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Sentiment analysis of the coverage of the Tom Lembong corruption: Case in online media

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Abstract

Corruption-related news remains a focal point of public discourse in Indonesia, particularly when involving high-profile figures such as former Minister of Trade Tom Lembong, who was accused in the sugar import corruption case during the Jokowi era. This study aims to analyze public sentiment toward news coverage of the case in online media, offering insights into how narratives are shaped and disseminated. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, sentiment analysis was conducted using the *Brand24* application on posts collected between June 22 and July 22, 2025. The analysis tracked sentiment fluctuations and identified the most influential accounts contributing to the discourse. Results indicate that negative sentiment dominated the coverage, with the peak occurring on July 19, 2025—one day after the Corruption Court sentenced Tom Lembong to 4.5 years in prison. Two accounts emerged as major amplifiers of negative sentiment: the TikTok account *Inibukanniko* and the YouTube channel *warganet.id*, both achieving a perfect influence score of 10/10. These findings underscore the central role of social media influencers in shaping public opinion on corruption cases, suggesting that online discourse is increasingly driven not only by mainstream media but also by independent digital content creators who can rapidly mobilize large audiences and intensify sentiment trends.

Keywords

Corruption, News, Online Media, Sentiment analysis, Tom Lembong

1 | INTRODUCTION

The development of information technology affects human life, the existence of the internet, television, radio and other technologies can make it easier for people to access information (Martin, 2017; Qadri, 2020). Online media refers to the journalistic works online media (Fatmawati, 2020). Online media is a means of conveying information that is developing in the digital world whose function is to convey messages or ideas of one person or group of people (Triwanto et al., 2025), online media has a crucial role in shaping public perception, where in today's digital era, the media has become a place for increasingly massive public opinion space and allows people to produce news and form opinions (Shi et al., 2019). The role of online media in shaping public opinion, especially electronic media, has become very significant along with the rapid development of media communication technology not only acting as a tool to disseminate information, but also as a shaper of ideology that influences public perception of certain issues (Khotimah et al., 2024).

The public as a subject in online media, positioned as communicators, contributes significantly to shaping public opinion. Public opinion constitutes statements of attitudes and opinions that may fluctuate in terms of intensity and stability (Lippmann & Curtis, 2017; Roberts & Stalans, 2018), public opinion typically refers to the shared sentiments of a group or community concerning a particular issue (Faridah et al., 2023). Public opinion is also shaped by the perceived content of the communicator's message, such as various issues that frequently occur within the communicant (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), and the media as a communication channel possesses the capacity to influence the formation of behaviour within the media user community (Daud, 2021). Therefore, the strategic position of the media as a bridge of information that shall be conveyed to the public as media consumers cannot be overlooked.

The presence of online media in the digital media era fundamentally serves to support and complement the function of the media, particularly in mass communication; there are five communication functions within the mass media, namely (Kencana & Meisyanti, 2020); (1) Supervision, the function is divided into two principal forms, namely warning supervision, which constitutes the form of information presented by the mass media containing threats, and instrumental supervision, which represents the form of information presented by the mass media containing various benefits and can be utilised by the community to conduct their daily lives; (2) Interpretation, the function of selecting and determining events that are appropriate or inappropriate to be presented to the public; (3) Relationship, the function of uniting diverse communities by presenting news or information based upon interests; (4) Dissemination of Values, the function whereby the mass media functions as a socialisation tool for the public; and (5) Entertainment, the function employed by the media through presenting content to reduce tension or anxiety in the minds of the public (Fitriansyah, 2018). Various messages and content presented in the media were previously constructed to attract public attention in order to obtain feedback according to what was anticipated (Faulina et al., 2020). The reality that occurs in online media is framed through construction by the media through emphasising certain meanings (Naqqiyah, 2020). News is a message produced by the media. News as a media product represents a certain reality that the creator or writer who works within the media wishes to convey (Waisbord, 2018). Media, in addition to providing information, can also disseminate culture to its readers or viewers; in other words, the media serves as a cultural agent (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Furthermore, within the world of mass media, reality must be recognised as part of a construction process (Astuti, 2016), therefore it shall be difficult to find true reality within the mass media (Herika & Ruliana, 2018). This is because the mass media possesses considerable power in producing and framing a reality in its reporting (Fatmawati, 2020).

Media products in the form of news come in various forms that have benchmarks commonly referred to as news value (Gunawan, 2024). Valuable news must possess actual and factual value, wherein factual news constitutes news information that corresponds with facts, not fiction or fabrication, and can attract the attention of a number of people (Herdiana & Abineri, 2025; Pandiangan & Ratnasari, 2023), whilst actual value signifies that every news presented represents the latest and consistently updated news (Herdiana & Abineri, 2025). The media

should stand as a watchdog upon the situation within the public space, whereby the media in general constitutes an institution that must rely upon the main pillar of truth (Fianto et al., 2023). Many mass media realities are not realities that simply exist, at least according to Berger and Luckmann's perspectives. Rather, they constitute a formation produced by a certain consciousness that presents the existence of objects with a certain intensity in its construction (Launa & Tawaang, 2021).

This study provides novelty by applying sentiment analysis utilising *Brand24* to analyse public perception of the Tom Lembong corruption case in online media, which represents a novel approach in measuring the impact of high-profile corruption case coverage in Indonesia. The innovation of this study lies in identifying temporal sentiment spikes that reveal highly specific public reaction patterns on 19th July 2025 (one day after the 4.5-year prison sentence), as well as discovering that TikTok account *Inibukanniko* and YouTube account warganet.id possess perfect influence scores (10/10) in shaping negative public sentiment. This research also offers methodological contributions through utilising data crawling over a full one-month period to provide longitudinal insights into the evolution of public sentiment towards corruption cases, which differs from previous studies that typically focus only upon cross-sectional analysis or shorter time periods.

News presentations related to corruption constitute news that captures the attention of the public. Corruption itself represents an act of violating the law through abusing authority or power for personal gain, whether carried out by government officials or individuals within the private sector (Romdoni & Nathasya, 2025). News related to corruption has become a serious case in Indonesia; within the community it has been proven to damage the social, economic and political order of the country. With the presence of online media as a conveyor of information to the public, it can have a significant impact in building perceptions and influencing public opinion towards corruption and law enforcement efforts (Behuku et al., 2025). Online media participate in forming opinions related to the news regarding Thomas Lembong, the former Minister of Trade, who was arrested by the Attorney General's Office as a suspect in the sugar import corruption case in 2015-2016 on 29th October 2024, and the announcement of the determination of suspect status close to the inauguration of the President of the Republic of Indonesia 2024-2029 (Kasman, 2025). This study was conducted to examine how sentiment analysis related to Tom Lembong's news in online media.

2 | METHODS

This study employed descriptive qualitative analysis. The findings were analyzed through data crawling using the Brand24 application with the keyword "Tom Lembong". The author limited data collection to June 22 to July 22, 2025, a time when this news was widely discussed in online media. This was because the crawling period coincided with the court hearing for Thomas "Tom" Lembong's legal case on July 18, 2025.

The data collection process involved systematic monitoring of online conversations across multiple digital platforms, including social media networks, news websites, blogs, and forums. Brand24's advanced analytics capabilities enabled the identification and categorization of relevant content based on sentiment analysis, reach metrics, and engagement levels. The application's real-time monitoring feature ensured comprehensive capture of public discourse during the specified timeframe, allowing for analysis of both immediate reactions and sustained discussions surrounding the legal proceedings.

Data validation procedures were implemented to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the collected information. This included cross-referencing findings with official news sources, filtering out duplicate content, and removing irrelevant posts that mentioned the keyword but were not related to the legal case. The researcher also established criteria for inclusion, focusing on content that directly addressed the legal proceedings, public reactions, or implications of the case. Posts with insufficient engagement or those from unverified sources were excluded to maintain data quality.

The analytical framework incorporated thematic coding techniques to identify recurring patterns, dominant narratives, and public sentiment trends throughout the observation period. Data interpretation followed established qualitative research principles, with particular attention to contextual factors that may have influenced online discourse. The temporal analysis approach allowed for tracking the evolution of public opinion from the initial news break through the court hearing date, providing insights into how digital conversations develop and change over time in response to legal proceedings involving public figures.

3| RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sentiment analysis constitutes an opinion exploration methodology that focuses upon examining public sentiment, emotions, and attitudes towards various elements such as topics, products, individuals, organisations, and services including films, issues, products, events, or any attributes that may be classified as positive, negative, or neutral (Devika et al., 2016; Drus & Khalid, 2019; Rodríguez-Ibánez et al., 2023; Serrano-Guerrero et al., 2015). In the digital era, with the emergence of the internet, public sentiment regarding certain issues has become increasingly diverse and varied. Through the facilitation of information dissemination and access, individuals who possess the requisite capability can upload their own content via various social media platforms, forums, microblogs, or online social networking sites. Websites and extensive digital spaces are utilised as a means of expressing individual opinions that can influence various aspects of life.

Fig. 1. Negative news sentiment regarding Tom Lembong peaked on July 19, 2025. *Source: author's processing using the Brand24 app, 2025.*

Fig. 2. Negative news sentiment regarding Tom Lembong peaked between July 13-19, 2025. *Source: Author's processing using the Brand24 app, 2025.*

Based upon the findings conducted in online media concerning the news of the Thomas "Tom" Lembong case, it is demonstrated that from 22nd June to 22nd July 2025, the news related to the case that is currently ensnaring the former Minister of Trade during the Jokowi Era exhibited the highest negative sentiment within the range of 13th-19th July 2025 (Figures 1 and 2). On 19th July 2025, approximately 173 negative sentiments were identified, whilst the news that possessed a positive sentiment value on 19th July 2025 constituted only around 45, and the range of 13th-19th July 2025 comprised approximately 94 posts. The elevated negative sentiment in online media occurred because this period represented the day after the decision of the Panel of Judges of the Central Jakarta Corruption Court, which sentenced Tom Lembong to 4.5 years in a sugar import case that caused state losses of approximately Rp. 194 billion (Bigwanto et al., 2023).

These findings are further corroborated by the most popular mentions data in Figure 3, wherein the TikTok account "*inibukanniko*" ranks first with the most viewed mentions, achieving a total of 7.6 million views, and ranks third as the top public profile. In the digital communication era, influencers on social media platforms such as TikTok possess a strategic position in conveying messages to audiences. The utilisation of social media creates new opportunities for influential individuals to assume a significant role in shaping public opinion (Juliana Saragih et al., 2024). On other occasions, social media is extensively employed as a primary tool for political actors to influence public perception. Their popularity enables them to have greater opportunities in audience reach, allowing them to reach numerous people with the messages and information they convey.
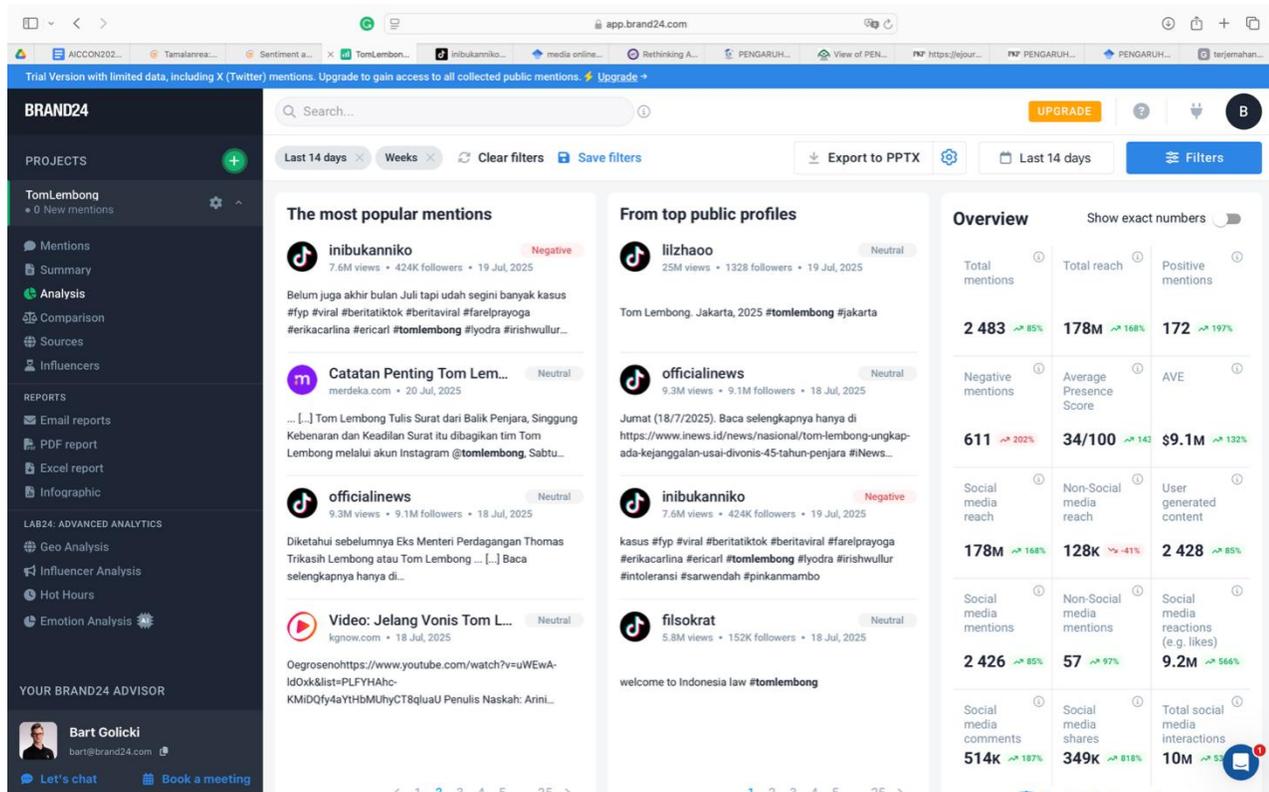
Fig. 3. Popular Mention accounts sharing Tom Lembong news. *Source: author's processing using the Brand24 app, 2025.*

The high influence of the TikTok account "i*nibukanniko*" can also be seen from Figure 4, with a simple caption uploaded to the personal TikTok account on July 19, 2025 at 04.55 pm with the caption:

"*Belum juga akhir bulan Juli tapi udah segini banyak kasus #fyp #viral #beritatiktok #beritaviral #farelprayoga #ericacarlina #ericacarl #tomlembong #lyodra #irishwullur #intoleransi #sarwendah #pinkanmambo*"

"It's not even the end of July yet but there are already this many cases *#beritaviral #farelprayoga #ericacarlina #ericacarl #tomlembong #lyodra #irishwullur #intoleransi #sarwendah #pinkanmambo*"

Upon deeper analysis regarding the caption utilised by the TikTok account "inibukanniko", the post does not contain positive or negative sentiment; the uploaded post is neutral, with the account owner merely sharing events in the media that attracted attention during July 2025. The elevated negative sentiment of the post was generated and interpreted by the system within the *Brand24* application due to the word "*belum/notyet*" which contains the meaning of negation, thereby signifying a negative classification. The substantial follower base of 434K also influences the reach of the post, consequently generating numerous comments (approximately 3,809), likes (381K), and shares (approximately 32.4K); this phenomenon accounts for the influence score in the Brand24 application occupying a perfect position of 10/10. Within Indonesia itself, the trend of utilising influencers as a strategy to influence the community in communication activities is extensively practised. Research concerning the influence of influencers in shaping public opinion demonstrates that influencers possess significant influence in shaping public opinion on social media, particularly on Instagram. Influencers who actively upload quality and interactive content tend to receive a greater response from their audiences. Furthermore, audiences who engage more actively, such as through commenting or sharing content, demonstrate a more positive perception of the issues discussed. This influence extends beyond product purchasing decisions to perceptions of social, political, and economic issues (Muth & Peter, 2023) . Based upon these findings, it can be concluded that the issues shared

constitute an important indicator, as proposed by Lasswell's communication model: "Who Says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect" (Ran Wei, 2018; Gustin et al., 2023).
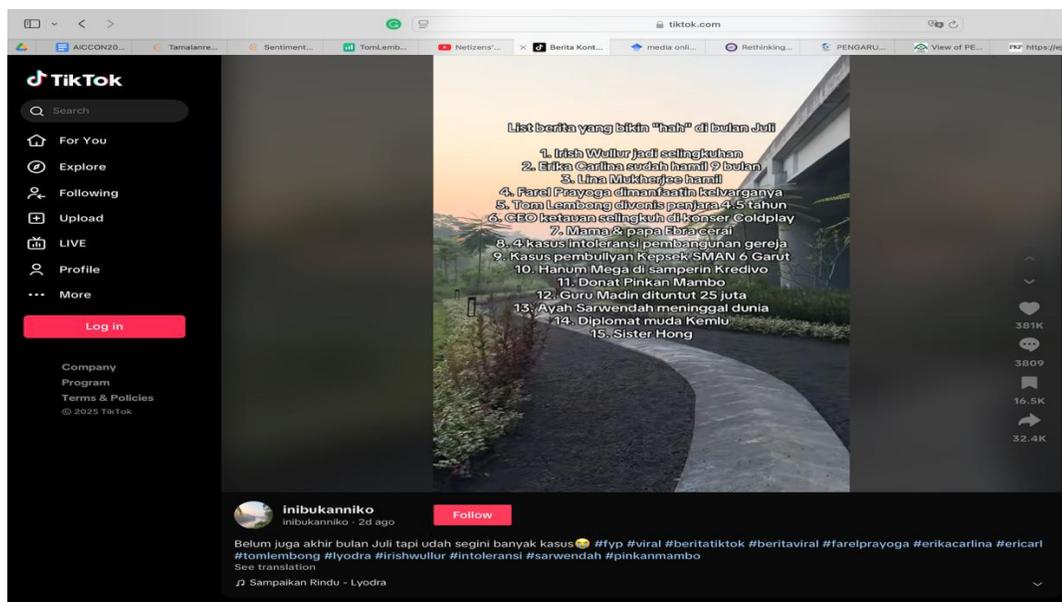

Fig. 4. The highest influence score on TikTok on July 19, 2025, and posts on the TikTok account *inibukanniko*. *S*ource: *A*uthor's processing using the Brand24 and TikTok applications, 2025.

Findings based on data crawling conducted with the Brand24 application on the next negative sentiment on a Youtube account posted on July 19, 2025 (Figure 5) where the highest negative sentiment with an influence of 10/10 is on the Youtube account "*warganet.id*" with the video title "Netizens disappointment with Lembong's Verduct. 20/07 *#tomlembong #sugar #prison #aniesbaswedan*". The video was reposted by the *warganet. id* account which contains comments from mothers who expressed disappointment after the 4.5 prison sentence handed down by the Judge. The warganet id account has 202K followers, the video has been viewed by 664K views with 2308 comments and 12,202 likes.

Findings based upon data crawling conducted with the Brand24 application reveal the next negative sentiment on a YouTube account posted on 19th July 2025 (Figure 5), wherein the highest negative sentiment with an influence score of 10/10 is attributed to the YouTube account *"warganet.id"* with the video title *"Netizens'* Disappointment with Lembong's Verdict. 20/07 *#tomlembong #sugar #prison #aniesbaswedan"*. The video was reposted by the *warganet.id* account, which contains comments from individuals who expressed disappointment following the 4.5-year prison sentence handed down by the judge. The warganet.id account possesses 202K followers; the video has been viewed 664K times with 2,308 comments and 12,202 likes.

Fig. 5. The highest account influence score on YouTube on July 19, 2025, and posts by the *Warganet.id* YouTube account. *Source: Author's processing using the Brand24 app and YouTube, 2025.*

Knowledge will influence attitudes and (Albarracin, 2018; Mutmainah et al., 2022), information related to Tom Lembong's verdict that went viral through the media also sparked reactions from the public, this can be seen from public comments on the posts of the *Warganet.id* YouTube account (Figure 6). Media in this case YouTube also has a crucial role in shaping and guiding opinions and influencing a person's attitude towards the topic being discussed (Septiani et al., 2024). Based on the image below, you can see a comment from *@dedesofyan1608* account which received 3 likes:

> "*Semoga para hakim dan jaksa yang menghukum Tom Lembong diberikan sakit yang mematikan seperti do'a para netizen, Aamiin YRA. Teruskan Bu perjuangannya dengan berani*"

> "May the judges and prosecutors who sentenced Tom Lembong be given a life-threatening illness, as netizens prayed for. Amen, YRA. Continue your courageous struggle, Ma'am."

Similar support also came from the account *@azmantaufik-f9m* which got 4 likes:

> "*Suara ibu suara benar dan Berani…saya salah seorang yg sama nasibnya dg Pak Tom Lembong…jadi korban kriminalisasi…Semoga Tuhan YMK Maha Adil, segera menutunkan Azab Balasan kpd orang-orang zalim dr Jaksa, Para Hakim dan Penguasa di Negara ini… Amiin Ya Allah…turunkan segara Balaq Mu…Amiin YRA.* 🤭🥹🥹🙌🙌🙌🙏🙏🙏"

> "Your voice is a true and brave voice… I am one of those who share the same fate as Mr. Tom Lembong… a victim of criminalization… May God Almighty, the Most Just, immediately bring down the Punishment of

Retribution on the oppressors of the Prosecutors, Judges and Rulers in this Country... Amen, O Allah... send down Your Retribution... Amen, O Allah. 🧑 🧑 🧑 🤲🏻 🤲🏻 🤲🏻 🙏 🙏 🙏 "

From the comments posted by the two accounts, it becomes apparent that the public expressed support for Tom Lembong and disappointment with the decision rendered by the court. The attitude demonstrated by the public in the comments on the YouTube account illustrates that their knowledge of the chronology of events, commencing from Tom Lembong's arrest to the trial process which was perceived to be "legally flawed", triggered their attitudes and reactions to the court's decision, which motivated them to comment on the post on the *Warganet.id* YouTube account. From a psychological perspective, considering that human attitudes and behaviour constitute the result of reactions that can be derived from the knowledge that an individual possesses, attitudes are consistently associated with behaviour that exists within reasonable parameters as a response or reaction to stimuli originating from the social environment (Saputra & Hidayat, 2025).
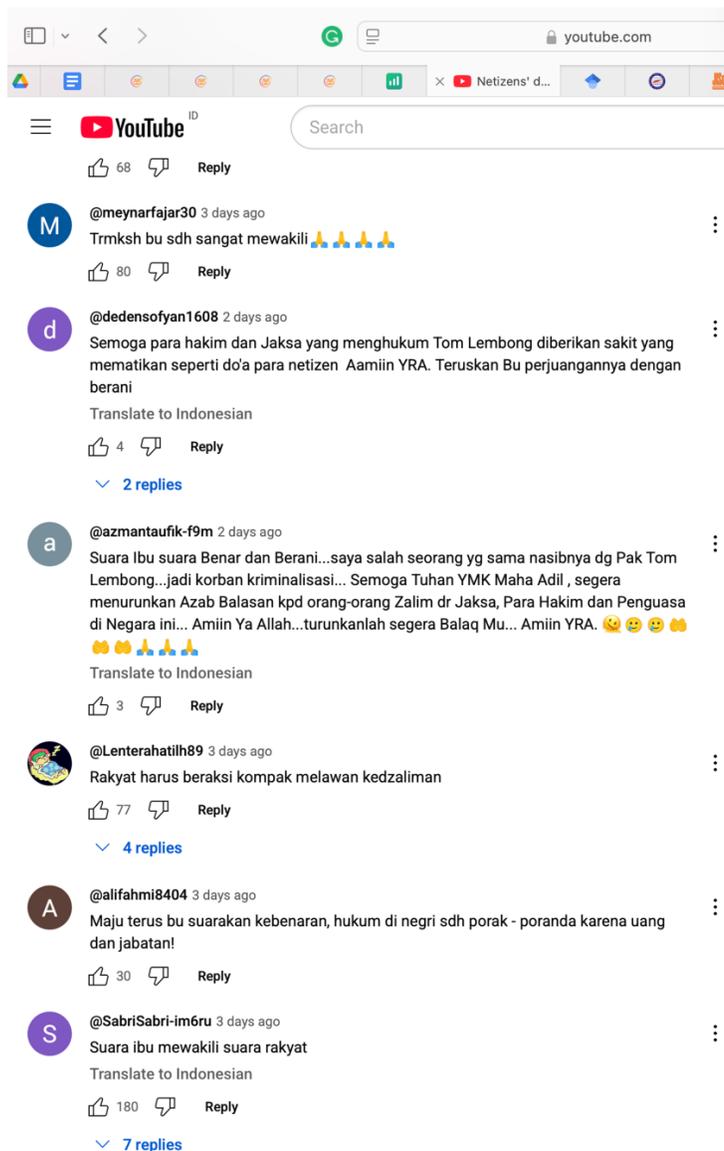

Fig. 6. Netizen comments on the *Warganet.id* YouTube account. *Source: YouTube, 2025.*

4| CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study demonstrates that news related to the Tom Lembong case was dominated by the largest negative sentiment on 19th July 2025, which reached 173 posts, coinciding with the day following the 4.5-year sentence imposed by the Corruption Court Judge against Tom Lembong. The account that possessed substantial influence in shaping negative sentiment was the TikTok account *Inibukanniko.* The elevated negative sentiment in the post was generated and interpreted by the system within the *Brand24* application due to the word *"belum",* which contains the meaning of negation, thereby signifying a negative classification. The substantial follower base of 434K also influenced the reach of the post, consequently generating numerous comments (approximately 3,809), likes (381K), and shares (approximately 32.4K). Additionally, the highest negative sentiment with an influence score of 10/10 was attributed to the YouTube account *"warganet.id"* with the video title "Netizens' Disappointment with the Lembong Decision. 20/07 *#tomlembong #sugar #prison #aniesbaswedan"*. The video was reposted by the warganet.id account, which contains comments from individuals expressing their disappointment regarding the judge's 4.5-year prison sentence. The account possesses 202K followers, and the video has been viewed 664K times, with 2,308 comments and 12,202 likes.

These findings provide significant theoretical contributions to understanding digital sentiment formation within Indonesia's socio-political context, wherein the temporal correlation between judicial decisions and public sentiment spikes demonstrates the immediate responsiveness of digital audiences to high-profile legal proceedings. Furthermore, the algorithmic interpretation of neutral content as negative sentiment, as observed with the "belum" classification, reveals critical limitations in automated sentiment analysis tools when applied to Indonesian linguistic contexts, suggesting that sentiment analysis applications may require cultural and linguistic calibration to accurately reflect genuine public opinion, particularly in multilingual societies where semantic nuances can significantly alter algorithmic interpretations. The study also reinforces social influence theory, wherein individuals with substantial digital followings can amplify sentiment patterns across broader audiences, regardless of their original content neutrality, thereby illuminating the substantial role of social media influencers in contemporary Indonesian public discourse, particularly concerning legal and political matters.

The perfect influence scores (10/10) achieved by both Inibukanniko and warganet.id accounts demonstrate the capacity of digital content creators to shape public perception through audience reach rather than content sentiment alone, which has profound implications for understanding how democratic discourse operates within digital spaces, where follower quantities and engagement metrics may supersede content quality or factual accuracy in determining public opinion formation. The study reveals that social media platforms function as significant mediators of public sentiment, capable of amplifying individual perspectives into collective movements of support or opposition. Consequently, this research suggests that contemporary media literacy programmes must address the distinction between algorithmic sentiment detection and authentic public opinion, particularly in contexts where automated systems may misinterpret cultural and linguistic nuances. Future studies should incorporate multiple sentiment analysis tools and manual verification processes to enhance analytical accuracy, whilst expanding analytical scope to include additional platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Furthermore, comparative studies examining sentiment patterns across different corruption cases could provide deeper insights into the relationship between judicial proceedings and public opinion dynamics within Indonesia's democratic framework.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research. All data were collected independently by the authors using the Brand24 application.

Data Availability Statement

The data in the study was obtained by crawling data in online media using the Brand24 application, the data can be accessed at the link https://app.brand24.com.

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