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Transforming citizen participation in local government communication: A thematic analysis of TikTok comments on the Bengkulu governor's account

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Abstract

Social media expands channels for citizen participation in government communication, yet comments on public officials' accounts remain understudied as expressions of public aspirations. This study examines forms of citizen participation, dominant issues, and expectations of government responsiveness through comments on the TikTok account of the Governor of Bengkulu. It employs qualitative thematic analysis informed by a netnographic perspective to examine 100 comments from five videos, each receiving more than one million views. Appreciation was the most frequent category (24%), followed by policy advice and public education (21%), criticism (17%), and social empathy (16%). Participation comprised three modes: evaluative (41%), instrumental (34%), and affective (25%). Comment patterns varied by issue, suggesting that TikTok expands participation from conventional forums into digital spaces, although online expressions of public aspirations do not guarantee government responses. The findings recommend that local governments integrate social media input into public complaint and service mechanisms by verifying comments, referring reports to relevant agencies, and informing citizens about follow-up actions.

Keywords: Digital citizen participation; Local government communication; TikTok comments; Government responsiveness; Participatory culture.

Abstrak

Media sosial memperluas saluran partisipasi warga dalam komunikasi pemerintahan, tetapi komentar pada akun pejabat publik masih jarang dikaji sebagai bentuk artikulasi aspirasi publik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bentuk partisipasi warga, isu dominan, dan ekspektasi terhadap respons pemerintah melalui komentar pada akun TikTok Gubernur Bengkulu. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis tematik kualitatif dengan perspektif netnografi terhadap 100 komentar dari lima video yang masing-masing memperoleh lebih dari satu juta tayangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa apresiasi merupakan kategori komentar terbanyak (24%), diikuti saran kebijakan dan edukasi publik (21%), kritik (17%), serta empati sosial (16%). Partisipasi warga terbagi menjadi tiga mode, yaitu evaluatif (41%), instrumental (34%), dan afektif (25%). Pola komentar bervariasi berdasarkan isu, menunjukkan bahwa TikTok memperluas saluran partisipasi dari forum konvensional ke ruang digital. Namun, ekspresi aspirasi secara daring belum menjamin adanya respons pemerintah. Temuan ini merekomendasikan agar pemerintah daerah mengintegrasikan aspirasi warga dari media sosial ke dalam mekanisme pengaduan dan pelayanan publik melalui verifikasi komentar, penerusan laporan kepada instansi terkait, serta penyampaian informasi mengenai tindak lanjut kepada warga.

Kata Kunci: Partisipasi digital warga; Komunikasi pemerintahan daerah; Komentar TikTok; Responsivitas pemerintah; Budaya partisipatif.

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Introduction

Social media has transformed communication between local governments and citizens, including how people express their aspirations, evaluate policies, and raise complaints about public services. Whereas citizen participation was previously channelled largely through deliberative forums, public consultations, and formal complaint mechanisms, the development of social media has expanded opportunities for citizens to interact directly with governments through digital channels. Medaglia and Zhu (2017) and Arshad and Khurram (2020) show that government social media can provide spaces for public deliberation and citizen political participation, although its effectiveness is influenced by factors such as transparency, trust, and government responsiveness. This development is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where approximately 180 million social media user identities, representing 62.9% of the total population, were reported by We Are Social and Meltwater (2025). The reported reach of TikTok also highlights the platform's significance in digital communication, although advertising reach does not necessarily reflect the number of unique active users. Social media can therefore be understood as an additional channel that broadens opportunities for citizens to express their views and aspirations in government communication.

This context is reflected in Helmi Hasan's use of TikTok following his appointment as Governor of Bengkulu on 20 February 2025 (Infonegeri, 2025). In September 2025, he encouraged civil servants to use TikTok for public service delivery and identified his personal account as one of the channels through which citizens could submit complaints (ANTARA Bengkulu, 2025). This practice illustrates the potential of social media to connect citizens with local government beyond existing participation channels. From the perspective of *New Public Service*, Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) emphasise that citizens should be treated as active citizens rather than merely as customers of public services. However, the presence of government or public officials on social media does not automatically guarantee two-way communication. Through an analysis of 2,893 posts published by local governments on Facebook, DePaula et al. (2018) found that government communication frequently served to provide information, perform symbolic acts, and engage in self-presentation. Meanwhile, Atnan et al. (2024) found that the management of Instagram and Twitter (X) by the Bandung City Government had not fully achieved meaningful public engagement, including because of limitations in creative content planning. These findings suggest that expanding digital channels must be accompanied by attention to interaction quality and follow-up on citizens' aspirations. Formal mechanisms such as SP4N-LAPOR! remain relevant, while social media can provide an additional space for citizens to articulate public concerns.

Previous studies on government social media can be grouped into several strands. The first concerns citizen engagement and its relationship with government, including Mansoor (2021) and Bonsón et al. (2019), who examined Twitter as a tool for citizen engagement in Andalusian municipalities in Spain. The second focuses on government communication strategies and content characteristics on social media. This strand includes studies by Chen et al. (2021) and Li et al. (2021) on TikTok in China; Wukich (2021, 2022, 2025) on government social media engagement strategies and forms; and Mabillard and Zumofen (2025) and Zumofen et al. (2025) on evaluating citizen engagement and managing government social media pages. In Indonesia, Atnan and Sembada (2025) and Hidayat and Muksin (2022) have also examined government social media management and digital communication. The third strand addresses government responses to digital participation, including studies by Weng et al. (2021), Tiwari et al. (2024), Adegbola et al. (2026), and Bherer and Verhoeven (2023). This literature demonstrates that government–citizen relationships through digital media have been examined from various perspectives. However, further research is needed to understand the content of citizen comments as a form of participation, particularly on short-video platforms and in the context of local government in Indonesia.

TikTok has several characteristics that distinguish it from other social media platforms. Because content distribution does not depend solely on follower networks, videos can reach broader audiences, including users who do not follow the accounts that publish them (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). In political and social contexts, TikTok also provides a space for expression, meaning-making, and public engagement through video formats, humour, and digital cultural practices (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Cheng and Li (2024) show that the characteristics and sentiment of TikTok news videos are associated with user engagement, including liking, commenting on, and sharing content. These characteristics make comment sections important not merely as indicators of interaction but also as spaces where citizens express evaluations, concerns, criticism, and proposals relating to public issues. Jenkins's (2006) perspective on *Participatory Culture* helps explain how citizens act as active users who contribute to the production and circulation of meaning. Meanwhile, *New Public Service*, as articulated by Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), provides a framework for examining how such expressions relate to the government's role in serving and responding to citizens.

Despite the growing body of research on government social media, several gaps remain. Thematically, Indonesian studies have tended to focus on the image of public officials and government communication, as illustrated by Hidayat and Muksin (2022). Setiawati and Al Hafis (2026), who examined TikTok comments on the account of Sherly Tjoanda, Governor of North Maluku, also connected netizens' comments with public trust but did not specifically conceptualise them as forms of citizen participation through which people express aspirations and demands concerning public services.

Contextually, research on digital participation through TikTok in provincial governments outside Java remains limited. Theoretically, the combined application of *Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, 2006) and *New Public Service* (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) to understand the relationship between citizen expression and government responsiveness has also received limited attention. Methodologically, further research is needed to explain comment-selection procedures transparently so that patterns of citizen participation can be traced and compared.

To address these gaps, this study analyses citizen comments on five TikTok videos posted on the account of Helmi Hasan, Governor of Bengkulu, each of which received at least one million views. The study aims to identify forms of citizen participation, map dominant issues and public aspirations, and examine citizens' expectations of government responsiveness. The comments are classified into eight categories, which are then grouped into three modes of participation: affective, evaluative, and instrumental. By integrating the perspectives of *Participatory Culture* and *New Public Service*, this study examines the shift in citizen participation channels from conventional forums, such as deliberative meetings and public consultations, towards digital spaces where aspirations, criticism, and demands concerning public services can be expressed through social media. This shift does not necessarily indicate that conventional channels have been abandoned; rather, it signals the emergence of additional spaces for participation that change how citizens articulate public interests and interact with government. The study also offers a transparent comment-selection procedure and recommendations for connecting digital aspirations with institutional follow-up by government.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative design using thematic analysis of TikTok comments, informed by a netnographic perspective. Kozinets (2020) regards comments, posts, likes, and interactions among users as social data that convey meanings, values, and communication patterns. From this perspective, this study treats comment sections as spaces of interaction between citizens and public officials rather than merely as collections of individual opinions. However, because the researcher did not participate in an online community or undertake prolonged immersion, the study is not classified as a full netnography. Thematic analysis was selected because it is suitable for identifying forms and meanings of citizen participation, while Mabillard and Zumofen (2025) emphasise that the quality of state–citizen interactions should be examined beyond platform metrics. The analysis also draws on the concepts of *Participatory Culture* and *New Public Service* to interpret the relationship between digital expression and public participation.

Data were collected from the public TikTok account @helmi_hasan, with each citizen comment serving as the unit of analysis. The observation period began on 20 February

2025, when Helmi Hasan took office as governor, and ended on 31 May 2026, the date on which the data were collected. Videos were selected purposively based on four criteria: they were uploaded after 20 February 2025; had received at least one million views; addressed public issues related to public services, citizen protection, education, health, or government responses; and had active comment sections. The one-million-view threshold was used to indicate the extent of digital circulation rather than to establish statistical representativeness. This criterion is consistent with the concept of *Participatory Culture*, while Bhandari and Bimo (2022) and Wukich (2022) emphasise that platform structures, ranking algorithms, and interactions among users help shape engagement on government social media accounts. The five selected videos are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample TikTok videos from @helmi_hasan with at least one million views

No.	Video	Upload date	Views	Issue and rationale for selection
1	Disturbance at SMAN 1 in Bengkulu City (bullying)	5 February 2026	1.8 million	Education, bullying, and child protection; represents a crisis in a school environment that prompts moral evaluations from netizens.
2	Bengkulu resident becomes a victim of human trafficking in Cambodia	3 February 2026	2.1 million	Human trafficking and citizen protection; represents the need for government assistance, migrant worker protection, and evacuation requests.
3	Repatriation of Adelia, a deceased migrant worker from Bengkulu, from Japan	14 November 2025	1.1 million	Migrant worker protection and humanitarian response; illustrates the government's response to a Bengkulu resident abroad.
4	Continuation of the Walk to School programme	19 May 2025	3.1 million	Education, student mobility, health, and safety; represents the high visibility of preventive programme content.
5	Toddler from Seluma, Bengkulu, goes viral after worms emerge from the child's body	17 September 2025	1.4 million	Public health, environmental poverty, and sanitation; represents social and health vulnerabilities.

Note. View counts and comment rankings are based on observations made on 31 May 2026.

Source: Author's observations of the TikTok account @helmi_hasan (2026).

Data collection involved non-participant observation. On 31 May 2026, the researcher recorded the 20 most visible comments from each video according to TikTok's display order, yielding a total of 100 comments. Spam, promotional content, duplicate comments, and comments consisting solely of emojis without substantive meaning were excluded and replaced with the next relevant comments in the display order.

Categories were established after open and axial coding so that the selection of comments would not be influenced by predetermined categories. The researcher documented screenshots of videos and comments, video links, view counts, likes and comment counts, and the dates and times of access to establish an audit trail. The study used only publicly accessible comments; the researcher did not interact with users or access private messages or closed groups. Usernames were removed, and comment content was paraphrased to protect commenters' identities. The methodological decisions and their rationales are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Comment selection procedures and measures to reduce subjectivity

Stage	Methodological decision	Rationale
Access date	Comments were collected on 31 May 2026.	Establishes a temporal boundary for data collection and makes the process auditable.
Number of comments	The 20 most visible comments from each video were selected, yielding 100 comments across five videos.	Maintains an equal number of comments across videos without imposing a predetermined distribution of categories.
Selection basis	Comments were selected according to their visibility order as displayed by TikTok at the time of access.	Reduces subjectivity by avoiding selection based on anticipated categories.
Exclusion criteria	Spam, promotional content, duplicates, empty comments, and emojis without substantive meaning were excluded.	Ensures that the analysed comments contain material relevant to coding.
Category development	Categories were established after open and axial coding.	Prevents predetermined categories from influencing data selection.
Documentation	Screenshots of videos and comments, video links, view counts, likes and comment counts, and dates and times of access were recorded.	Establishes an audit trail and supports subsequent data retrieval.

Source: Compiled by the author (2026).

Data analysis followed the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021). The researcher repeatedly read all 100 comments, assigned initial codes to meaningful segments, grouped related codes into provisional themes, reviewed the coherence and boundaries of each theme, defined and named the themes, and then interpreted them through the concepts of *Participatory Culture* and *New Public Service*. This process produced eight categories. When a comment conveyed more than one meaning, it was coded according to its dominant intention. Comments containing regional dialects, abbreviations, or colloquial language were normalised to a limited extent without altering their meanings. All coding was conducted by a single researcher, consistent with the study's exploratory aim of developing an initial

typology. Analytical credibility was supported by an audit trail, triangulation of digital sources, and consistency checks through constant comparison across comments and videos. The study did not conduct inter-coder reliability testing. Accordingly, the findings represent an exploratory snapshot of publicly visible digital interactions up to 31 May 2026.

Results and Discussion

Typologies and patterns of citizen participation in digital government communication

The TikTok account @helmi_hasan serves as a hybrid communication channel that combines personal, political, and governmental elements. Since Helmi Hasan took office as Governor of Bengkulu, the account has featured messages, programmes, and responses related to local government administration. Accordingly, this study limits its observation to content published after his inauguration. The Bantu Rakyat programme provides one link between the account's activities and local government operations by encouraging citizens to submit requests for assistance, complaints, and expressions of gratitude. TikTok thus functions both as a promotional medium and as a space for expressing public aspirations. Research on e-government indicates that communication through social media requires mechanisms for handling public input and providing institutional responses to support responsive governance (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2024). This context is important for understanding the role of comments as a form of communication between citizens and regional leaders.

The account's hybrid character also shapes how citizens participate. Some comments address Helmi Hasan personally through expressions of gratitude, requests, or appeals for direct intervention. However, the issues raised concern public affairs, including education, healthcare services, and migrant worker protection. Personal appeals made through a regional leader's account can therefore also be understood as expressions of public concerns directed towards the local government bureaucracy. This study draws on Jenkins's (2006) theory of *Participatory Culture* as its conceptual framework, while comment categories were developed inductively through thematic analysis. The coding process produced eight categories: complaints, appreciation, criticism, questions or clarifications, policy advice or educational support, requests for assistance or follow-up, social empathy, and personal involvement or testimonials. The development of these categories followed the principles of inductive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021).

Table 3. Categories of citizen participation

Participation category	Operational meaning	Example of comment form
Complaint	Citizens' complaints about public services, social conditions, infrastructure, education, or health.	Reports of damaged roads, service complaints, school problems, or residents' health conditions.
Appreciation	Praise or support for the actions of the governor or regional government.	Expressions of gratitude, support for a prompt response, or praise for a programme.
Criticism	Dissatisfaction with policies, government responses, or related actors.	Comments describing the government as slow or unfair, or as being focused on image-building.
Questions/clarifications	Requests for further information, clarification, or explanation.	Questions about assistance status, procedures, or case follow-up.
Policy advice/educational support	Constructive input proposing solutions or improvements.	Suggestions to establish a complaint channel, assist victims, or evaluate schools.
Request for assistance/follow-up	Comments asking the governor or local government to intervene directly.	Requests for financial assistance, evacuation, access to health services, or case resolution.
Social empathy	Sympathy, prayers, emotional support, or solidarity with victims or affected residents.	Prayers for victims, sympathy for families, or moral support.
Personal involvement/testimonials	Personal experiences or accounts related to the issue featured in the video.	Accounts of similar experiences, claims of being a survivor, or confirmation of the conditions shown.

Source: Author's thematic coding (2026).

The analysis covered 100 comments from five videos, with 20 comments contributed by each video. Table 4 presents the distribution of the eight categories across the videos and their overall frequencies. Appreciation was the most frequent category, accounting for 24 comments (24%), followed by policy advice, education, or support, with 21 comments (21%). Social or government criticism accounted for 17 comments (17%), while social empathy accounted for 16 (16%). The remaining categories were personal involvement or testimonials, with nine comments (9%); requests for assistance or follow-up, with seven (7%); complaints, with four (4%); and questions or clarifications, with two (2%). This distribution indicates that citizen participation extended beyond support for the governor to include evaluation, expressions of need,

personal experiences, and solidarity. Figure 1 presents the aggregate percentages for these categories.

Table 4. Distribution of comment categories by video

Participation category	**V1**	**V2**	**V3**	**V4**	**V5**	**Total**	**%**
Complaint	3	1	0	0	0	4	4
Appreciation	0	0	15	9	0	24	24
Social/government criticism	6	4	0	1	6	17	17
Questions/clarifications	1	0	0	0	1	2	2
Policy advice/education/support	2	5	0	8	6	21	21
Request for assistance/follow-up	1	4	1	0	1	7	7
Social empathy	5	3	3	0	5	16	16
Personal involvement/testimonials	2	3	1	2	1	9	9
Total	20	20	20	20	20	100	100

Note. V1 = bullying at SMAN 1; V2 = human trafficking in Cambodia; V3 = Adelia's repatriation; V4 = Walk to School programme; V5 = Seluma toddler. Comments conveying more than one meaning were coded according to their dominant intention.

Source: Author's thematic coding (2026).

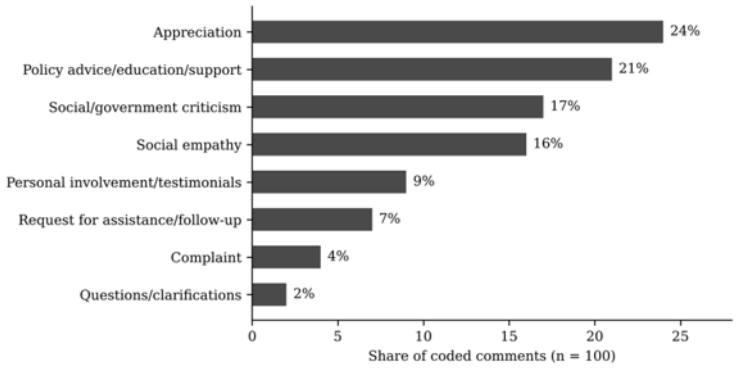


Figure 1. Aggregate distribution of citizen participation categories (n = 100)

Source: Author's thematic coding (2026).

The eight categories were grouped into three modes according to the primary orientation of each comment. The affective mode encompasses social empathy and personal involvement or testimonials, which express solidarity, feelings, and citizens' experiences. The evaluative mode combines appreciation and criticism as assessments of the government or related actors. The instrumental mode includes complaints, questions or clarifications, policy advice, and requests for assistance, all of which are oriented towards action, answers, or policy improvement. Table 5 presents the distribution of these three modes across the videos. Overall, the evaluative mode accounted for 41 comments (41%), the instrumental mode for 34 (34%), and the

affective mode for 25 (25%). The predominance of the evaluative mode indicates that assessments of performance were the most common form of participation in the sample, although practical needs and expressions of solidarity also represented substantial proportions.

Table 5. Modes of participation by video

Mode (included categories)	**V1**	**V2**	**V3**	**V4**	**V5**	**Total**
Affective (social empathy; personal involvement/testimonials)	7	6	4	2	6	25 (25%)
Evaluative (appreciation; criticism)	6	4	15	10	6	41 (41%)
Instrumental (complaints; questions; policy advice; requests for assistance)	7	10	1	8	8	34 (34%)
Total	20	20	20	20	20	100 (100%)

Note. The modes aggregate the categories presented in Table 4.

Source: Compiled by the author (2026).

Differences in category distributions indicate that participation patterns in the sample varied according to the issue featured in each video. In the video about bullying at SMAN 1 in Bengkulu City, social criticism accounted for 30% of comments and social empathy for 25%. There were also three complaint comments (15%), consistent with the distribution for the first video in Table 4. Netizens questioned the attitudes of those who witnessed the bullying, the actions of teachers, and the school's responsibility to protect the victim. By contrast, the video about a Bengkulu resident who became a victim of human trafficking in Cambodia was dominated by prevention advice and education, at 25%, followed by criticism and requests for assistance, each accounting for 20%. Some commenters shared experiences as survivors or relatives of people who had nearly become victims. Together, these two videos illustrate forms of participation involving social evaluation, solidarity, the sharing of experiences, and demands for intervention.

Different patterns emerged in the video about Adelia's repatriation from Japan and the Walk to School programme. In the Adelia video, appreciation accounted for 75% of comments and social empathy for 15%, expressed primarily through prayers and condolences. In the Walk to School video, appreciation accounted for 45%, while policy advice or support accounted for 40%. Netizens supported the programme as a way to foster discipline and healthy habits, although some raised concerns about the distance between home and school. In the video about the toddler in Seluma, advice and education accounted for 30% of comments, social or government criticism for 30%, and social empathy for 25%. Comments included prayers for the child, reminders about hygiene, community health posts (*posyandu*), deworming medication, and sanitation, as well as criticism of village officials and assistance programmes. These comparisons

demonstrate variations in public responses without requiring an extensive repetition of each issue.

Overall, the bullying incident and the toddler's case in Seluma elicited a combination of criticism and empathy; the human trafficking case prompted prevention advice, criticism, and requests for assistance; the video about Adelia's repatriation was dominated by appreciation; and the Walk to School programme received appreciation and policy support. These patterns show that citizen comments served diverse purposes, ranging from evaluating government actions to expressing needs, sharing experiences, and demonstrating solidarity. The findings also provide context for Setiawati and Al Hafis (2026), who interpret comments on a governor's TikTok account primarily as expressions of public trust. In this study, appreciation accounted for only 24% of all comments, while the remaining 76% comprised criticism, advice, requests for assistance, testimonials, complaints, clarifications, and expressions of solidarity. However, because the sample included only 20 comments from each video, these patterns describe the analysed data and cannot be directly generalised to the entire population of Bengkulu residents.

Dominant issues and citizen aspirations in TikTok comment sections

The five videos analysed addressed a range of public issues, including education, student safety, school violence, migrant worker protection, human trafficking, public health, and social vulnerability. Comment counts alone are insufficient to explain participation patterns, as each category must be interpreted in the context of the issue presented in the corresponding video. Table 6 presents a public issue matrix linking video topics, the issues highlighted, dominant comment categories, and their analytical implications. The video concerning bullying at SMAN 1 primarily elicited social criticism and empathy, whereas the video about human trafficking in Cambodia featured educational suggestions, criticism, and requests for assistance. By contrast, the video documenting the repatriation of Adelia's body from Japan was dominated by appreciation. Meanwhile, the *Walk to School* programme and the case of the toddler in Seluma prompted a combination of policy support, criticism, education, and social solidarity.

Table 6. Public issue matrix based on five sample videos

Video	Public issues	Dominant category	Analytical implications
Disturbance/bullying at SMAN 1	Bullying, school violence, child protection	Social criticism (30%); social empathy (25%)	The comment section serves as a space for moral evaluation of schools, teachers, and bystanders perceived as having failed to protect the victim.

Victims of human trafficking in Cambodia	Human trafficking, citizen protection, migrant workers	Suggestions/education (25%); criticism (20%); requests for assistance (20%)	Comments provide space for testimony and public education while expressing pressure on the government to investigate trafficking networks.
Repatriation of Adelia's body from Japan	Migrant worker protection, humanitarian response	Appreciation (75%); social empathy (15%)	A tangible government response elicited predominantly positive evaluations, although some comments called for investigations into the institutions involved.
Walk to School programme	Education, student health, mobility	Appreciation (45%); policy suggestions/support (40%)	Preventive programmes generate policy legitimacy and public education, while comments also identify implementation challenges related to the distance between home and school.
Toddler from Seluma with a worm infestation	Child health, sanitation, environmental poverty	Advice/education (30%); criticism (30%); social empathy (25%)	A child health case prompts solidarity and public education, alongside criticism of basic services and assistance systems.

Note. The matrix is based on the coding of the 20 most visible comments from each video.

Source: Author's thematic coding (2026).

The matrix shows that each issue elicited different forms of participation, which may provide local governments with an initial basis for understanding citizens' aspirations. Videos concerning bullying, human trafficking, and the toddler's health problems elicited empathy, criticism, testimonials, and demands for follow-up action. By contrast, the video about Adelia's repatriation and the *Walk to School* programme received more expressions of appreciation and policy support. These differences suggest that comments can serve as preliminary indicators for identifying issue sensitivity and determining the type of response required. However, these patterns do not, in themselves, demonstrate policy effectiveness or represent the views of the entire population. Another implication concerns the distribution of responsibilities across institutions. The SMAN 1 case points to the provincial education office, human trafficking involves employment services and migrant worker protection agencies,

while the toddler's case in Seluma involves district-level health services, village officials, and *posyandu* (community health posts).

These differences in institutional responsibilities indicate that a single communication account cannot independently address every public concern. Feedback on the *Walk to School* programme, for example, requires coordination with the education office and school principals, whereas child health concerns require the involvement of healthcare providers and local government. Similarly, reports of human trafficking require coordination with agencies authorised to address employment issues and protect migrant workers. TikTok comments may therefore serve as an initial point for identifying problems and forwarding citizens' concerns, but follow-up requires clear referral procedures. This finding supports the proposal, presented in the conclusion, to establish a cross-agency team. Such a team could connect the governor's account with relevant provincial and district-level government agencies, ensuring that citizens' aspirations do not remain confined to digital conversations but are referred to the institutions responsible for addressing them.

Shifting models of citizen participation from conventional forums to digital spaces in government communication

Social media has changed not only where citizens express their views but also how public aspirations reach those in positions of power. Whereas public hearings, deliberative meetings, and formal complaint mechanisms provide conventional channels, TikTok allows citizens to respond to public issues directly within officials' communication spaces. This pattern is evident in the 100 most visible comments from five viral videos on the TikTok account of Bengkulu Governor Helmi Hasan, collected on May 31, 2026, with 20 comments selected from each video. The issues included bullying at SMAN 1 Bengkulu, human trafficking in Cambodia, the repatriation of Adelia's body from Japan, the *Walk to School* program, and child health in Seluma. The diversity of these issues suggests that an official's account functions as a meeting point for public aspirations across multiple sectors, rather than merely as a channel for publicizing government activities.

This shift is consistent with Jenkins's (2006) concept of *participatory culture*, although the findings of this study reveal a more specific political dimension. Jenkins explains that media users no longer simply receive messages but also produce, circulate, and interpret meaning. In this study, citizens use comments to evaluate government actions, propose policies, and request assistance. Zeng and Abidin (2021), in their study of the #OkBoomer political meme on TikTok, similarly demonstrate that digital platforms enable political expression through humor and meme culture. However, political expression on a governor's account has a different orientation: citizens engage directly with a communication channel belonging to a holder of political power. TikTok is therefore not merely a space for expression but also a channel through which

public demands are articulated. Nevertheless, these findings indicate an expansion of participation channels, not evidence that conventional forums have been abandoned.

The distribution of comments indicates that citizen participation encompasses support, evaluation, and the articulation of interests. Appreciation was the largest category, accounting for 24% of comments, followed by policy suggestions, education, or support (21%); criticism (17%); social empathy (16%); personal involvement or testimonials (9%); requests for assistance or follow-up (7%); complaints (4%); and questions or requests for clarification (2%). DePaula et al. (2018), through a content analysis of 2,893 Facebook posts by local governments in the United States, identified 12 communication categories encompassing information provision and symbolic actions. The distinction is important: DePaula et al. examined government messages, whereas the present study investigates how citizens respond and articulate their interests. Policy suggestions and criticism together accounted for 38% of comments, indicating that the comment section should not be interpreted merely as a measure of the governor's popularity. It also serves as a space for public evaluation, although the findings do not establish whether such evaluations influence government decisions.

The three modes of participation further clarify these functions: evaluative participation accounted for 41%, instrumental participation for 34%, and affective participation for 25%. The evaluative mode encompasses appreciation and criticism; the instrumental mode includes policy suggestions, complaints, questions, and requests for assistance; while the affective mode comprises expressions of empathy and personal testimonials. Wukich (2021), in an analysis of Facebook posts from 62 cities across three US states during Hurricane Florence, found that government communication was more oriented toward citizens as service customers and partners than toward policy deliberation, risk communication, and community resilience. The present study complements this perspective by highlighting the citizen side of the interaction: citizens are not merely service recipients but also evaluators and proponents of action. However, the predominance of the evaluative mode should not be equated with involvement in decision-making. Participation has extended beyond information consumption, but it does not necessarily amount to deliberation that produces shared decisions.

Differences in the comments across the five videos indicate that forms of participation are associated with the issues being discussed. In the case of bullying at SMAN 1 Bengkulu, criticism accounted for 30% of comments and empathy for 25%. On the issue of human trafficking in Cambodia, suggestions or educational comments accounted for 25%, while criticism and requests for assistance each represented 20%. The video concerning the repatriation of Adelia's body from Japan was dominated by appreciation (75%) and empathy (15%). For the *Walk to School* program, appreciation accounted for 45% and suggestions or support for 40%. Meanwhile, the video about a

toddler's health in Seluma featured suggestions (30%), criticism (30%), and empathy (25%). Chen et al. (2020), in their study of the Healthy China Weibo account during the COVID-19 crisis, found that dialogic interaction, information about government responses, and emotional context were associated with user engagement. The findings of the present study reinforce the importance of issue context: citizens do not respond uniformly but instead adapt their expressions to the issues under discussion.

Extensive content reach does not automatically translate into substantive participation. The *Walk to School* video received 3.1 million views, yet none of the 20 comments analyzed fell into the categories of complaints, questions, or requests for assistance. This finding does not establish that criticism was absent from the entire audience; rather, it demonstrates that popularity and forms of participation are distinct. Atnan et al. (2024) identified a related problem from the perspective of government social media management. Through a case study and quantitative content analysis of the Bandung City Government's Instagram and Twitter (X) accounts during 2022, they concluded that social media management had not generated high-quality engagement. Content planning remained suboptimal, interactions and responses to comments were inconsistent, and evaluation was not used to its full potential to improve communication strategies. This comparison underscores that the success of government communication should be assessed not only by views or expressions of appreciation but also by the quality of interaction and the capacity to manage public input.

The next challenge concerns how digital aspirations are connected to institutional processes. Tiwari et al. (2024), in a systematic literature review of responsive governance based on information and communication technologies, linked public input, government processes, and governance outcomes. This framework highlights a limitation of the present study: comments can be identified and categorized, but bureaucratic processes and follow-up outcomes are not measured. Faber (2023), in a study of social media use by municipal governments in the Netherlands in 2018 and 2021 involving 724 observations, found that the adoption of paid customer relationship management tools had reached 89% by 2021. Faber's findings highlight the importance of organizational support in social media management. Whereas Tiwari et al. emphasize the connection between public input and outcomes, Faber demonstrates the need for management infrastructure. Without mechanisms for recording, forwarding, and evaluating public input, officials' accounts risk merely displaying citizens' aspirations rather than ensuring that they are processed.

The gap between citizens' voices and government responses is evident in the 34 comments classified under the instrumental mode of participation. Of these, 13 consisted of complaints, questions, or requests for assistance, while the remainder involved policy suggestions, educational content, and support. These three forms,

which specifically sought clarification or follow-up, appeared across four of the videos; the *Walk to School* video contained no comments in any of these three categories. Weng et al. (2021), through an analysis of 136 cases of social media participation in policymaking in China, identified four patterns of government response: Ostrich, Cuckoo, Queen Bee, and Mandarin Duck. The Cuckoo pattern, in which the government reacts after public input emerges, was the most dominant, whereas patterns characterized by high participation from both sides were relatively rare. This framework clarifies the problem raised by the present study: visible citizen voices do not necessarily constitute participation connected to decision-making processes. Without data on government responses, claims about government responsiveness cannot be substantiated.

The relationship between citizen participation and government responsiveness cannot be explained solely by the existence of digital communication channels. Arshad and Khurram (2020), in a survey of 388 followers of the Punjab Food Authority's social media accounts in Pakistan analyzed using structural equation modeling, found that trust was not a significant predictor of online political participation, while perceived responsiveness showed a negative relationship with participation in their model. These findings challenge the assumption that greater perceived government responsiveness invariably encourages higher levels of political engagement. Meanwhile, Zumofen et al. (2025), in a mapping of municipal government social media use across five Nordic countries and 19 interviews with communication managers, found that Facebook was the most widely used platform, Instagram exhibited high engagement, and X had relatively low engagement. Together, these studies demonstrate that platform use and citizen participation should not be treated as equivalent indicators.

The distinction between providing a communication space and generating meaningful participation is also important from the perspective of the *New Public Service*. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) position citizens as participants in shaping the public interest rather than merely as customers of government services. This perspective requires citizens' aspirations to extend beyond comments and find a place within government processes. This argument is reinforced by Adegbola et al. (2026), who analyzed eighth-round Afrobarometer data from 42,684 respondents across 30 sub-Saharan African countries. They found that perceptions of elected representatives' responsiveness were positively associated with government approval and trust in political institutions but were not significantly associated with electoral participation. Conversely, citizen-initiated contact with elected representatives was strongly associated with electoral participation but was not significantly associated with government approval, institutional trust, or satisfaction with democracy. These findings underscore that the expression of public aspirations, perceptions of government responsiveness, and political consequences are distinct dimensions. Accordingly, this study identifies

TikTok as a channel for articulating public aspirations but does not establish that those aspirations are acted upon or influence policy.

Conclusion

This study shows that TikTok expands models of citizen participation in government communication by extending participation from conventional channels to digital spaces where citizens can communicate their aspirations directly to public officials. Such participation is not limited to expressing support for the government but also encompasses evaluation, policy suggestions, social empathy, personal testimonials, and requests for assistance. This is reflected in the predominance of the evaluative mode of participation (41%), followed by the instrumental mode (34%) and the affective mode (25%). These patterns indicate that citizens use comment sections to perform different political functions depending on the nature of the public issues being discussed. However, expanded access to communication does not automatically produce participation that influences government. Without mechanisms linking public aspirations to bureaucratic processes and policy follow-up, digital interactions risk remaining at the level of opinion articulation. Accordingly, the main contribution of this study lies in distinguishing participation as an expression of citizens' views from participation as input integrated into government processes.

This study contributes to research on digital government communication by demonstrating that citizen participation should be analyzed in terms of the forms of expression, orientations toward engagement, and connections with institutional responses, rather than solely through view counts or interaction metrics. In practical terms, local governments need to establish comment-management mechanisms that include recording public aspirations, classifying issues, forwarding them to relevant agencies, and publishing follow-up actions so that social media can function as an accountable channel for participation. Nevertheless, this study is limited to the 100 most visible comments from five videos on a single governor's account; therefore, its findings do not represent all users or patterns of digital government communication more broadly. The study also does not systematically measure government responses or directly compare digital participation with conventional forums. Future research should expand the number of accounts and comments examined, incorporate interviews with citizens and government communication managers, and trace the follow-up of public aspirations to assess the extent to which digital participation actually influences public policymaking processes and outcomes.

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