

Public Perception of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis-MBG) on TikTok: A Netnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines public perception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis-MBG) as reflected in interactions on TikTok, addressing the gap between policy design and its implementation in practice. Specifically, it seeks to understand how the public evaluates the implementation of MBG based on George C. Edwards III's policy implementation framework, which includes communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. This research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach using netnography. Digital data were collected through online observation, scraping, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal a paradox in policy implementation as reflected in public perception. While the consistency of program communication and the visible commitment of government officials were positively perceived, substantial criticism emerged regarding resources and bureaucratic structure. Public responses highlighted inequalities in supply chain management that tend to disadvantage local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). In addition, critical weaknesses in the supervision of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were identified, culminating in a mass food poisoning incident in Kulon Progo. This study contributes to the literature on policy implementation and digital society by demonstrating how TikTok functions as a critical digital space. It not only serves as a platform for policy dissemination but also acts as a "digital judge" that can rapidly erode public trust when implementation failures occur. Therefore, the government is strongly recommended to strengthen regulations protecting local economies and improve quality control mechanisms to address these bureaucratic gaps.



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Introduction

Human resource development (HRD) is widely recognized as a fundamental element in achieving Indonesia's Golden Vision 2045 (Kartikasari, 2024). The quality of human resources is not only determined by intellectual capacity and skills, but is also intrinsically linked to physical and mental health, which are strongly influenced by nutritional status. Therefore, ensuring adequate access to nutrition, particularly for children, is an essential prerequisite for supporting cognitive development and, in turn, fostering a more productive society.

From an academic perspective, nutrition has a direct impact on human resource quality. This is consistent with reports from the World Health Organization World Health Organization & United Nations Educational (2021), which identify adequate nutrition among school-aged children as a key determinant of educational success, as it plays a crucial role in enhancing cognitive capacity, physical stamina, and learning resilience. Optimal nutritional intake has been shown to improve concentration, memory, and academic

performance. Conversely, malnutrition can lead to long-term adverse effects on cognitive development, health outcomes, and economic productivity (Hadriani, 2024). Despite notable progress, Indonesia continues to face a significant challenge in the form of the triple burden of malnutrition, which includes undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies. The high prevalence of stunting and malnutrition reflects persistent inequalities in nutritional access and food distribution that require urgent attention.

In response to this urgency, the government established the Badan Gizi Nasional (National Nutrition Agency) through Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 (Peraturan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 83 Tahun 2024 Tentang Badan Gizi Nasional, n.d.). The Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis-MBG) was introduced as a strategic initiative aimed at improving nutritional status and promoting healthy dietary behavior among key target groups, including students, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and young children. However, the implementation of large-scale and complex public policies such as MBG requires careful examination of public acceptance and societal responses.

In this context, social media-particularly the TikTok platform, plays a central role as a space for interaction, information dissemination, and public opinion formation. The dynamic exchange of user-generated content enables rapid feedback, making it an important site for understanding how policies are perceived and evaluated by the public. Despite the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping public discourse, limited studies have explored how policy implementation is interpreted through social media interactions, especially using a netnographic approach. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze public responses to the MBG program as reflected in TikTok interactions, in order to better understand the dynamics of public perception in the digital era.

Method

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design aimed at analyzing and gaining an in-depth understanding of public perceptions, behaviors, and interactions related to the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), presented descriptively within its natural context (Moleong, 2011). Specifically, this research applies a netnographic approach, an adaptation of ethnography designed to examine social interactions in digital environments. The study was conducted in cyberspace, with a focus on the social media platform TikTok. The primary subjects of the study are users who interact with, create, or respond to content related to the MBG program.

The data collection techniques are aligned with the netnographic approach. These include netnographic observation (direct observation of discussions and user comments), data scraping (retrieval of data using relevant keywords such as “free nutritious meal program”), and digital documentation (systematic storage of data and recording of interaction patterns in analytical matrices). The data sources are classified into primary and secondary data. Primary data are derived directly from user interactions on TikTok, including comments, posts, and responses. Secondary data consist of supporting materials such as news articles, government reports, legal documents, and relevant academic publications.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves three systematic stages. First, data reduction was conducted to identify and select the most relevant digital data. Second, thematic categorization was performed to group data based on expressed sentiments (positive, negative, and neutral) as well as dominant issues discussed. Finally, interpretation was carried out to explain the meaning behind patterns of social interaction, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how the public responds to the MBG program and the specific factors shaping their perceptions.

Results and Discussion

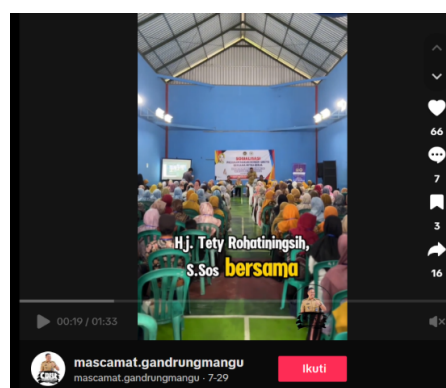
Communication and Public Reception on TikTok: A Netnographic Perspective

This study positions public perception as a dynamic cognitive process shaped through continuous interaction within digital environments. In line with (Thoha, 2017: 141), perception is understood as an individual cognitive mechanism for interpreting environmental information, while (Walgito, 2003: 99) emphasizes that perception is influenced by personality, psychological conditions, and individual expectations. At the collective level, public perception reflects how groups of individuals construct shared meanings based on similar observations, yet may arrive at different interpretations. This process becomes particularly significant in shaping motivation, where positive perceptions tend to strengthen engagement, while negative perceptions may reduce public support.

Within the context of public policy, perception plays a critical role in determining the success of policy implementation. Public engagement is essential for effective governance and sustainable development (Herman et al., 2026). Referring to George C. Edwards III's framework (Agustino, 2020; Edwards III, 1980), communication is a key variable that ensures policy messages are delivered clearly, consistently, and accurately. In the case of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), communication strategies are designed to convey policy objectives to both implementers and beneficiaries. However, in the digital era, communication is no longer a one-way process. Instead, it is mediated through interactive platforms such as TikTok, where meaning is continuously negotiated through user-generated content.

From a netnographic perspective, TikTok functions not merely as a dissemination channel, but as a social space where public understanding is constructed, contested, and reinforced. The findings of this study indicate that communication surrounding the MBG program reflects a relatively strong level of clarity and consistency. This is evidenced by structured socialization efforts conducted by the Badan Gizi Nasional (BGN) in collaboration with members of Commission IX of the Indonesian House of Representatives across multiple districts (@mascamat.gandrungmangu, 2025).

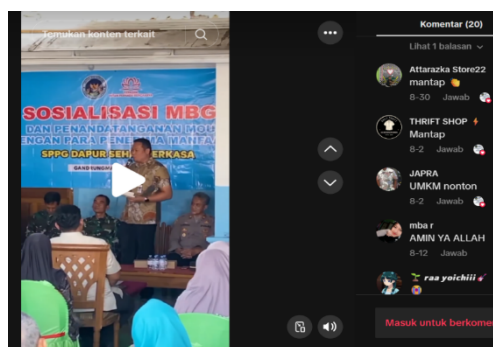
Figure 1. Government-led socialization of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) involving the National Nutrition Agency and members of the Indonesian House of Representatives



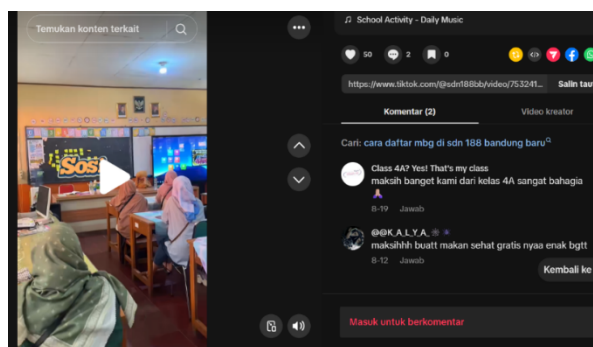
Source: @mascamat.gandrungmangu (2025)

These initiatives emphasized the broad target groups of the program, including students, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers, while also highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability through institutional oversight by agencies such as BPK and KPK. The emphasis on institutional oversight by supervisory bodies such as BPK and KPK also reflects a strategic effort to strengthen public trust and mitigate the spread of misinformation surrounding the program. Netnographic data collected from TikTok interactions further reveal that these communication efforts are generally well received by the public. Comments such as “mantap” (great) on posts by @dapurperkasa (2025) indicate that users perceive the information as clear, accessible, and relevant.

Figure 2. TikTok user interactions reflecting positive public perception of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG): (a) clarity of communication, and (b) appreciation of program implementation



(a)



(b)

Source: @dapurperkasa (2025); @sdn188bb (2025)

This suggests that the use of TikTok as a communication medium successfully simplifies complex policy messages into formats that are easily understood by a broader audience. In this context, TikTok facilitates not only information dissemination but also immediate public feedback, allowing users to actively engage with policy narratives. Moreover, expressions of appreciation, such as “terima kasih makan gratisnya kami bahagia” (thank you for the free meals, we are happy) found in comments on @sdn18bb (2025), reflect positive public reception toward the consistency of program implementation. These responses indicate that communication effectiveness is reinforced by tangible policy outcomes experienced directly by beneficiaries. In line with (Pangaribuan, 2022), consistent provision of nutritious meals contributes to improved immunity and reduced illness among students, thereby strengthening positive public perception.

However, from a deeper analytical perspective, these positive responses should not be interpreted solely as indicators of comprehensive policy success. Instead, they reflect what can be described as *surface-level acceptance*, shaped by initial exposure to policy benefits and effective communication strategies. Netnographic observation suggests that TikTok interactions tend to amplify visible and immediate outcomes, such as the distribution of free meals, while more complex structural issues remain less prominent in early-stage discourse.

Public surveys suggest that individuals show diverse levels of interest and reactions (Aysolmaz et al., 2023). This highlights an important characteristic of digital public perception: it is highly responsive, emotionally driven, and shaped by algorithmic visibility. Content that showcases successful program delivery is more likely to generate positive engagement, which in turn reinforces favorable perceptions. In this sense, TikTok contributes to the construction of a *performative legitimacy*, where policy success is validated through visible public approval in digital space. From the perspective of Edwards III's framework, these findings indicate that the communication variable of the MBG program can be considered relatively successful. The clarity of messaging, consistency of socialization, and accessibility of information contribute to positive public reception. Nevertheless, the netnographic evidence also suggests that communication alone is insufficient to sustain long-term public trust. In other words, while effective communication is capable of generating initial legitimacy, it does not guarantee the overall success of policy implementation. Public perception formed through TikTok interactions remains dynamic and contingent upon real-world outcomes. As subsequent findings in this study will demonstrate, when discrepancies emerge between communicated narratives and implementation realities, the same digital space that once amplified positive perception can rapidly transform into a site of critical evaluation.

Resource Constraints and Public Criticism in Digital Discourse

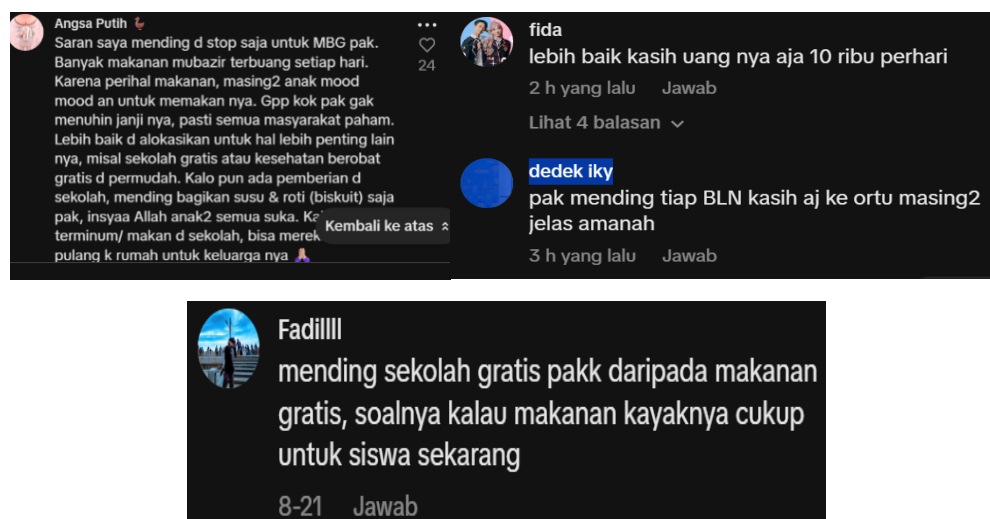
Within the framework of policy implementation, resources constitute a fundamental determinant of policy success. According to (Edwards III, 1980), resources encompass not only financial capacity, but also human resources, information, authority, and supporting infrastructure. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), the availability of resources appears to be formally adequate. However, netnographic findings from TikTok interactions reveal a more complex reality, where the issue is not merely resource availability, but rather how these resources are distributed, managed, and perceived by the public.

This finding aligns with the argument of (Sydnes et al., 2025), who emphasize that policy implementation is not solely determined by the availability of resources, but also by the complexity of coordination and the capacity to manage interdependent actors within implementation processes. In this context, resource adequacy does not automatically guarantee effective outcomes, as implementation success is contingent upon how resources are governed, distributed, and monitored across different levels of administration. Furthermore, in the digital era, resource-related issues are not only experienced administratively but are also publicly evaluated through online platforms, where perceptions of inefficiency, inequality, and mismanagement can significantly influence public trust and policy legitimacy.

From a regulatory perspective, the MBG program is supported by a strong legal foundation through Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024, which establishes the Badan Gizi Nasional (BGN) as the central implementing agency. In line with Van Meter and Van Horn in (Nugroho, 2014), effective policy implementation requires the integration of human, material, and methodological resources. Among these, human resources play a particularly critical role due to their dual function as both policy implementers and beneficiaries. The organizational structure of BGN, which includes advisory and operational divisions, reflects an institutional effort to ensure functional efficiency and program execution. However, despite this formal adequacy, public perception as captured through TikTok interactions reveals growing concerns regarding financial resources. The substantial allocation of the program budget, reaching approximately Rp335 trillion, has become a central topic in digital discourse. Netizens actively question the efficiency and effectiveness of such large-scale spending, expressing concerns about potential

waste and misallocation of public funds (BBC News Indonesia, 2025). Some comments even suggest that the budget should be redirected toward sectors perceived as more urgent, such as education or healthcare.

Figure 3. Public reactions on TikTok regarding the MBG program budget allocation, highlighting concerns over efficiency and potential misuse of public funds



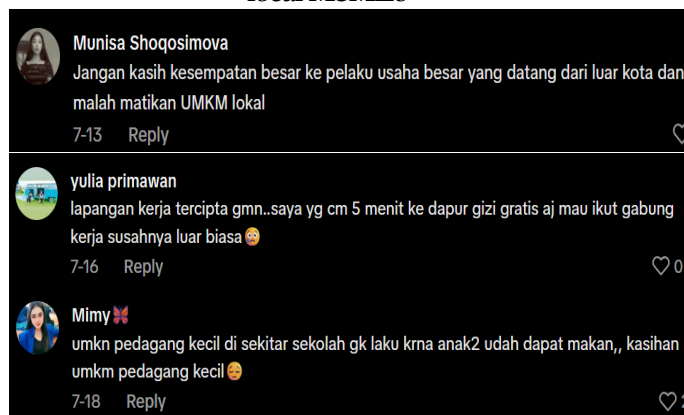
Source: BBC News Indonesia (2025)

From a netnographic perspective, these responses illustrate how digital platforms function as spaces for participatory policy evaluation. TikTok users do not merely consume information but actively reinterpret policy decisions through personal judgment and collective discourse. Financial transparency, therefore, becomes not only a technical requirement but also a symbolic factor shaping public trust. The visibility of large budget figures, when not accompanied by clear accountability narratives, tends to trigger skepticism and critical engagement.

This phenomenon can be further understood through the lens of digital public sphere theory, where online platforms enable decentralized and participatory forms of policy scrutiny (Schuessler et al., 2026). In such environments, policy legitimacy is no longer constructed solely through formal institutional processes, but also through continuous public evaluation mediated by digital interactions. As a result, issues related to transparency and accountability become highly visible and subject to collective interpretation. In this context, perceptions of inequality in resource distribution, particularly within supply chain arrangements, are rapidly amplified and transformed into broader critiques of governance. This dynamic illustrates how digital discourse not only reflects public perception but actively shapes narratives of fairness, inclusion, and policy effectiveness.

Beyond financial concerns, another crucial dimension of resource constraints lies in the management of supply chains and logistical systems. Theoretically, the MBG program is expected to generate positive spillover effects by involving local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in food provision and distribution. This aligns with the argument that sustainable food systems require collaboration between government, private sector, and local communities (Qomarrullah, 2025). However, empirical findings from TikTok interactions reveal a significant gap between policy expectations and implementation realities. Public comments indicate that market access within the MBG supply chain is often dominated by larger external actors, which, according to public perception, tends to “kill” or displace local MSMEs. This condition reflects a significant imbalance in supply chain governance and highlights the need for a more equitable supply chain management system. This condition has been explicitly criticized by users, who argue that the program, instead of empowering local economies, may actually undermine them.

Figure 4. Public reactions on TikTok highlighting the negative impact of the MBG program on local MSMEs



Source: @indahprabowomaharani (2025)

Furthermore, netnographic data highlight complaints from small vendors operating around schools, who report declining income due to reduced demand following the implementation of the MBG program, indicating direct economic disruption at the grassroots level. These findings suggest that the policy may have unintended economic consequences at the micro level. In this regard, the absence of clear technical guidelines (*petunjuk teknis*) for local economic protection emerges as a critical weakness, suggesting a regulatory gap in ensuring the protection and inclusion of local economic actors within the program. Without such regulatory safeguards, the supply chain system fails to integrate existing local economic ecosystems. This condition reflects a deeper structural issue in resource management. Resources should not be understood solely in terms of availability, but also in terms of equitable distribution and governance. The inability to design an inclusive supply chain indicates a limitation in policy planning and coordination. As a result, the program risks creating what can be described as a *policy contradiction*, where an initiative intended to improve welfare simultaneously generates new forms of economic vulnerability.

Additionally, the informational dimension of resources plays an important role in shaping implementation outcomes. The MBG program is supported by nutritional standards based on the Regulation of the Minister of Health No. 29 of 2019 concerning Recommended Dietary Allowances, which establishes benchmarks such as daily energy intake (2,100 kcal) and protein requirements (57 grams). While this regulatory framework provides a clear technical foundation, its effectiveness depends on consistent implementation and monitoring at the operational level. From the perspective of digital discourse, however, such technical standards are rarely the focus of public attention. Instead, TikTok interactions tend to highlight visible and immediate impacts, such as economic disruption or perceived unfairness. This indicates a gap between policy design (which emphasizes technical standards) and public perception (which prioritizes lived experience). Overall, netnographic findings suggest that the resource dimension of the MBG program is characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, resources appear sufficient in terms of legal framework, institutional structure, and financial allocation. On the other hand, public perception reflects dissatisfaction arising from issues of transparency, inequality, and implementation gaps. This paradox reinforces the argument that in the digital era, the success of policy implementation is not determined solely by the adequacy of resources, but also by how those resources are perceived, experienced, and evaluated by the public. TikTok, in this context, functions as a critical arena where these perceptions are continuously constructed and contested, transforming resource-related issues into broader narratives of trust, fairness, and accountability.

Bureaucratic Structure, Disposition, and Policy Failure: Netnographic Evidence from TikTok

In the context of policy implementation, bureaucratic structure and disposition represent critical variables that determine whether a policy can be translated effectively into practice. According to Edwards III (1980), bureaucratic structure refers to the organizational arrangements, procedures, and coordination mechanisms that guide implementation, while disposition relates to the attitudes, commitment, and responsiveness of policy implementers. These two variables are closely interconnected: even a well-designed bureaucratic structure may fail if implementers lack commitment, and conversely, strong commitment may not be sufficient in the absence of clear institutional coordination.

In the case of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), the bureaucratic structure is formally well-established through Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024, which defines the organizational framework of the Badan Gizi Nasional (BGN). This structure includes advisory bodies and operational units with specific responsibilities, supported by Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and technical guidelines designed to ensure efficiency, accountability, and compliance with food safety and nutritional standards. From a formal perspective, this indicates that the structural prerequisites for effective policy implementation are in place.

In addition to structural design, the disposition of implementers appears to be reinforced through institutional commitment at the national and regional levels. This is reflected in large-scale coordination initiatives, such as the Regional Consolidation Meeting held in Sentul, Bogor, in October 2025, which involved approximately 9,000 participants, including regional leaders and nutrition experts (@sppgcimaragas.pangatischen, 2025). The collective declaration of commitment in such forums signals strong political will and a shared sense of responsibility among key stakeholders.

Furthermore, efforts to strengthen implementation capacity are evident in the recruitment strategy adopted by the program. The use of flexible and inclusive recruitment mechanisms, combined with competitive financial incentives ranging from Rp3,700,000 to Rp4,700,000 (BGN, 2025), reflects an attempt to mobilize a large operational workforce. Interestingly, the emphasis on discipline and work ethic rather than formal educational qualifications suggests a pragmatic approach aimed at expanding participation and ensuring operational scalability.

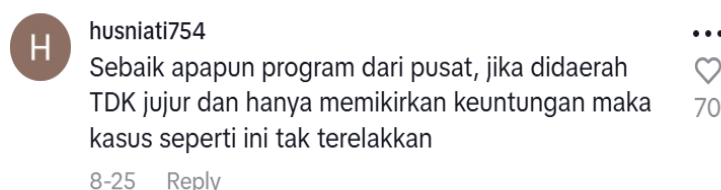
However, despite these formal and symbolic indicators of strong bureaucratic structure and positive disposition, netnographic evidence from TikTok interactions reveals a significant gap between institutional design and implementation realities. One of the most critical findings of this study is the occurrence of a mass food poisoning incident affecting 497 students in Wates, Kulon Progo, in July 2025. Laboratory tests confirmed contamination by harmful bacteria, including *E. coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Bacillus cereus*, indicating a serious failure in enforcing food safety standards.

From the perspective of Edwards III's framework, this incident highlights a fundamental problem of bureaucratic fragmentation. The lack of effective coordination between BGN as the central implementing agency and local health authorities responsible for food hygiene appears to have created a critical supervision gap. In this situation, SOPs that are formally well-defined fail to function effectively in practice, indicating a failure not only in policy design, but also in the enforcement of SOPs at the operational level. This confirms that the presence of formal procedures alone is insufficient without strong inter-agency coordination and accountability mechanisms.

Moreover, the possibility of undocumented or ambiguously defined technical policies further complicates implementation. As noted by Kristian (2023), the absence of clearly documented guidelines can lead to multiple interpretations among implementers, increasing the risk of miscommunication and operational errors. In the context of the MBG program, such ambiguity may have contributed to inconsistencies in food safety practices across different implementation sites.

From a netnographic perspective, the Kulon Progo incident represents a turning point in public perception as expressed through TikTok interactions. The platform rapidly transformed into a space for public criticism, where users openly questioned the integrity, competence, and accountability of local implementers. Comments highlighted concerns that profit-oriented practices might override quality standards, particularly in large-scale food production. These reactions indicate a shift from initial acceptance to critical evaluation, demonstrating how quickly public trust can erode when implementation failures become visible.

Figure 5. TikTok user comments criticizing the integrity and accountability of local implementers following the Kulon Progo incident



Source: @husniati (2025)

Importantly, the nature of TikTok as a digital platform amplifies such incidents through rapid content circulation and emotional engagement. Unlike traditional feedback mechanisms, TikTok enables real-time, collective

interpretation of policy failures, where individual experiences and opinions are aggregated into broader narratives of distrust. In this sense, TikTok functions not only as a communication channel but also as a *digital arena of accountability*, where policies are continuously evaluated by the public.

This finding suggests that strong commitment is primarily concentrated at the elite level, while the conditions at the grassroots level remain less visible and insufficiently examined. While official narratives emphasize strong institutional support and commitment, the relative absence of viral complaints from frontline implementers does not necessarily indicate smooth implementation. Instead, it may reflect the dominance of top-down narratives that overshadow operational challenges at the ground level. This suggests that the disposition of lower-level implementers remains underexplored and potentially underrepresented in digital discourse. Furthermore, the absence of viral complaints should not be interpreted as evidence of smooth implementation, but rather as a limitation of digital visibility, where certain operational issues remain underrepresented in online discourse. Overall, this study identifies a clear paradox between formal institutional strength and practical implementation failure. While the bureaucratic structure and disposition of the MBG program appear robust on paper, their effectiveness is undermined by coordination gaps, ambiguous regulations, and weak enforcement mechanisms.

In the context of digital society, these weaknesses are not only experienced but also publicly exposed and amplified through social media interactions. Netnographic evidence from TikTok demonstrates that policy failure is no longer confined to administrative domains but becomes a visible and contested issue in public discourse. As a result, bureaucratic shortcomings are rapidly translated into declining public trust. This finding reinforces the broader argument of this study: in the digital era, policy implementation is not only evaluated through institutional performance but also through public perception shaped in online spaces. TikTok, therefore, emerges as a powerful “digital judge,” where the success or failure of public policies is continuously negotiated and redefined by society.

Conclusion

This study reveals a clear paradox in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) when viewed through the lens of public perception on TikTok. Based on Edwards III's policy implementation framework, the findings indicate that the communication dimension has been relatively successful, as reflected in positive public responses to consistent program socialization and accessible information delivery. Likewise, the disposition variable, particularly in terms of formal commitment from government actors, has been positively acknowledged. However, significant challenges emerge in the dimensions of resources and bureaucratic structure. Public discourse on TikTok highlights concerns over budget efficiency, potential misallocation of resources, and unintended negative impacts on local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The most critical issue arises from the failure of bureaucratic structures to enforce food safety standards, as evidenced by the mass food poisoning incident in Kulon Progo. This case has been interpreted by the public as a reflection of weak oversight, fragmented coordination, and compromised integrity at the local implementation level.

This study contributes to the literature on policy implementation and digital society by demonstrating that social media platforms are not merely tools of communication, but active arenas where public perception is constructed, negotiated, and amplified. Through a netnographic approach, this research highlights the role of TikTok as a “digital judge” that rapidly shapes public trust based on visible policy outcomes. The findings extend Edwards III's framework by emphasizing the importance of digital public perception as a complementary dimension in evaluating policy success in the contemporary era. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to one social media platform, which may not fully represent broader public opinion across different demographic groups. Second, netnographic data are inherently interpretative and dependent on visible interactions, which may overlook silent or less-expressed perspectives.

Based on these findings, future research is recommended to adopt comparative approaches across multiple digital platforms or integrate mixed methods to capture a more comprehensive understanding of public perception. From a policy perspective, the government needs to strengthen accountability mechanisms at the local level, improve supply chain governance, and enforce stricter quality control systems to ensure food safety and program sustainability. Strengthening these aspects is essential not only for improving implementation outcomes but also for rebuilding public trust in the MBG program.

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Author Contributions Statement

SS, FSR contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study. SS conducted data collection and analysis, while FSR provided supervision and critical review of the research process. SS drafted the manuscript, and FSR contributed to editing and revising the final version. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

AI Usage Statement

The author used artificial intelligence (AI) tools in this study solely for language editing, grammar checking, and improving clarity and readability of the manuscript. AI was not used to generate research ideas, conduct analysis, interpret data, or produce the main findings of the study. All intellectual content, arguments, and conclusions presented in this article are the responsibility of the author. AI tools are not credited as authors or contributors, in accordance with academic publishing ethics.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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