

Construction of Narratives on The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program on Social Media: A Framing Study of Supportive and Critical Content

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is a government policy aimed at improving the nutritional quality of the population and has become a widely discussed issue on social media. This study aims to analyze audience reception of the MBG Program through netizen comments on TikTok using Stuart Hall's reception theory. The study employed a qualitative approach with a reception analysis method. Data were collected through non-participant observation and documentation of netizen comments, then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model and validated through data triangulation. The findings indicate that audience reception was divided into three categories: the *dominant-hegemonic position*, *negotiated position*, and *oppositional position*. The oppositional position emerged as the most dominant category, comprising 46 comments, indicating that most netizens understood the intended objectives of the MBG Program but rejected the dominant meaning offered and constructed alternative interpretations based on their views of policy priorities, economic conditions, and program effectiveness. These findings confirm that audiences actively participate in interpreting media messages and demonstrate that public reception of the MBG Program in digital spaces remains characterized by criticism and differing perspectives

How to cite:

1. INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) has become one of the public policies receiving the greatest public attention since its implementation as part of Indonesia's human resource development agenda. The program is positioned not only as an effort to meet the nutritional needs of school-age children, but also as a strategic instrument for improving the quality of future generations. Various posts regarding the implementation of MBG are routinely disseminated through government social media accounts, mass media, and informational platforms, generating diverse public responses. The high intensity of media coverage and information distribution has made MBG an important phenomenon of public communication, particularly in relation to how audiences interpret messages conveyed through digital media (Kiftiyah et al., 2025).

Data indicate that nutritional problems remain a major national development challenge. According to the 2023 Indonesian Health Survey (*Survei Kesehatan Indonesia* or SKI) released by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, the national prevalence of stunting remains at 21.5 percent. Although this figure has declined compared with previous years, it remains above the government's target. This condition indicates that interventions aimed at improving nutritional fulfillment, particularly among children and adolescents, remain urgently needed. The MBG Program has therefore emerged as one of the policy responses expected to strengthen access to nutritious food while supporting improvements in the health quality of students (Kemenkes BKPK, 2023).

The development of communication technology has transformed patterns of information dissemination concerning public policy. Social media no longer functions merely as a channel for distributing messages, but has increasingly become a discursive space in which citizens express support, criticism, and interpretations of public policies. The **Digital 2025: Indonesia** report published by DataReportal shows that the number of social media users in Indonesia has exceeded 143 million. This figure illustrates the growing importance of digital interaction in the formation of public opinion, including comment sections that provide spaces for people to express their views on emerging issues (Kemp, 2025).

Contemporary discussions surrounding MBG can be observed across various digital platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram. Posts concerning food distribution, menu quality, implementation effectiveness, and the use of state budgets have generated a wide range of responses from netizens. Some users express appreciation because the program is perceived as helping to meet the nutritional needs of schoolchildren. Others question aspects of technical implementation, budget transparency, and the program's long-term sustainability. These differing responses demonstrate that audiences do not necessarily receive policy messages in a uniform manner.

The diversity of these interpretations indicates that the meaning of a message is not determined entirely by the message producer. Audiences possess the capacity to interpret information according to their experiences, values, knowledge, and social backgrounds. Comments appearing under MBG-related posts demonstrate an active process of meaning-making among members of the public. This reality reinforces the understanding that digital media have become arenas in which meanings are negotiated between policy-making institutions and citizens as message recipients (Anjasmika et al., 2025).

This perspective is consistent with Stuart Hall's argument that audiences are not passive recipients who simply accept media messages in their entirety. Hall's encoding-decoding model positions audiences as active subjects in the interpretation of media messages. Within this framework, audiences may occupy a dominant position when they accept the meaning offered by the media, a negotiated position when they accept certain elements of the message while adapting them to personal experiences, or an oppositional position when they reject the meaning constructed by the message producer. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the diverse responses of netizens to the MBG Program circulating on social media (Hall, 2007).

A complementary perspective is provided by Denis McQuail, who argues that modern media audiences possess increasing autonomy in selecting, interpreting, and responding to the messages they receive. Audiences do not merely consume information; they also produce meanings and redistribute their interpretations to wider publics. In the context of social media, this capacity is reflected in commenting, reposting, and online discussion, all of which enable individuals to participate in the formation of public opinion. McQuail's perspective therefore reinforces the assumption that netizens' responses to MBG constitute meaningful expressions of interpretation that warrant examination from a communication studies perspective (McQuail & Deuze, 2020).

Stuart Hall's audience reception theory further emphasizes that audiences actively interpret media messages rather than functioning merely as passive recipients. Hall explains that communication operates through a process of **encoding**, in which message producers construct particular meanings, and **decoding**, in which audiences interpret those meanings according to their experiences, values, and social contexts. Differences in background may therefore produce different interpretations of the same message. Hall categorizes audience reception into three positions: the **dominant-hegemonic position**, in which audiences accept the message in accordance with the meaning preferred by the media; the **negotiated position**, in which audiences accept certain aspects of the message while adapting them to personal circumstances; and the **oppositional position**, in which audiences understand but reject the preferred meaning offered by the message. This framework is relevant for examining netizen comments on the Free Nutritious Meal Program because social media responses demonstrate patterns of acceptance, negotiation, and rejection toward policy messages circulating in digital spaces (Hall, 2007).

Research on audience reception in digital media has been widely conducted to understand how audiences interpret messages received through various social media platforms. A study by Ken Ariestyani and Adisa Ramadhanty entitled **Social Media Audiences: Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis of Young People's Sexual Health** examined audience interpretations of sexual education content on the Instagram account @tabu.id. The findings identified three reception positions: **dominant-hegemonic**, **negotiated**, and **oppositional**, with the dominant position emerging as the most prevalent category. These findings indicate that personal experience, cultural values, and individual backgrounds influence how audiences interpret media messages. The study is relevant to the present research because both

employ Stuart Hall's reception theory to identify patterns of audience meaning-making in relation to issues discussed on social media (Ariestyani & Ramadhanty, 2022).

Another study conducted by Hana Maudunnajah et al. in the article **Analysis of Netizen Reception on Social Media X toward Actor Abidzar's Statement in the Film Adaptation A Business Proposal** employed a netnographic approach to analyze netizen comments on the social media platform X. The findings showed that the oppositional position was the most dominant category, as the majority of netizens rejected and criticized the statement made by the research subject. These findings demonstrate that social media functions as a space for the negotiation of meaning, enabling audiences to actively express interpretations, criticism, and rejection of circulating messages. The main difference between that study and the present research lies in the object of analysis. The previous study focused on netizens' responses to statements made by a public figure in the entertainment industry, whereas the present study focuses on netizens' interpretations of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a government public policy. Nevertheless, the study provides a strong conceptual basis for treating netizen comments as empirical data through which dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions can be identified in audience reception analysis (Maudunnajah et al., 2026).

The urgency of this study lies in the need to understand how the public interprets the Free Nutritious Meal Program amid the high intensity of digital communication and the public debate surrounding its implementation. Understanding audience reception is important because the success of a public policy is determined not only by how the program is implemented, but also by how the public receives and interprets the messages communicated about it. Analyzing netizen comments can provide an overview of patterns of public meaning-making while also offering useful input for the government and relevant stakeholders in designing more effective policy communication strategies. Therefore, examining audience reception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program through the analysis of netizen comments is highly relevant within communication studies, particularly in the fields of digital communication and public policy communication.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using an audience reception analysis method. The qualitative approach was selected to understand and interpret the meanings constructed by netizens regarding the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) through comments posted on TikTok. The reception analysis method was based on Stuart Hall's theory, which classifies audience interpretations into three positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. This approach enables the researcher to identify how netizens accept, negotiate, or reject the messages conveyed in content related to the MBG Program (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The research data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from netizen comments on TikTok posts discussing the Free Nutritious Meal Program and generating high levels of interaction. Secondary data were obtained from books, scientific journal articles, government reports, news articles, and other documents relevant to the research topic. Data were collected through non-participant observation and documentation by observing interactions in the comment sections and collecting and archiving comments relevant to the research focus.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation was conducted by selecting and categorizing comments according to the audience reception categories. The data were then presented in narrative descriptions and tables to facilitate interpretation. Data credibility was strengthened through data triangulation by comparing findings from netizen comments with various supporting sources, including scientific literature, official documents, and media reports (Susanto et al., 2023).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The researcher analyzed 60 netizen comments on TikTok posts concerning the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Data collected through documentation and non-participant observation were analyzed using Stuart Hall's reception theory to identify how audiences interpreted the messages contained in MBG-related content. The findings were subsequently classified into three reception positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. This classification was used to understand how netizens accepted, negotiated, or rejected the meanings constructed within the

messages. The results were then interpreted to explain patterns of audience reception and the dynamics of meaning-making that emerged within digital communication spaces.

Reception Category	Number of Comments	Percentage
Dominant-Hegemonic	8	13.33%
Negotiated	6	10.00%
Oppositional	46	76.67%
Total	60	100%

Dominant-Hegemonic Position

The *dominant-hegemonic position* indicates that audiences accept the message in accordance with the meaning constructed by the message producer. In this study, this category is reflected in netizen comments that support the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) and regard it as a positive policy for improving the nutritional quality of Indonesian children. Audiences in this category tend to accept the narrative conveyed in the content without expressing significant rejection or criticism of the program's objectives.

Several comments indicate that netizens perceive MBG as a form of government concern for public welfare, particularly for students who require access to nutritious food. The program is viewed as capable of supporting children's nutritional needs while also contributing to the improvement of human resource quality in the future. Such views reflect full acceptance of the meaning constructed in the content, namely that MBG is a policy that provides tangible benefits to society.

"Through MBG, tens of thousands of unemployed people have found jobs."

This comment falls within the *dominant-hegemonic position* because the netizen accepts and reinforces the positive narrative associated with the Free Nutritious Meal Program. The audience perceives MBG not only as a nutritional program but also as a policy capable of creating employment opportunities. There is no indication of rejection or negotiation regarding the message being conveyed. Instead, the comment demonstrates full acceptance of the program's benefits as constructed within public discourse.

"Please continue the MBG program, Sir. We fish farmers strongly support it."

This comment reflects a *dominant-hegemonic position* because the netizen explicitly supports the continuation of the MBG Program. The support is based on direct experience as a fish farmer who perceives economic benefits from the program. The audience accepts the objectives and benefits of the program as communicated by the government, namely that it generates positive impacts not only for beneficiaries but also for businesses involved in the food supply chain.

"But MBG also helps reduce unemployment, bro."

This comment is categorized as dominant because the netizen uses the program's perceived benefits as an argument in defense of MBG. The focus of the comment lies on the positive impact of reducing unemployment. Although the comment begins with the word "but," suggesting that it responds to criticism from another user, its substance still affirms the benefits of the program and does not indicate rejection of the dominant meaning constructed around MBG.

"It is a new policy, so there is nothing wrong with continuously evaluating and improving it. Don't cancel it over every minor issue. Respect to those who provide constructive criticism."

This comment can be categorized as a *dominant-hegemonic position* because the netizen fundamentally accepts the existence and objectives of the MBG Program as a policy worth continuing. The criticism expressed is not directed toward rejecting the program but toward improving its implementation. The emphasis on evaluation and constructive criticism indicates that the audience continues to recognize the program's positive value and supports its continuation. Therefore, the dominant meaning offered by the program remains accepted.

Overall, these four comments demonstrate acceptance of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a policy that provides both social and economic benefits. The audiences do not display rejection of the

program's objectives; rather, they support and reinforce the positive narrative constructed around MBG. This finding is consistent with Stuart Hall's concept of the *dominant-hegemonic position*, in which audiences interpret and accept messages in accordance with the preferred meaning intended by the message producer. In the context of this study, netizens occupying the dominant position interpret the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a policy worthy of support because it is perceived as addressing nutritional problems that remain a challenge to national development. This acceptance indicates that the messages disseminated through social media were received and interpreted in accordance with the communicative objectives embedded in MBG-related content.

Negotiated Position

The *negotiated position* indicates that audiences accept the central message conveyed in content concerning the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) but do not fully agree with all of the meanings constructed within it. Netizens in this category tend to acknowledge the benefits of the program while simultaneously offering criticism, suggestions, or qualifications based on their own experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. This form of reception demonstrates that audiences do not accept the message absolutely but instead negotiate the meaning being offered.

Based on the analysis, several comments supported the objective of the MBG Program in improving students' nutritional quality while questioning aspects of its implementation. Some netizens emphasized the importance of monitoring food quality, ensuring equitable distribution, maintaining budget transparency, and securing the program's long-term sustainability. These responses indicate acceptance of the program's positive values while also expressing expectations that its implementation should be more effective and appropriately targeted.

"MBG is good, but the problem is that this country is still developing and there are many more important issues that should be prioritized over MBG."

This comment is categorized as a *negotiated position* because the netizen acknowledges the existence and benefits of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, as indicated by the statement that the program is "good." However, this acceptance is not unconditional, because the netizen considers other national issues to be more urgent and deserving of government priority. Thus, the audience accepts the dominant meaning concerning the benefits of MBG but adjusts that meaning according to their interpretation of national development priorities. This combination of acceptance and critical qualification is a key characteristic of the negotiated position.

"The program is good, but there are too many irresponsible people at the lower levels. It needs to be trustworthy and properly targeted. Please don't include noodles on the menu; there are nutritionists involved, so it should not be handled carelessly."

This comment reflects a *negotiated position* because the netizen acknowledges that the MBG Program is a good policy but criticizes aspects of its implementation and quality. The audience does not reject the program's objectives but instead calls for stronger supervision so that the intended benefits can be achieved more effectively. Criticism regarding possible misconduct by certain actors and the quality of the food menu indicates that the netizen accepts the basic idea of the program while negotiating the way in which it is implemented.

"MBG is actually a good program if the country is already stable and in a good condition. Instead of prioritizing MBG, the government should first improve the education system, the health system, and cooperate with industrial companies to create more jobs."

This comment falls within the *negotiated position* because the netizen does not directly reject the MBG Program. The statement that "MBG is actually a good program" indicates acceptance of its objectives. However, the netizen argues that implementation should take place only after the government has addressed other issues considered more urgent. The audience therefore accepts the positive value of the program but interprets its urgency and policy priority differently from the dominant narrative. This reflects a process of negotiating meaning between the message received and the audience's personal perspective.

*"Yes, it should be improved. For example, the management of the 'free meal stall' seems better because the food looks more varied every day, even without vendors seeking personal profit—just donors investing in the hereafter."**

This comment reflects a *negotiated position* because the netizen supports improvements to the implementation of the MBG Program without rejecting the program itself. The comment focuses on alternative approaches to management and distribution that are perceived as more effective. The audience accepts the program's objectives as positive but proposes a different implementation model based on their own perspective and experience. The presence of criticism and constructive suggestions indicates that the netizen neither fully accepts the dominant meaning nor adopts a position of complete rejection.

Oppositional Position

The *oppositional position* refers to a condition in which audiences understand the message conveyed in content concerning the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) but reject the dominant meaning constructed within it. Such rejection emerges from differences in viewpoints, experiences, and considerations that lead netizens to construct alternative interpretations of the program. Audiences in this category do not regard MBG as an entirely appropriate solution to the problems faced by society, resulting in responses that are critical and, in some cases, directly contradictory to the intended message.

The analysis identified a number of comments questioning the urgency of the program, the effectiveness of budget allocation, and the government's policy priorities in addressing existing social problems. Some netizens argued that the budget allocated to MBG could be redirected toward sectors they considered more urgent, such as education, health, or infrastructure development. Several comments also expressed doubts about the program's capacity to generate a significant impact on improving public nutrition. These views reflect rejection of the narrative that positions MBG as a policy that is wholly beneficial to the public.

"Just stop the MBG program; it would be better to make basic food prices cheaper."

This comment is categorized as an *oppositional position* because the netizen explicitly rejects the continuation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. The phrase "just stop the MBG program" indicates a clear perception that the program should not be continued. The netizen constructs an alternative meaning by arguing that reducing the prices of basic necessities would constitute a more important and beneficial policy for society than implementing MBG. Thus, the audience understands the program's objectives but rejects the dominant meaning that frames MBG as a necessary solution for the public.

"STOP MBG! Fix the economy."

This comment reflects an *oppositional position* because the netizen explicitly expresses rejection of the MBG Program through the word "STOP." The rejection is based on the view that the government should prioritize improving economic conditions rather than implementing MBG. The audience does not merely criticize the program's implementation but rejects the policy priority itself. Accordingly, the comment represents an interpretation that directly opposes the dominant meaning surrounding the perceived benefits of the MBG Program.

"Free internet is more important; people can cook their own food."

This comment falls within the *oppositional position* because the netizen rejects the underlying assumption of the MBG Program. The comment suggests that access to free internet is a more urgent need than the government's provision of nutritious meals. The statement that "people can cook their own food" indicates that the netizen does not regard MBG as a necessary solution and instead constructs an alternative interpretation of what should constitute a public policy priority. This rejection of the program's urgency places the comment within the oppositional position.

"Don't stop MBG, Sir, because if it is stopped, there will be fewer opportunities for corruption."

This comment is categorized as an *oppositional position* because it employs irony or sarcasm to criticize the MBG Program. Although the literal wording appears to support the continuation of the program, its implied meaning expresses criticism and distrust toward its implementation. The netizen associates MBG with potential corruption, thereby constructing a negative interpretation that contradicts the dominant narrative portraying the program as beneficial. In reception analysis, such cynical interpretations that challenge the legitimacy of the program are characteristic of an oppositional position.

These four comments demonstrate the characteristics of the *oppositional position* as conceptualized by Stuart Hall, in which audiences understand the message being communicated but reject its dominant meaning and construct alternative interpretations based on their own perspectives. The forms of rejection identified in these comments are primarily associated with differing perceptions of policy priorities, program effectiveness, and levels of trust in the implementation of MBG.

These findings are consistent with Stuart Hall's concept of the *oppositional position*, which describes a situation in which audiences understand the preferred meaning offered by the message producer but choose to reject it and construct alternative meanings based on their own perspectives. In this study, netizens occupying the oppositional position interpret the Free Nutritious Meal Program through perspectives that differ from the dominant narrative constructed in social media content. The presence of oppositional readings demonstrates audiences' capacity to criticize and resist the messages they receive, indicating that communication processes do not necessarily result in uniform acceptance among members of the public.

These findings are consistent with Stuart Hall's audience reception theory, which explains that audiences actively interpret media messages through the process of *decoding*. According to Hall, audiences do not necessarily accept messages according to the meanings constructed by message producers through *encoding*. Instead, they may generate different interpretations based on their social backgrounds, experiences, and interests. The dominance of the *oppositional position* in this study indicates that most netizens understood the intended message concerning the benefits of MBG but chose to reject that meaning because they held different perspectives regarding societal needs and development priorities. This finding reinforces Hall's argument that communication is a dynamic process and does not necessarily produce identical meanings between message producers and recipients (Hall, 2007).

The findings of this study are similar to those of Hana Maudunnajah et al., who examined netizen reception on the social media platform X toward statements made by actor Abidzar in the film adaptation of *A Business Proposal*. Their study likewise found that the *oppositional position* was the most dominant category, as the majority of netizens rejected and criticized the message under examination. This similarity suggests that social media have developed into digital public spaces in which audiences can actively express criticism, rejection, and alternative interpretations of circulating issues. The primary difference lies in the object of analysis: the present study focuses on a public policy, whereas the previous study examined audience responses to a public figure in the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, both studies demonstrate audiences' capacity to resist and reinterpret the messages they receive (Maudunnajah et al., 2026).

The findings differ from those of Ariestyani and Ramadhanty, who found that the *dominant-hegemonic position* was the most prevalent category in audience reception of sexual health content on social media. This difference may be influenced by the characteristics of the issues examined. Sexual health education content may be perceived primarily as information that provides direct benefits without necessarily involving debates over the allocation of public resources. In contrast, the Free Nutritious Meal Program is a public policy involving the use of state resources and budgets, making it more likely to generate differing views and criticism among members of the public. These contrasting findings indicate that patterns of audience reception are strongly influenced by the context and characteristics of the issue being communicated (Ariestyani & Ramadhanty, 2022).

The findings further indicate that positive public reception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program has not been uniformly established within the digital space examined in this study. The predominance of the *oppositional position* reflects the presence of doubts, criticism, and rejection among the analyzed netizen comments regarding the relevance and implementation of the program. Such responses do not necessarily indicate rejection of the broader objective of improving nutrition promoted by MBG. Rather, they primarily reflect differing views concerning policy priorities, implementation effectiveness, and public trust in program management. Accordingly, the findings suggest that successful policy communication depends not only on the dissemination of policy messages but also on the capacity of public institutions to build trust and respond to concerns emerging within society. The predominance of oppositional readings also illustrates the role of social media as a space for negotiating meaning, where citizens actively evaluate, criticize, and interpret public policies in relation to their own experiences and social realities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze audience reception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) through netizen comments on TikTok using Stuart Hall's reception theory. The findings show that netizens interpreted the MBG Program through three reception positions: the *dominant-hegemonic position*, *negotiated position*, and *oppositional position*. The *dominant-hegemonic position* was reflected in comments that accepted and supported the program because it was perceived as capable of improving public welfare and creating economic opportunities. The *negotiated position* was represented by comments that acknowledged the benefits of the program while still offering criticism and suggestions regarding its implementation and policy priorities. The *oppositional position* was reflected in comments that rejected the dominant meaning constructed around the program and argued that other needs should receive greater priority from the government.

Based on the analysis, the *oppositional position* emerged as the most dominant reception category, comprising 46 comments. The predominance of this category indicates that most netizens understood the objectives of the Free Nutritious Meal Program but did not fully accept the preferred meaning offered and instead constructed alternative interpretations based on their experiences, economic conditions, and perceptions of national development priorities. These findings confirm Stuart Hall's view that audiences are active subjects capable of accepting, negotiating, or rejecting media messages. Overall, the study shows that public reception of the MBG Program within the digital space examined remains characterized by criticism and differing perspectives. This suggests that the success of a public policy is determined not only by the quality of its objectives, but also by the level of public trust in its implementation and the extent to which its benefits are perceived in practice..

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