PERSPEKTIF
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND LIBRARY SCIENCE
ACADEMIC SOLUTION PUBLISHER

# Public Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG): A Qualitative Analysis of Online Criticism on X

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**Keywords**
Public Perception;
Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG);
Social Media X;
Public Opinion;
Public Policy

**How to cite:**

**Abstract**
The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is one of the government's priority policies aimed at improving the quality of human resources by fulfilling nutritional needs, particularly among students. This study aims to analyze public perceptions of the MBG Program through criticism expressed by netizens on the social media platform X. The study employed a qualitative approach using qualitative content analysis. Data were obtained from posts, comments, and replies by X users discussing the MBG Program and were analyzed through data reduction, coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation. The findings show that public criticism was dominated by issues related to budget utilization, transparency in program management, implementation effectiveness, and perceptions of government policy. The findings indicate that netizen criticism represents a form of public participation that reflects societal expectations for a more transparent, accountable, and well-targeted implementation of the program. This study emphasizes the importance of effective public communication in strengthening public acceptance of and trust in government policy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is one of the national priority programs initiated under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto and Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka. The program was designed as an effort to improve the quality of Indonesia's human resources by fulfilling the nutritional needs of the population, particularly students. From a public policy perspective, MBG is positioned not merely as a social assistance program but also as a human development instrument expected to support improvements in health, educational quality, and the future productivity of younger generations. The broad scope of its beneficiaries and the substantial budget required for implementation have made the program one of the government policies receiving considerable attention from various segments of society (Muh Fadhal Hiqh Pangera et al., 2025).

As a public policy that directly addresses basic societal needs, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program cannot be separated from processes of public evaluation and oversight. In a modern democratic system, citizens have opportunities to respond to, assess, and criticize government policies. Such responses are important because they may reflect the level of public acceptance while also providing input for policy improvement. Therefore, public perceptions of MBG implementation

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doi: 10.70489/perspektif.v4i2.1246

constitute an important aspect for understanding the extent to which the program is regarded as relevant, effective, and responsive to societal needs.

The development of information and communication technology has transformed patterns of interaction between government and society. Social media no longer functions solely as a channel for information exchange but has evolved into a digital public sphere that enables citizens to express aspirations, engage in discussion, and exercise social oversight over government policies. One platform with these characteristics is X. This platform enables rapid, open, and interactive information dissemination, making it one of the principal spaces for the formation of public opinion. Through posts, comments, and ongoing discussions, citizens can directly express their views on issues receiving national attention (Rafifah Suaib & Aryana Pratiwi, 2025).

In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, X has become an arena in which diverse public perceptions are expressed. Emerging conversations indicate that citizens do not merely support the objectives of the program but also criticize various aspects of its implementation. These criticisms concern program effectiveness, transparency in budget utilization, distribution mechanisms, the quality of implementation in the field, and the prioritization of government policy. The diversity of criticism suggests that MBG implementation is perceived as a complex public issue involving various social, economic, and political interests.

The scale of public attention toward the Free Nutritious Meal Program can be observed from the high intensity of media coverage and public discussion developing across news media and social media. Based on data from February 1–19, 2026, the MBG issue appeared in 12,166 media articles and generated 37,130 mentions. During the same period, discussions of MBG on social media reached 123,344 conversations. These figures indicate that MBG has become one of the most visible and widely discussed public policy issues in the digital sphere. This condition suggests that citizens are actively following, evaluating, and discussing developments related to the program.

Furthermore, conversation data from X show that negative sentiment dominated at 89.7%, while positive sentiment accounted for only 8.9% and neutral sentiment for 1.4%. The dominance of negative sentiment constitutes an important phenomenon for further examination because it indicates a strong tendency toward public criticism of the program's implementation. Nevertheless, sentiment data alone cannot adequately explain the reasons, forms, and substantive content of the criticism expressed by the public. Sentiment percentages only illustrate general attitudinal tendencies, whereas the meanings underlying such criticism require deeper interpretation through a qualitative approach (Karimani, 2026).

Research on public responses to government policy on social media has generally focused on sentiment measurement and quantitative analysis. Although such approaches are useful for identifying levels of public support or opposition, they do not fully explain how citizens construct criticism toward a particular policy. In fact, understanding the content, themes, and patterns of criticism is essential for identifying the aspects of policy implementation that receive the greatest public concern. Therefore, research is needed that goes beyond measuring sentiment and instead interprets the meanings embedded in public criticism expressed within digital discussion spaces.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study is important because it analyzes public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) through criticism expressed by netizens on X. The study is expected to identify the major themes of criticism, understand patterns of public perception regarding program implementation, and explain how social media functions as a digital public sphere in the formation of public opinion toward government policy. Accordingly, this research contributes not only to the development of studies on digital communication and public opinion but also to policy evaluation by providing insights that may assist policymakers in improving the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in the future.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using qualitative content analysis to understand public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) as reflected in criticism expressed by netizens on the social media platform X. A qualitative approach was selected because the study did not focus on measuring the number or frequency of opinions, but rather on interpreting, understanding, and assigning meaning to the messages conveyed by social media users. Qualitative content analysis enables researchers to identify themes, patterns, and tendencies within digital conversations, thereby providing a deeper and more contextual understanding of public perceptions (Elo et al., 2014).

The objects of this study were posts, comments, and replies discussing the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) on X. Research data were collected through digital documentation by gathering posts containing keywords such as “MBG,” “Makan Bergizi Gratis,” and other terms related to the program. Data were selected using purposive sampling, whereby posts were chosen based on specific criteria, including the presence of criticism or evaluation of the program, publication within the designated research period, and public accessibility. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that the analyzed data were directly relevant to the research focus and capable of providing rich information concerning public perceptions of MBG implementation.

The data analysis process was conducted through several stages based on the qualitative data analysis model developed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The first stage involved data reduction, in which posts relevant to the research focus were selected. The second stage was coding, which involved assigning labels to each item of data based on the themes or issues emerging from public criticism. The third stage was categorization, in which the data were grouped into specific themes such as criticism of budget allocation, transparency, implementation, program effectiveness, and policy priorities. The final stage involved data interpretation to identify patterns of meaning and explain how public perceptions were constructed through critical narratives circulating on social media.

To ensure research credibility, source triangulation was employed by comparing findings from social media posts with information derived from mass media reports, policy documents, and relevant scholarly literature. In addition, the analytical process was conducted systematically and iteratively to ensure consistency in data interpretation (Hasanah & Surya, 2025). The findings were then presented in the form of thematic descriptions illustrating various forms of criticism and public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of public opinion in digital spaces and its contribution to the evaluation of public policy in Indonesia.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Criticism of the MBG Program Budget Allocation

One of the most dominant themes identified in netizen discussions on the social media platform X concerns the use of the budget allocated to the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). The substantial amount of funding required to implement the program has generated various public responses, particularly regarding the effectiveness, prioritization, and transparency of state budget management. Netizens not only highlighted the size of the budget, which was perceived as considerable, but also compared it with the funding needs of other sectors that were considered to still require greater government attention.

The emerging debate reflects differing public perspectives on whether the MBG budget should be viewed as an appropriate form of social investment or as a policy that could potentially increase the country’s fiscal burden. These findings indicate that budget management constitutes one of the key factors shaping public perceptions of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. The following netizen comments illustrate how criticism and debate regarding the use of the MBG budget have developed within the digital public sphere (Hiama et al., 2025).




Figure 3. Posts Containing Critical Comments on Platform X. This figure displays posts from the accounts @AbuMuhammadalFatih and @AdilNusantara.

Based on these comments, netizen criticism was identified regarding the budgetary aspects of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). The comments posted by the accounts @AbuMuhammadalFatih and @AdilNusantara indicate that public discussion does not focus solely on the objectives of the program, but also on the substantial amount of funding allocated to its implementation. One user emphasized the importance of data accuracy when discussing the state budget, while another criticized the growing burden of government expenditure resulting from various priority programs, including MBG. These findings indicate that budgetary issues have become one of the most prominent topics in public conversations surrounding the program.

The criticism expressed suggests that the public has a strong concern for transparency, effectiveness, and accountability in the use of state funds. Netizens evaluate not only the benefits of the program for society but also its potential implications for budget allocations to other sectors that similarly require government attention. In this context, X functions as a digital public sphere that enables citizens to openly express evaluations and exercise oversight over government policies. Therefore, budget-related criticism can be understood as a form of public participation that reflects societal expectations for the MBG Program to be implemented transparently, accurately targeted, and capable of delivering benefits that are proportionate to the resources allocated.

## Public Perception and the Digital Public Sphere in MBG Discourse

The findings show that X functions as a digital public sphere that enables citizens to express support, criticism, and evaluation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). The various conversations that have emerged indicate that public perceptions of the program are shaped by information, personal experiences, and interactions among social media users. Through this digital space, citizens do not merely act as recipients of information but also actively participate in shaping public opinion and monitoring the implementation of government policies (Putriyekti Assaroh, 2025).




Figure 4. Posts Containing Public Perceptions on Platform X. This figure displays posts from the accounts @LD3 and @JurnalAspirasiRakyat

Based on the analyzed posts, negative public sentiment toward the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) was evident on the social media platform X. The first post, published by the account @LD3, criticized the program for allegedly creating only temporary employment opportunities and reflected a perception that political interests might underlie its implementation. Such a perspective indicates a relatively low level of trust among some members of the public toward government policy, causing a socially oriented program to also be interpreted through a political lens.

The second post, published by the account @JurnalAspirasiRakyat, highlighted opposition to the proposed use of alternative food sources, such as insects or sago worms, to fulfill nutritional requirements within the MBG Program. This criticism indicates that public acceptance of food-related policies is influenced not only by nutritional considerations but also by cultural factors, consumption habits, and perceptions of state budget management. These findings suggest that social media has become an important space for the formation of public opinion, in which various criticisms and interpretations of government policy can develop and influence broader societal perceptions.

The findings further show that public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) on X tend to be dominated by criticism concerning budget utilization and program implementation. This finding can be explained through public perception theory, which views perception as a process through which individuals receive, interpret, and assign meaning to information obtained from their social environment. In the context of this study, information regarding the size of the MBG budget, media coverage, and discussions circulating on social media collectively shape how the public perceives the program. These perceptions are influenced not only by the program's objective of improving public nutrition, but also by how citizens assess its effectiveness, transparency, and accountability. Therefore, criticism of budget utilization can be understood as the result of public interpretation of information concerning the policy.

The findings also indicate that criticism developing on social media does not necessarily reflect complete rejection of the MBG Program. Instead, much of the criticism is directed toward issues of governance and program implementation. This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of public opinion, which explains that society develops collective judgments on an issue through the exchange of information and arguments within social spaces. In the case of MBG, the emerging public opinion reflects expectations that the government will implement the program in a more transparent, well-targeted, and sustainable manner. Accordingly, criticism expressed by netizens may be understood as a form of public evaluation intended to encourage policy improvement rather than merely as resistance to a government program (Rafifah Suaib & Aryana Pratiwi, 2025).

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that X functions as a digital public sphere, consistent with Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere (Cefaï, 2017). Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as an arena in which citizens can discuss, exchange views, and form opinions on issues of common concern. In the digital era, this function has become increasingly visible through social media platforms, which enable citizens to express opinions openly without spatial or temporal limitations. Discussions concerning MBG illustrate how netizens use X to express criticism, provide support, and debate various aspects of government policy. These activities reflect a process of public communication in which citizens actively participate in monitoring and evaluating state policies.

In addition, the high intensity of criticism identified in this study indicates that social media functions not only as a communication channel but also as an instrument of social control within a democratic society. The existence of a digital public sphere enables citizens to monitor budget utilization, highlight implementation problems, and demand accountability from the government. From the perspectives of political communication and public policy, this condition reflects a shift in the relationship between government and society, in which citizens no longer function merely as passive recipients of policy but increasingly act as active participants who evaluate policy and influence the direction of public discourse. Therefore, public perceptions expressed on social media can provide valuable input for the government in improving the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program and strengthening public trust in government policy

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), as reflected in critical discussions on the social media platform X, are primarily shaped by concerns regarding budget allocation, financial transparency, implementation effectiveness, and government accountability. The qualitative content analysis reveals that netizens critically evaluate not only the program's objectives of improving nutritional well-being but also its financial implications, policy priorities, and implementation practices. Criticism concerning substantial budget expenditures, perceived political interests, temporary employment opportunities, and the suitability of alternative food ingredients demonstrates that public responses encompass economic, political, social, and cultural considerations. These findings indicate that negative expressions on social media do not necessarily represent complete opposition to the program; rather, they reflect demands for responsible governance, efficient resource allocation, and greater transparency. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that X functions as a digital public sphere in which citizens actively exchange information, construct opinions, and exercise social oversight over government policies.

The findings contribute to the understanding of digital public communication by demonstrating how social media criticism can serve as a form of civic participation and an informal mechanism of public policy evaluation. From the perspective of the digital public sphere, interactions among netizens create opportunities for public deliberation and the articulation of collective concerns regarding government programs. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of transparent budget reporting, evidence-

based policy communication, effective implementation monitoring, and responsive engagement with public criticism to strengthen the credibility and public acceptance of the MBG Program. Nevertheless, because this study relies on purposively selected posts and comments from X, its findings represent the perspectives expressed within the analyzed digital discussions rather than the perceptions of the Indonesian population as a whole. Future research should incorporate broader social media datasets, comparative platform analyses, and interviews with program beneficiaries to provide a more comprehensive understanding of public perceptions and their implications for policy implementation.

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