

How WhatsApp Comments on COVID-19 Reflect the Writers' Attitude on the Government of Kenya's Response to COVID-19

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Cite this article in APA

Manyasi, A., Khaemba, J., & Kitetu, C. (2025). How WhatsApp comments on COVID-19 reflect the writers' attitude on the Government of Kenya's response to COVID-19. *Journal of languages and linguistics*, 4(1), 29-36. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jll.v4i1.832>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2025-08-13

Accepted: 2025-09-12

Published: 2025-10-13

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Abstract

This paper examined public attitudes expressed through WhatsApp comments in Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the government's handling of the crisis. Data was drawn from WhatsApp archives of five groups, including medics, former university classmates, neighbours, investment partners, and workmates, over twelve months (March 2020–March 2021). The study applied Critical Discourse Analysis, using Norman Fairclough's ideas and the Appraisal Framework as theoretical frameworks. A qualitative approach was employed, with data thematically coded and subjected to content and critical discourse analysis to reveal writers' attitudes toward the Kenyan government's pandemic response. Findings revealed widespread distrust in the government's ability to manage the crisis, with criticism of inefficiency, corruption, and economic hardship, alongside occasional support and compliance. Writers used discursive devices such as sarcasm, irony, blaming, labelling, humour, and exaggeration to navigate tensions between public health measures and governance failures. The findings contribute to scholarly literature on new media discourse, particularly Kenyan WhatsApp discourse, an understudied platform in discourse analysis.

Key terms: Appraisal framework, attitude, COVID-19, critical discourse analysis, WhatsApp comments.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic posed profound social, economic, and political challenges to governments across the world. In Kenya, the government implemented various containment measures such as lockdowns, curfews, mass testing, and the procurement of medical supplies to curb the spread of the virus. Effective communication became critical during this period, as citizens needed timely updates on health advisories, movement restrictions, and policy directives. Much of this information was circulated through social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, which serves as a dominant communication channel in Kenya due to its accessibility, affordability, and user-friendly group features.

WhatsApp is widely used for everyday communication in Kenya within families, communities, workplaces, religious groups, and informal networks. During the pandemic, messages and updates about COVID-19 were often accompanied by comments reflecting users' attitudes toward the government's response. These comments, though informal, provide a valuable lens for understanding public perception and emotional reactions to crisis management.

While numerous studies have examined social media discourse on platforms such as Twitter (now X) and Facebook, limited research has focused on WhatsApp, especially during periods of national crisis. This study addresses that gap by analysing how Kenyan citizens expressed their attitudes toward the government's COVID-19 response through comments in selected WhatsApp groups. Data were drawn from five groups comprising medics, former university classmates, neighbours, investment partners, and workmates who actively discussed COVID-19-related developments. The central claim is that the language used in these comments reveals citizens' feelings and evaluations of how the government handled the pandemic.

WhatsApp groups provide fertile ground for discourse analysis because they function as digital discourse communities. Kelly (2014) notes that online communities share similar characteristics with traditional discourse communities, where communication fosters shared norms, values, and meanings. Members express their opinions freely, making such spaces suitable for exploring attitudes

and ideologies. Since social media users are part of wider societal structures, their language use during crises reflects not only virtual interactions but also the broader social and political contexts. Consequently, online discourse can influence public perception and even shape real-world responses to crises through intertextual and interdiscursive linkages between online and offline communication.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the Appraisal Framework to interpret how WhatsApp comments on COVID-19 reveal users' attitudes toward the Kenyan government's actions. CDA, as defined by Fairclough (2001), views language as a form of social practice shaped by and shaping social structures. It focuses on how linguistic choices reflect power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities. Fairclough's sociocultural approach emphasises that discourse involves both the production and interpretation of meaning, the latter being influenced by internalised ideologies and shared beliefs.

Complementing CDA, the Appraisal Framework, derived from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994), provides tools for examining how speakers or writers express approval, disapproval, and emotional stance. It encompasses three main metafunctions of language: the ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (establishing relationships), and textual (organising discourse coherently). Through appraisal, language is analysed in terms of how attitudes, judgments, and emotions are conveyed and sourced (Pascual & Unger, 2010).

Drawing on these frameworks, this paper explores how discursive and framing devices such as sarcasm, irony, blame, humour, labelling, and exaggeration were employed in WhatsApp comments to express criticism of governmental inefficiency, anger over economic hardship, distrust of COVID-19 measures, and occasional support or compliance. The study situates these linguistic patterns within Kenya's broader governance context during the pandemic, providing qualitative insights into citizens' evaluative language and contributing to a deeper understanding of public sentiment during health crises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Kenya, there were apprehensive reactions both online and offline (Asmara, 2020). A series of events followed, including international travel restrictions, quarantine requirements, closure of schools and higher institutions of learning, the introduction of remote working, emphasis on cashless transactions, bans on congregational meetings, installation of cleaning facilities in hospitals and shopping malls, and the disinfection of cargo, aircraft, and ships entering the country. These measures attracted extensive discussions among citizens on various platforms. The Ministry of Health provided daily updates on the pandemic, and many Kenyans took to social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups to share their experiences and opinions (Seufert et al., 2022).

The pandemic, which resulted in numerous infections and fatalities, generated significant online activity concerning the severity of the disease, casualty figures, symptoms, preventive measures, treatment, and government responses. The democratic space provided by social media made it easy for the public to engage in open discussions about the crisis (Costa et al., 2022). WhatsApp, in particular, became a key platform for Kenyans to express their sentiments about the pandemic and react to government containment measures. The present study, therefore, investigated how WhatsApp comments on COVID-19 reflected writers' attitudes toward the Government of Kenya's response to the pandemic.

Silberstein (2002) argued that online discussions could influence crisis management. The scholar examined public rhetoric in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and found that through strategic discursive framing, the media constructed the event as an act of war rather than terrorism. Similarly, Evolvi (2019) analysed tweets posted after the 2016 British referendum on the European Union (Brexit) and found that they were largely antagonistic, characterised by sarcasm, anger, and fear directed at minority groups. The study revealed that X (Formerly twitter) users often interacted within like-minded communities, avoiding engagement with opposing viewpoints.

Chiluwa (2019) examined online discourses of the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an armed Tuareg group in northern Mali. The analysis revealed the group's affiliations, aspirations, and relationship with the Malian government. Despite ceasefire agreements in 2014, the study found that social media discourse continued to reflect themes of war, security violations, and accusations of broken agreements, suggesting that such online discourse had the potential to escalate conflict.

In a related study, Kamalu (2016) conducted a critical discourse analysis of online legitimations surrounding the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. The findings indicated that public discourse on Ebola was shaped less by medical perspectives and more by political, racial, and religious narratives.

Several linguistic studies were also conducted on COVID-19. Many of these were undertaken by lexicographers such as Crystal (2020), who examined how the pandemic influenced language use globally. Thorne (2020) compiled glossaries of new words that emerged during the pandemic, reflecting the unique linguistic environment it created. These glossaries included nicknames, slang, puns, abbreviations, jargon, and terminology related to remote work, security measures, and social conduct.

In Kenya, Mulonzi et al. (2024) investigated how newspaper headlines discursively constructed the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis showed that print media often framed the pandemic in negative and crisis-laden terms, creating fear among the public. Similarly, Mogambi and Barasa (2021) analysed government briefings and noted that officials frequently framed the pandemic as a "war" or emergency using militaristic metaphors. While this framing aimed to encourage compliance, it was received with scepticism by some segments of the public.

Regarding corruption, mismanagement, and public trust, reports during the pandemic documented irregularities within the Kenya Medical Supplies Authority (KEMSA), including inflated prices for masks and other medical supplies, as well as irregular expenditures amounting to millions of dollars. Lugulu (2022) examined corruption in Kenya during the

COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for the right to health, finding that corruption significantly impaired access to quality care and essential medical goods.

METHODOLOGY

The research was qualitative in nature. The research sought to identify emergent themes and patterns within sampled WhatsApp comments from five WhatsApp groups across different regions of Kenya. The thematic content was then subjected to content analysis. The data were coded for themes such as criticism, frustration, and distrust, while rhetorical devices such as satire, irony, and humour were also identified and analysed. The WhatsApp comments on COVID-19 were drawn from five groups comprising medics, former university classmates, neighbours, investment partners, and workmates. Data collection covered a period of one year, from March 2020 to March 2021. Only text-based messages were used as data. The data were downloaded from WhatsApp archives using ethical procedures, which included requesting data sharing from willing participants, collaborating with group members and administrators, obtaining the necessary permissions, and gathering insights from participants with access to multiple groups. The group memberships ranged between 30 and 595 participants.

The study adopted a purposive sampling design to identify the comments used for analysis. Since linguistic studies do not require large samples (Cheshire, 1982; Milroy & Milroy, 1985), the study analysed a total of one hundred and thirteen WhatsApp threads. The qualitative data were processed, coded, and organised to detect recurrent themes and linguistic patterns through thematic and discourse analysis techniques. Manual thematic analysis enabled the researchers to gain an overall view of the data, facilitating the selection of representative texts for further analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data from which this paper stems reveal that using rhetorical devices such as satire, irony and metaphors, WhatsApp comments on COVID-19 in Kenya revealed attitudes of criticism of government inefficiency, condemnation of corruption and mismanagement, mistrust of government institutions, frustrations over economic hardships brought about by the COVID-19

containment measures with a few comments calling for solidarity and support of the government measures. WhatsApp groups allowed citizens to voice dissent where direct criticism of the government might have been risky or socially fraught.

Criticism of Government Inefficiency

At the commencement of the pandemic in March 2020, many comments reveal a highly critical attitude of some writers towards the government. The comments expressed dissatisfaction with the government's preparedness and implementation of preventive measures. Comments highlighted delayed responses such as insufficient testing capacity, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), and poor enforcement of health protocols. Such remarks reflect citizens' frustration with systemic weaknesses and perceived negligence, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1

WU1: Corona virus was obviously coming to Kenya. Anything from China easily gets to

Kenya. We are compromised in the health sector. Sad to say, but we are ill-prepared.

WU2: Love them or hate them. the Chinese interventions in Wuhan count for something. We can never match up. I foresee massive deaths in our land.

In the above chat, the writers have no faith in the Kenyan government's ability to contain COVID-19. They consider Kenya to be ill-prepared for the pandemic. In addition, the data reveal feelings of disappointment in the manner in which the government used double standards in its application of containment measures. While citizens would be harassed for not abiding by the COVID-19 protocols, political leaders would breach the protocols publicly and face no consequences. In the period of the study, there were Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) campaigns in the country, and politicians flaunted the COVID-19 protocols either campaigning for or against the initiative. The discussion below was posted after a BBI rally on the weekend.

Excerpt 2

WU1: *More virus on Monday and Tuesday...I tell you...the marijuana taken by our leaders is too much...I desire to be a Ugandan for two months.*

WU2: *Colleagues, the devil is a liar. Imagine I am coughing, but am told reggae is totally shattered.*

Condemnation of Corruption and Mismanagement

A dominant theme in the sampled WhatsApp discourse was the exposure of corruption scandals, particularly the misuse of COVID-19 funds and irregular procurement processes. Sarcastic remarks and outright condemnation in group chats underscored the perception that government officials prioritised personal gain over citizens' health. These reactions illustrate deep-seated mistrust toward state institutions. This is exemplified in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 3

WU1: *I hear Trump has given us 200 ventilators*

WU: *And they are state-of-the-art ones*

WU2: *Those ones will be stolen by the very rich*

WU1: *As for the rest of us, let us just breathe free air given to us by God*

Government officials, like the police, were also portrayed as conmen who took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to swindle citizens. The following thread portrays law enforcers as being hungry for bribes after a news item on various television channels reported that 147 people had been arrested for disobeying COVID-19 protocols.

Excerpt 4

WU1: *And everyone was released with 500. That is a total of 73,500 collected bribes.*

WU2: *The media should report correctly that 147 failed to provide bribes to buy their freedom. Give the figures of those who secured their freedom and name their price.*

WU3: *The bribe is 5 thousand Kenyan shillings for not wearing a mask*

Mistrust of Government Intervention Measures

The strong presence of criticism and corruption allegations in WhatsApp comments revealed a deficit of trust in public institutions. Users perceived the government of Kenya as only being interested in foreign funding, which eroded trust, undermining compliance with public health directives. When the first patient, dubbed patient zero, was presented to the public after recovering from COVID-19, there were numerous reactions in the sampled WhatsApp data with comments reflecting an attitude of mistrust and disappointment in the manner in which the Kenyan government was managing the pandemic. An example is provided in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 5

WU1: *Now, where did they get this, Brenda?*

WU2: *From the way she is confusing herself, it is like they did not do a proper rehearsal.*

WU1: *She does not even know for how many days she was in quarantine....at one point 22, another point 23...*

WU2: *SHE IS A FAKE*

In the same vein, there were comments from people who did not believe that COVID-19 was real. The texts intimated that the disease was non-existent, and it was just the government's ploy to lure donors, then squander funds allocated to curb the spread of COVID-19. An example is provided below:

Excerpt 6

WU1: *I don't know if this virus exists. What I know is that there is money put aside for it. The money is what makes them give us all this propaganda.*

WU2: *This stupidity of covid should be taken very far away. You can't instil fear in us by talking of social distancing for a disease that does not exist...*

Expressions of Economic Hardship

The data also contained comments that reflected anger at the government's neglect of ordinary citizens' livelihoods. Many comments suggest that Kenyans were caught between obeying health directives and securing livelihoods. For those in informal economies,

lockdowns and curfews were not only inconvenient but existential threats, for they disproportionately affected low-income groups. The writers of such comments show that government responses did not adequately consider economic safety nets.

Excerpt 7

WU1: Nairobi is the epicentre of this thing

WU2: Yet, people from Nairobi do not pay attention to lockdown.

WU1: With the kind of economy that we have, lockdown is suicidal

WU3: There are many ways of dying. Let me die while working on my hustle.

Support and Solidarity with Health Interventions

Amidst the many antagonistic comments on how the Kenyan government responded to COVID-19, there were a few positive ones that called for support and urged compliance with government interventions. Some users pointed out. Such attitudes coexisted with the negative attitudes in group chats that the government was dealing with a difficult global crisis and that mistakes were inevitable. Some comments encouraged compliance with mask mandates, handwashing campaigns, and vaccination drives. This demonstrates that certain segments of the population appreciated the government's attempt to safeguard public health. An example is provided in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 8

WU1: This shows that Kenya is far ahead in fighting corona virus in Africa. Kudos to our Kenyan doctors and the government. God bless you.

WU2: I am fully behind the president despite losing my job because of the pandemic, he is trying to listen from experts in the health sector, and that is a good gesture

WU3: I am of the 62 per cent who are satisfied with the government's response. I think the president has offered great leadership throughout this crisis.

Discussion

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a valuable framework for interrogating the WhatsApp

comments on COVID-19 in Kenya, as it emphasises the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2003). By analysing rhetorical devices such as satire, irony, and metaphor, the data reveals how Kenyan citizens constructed meanings around state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. CDA treats discourse not merely as language but as a social practice that reflects, reproduces, and challenges power relations (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). WhatsApp groups, therefore, functioned as an alternative public sphere where citizens could air their opinions on the government's management of the pandemic with relative safety compared to mainstream media.

A key theme was criticism of the state's preparedness and crisis management. Citizens expressed frustration with delayed testing, inadequate PPE, and selective enforcement of COVID-19 protocols. Contrasting citizens' harassment with politicians' violations of rules during Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) rallies underscored perceived double standards. Fairclough (2003) argues that citizens often "recontextualise" official discourse, reframing it with irony and satire to highlight contradictions in governance. This resonates with Obadare (2021), who describes "performative preparedness" in African states, where governments project readiness but fail in execution. WhatsApp satire thus became a form of "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1990), undermining state narratives of competence.

Another dominant discourse was the exposure of corruption scandals, such as stolen ventilators (Excerpt 2) and police bribes (Excerpt 3). Sarcasm and humour revealed citizens' perception that elites exploited the pandemic for personal gain. Within CDA, this demonstrates how exposes "hidden power relations" (Fairclough, 1995) discourse. Corruption during COVID-19 was not unique to Kenya; Transparency International (2021) documented widespread misuse of pandemic funds across Africa. By portraying police as "conmen" and officials as opportunists, WhatsApp users reinforced long-standing narratives of state predation (Cheeseman & De Gramont, 2017). Such findings align with Chilwa and Ifukor (2015), who note that African digital media often serve as platforms for satirising and delegitimising state authority.

The CDA framework also helps uncover how scepticism about "Patient Zero" (Excerpt 4) and outright denial of COVID-19's existence (Excerpt 5) discursively delegitimised state interventions. Citizens framed the pandemic as a government "project" to attract donor funds. This reflects the "politicisation of health crises" (Nguyen, 2010; Jalloh et al., 2020), where mistrust of state motives undermines compliance. Fairclough's (1992) notion of "ideological framing" is evident: by construing COVID-19 as fabricated, citizens resisted both health directives and state authority.

The data also revealed frustrations with lockdowns and curfews, which disproportionately hurt informal workers. Fairclough (2001) reminds us that discourse is tied to material realities; here, linguistic expressions of anger indexed the economic precarity of low-income groups. Harris et al. (2021) argue that Global South pandemic responses often ignored socio-economic contexts, exacerbating inequalities. WhatsApp comments illustrate this disconnect, showing how discourse became a medium for negotiating survival in the face of structural neglect.

Despite widespread criticism, some comments (Excerpt 7) expressed support for doctors and the president's leadership. Fairclough (2003) describes this as "interdiscursivity," where conflicting discourses, criticism and compliance coexist. Similar patterns have been observed across Africa: while mistrust was widespread, some citizens acknowledged governments' difficult balancing acts in managing the pandemic (Ezeibe et al., 2020). This heterogeneity highlights digital spaces as sites of both dissent and solidarity

CONCLUSION

WhatsApp discourse on COVID-19 in Kenya illuminates the interplay of language, power, and resistance. Citizens used satire, irony, and metaphor to articulate criticism of inefficiency, condemn corruption, and express mistrust, while also highlighting economic struggles and offering limited solidarity. These discourses show WhatsApp as a parallel public sphere where state narratives were challenged, reinterpreted, and sometimes partially endorsed. Ultimately, the analysis underscores how language became a vital tool for negotiating governance, trust, and survival during the pandemic.

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