmediated).

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied through cross-checking between the categories of speaker, context, and linguistic features Aguilar, (2020). Reflexive analysis was also conducted to identify potential researcher bias and to ensure that interpretations were firmly grounded in the data. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed contextual information for each data excerpt, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings in other similar online media settings.

For data analysis, the study followed a thematic and contextual approach grounded in the register theory. Each utterance was analyzed in terms of its lexicogrammatical features (e.g., word choice, sentence type), its communicative purpose (e.g., expressing anger, asserting authority, mocking), and its register

dimensions (field, tenor, mode). Patterns were identified across utterances to reveal how insulting language operates differently depending on who uses it, in what context, and for what function Owen, (2019). The analysis also sought to explain how language reflects broader norms of appropriateness, authority, and social identity in digital discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of insulting language used by Indonesian netizens in online discourse reveals several prominent linguistic and contextual patterns. Applying Halliday's (1978) theory of register specifically, examining the field (topic or activity), tenor (relationship between speaker and audience), and mode (medium or form of discourse). This section discusses how insults are constructed, why they are used, and what they reflect about online sociolinguistic behavior.

Table 1. Insults by netizens

No	Quatation	Insulting Words	Field	Tenor	Mode
1	Es teh kamu masih banyak? Ya dijual lah, goblok	goblok	Sarcastic comments/personal consumption	Netizens → the public (general/satirical)	Writing, informal, sarcastic
2	Penasehat pengurus besar NU, orang2 NU pada bodoh kali ya?	bodoh	Politics/religion	Netizens → institutions (NU)	Writing, informal
3	Lo aja bodoh	bodoh	Social/neighborly relations	Netizens → neighbors (direct)	Writing, semi-dialogic, informal
4	Turis bodoh itu seharusnya tetap tinggal di rumah	bodoh	Tourism/environment	Netizens → foreign tourists	Writing, formal-cynical
5	Ini pertanyaan orang bodoh saja ya	bodoh	Politics/economy	Netizens → politicians/officials	Writing, formal-cynical
6	Hei pensiunan TNI, anda bodoh kalau memilih orang yang kita pecat	bodoh	Politics/elections	Netizens → retired military personnel	Writing, sharp, public
7	Ah aya-aya wae bangsat teh, janten ninggalkeun nu awon...	bangsat	Crime	Netizens → thieves	Indonesian-Sundanese mix, emotional
8	Ten Hag ini emang pelatih goblok	goblok	Sports/soccer	Netizens → MU coach (public figure)	Writing, informal
9	Goblok parah emang si driver...	goblok	Traffic/accidents	Netizens → drivers	Writing, informal
10	Heran deh sama … eksperimen goblok	goblok	Sports/soccer	Netizens → soccer	Writing, informal

				coaches	
11	Aduh ngeri bgt... tolol bgt supir anjg	tolol, anjg	Accidents/traffic	Netizens → drivers	Writing, very informal, emotional
12	Emang supir tolol anjeng, Cipondoh tuh kecil...	tolol, anjeng	Transportation/urban	Netizens → truck drivers	Writing, crude, local
13	Tolol kok dipamerin dan merasa bangga sih	tolol	Social	Netizens → public figures	Writing, informal
14	Embuh lah, pekok dasare	pekok	Pendidikan/sekolah	Netizen → sesama orang tua murid	Writing (chat), informal
15	Pegawai... sering dicap goblok	goblok	Institusi/pemerintahan	Netizen → narasi umum (indirek)	Writing, neutral

Register Realization in Netizen Insults

The **field** of these utterances spans across informal and reactive situations: traffic accidents, sports commentary, political dissatisfaction, and daily complaints. For example, "*Aduh ngeri bgt liat kecelakan truk… tolol bgt supir anjg*" reflects spontaneous outrage following a public traffic incident. Similarly, "*Goblok parah emang si driver…*" and "*Emang supir tolol anjeng…*" suggest a pattern of emotionally charged, reactionary commentary tied to public safety concerns. In contrast, the utterance "*Penasehat pengurus besar nahdlatul ulama, orang2 NU pada bodoh kali ya?*" shows the field shifting to religious leadership, with an underlying critique of institutional corruption.

The **tenor** in these examples is typically horizontal or indirect. Most netizen utterances are not addressed to specific individuals but rather expressed **toward the public** or **a generalized subject** (e.g., *supir*, *orang NU*, *cowok yang gak puasa*). This diffuse tenor allows speakers to express harsh criticisms without accountability, reinforcing what Tahir and Ramadhan (2024) describe as the **amplifying role of anonymity and emotional detachment in hate comments.** The absence of reciprocal dialogue promotes the uninhibited use of insults such as *tolol*, *goblok*, *bego*, and *bangsat*, terms which would likely be mitigated or censored in face-to-face interaction.

In terms of **mode**, all utterances are written (text-based), informal, and posted in highly accessible digital spaces (e.g., social media, comment sections, and public forums quoted by *detik.com*). This written-yet-conversational mode reinforces Halliday's idea that language choices are shaped by communicative channels. Here, the mode encourages expressive, often exaggerated speech acts that mimic spontaneous oral speech. The casual style ("*lo aja bodoh*", "*embuh lah, pekok dasare*") reflects not only informality but a form of **digital orality**, speech-like writing shaped by online media.

The use of insulting language by netizens primarily serves **expressive and evaluative functions**, aligning with Setyaningtias et al.'s (2023) findings on the use of

swearing to express annoyance and frustration. Phrases such as "*itu sih cowoknya… tolol kok dipamerin*" and "*ten hag emang pelatih goblok*" express subjective discontent and disapproval. The lexicon of insult becomes a tool to position the speaker as morally or intellectually superior to the target, whether that be a soccer coach, public official, or anonymous driver.

Furthermore, netizens employ insults to build **group alignment** and reinforce social values. For instance, "*tolol bgt supir anjg…*" is not only an attack but also a declaration of shared outrage, assuming an audience who agrees with the condemnation. This function is similar to what Romlah et al. (2024) describe as **"ridiculing to create social distance",** and it reflects an informal digital norm in which harshness functions as a shorthand for solidarity and truth-telling.

Another recurring pattern is the use of insulting language as a form of **social commentary**, particularly in political or institutional critique. For example, the sarcastic comment about the NU leadership "*orang2 NU pada bodoh kali ya?*" exemplifies how insults target systemic frustration rather than individuals. Mubarok et al. (2024) emphasize that such utterances may not be legally actionable hate speech but still contribute to a **toxic online atmosphere** that normalizes verbal aggression as political expression.

Compared to previous studies, this research finds that netizens do not merely use insults as reactions to specific issues but as a broader **mode of digital self-expression**. Tahir and Ramadhan (2024) primarily categorized hate speech into rigid types (e.g., dehumanization, violence), yet the data here show a **fluid, situational use of insult**, often layered with humor, sarcasm, or emotional appeal. This aligns with Dara et al. (2023), who point out that offensive language often shifts in meaning depending on **register and social setting**, and supports the argument that context-sensitive analysis is essential.

However, while prior studies focused on the content and criminality of speech (e.g., Mubarok et al., 2024; Aditya et al., 2024), this study emphasizes the **linguistic patterns of register**; how form, participant role, and medium interact to shape insult expression. By showing how *mode* and *tenor* influence the intensity and acceptability of such language, this research adds a fresh contribution to sociolinguistic discussions of verbal aggression in Indonesia.

Table 2. Insults by religious leader

No	Quatation	Insulting Words	Field	Tenor	Mode
1	Boleh beda pilihan tapi kudu rukun. Warga jadi pendukung harus cerdas, jangan pendukung goblok. Cerdas itu menyosialisasikan programnya, bukan menjelekkan calon lainnya	goblok	Politics/ election	Religious leaders → general public (advice)	Oral (quoted in the media), formal-informal

2	Kalau pendukung goblok itu yang menjelek-jelekkan calon lainnya. Saya itu hubungan dengan Ganjar baik, dengan Anies baik, dengan Prabowo baik banget. Saya dengan Bu Khofifah dan Pak Prabowo kenal banget	bodoh	Politics/ election	Religious leaders → public/netizens	Oral (interview/ quotation), informal-rhetorical

Register Realization in Religious Leader Insults

The analysis of insulting language used by religious figures reveals a distinct linguistic strategy in which derogatory terms. Such as *goblok*, are embedded within larger moral appeals and persuasive political messages. Unlike netizen insults, which tend to be spontaneous, aggressive, and emotionally charged, the use of insulting language by religious leaders is more calculated and rhetorically structured, demonstrating a shift in **register** shaped by the speaker's role and communicative goals.

In the utterance "*Warga jadi pendukung harus cerdas, jangan pendukung goblok,*" the **field** is clearly political, centering on electoral behavior and the responsibilities of voters. The **tenor** here is asymmetrical: a religious leader speaking from a position of authority to the general public. Despite the use of the informal and highly offensive term *goblok*, the **mode** of communication, public speech, later quoted in digital news etains a semi-formal character, as the speech is intended for a wide audience and fulfills a persuasive function. The insult is used not to degrade a specific individual, but to contrast two types of citizens: the "smart" voter and the "stupid" one. Here, *goblok* functions as a **negative model** to be rejected, reinforcing a normative stance that responsible political participation involves rational discussion, not defamation.

This aligns with Halliday's concept of **register**, particularly how **tenor and field** influence lexical choices. The status of the speaker (religious figure), the seriousness of the topic (national politics), and the public nature of the mode all contribute to the calculated yet emotive use of insulting language. The term *goblok*, though harsh, is strategically used to emphasize moral differentiation rather than personal attack.

The second utterance "*Kalau pendukung goblok itu yang menjelek-jelekkan calon lainnya. Saya itu hubungan dengan Ganjar baik, dengan Anies baik, dengan Prabowo baik banget*"—further demonstrates how insulting language is integrated within a rhetoric of political neutrality and harmony. In this case, the insult functions as an **ideological marker**, used to condemn divisive political behavior (e.g., slandering opponents) rather than to vilify particular individuals. The speaker constructs an ethos of moderation and inclusivity, aligning himself with multiple political actors while distancing from those labeled as *goblok*—a move that reinforces his authority as a moral guide. The **mode** here, while informal in tone, carries significant discursive weight due to its circulation in mass media and its association with a religious figure.

Compared to previous studies, these findings highlight a more nuanced function of insulting language. While Mubarok et al. (2024) and Tahir and Ramadhan (2024) focus primarily on netizen-driven hate speech and its aggressive, often anonymous expression, the current data shows that **public figures can also employ insulting terms in ways that are socially strategic and ideologically loaded**. Their language serves not merely expressive purposes, as in Setyaningtias et al. (2023), but also persuasive and normative ones. The use of *goblok* in this context is not an uncontrolled act of aggression but a rhetorical device within a moral-political narrative.

Table 3. Insults by vice presidential candidate

No	Quatation	Insulting Words	Field	Tenor	Mode
1	Itu asumsi pelatihnya menganggap Gibran bodoh dan menganggap saya juga bodoh. Dikira bisa dikerjain kayak gitu...	goblok	politics/ campaign debate	Vice presidential candidate → public/media	Spoken (interview/ broadcast), formal-informal
2	Bodoh itu, bodoh karena posko pemilu itu sudah ada, bukan posko, namanya desk pemilu sejak tahun 2014 sudah ada...	bodoh	elections	Vice presidential candidate → public/politic al audience	Spoken (speech/qu otation), semi-formal
3	Itu kan orang-orang dodol (bodoh) gak baca fakta. Lalu menganggap itu salah kan...	bodoh	politics/ media	Vice presidential candidate → critics/netizen	Spoken, informal-rhetorical

Register Realization in Vice Presidential Candidate Insults

The use of insulting language by a candidate for vice president (cawapres) in Indonesian political discourse demonstrates the strategic deployment of emotionally loaded terms in public argumentation. Across all three utterances, the term *bodoh* or its synonymous slang *dodol* is employed to discredit opposing interpretations, question adversaries' competence, and assert the speaker's epistemic authority.

In the first quote, the speaker addresses an accusation or assumption made about the political training of Gibran and himself, stating, *"asumsi pelatihnya menganggap Gibran bodoh dan saya juga bodoh."* This instance positions *bodoh* as a projection, the attribution of stupidity to the speaker and his ally by others, which he then rejects and turns against the source of the accusation. The **field** is political performance in debates; the **tenor** is vertical but reactive, with the cawapres defending himself against public or media critique. The **mode** is semi-formal spoken discourse, possibly recorded in a press conference. This supports Halliday's claim that **lexical choices are shaped by the communicative context**, public rebuttal in a high-stakes political setting.

The second utterance exemplifies the use of *bodoh* not as a reactive label but as a form of **corrective emphasis**. In stating *"bodoh itu, bodoh karena posko pemilu itu sudah ada…"* the speaker constructs a logical explanation for why someone's misunderstanding is wrong framing stupidity as ignorance of verifiable facts. This mirrors patterns seen in Setyaningtias et al. (2023), where *abusive* forms of swearing functioned as epistemic judgment rather than pure insult. Here, *bodoh* becomes a rhetorical device for asserting one's superior knowledge and positioning oneself as the voice of institutional accuracy. Compared to netizen discourse, where *bodoh* is used emotionally and impulsively, the cawapres's usage is **deliberate, intellectualized, and rooted in technocratic legitimacy.**

The third quote continues this pattern, but with a more informal and mocking tone *"itu kan orang-orang dodol gak baca fakta."* The use of *dodol*, a colloquial synonym for *bodoh*, softens the attack slightly while maintaining its function of **delegitimizing critics**. This blending of informal language into formal discourse reflects a **register shift**. A movement between institutional discourse and popular speech which Halliday (1978) identifies as a marker of adaptability in public figures. It also aligns with observations from Tahir & Ramadhan (2024), who note that hate or dismissive language in political communication often appears when the speaker engages directly or indirectly with netizen audiences.

Critically, while much of the previous literature focuses on **aggressive netizen language** Mubarok et al., (2024); Aditya et al., (2024), the current data show that **elite political actors also participate in verbal boundary-pushing**, albeit with more structured and strategic motives. The cawapres does not insult random individuals; he **targets the credibility of interpretations**, framing them as factually ignorant and therefore undeserving of influence. Unlike netizen insults that are often horizontal in tenor (peer-to-peer), these utterances operate in a **top-down dynamic**, where the speaker asserts epistemic control over a less-informed audience.

Table 4. Insults by political commentator

No	Quatation	Insulting Words	Field	Tenor	Mode
1	Memecat mahasiswa... kalau dia bodoh, kalau dia tolol, kalau dia dungu, bukan karena dia aktivis...	Bodoh, tolol, dungu	Education/ campus policy	Commentator → public/campus authorities	Oral (quoted in the media), formal-rhetorical
2	Kita tidak boleh menghina manusia. Yang saya hina adalah jabatan. Dungu cara berpikir yang membuat kita tertinggal...	dungu	Governmet /leadership	Commentator → officials/institutions	Oral/written (quoted), semi-formal

Register Realization in Political Commentator Insults

The use of insulting language by political commentators in public discourse reveals a strategic engagement with harsh vocabulary to perform intellectual critique rather than interpersonal attack. Unlike netizen language, which often expresses spontaneous emotional outrage, these utterances—though containing highly stigmatized words like *bodoh*, *tolol*, and *dungu* function within a formal and ideologically motivated register.

In the first utterance, the speaker lists the conditions under which students *may* legitimately be sanctioned by campus authorities, stating: *"kalau dia bodoh, kalau dia tolol, kalau dia dungu"*, and clearly contrasting these with being punished for activism. Here, the **field** is educational policy and academic freedom; the **tenor** reflects a vertical dynamic, where the speaker critiques institutional authority (i.e., university administration). The **mode** is oral but formal-retoric in nature, likely part of a speech or interview quoted by media. The repetition of synonyms (*bodoh*, *tolol*, *dungu*) is a rhetorical strategy to stress the **injustice of punishing students for non-intellectual reasons**, aligning with Halliday's (1978) notion of **tenor-influenced lexical choices**.

The function of the insult is **not directed at individuals**, but rather used hypothetically to build a **logical contrast**. This is consistent with findings from Setyaningtias et al. (2023), who found that even harsh terms can serve structured, rational purposes in discourse, especially when situated in a formal or educational setting. Here, the insults serve to highlight what would be an academically legitimate cause for sanctioning, thereby **strengthening the argument against punishing activism.**

The second utterance demonstrates a more ideologically loaded use of insult: *"dungu cara berpikir yang membuat kita tertinggal…"*. The speaker emphasizes that they are not insulting people, but **positions or systems of thinking**, explicitly stating *"yang saya hina adalah jabatan."* This meta-commentary on insult usage reflects a high level of discourse awareness. The insult *dungu* is used to critique **intellectual failures within leadership structures**, rather than individuals per se. The **field** is political governance, the **tenor** is top-down but abstracted, and the **mode** is likely a formal speech, given the structured syntax and reflective tone.

In contrast to earlier findings from Tahir and Ramadhan (2024) and Mubarok et al. (2024), which often treat insults as impulsive, personal attacks with potential legal ramifications, this analysis reveals that **insults can also function as intellectual critiques in institutional discourse**. The phrase *"dungu cara berpikir"* is not only evaluative but also diagnostic. It labels a system of thought as flawed, intellectually regressive, and damaging to collective progress. This shifts the function of the insult from aggression to **epistemic judgment**.

These utterances also contrast with data from religious leaders and netizens. Whereas religious leaders used *goblok* as part of moral persuasion, and netizens as emotional expression, commentators here use insult to **expose failures in logic, leadership, or institutional principles**. The language, while still technically

derogatory, is appropriated for **reasoned public critique**, showing that insulting terms can be reshaped and reframed depending on **register**, particularly tenor and mode.

CONSLUSION

This study concludes that insulting language in Indonesian online media transcends mere spontaneity or vulgarity, functioning instead as a context-sensitive linguistic choice meticulously shaped by the dynamics of field, tenor, and mode, as elucidated through Halliday's theory of register. The findings demonstrate that insults such as "bodoh," "tolol," "goblok," and "dungu" fulfill a diverse array of socially meaningful functions, including emotional expression, ideological resistance, moral instruction, and epistemic critique. These functions are contingent upon the speaker (e.g., netizens , religious figures , politicians , commentators), the audience, and the specific communicative setting. This variation underscores that even stigmatized language can be employed purposefully and strategically, rather than solely offensively. The study significantly contributes to sociolinguistics by illustrating how register theory offers a robust framework for comprehending the social work performed by offensive language within digital discourse, thereby highlighting the intricate interaction between linguistic form and social function. More broadly, this research emphasizes language's pivotal role in shaping public reasoning, social identity, and political dialogue within Indonesia's online public sphere, where authority, criticism, and emotion converge through words that, while challenging civility, effectively construct meaning. Such insights are particularly vital in the contemporary polarized digital landscape, where the demarcation between freedom of expression and verbal harm is increasingly contentious. Ultimately, the study affirms that the manner in which insults are deployed is inextricably linked to how individuals relate, resist, and represent themselves within society. This comprehensive understanding of digital insults enriches our grasp of how language both reflects and constructs complex social realities in the online realm.

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