



LOOKING AT NETIZEN RESPONSES ABOUT FREE NUTRITIOUS MEALS (MBG) ON @PRABOWO'S INSTAGRAM POST ON FEBRUARY 10, 2025

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Virtual Ethnography, Symbolic Interactionism, Instagram, MBG

This study is done in order to figure out how netizens form, negotiate and communicate meaning on A nutritious program (MBG) through a comment on instagram account @prabowo. With a qualitative approach and a virtual ethnographic method. The study Employing the symbolic interactionism theory of Herbert blumer with 3 main foundation namely, meaning, language, thought. The results of this study are in the form of meaning, netizens interpret MBG not only based on information but from the meaning they feel in real life. Language, social interaction forms a collective meaning regarding the gap in state budget priorities, with symbols as markers of social and emotional meaning; "PHK", "3T", "gas queue". Thoughts, netizen comments reflect awareness of their life experiences and social positions, this shows that the process of forming meaning involves self-reflection.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a leader of a country, in addition to holding power and establishing government regulations, a President also often uses social media as a tool to interact with his people. Social media has become a crucial tool in political communication in the current global era, allowing political figures to interact with the public directly or in real time and influence the public (Khotimah & Ula, 2023). The background to the free nutritious meal program according to Prabowo Subianto is that 25% of children in Indonesia do not eat nutritious food every day and to eliminate hunger without distinguishing the economic status of children in Indonesia (Andin et al., 2025). The Prabowo-Gibran National Campaign Team (TKN) said that this program aims to not only meet the nutritional needs of children, but also reduce the economic burden on families, especially among the underprivileged. In a political context, social media not only functions to disseminate information, but also as a space for interaction and negotiation between leaders and the public (Rahma et al., 2024). Social media is an effective means of providing information quickly about government programs and becoming a digital space where people can speak and voice their opinions (Purwanti, 2024).

Fard & Rostamy argue that government performance affects public trust in the government. From a political perspective, trust arises when people judge that the government and its leaders are effective, fair, and honest (Nivada & Yani, 2020).

Several previous studies have stated that the public is waiting for real action after the election, high expectations and promises are sometimes not in line, resulting in feelings of disappointment and eroding trust in the government. This disappointment can lead to social dissatisfaction and decreased public participation in the political process, creating a distance between leaders and the people they lead (Dwijayanti, 2024)

For example, other studies also say that social media is a medium that is very popular with young people and this turns out to be the key to success in conveying political messages from public officials. Political messages conveyed through social media will be more effective if conveyed in the form of creative media and a humorous approach (Adnaneswari et al., 2023).

The Virtual Ethnography approach is a relevant approach to analyze this phenomenon. This approach allows researchers to dive into digital culture and communication patterns that emerge in online environments. Creswell (in Iskandar & Irawati, 2023) is one of the qualitative research strategies in which researchers investigate a cultural group in a natural environment over a long period of time in collecting primary data, observational data, and data that usually develops according to conditions in responding to the realities of life encountered in the field. Simply put, when mentioning the word virtual after ethnography, the word virtual is meant as the field or location of ethnographic research. According to Johansson and Linberg, a culture built in a subculture has several differences in social regulations compared to real-life culture (Mencela et al., 2024).

In the theoretical framework, Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism is the basis for analyzing this study. Blumer said that human interactions are very diverse and individuals interpret and define actions, rather than simply reacting to them. Blumer stated that there are 3 main assumptions in symbolic interactionism: (1) human meaning acts based on the meaning given to something, (2) language (language) meaning comes from social interaction, (3) thought (thought) meaning is modified through the process of individual interpretation (Prihandayani & Yulianti, 2024). This theory has a special methodology, because symbolic interactionism sees meaning as a fundamental part of social interaction (Zanki, 2020). Blumer argues that humans behave based on meaning, meaning is obtained when interacting with other humans, these meanings are refined in future social interactions (Shindhita & Mukaromah, 2020). Social groups are realized and upheld by their social processes. Basically, social life is "human interaction using symbols" (Rouf et al., 2022).

Most political communication research conducted on social media focuses on quantitative data collection or content analysis, without considering the meanings and symbols that emerge in public interactions. Moreover, there are still few studies that utilize virtual ethnography and symbolic interactionism theory to investigate how people act on government policies in the digital space. Thus, this study seeks to understand how netizens form, negotiate and convey meaning in the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program through comments on the Instagram account @prabowo.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach. According to Boghdan and Taylor, a qualitative approach is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior (Mayasari, 2022).

The virtual ethnography method is useful for understanding culture, interactions, and meanings formed in digital spaces, especially on the Instagram account @prabowo (Mayasari, 2022). This approach is considered relevant because it allows researchers to study the dynamics of public communication online without having to be physically present, but still focus on the social context of digital users.

The data used consists of primary data, namely 7 netizen comments on President Prabowo's Instagram post about the MBG Program uploaded on April 10, 2025. Comments were selected purposively, namely based on the number of likes, replies, netizen interactions that contain diverse content and meanings that appear. Secondary data includes captions, hashtags, and contextual elements in posts.

Data collection in this study was carried out through online observation and digital documentation, with comments and interactions that appeared in the comments on the post. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis conducted in 5 stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review and refinement, and writing the analysis results. The initial coding process was carried out by marking recurring words, phrases, or meaning patterns. The main themes that emerged included support, hope, criticism, and doubts about the MBG program.

With this methodology, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of netizen responses to the MBG Program on Instagram, combining analysis of themes, symbols, interactions, and cultural contexts. The results of the study are expected to provide insight into the dynamics of public opinion in the digital space as well as practical implications for social policy.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Instagram account @prabowo is the official social media account of President Prabowo Subianto which is used to convey important messages related to politics and public policy to the Indonesian people. Prabowo's Instagram account often displays content such as photos or videos of activities and messages related to policies implemented during his administration. As a national leader, Prabowo uses this platform as a place for Prabowo to get closer to the public. The focus of this study is the form of interaction that occurs in the digital space and explores how netizens interpret MBG through their comments on the Instagram post @prabowo on February 10, 2025. This study uses the thematic analysis method which is one of the data analysis methods that aims to identify patterns or find themes through the data that has been collected.

Instagram as a Virtual Ethnographic Space

The Instagram account @prabowo as a medium to present, communicate state policies, government programs and build the image of a leader with the number of followers currently reaching 15.1 million and the number of posts 1,577 as of April 9, 2025. As seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Instagram profile @prabowo
Source : Instagram

There is a caption in the post with the narrative, namely "Today, I again reviewed the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, this time at SDN 1 and SDN 2 Kedung Jaya, Bogor, West Java. Seeing the enthusiasm of the children when receiving and enjoying nutritious food at school is a joy in itself. Their smiles and joy reflect great hopes for the future of Indonesia. This program is expected to meet the needs of balanced nutrition, support children's optimal growth and development, and form a healthy, intelligent, and quality generation towards Indonesia Emas 2045." As seen in Figure 2.

This narrative uses symbolic language that carries values such as happiness, hope, health, the future, and children as national assets. Symbols such as "children's smiles and joy" and "Indonesia Emas 2045" function as rhetorical tactics to emphasize that the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program is not only about food but also concerns the future of the country.



Figure 2. Instagram post @prabowo on February 10, 2025

Public Interaction and Negotiation of Meaning

The comment column provides an opportunity for the public to participate in discussions, respond, interpret, and negotiate government policies. In this case, Instagram functions as a virtual ethnographic site where digital cultural practices, such as liking, commenting, and using visual symbols (emojis), become part of how people express their emotions and attitudes, as well as their perceptions of the MBG program. Comments on the Instagram post @prabowo dated February 10, 2025 show communication dynamics that are not only informative but also dialogical and meaningful. Therefore, these netizen comments can be considered as digital cultural artifacts that have symbolic meaning and socio-political reflections of society, not just spontaneous reactions. In online platforms such as Instagram, interactions between the government and netizens or netizens and netizens occur in real time. To express criticism or support for policies, netizens use informal language, use emojis, and even contain sarcasm. In Indonesian digital culture, this communication pattern reflects the practice of collective self-representation and community that is unique. Thus, it is very important to understand the context of social media as a medium for interaction before studying further the topics that emerge from public comments.

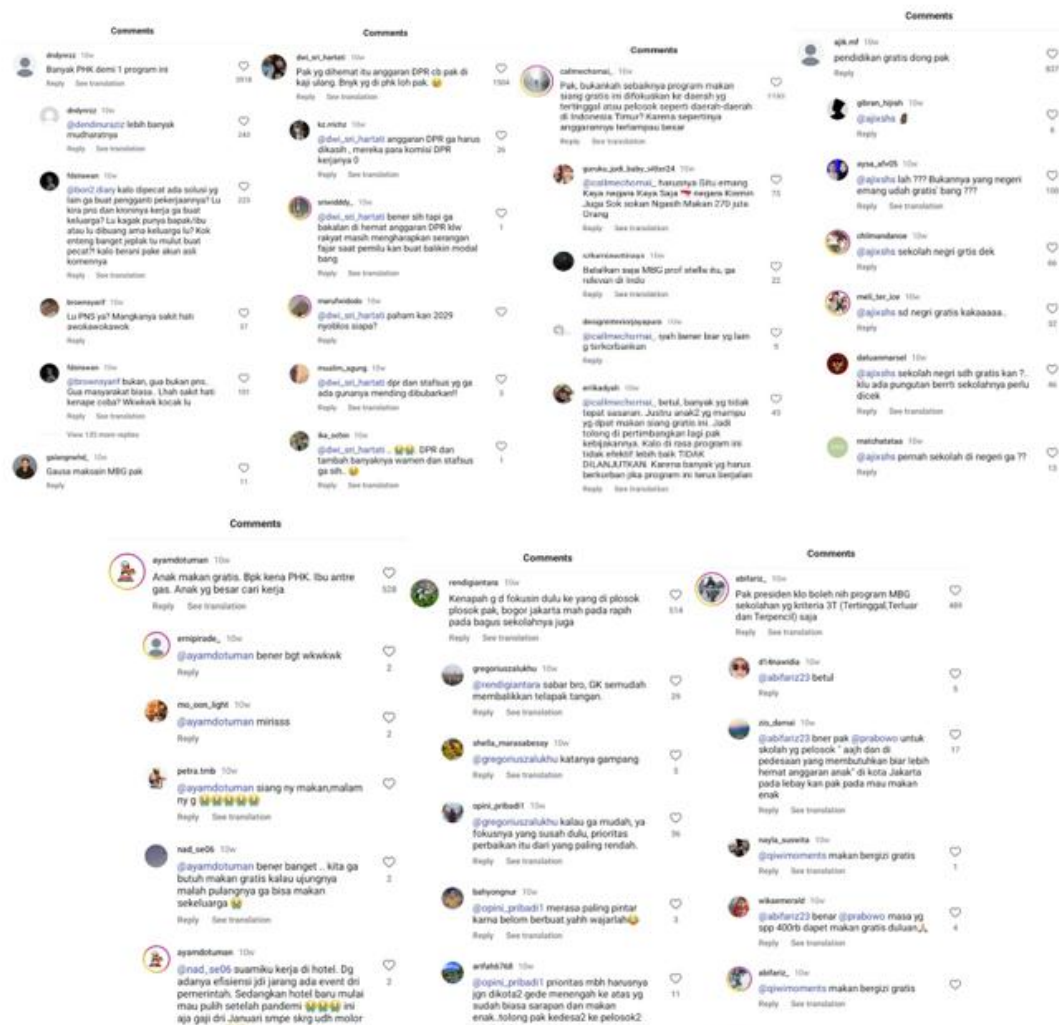


Figure 3. Screenshot of comments on @prabowo's Instagram post

In digital space, users interact with each other, this is where the interaction between comments becomes important. Virtual ethnography includes social relations formed between netizens in the communication space, not only capturing the content of a single message. Netizens not only comment on the content of the upload, but also mutually reinforce the meaning that has been formed together. For example, a user suggests that the MBG program be prioritized for the 3T (Underdeveloped, Outermost, Remote) areas. This comment is supported by another user who adds that children in villages need more help than children in

big cities like Jakarta. Users use symbols such as "3T", "in the city of Jakarta it's too much", or "SPP 400rb" to indicate inconsistencies that they think need to be fixed.

This interaction shows that individual social experiences and perceptions shape the comment space on social media as a place where alternative policy proposals emerge. They build a shared understanding of distributive justice that contains empathy, criticism, and social solidarity, which are characteristics of symbolic interaction in digital space. The comment "children eat for free. Father gets laid off. Mother queues for gas. Older children look for work" has generated many responses that provoke emotions from other netizens who have similar fates. The comments use a simple but symbolistic style of speech, arranging various family crises in sequence as a metaphor for the effects of inconsistent policies. The comment space has turned into a place to share life's hardships through responses such as "very true" and "sad", as well as further stories about losing jobs and working in hotels. This interaction shows that the MBG program is not only related to children's food at school but is also closely related to the family's economic crisis. Other netizens also left comments stating "many layoffs for this 1 program", which resulted in a series of online interactions that showed the dynamics of emotions, satire, and social positions.

The comment "more harm" confirms failure and reinforces pessimism. The comment "do you think Pas and his cronies work for the family?" is a comment that questions the solution as well as the role of individuals in the system. This shows how the conversation turns into a debate between individuals with their respective identities as ordinary people, as those who feel victimized or as those who are cynical. This interaction also shows that the comment space is also a place of symbolic conflict where netizens exchange stories to defend their positions. There is a fragmentation of meaning among netizens about their understanding of the MBG program. The differences in meaning that are seen are that some netizens see MBG as a fair solution for disadvantaged areas, others consider it a painful social irony or an imbalance in budget allocation. Even in one section, there is a comment that systematically satirizes the impact of the policy on the household economy. Interaction in the comments column also shows how a meaning is formed from social discussions between netizens who strengthen each other, criticize, or even laugh at reality.

Symbolic Interactionism in Analysis

Comments were collected from Instagram posts @prabowo on February 10, 2025. Thematic analysis was carried out through repeated reading stages, marking similar narrative patterns, and inductive categorization which resulted in 3 main themes selected based on repeated occurrences, the strength of symbolic meaning, and their relationship to symbolic interactionism theory.

Table 2. Thematic classification of netizen comments on MBG grouped into 3 themes, namely:

No.	Main Theme	Comments	Likes	Sub-theme	Symbol	Theoretical Interpretation
1.	Critique of Budget Allocation Geographic Disparities	"Banyak PHK demi 1 program ini" (@dndynrzz, 27/2)	3.918	Criticism of budget trade-off	"PHK" economic symbol	= Describing the impact of policies emotionally, showing collective anxiety. - "DPR budget" as a symbol of fiscal injustice
		"Pak yg dihemat itu anggaran DPR cb pak di kaji ulang. Bnyk yg di phk loh pak. 😞 (emoticon sedih keluar airmata)" (@dwi_sri_hartati, 13/2)	1.503	Criticism of allocation to other institutions	"DPR budget", "PHK", "😞".	- emoji 😞 as an emotional symbol that strengthens criticism
2.	and Justice Critique of Budget Allocation	"Pak, bukankah sebaiknya program makan siang gratis ini difokuskan ke daerah yg tertinggal atau pelosok seperti daerah-daerah di Indonesia Timur? Karena sepertinya	1.154	Proposed priorities for underdeveloped areas	"underdeveloped areas", "remote areas", "big budget"	"underdeveloped areas" as a marker of spatial justice "big budget" = symbol of policy inefficiency

	anggarannya terlampau besar” (@callmechomai_, 13/2)				
	“Kenapa g d fokusin dulu ke yang di plosok plosok pak, bogor jakarta mah pada rapih pada bagus sekolahnya juga” (@rendigiantara, 13/2)	514	Criticism of implementation for developed areas	“plosok”, “Bogor Jakarta”	“underdeveloped areas” as a marker of spatial justice
	“Pak presiden klo boleh nih program MBG sekolahan yg kriteria 3T (Tertinggal, Terluar dan Terpencil) saja” (@abifariz_, 27/2)	488	Proposed targeting of policies	“3T”	“big budget” = symbol of policy inefficiency
	“Pendidikan gratis dong pak” (@ajik.mf, 27/2)	839	Request for priority of other basic needs	“Free education”, “dong”	- Education vs MBG = dispute over definition of public needs - the word “dong” reflects a strong expectation that education should already be free
3.	Geographic Disparities “Anak makan gratis. Bpk kena PHK. Ibu antre gas. Anak yg besar cari kerja” (@ayamdotuman, 20/2)	527	Systemic symbolic representation of the family	“PHK”, “gas queue”, “free food”	- “Bogor/Jakarta” (symbol of progress) vs “remote” (symbol of backwardness which is a geographical symbol. This also includes the Binary Opposition developed by Derrida, which refers to hierarchical distinctions, where one concept is considered superior to another.

Criticism of Budget Allocation. This theme shows the symbolic resistance to the MBG program which is associated with the sacrifice of other groups, who are rumored to experience layoffs. Injustice in government policy priorities is shown by words such as “PHK”, and “DPR budget”. These symbols in symbolic interactionism now not only refer to tangible things such as money or DPR, but also have the meaning of being a symbol of disappointment, and distrust of the process used by the government to make decisions. This discourse also shows that interactions on social media form collective meanings about who is being sacrificed and who is benefiting.

Geographical Disparities & Injustice. The spatial dimension is raised as a representation of social inequality in the second theme. Words such as “remote”, “underdeveloped areas”, “3T” not only indicate location, but also indicate alienation and feelings of abandonment. Geographical space can be interpreted socially in symbolic interactionism, meaning that areas outside the center of power indicate structural injustice. Comments like this show that the MBG program is understood through regional experiences and social positions, not universally understood.

Social & Economic Impact. This theme shows the emotional aspect of public interaction towards MBG. Terms such as “children eat for free”, “gas queue” show an idealistic process towards political parties who implement the program. In symbolic interactionism, this is a process in which the public understands political actions through symbols related to the affective and moral aspects of society.

Based on the theory of Symbolic Interactionism by Blumer 1969, differences in the construction of meaning between the Government and the Public were found. The government uses the symbols of “children’s smiles” and “Golden Indonesia 2045” as representations of the success of the program. The public builds counter symbols such as “PHK” and “gas queue” which shift the meaning of MBG which is an economic burden.

Thematic analysis shows a complex negotiation process about public priorities. Through comments on social media, the public actively questions the budget allocation for the MBG program through trade-off-based criticism, namely a tug-of-war process where there are two choices and sacrificing other choices to get better aspects. The government prioritizes nutrition programs, while the public prioritizes free education as a long-term solution, there is a clear difference in the hierarchy of needs. The public interprets "priority policies" through comments on social media, then compares the impact of the MBG program with other urgent needs they face. This process of negotiating meaning reveals that the public is not only a passive recipient of a policy, but they are also individuals who are able to provide evidence-based criticism through digital platforms.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that public responses to the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) are multifaceted, not only about evaluating technical implementation but also basic criticism of the philosophy of the policy itself through the process of negotiating meaning in the digital space. The meaning of policy is never static, but is always negotiated through symbolic interaction, where society acts as an active creator rather than a passive recipient. The fundamental differences in views that emerge indicate a paradigm or framework of thinking in viewing the role of the state and development priorities, which cannot be resolved simply by improvements.

This study broadens the understanding of symbolic interactionism in the global era, by showing how social media has opened up space for symbolic interaction in public policy discourse, while emphasizing how important it is to consider this aspect of communication when analyzing contemporary public policy. Virtual ethnography also shows how the Instagram comment space is a valid research medium for understanding socio-political dynamics.

Interaction on social media proves that social media is a dynamic medium, where the meaning of government policies will continue to be negotiated, questioned, and even reshaped by the public based on their personal experiences.

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