E-ISSN: 3031-8629
P-ISSN: 3032-3258

Halaman 5171-5198
Volume 3 Nomor 4 Tahun 2026

Memes, Public Narratives, and Policy Perception: Social Media Discourses on Indonesia's Free Meal Program

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Abstrak

Perkembangan budaya digital partisipatif telah mengubah cara masyarakat memahami dan merespons kebijakan publik. Meme internet kini tidak hanya menjadi hiburan, tetapi juga sarana untuk menyampaikan kritik, membentuk opini, dan membangun narasi mengenai kebijakan pemerintah. Namun, kajian tentang peran meme dalam membentuk persepsi terhadap kebijakan kesejahteraan, khususnya di negara non-Barat, masih terbatas. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana meme Instagram membangun narasi publik dan persepsi terhadap Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) di Indonesia. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif berorientasi naratif, penelitian ini menganalisis 32 meme yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling berdasarkan relevansi dengan isu MBG dan tingkat interaksi. Analisis mencakup referensi eksternal, narasi internal, nada komunikasi, sasaran narasi, dan pola situasi yang berulang. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi lima narasi dominan, yaitu kekhawatiran terhadap beban anggaran, ketidakpercayaan terhadap institusi, ketidaktepatan prioritas kebijakan, kegagalan implementasi, dan simbolisme politik. Meme cenderung membingkai MBG melalui persoalan tata kelola, alokasi anggaran, kapasitas institusi, dan akuntabilitas, bukan semata-mata tujuan pemenuhan gizi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa persepsi terhadap MBG berkaitan dengan legitimasi kebijakan dan kepercayaan terhadap kapasitas pemerintah. Penelitian ini menempatkan meme sebagai ruang komunikasi informal tempat masyarakat memperdebatkan legitimasi, kepercayaan, dan penerimaan terhadap kebijakan publik. Dengan melihat meme sebagai pembentuk narasi, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian komunikasi politik digital dan persepsi kebijakan dalam masyarakat yang semakin terhubung.

Kata kunci: *Meme; Narasi Publik; Persepsi Kebijakan; Komunikasi Digital; Media Sosial*

Abstract

The growth of participatory digital culture has transformed how citizens interpret and respond to public

policies. Internet memes have become communicative tools for expressing criticism, negotiating meanings, and shaping collective interpretations of governance. However, their role in shaping perceptions of welfare policies, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains underexplored. This study examines how Instagram memes construct public narratives and policy perceptions surrounding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). Using a qualitative narrative-oriented approach, 32 memes were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to MBG discussions and visible engagement. The analysis examined external references, internal narratives, communicative tones, narrative targets, and recurring scenarios. Five dominant narratives emerged: fiscal burden and budget anxiety, institutional distrust, policy misprioritization, implementation failure, and political symbolism. Rather than emphasizing nutritional objectives, the memes predominantly frame MBG through concerns about governance, budget allocation, institutional competence, and accountability. The coexistence of fiscal anxiety and institutional distrust suggests that perceptions of MBG are closely associated with policy legitimacy and state capacity. These findings highlight meme circulation as an informal space where citizens negotiate trust, legitimacy, and acceptance of welfare policies. By examining memes as narrative mechanisms rather than merely humorous content, this study contributes to research on digital political communication, public narratives, and policy perception in networked societies.

Keywords : *Memes; Public narratives; Policy Perception; Digital Communication; Social Media*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed how public discourse is produced, circulated, and contested in contemporary societies. Digital platforms no longer function merely as channels for information dissemination; instead, they increasingly operate as participatory spaces where users actively construct meanings, negotiate identities, and evaluate political and social realities. Within these environments, citizens engage in informal forms of political expression that extend beyond conventional participation mechanisms such as elections, public forums, or institutional deliberation (Chmel et al., 2024) Digital participation is increasingly shaped by visual and humorous forms of communication, particularly memes, which facilitate rapid engagement with complex public issues (Cervi & Divon, 2023).

Internet memes have evolved from humorous online content into influential

communicative artifacts embedded within political discourse, social criticism, and public meaning-making processes. Memes often combine visual symbolism, irony, intertextuality, and cultural references to communicate positions regarding controversial issues. Consequently, memes may serve as simplified yet persuasive forms of public commentary that can shape perceptions, reinforce collective attitudes, and influence political interpretations (Cao, 2024). Emerging evidence further indicates that memes can affect public opinion formation, political learning, and engagement with policy-related issues, suggesting that digital humor increasingly operates within broader ecosystems of political communication.

Recent studies increasingly conceptualize memes as mechanisms of participatory political communication rather than merely entertainment products. Political memes have been shown to facilitate criticism toward institutions, challenge dominant narratives, and communicate scepticism regarding governance and legitimacy (Ross, 2021). Their communicative power lies in translating abstract or technical issues into emotionally resonant and easily shareable content. As a result, memes frequently function as vernacular political discourse through which ordinary users evaluate state actions and institutional performance. In highly digitalized environments, memes may become informal arenas where legitimacy, accountability, and public trust are symbolically negotiated (Johann, 2022).

The increasing political significance of memes has encouraged scholars to examine them as narrative structures rather than isolated humorous artifacts. Internet memes may operate as "partial stories," condensing broader social anxieties, ideological conflicts, and collective interpretations into fragmented but meaningful representations (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). These narratives rarely provide complete explanations; instead, they rely on shared contextual knowledge and cultural familiarity among audiences. Consequently, memes become important sites for understanding how publics construct interpretations surrounding crises, governance failures, or political decisions. The narrative dimension of memes is particularly relevant when examining public responses toward welfare policies, where perceptions of fairness, priorities, and effectiveness frequently shape acceptance (Halversen & Weeks, 2023)

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) represents one of the most visible contemporary welfare initiatives and has generated extensive discussion across

social media. Designed as a large-scale nutritional intervention, the program has simultaneously been interpreted as a welfare policy, developmental investment, fiscal commitment, and political project. Public responses toward MBG have therefore extended beyond questions of nutrition and increasingly involve debates concerning implementation capacity, budget allocation, policy priorities, institutional competence, and governmental accountability.

The emergence of MBG-related memes illustrates how welfare policies become interpreted through digital culture. Rather than discussing policy outcomes in technical terms, social media users frequently translate concerns regarding budgeting, implementation, and governance into satire, irony, and humour. Such practices suggest that policy perception is increasingly mediated through informal communicative forms. Memes associated with MBG often compare the program with educational spending, employment concerns, taxation, or institutional performance, indicating that digital narratives surrounding welfare policies are shaped by broader expectations regarding state responsibility and distributive justice.

Political memes predominantly focuses on electoral politics, political polarization, ideological mobilization, or campaign communication in Western contexts (Carrasco-Polaino et al., 2025). Meanwhile, studies examining memes in relation to welfare policy perception, governance legitimacy, and public trust remain limited. Research concerning Indonesian digital culture has also rarely explored how memes contribute to constructing narratives surrounding state programs and social policy. Consequently, insufficient attention has been given to how everyday digital participation influences interpretations of welfare initiatives and institutional legitimacy.

This gap is important because welfare policies do not operate solely through implementation outcomes but also through public perceptions of legitimacy, fairness, and effectiveness. Negative or skeptical narratives circulating through memes may shape broader attitudes toward government programs, potentially influencing trust and acceptance. Understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly relevant in digital societies where public opinion formation is strongly mediated by online interaction and symbolic communication.

Building on this background, this study examines how internet memes construct public narratives and shape policy perceptions of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program on social

media. By employing qualitative narrative-oriented meme analysis, this research identifies dominant narratives embedded within MBG-related memes and explores how satire, criticism, and digital participation contribute to the interpretation of welfare policies in online spaces. Beyond meme studies, this research contributes to discussions concerning digital political communication, policy legitimacy, and public trust in governance.

Literature Review

2.1 Internet Memes as Political and Policy Communication

The growing integration of social media into everyday life has changed how people produce and interpret political information. Communication surrounding governance and public policy no longer depends exclusively on institutional actors or traditional news media; instead, ordinary users actively construct political meanings through visual culture, humor, and digital participation. Within this environment, internet memes have developed into highly recognizable communicative forms capable of simplifying complex social issues into brief yet emotionally resonant messages (Oyemade & Adeagbo, 2020).

The communicative power of memes derives partly from their intertextuality. Meaning is often generated through references to existing cultural symbols, public events, and shared experiences, allowing audiences to immediately recognize criticism or ideological positioning embedded within the content (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). This characteristic makes memes particularly effective in discussions involving controversial policies because they compress political evaluation into accessible visual formats.

Humor and satire further increase the persuasive capacity of memes. Political criticism delivered through humorous representations tends to reduce resistance, encourage engagement, and facilitate circulation across online communities (Davis et al., 2018). Consequently, memes may simultaneously entertain, criticize, and influence perceptions regarding institutional performance. In this sense, memes increasingly resemble informal political commentary rather than casual digital entertainment.

Studies examining online political expression have shown that memes contribute to framing political events, reinforcing ideological positions, and challenging dominant institutional

narratives. However, much of this literature concentrates on electoral politics, protests, or polarization. Less attention has been given to welfare policies and government programs, despite their visibility within digital discourse.

This limitation is important because policy debates increasingly unfold through participatory online environments where public evaluations are expressed symbolically. Examining MBG-related memes, therefore, extends meme scholarship toward welfare governance and policy communication contexts.

2.2 Memes, Public Narratives, and Meaning Construction

Narratives influence how societies interpret uncertainty, assign responsibility, and evaluate institutions. Public understanding of policies is rarely shaped solely by technical information; rather, interpretation often emerges through stories that organize actors, conflicts, causes, and consequences into coherent meaning structures (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020). Within digital environments, narratives frequently appear in fragmented forms. Memes rarely present complete explanations but instead condense broader interpretations into symbolic representations. Such fragments may nevertheless communicate assumptions concerning competence, fairness, legitimacy, or institutional failure. This perspective positions memes not simply as reactions to events but as active components in constructing collective narratives (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Meaning construction through memes becomes particularly visible during moments of social tension or policy controversy. Under such conditions, repeated circulation of similar meme themes can contribute to the normalization of specific interpretations. Narratives portraying institutions as inefficient, for example, may gradually shape broader assumptions regarding governance quality.

Collective meaning-making in digital spaces also depends heavily on participatory interpretation. Audiences do not passively receive messages; they modify, reproduce, and reinterpret content according to shared experiences and sociopolitical contexts (Literat & van den Berg, 2019). In conclusion, meme narratives remain fluid and continuously negotiated.

The narrative dimension is especially relevant for welfare programs because policies concerning redistribution, social protection, or public expenditure often generate competing

interpretations regarding justice and priorities. Programs designed as social assistance may therefore become simultaneously understood as investment, burden, political symbolism, or evidence of state responsibility. Such multiplicity suggests that analyzing MBG memes provides insight into how public narratives surrounding welfare policy are constructed and contested.

2.3 Digital Participation, Policy Perception, and Legitimacy in Social Media Environments

Participatory culture has expanded the role of citizens from information consumers to producers of political interpretations. Expressions of support, scepticism, and resistance increasingly emerge through ordinary digital practices such as reposting, commenting, parody, and meme creation (López-Olano et al., 2022). These practices demonstrate that engagement with policy issues may occur outside formal institutional settings. The relationship between participation and policy perception becomes particularly important when evaluating legitimacy. Public acceptance of governmental programs depends not only on measurable outcomes but also on perceptions of transparency, responsiveness, competence, and distributive fairness (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Trust in institutions functions as a crucial condition shaping whether policies are interpreted positively or sceptically.

Low institutional trust frequently intensifies criticism toward public spending and implementation processes. Under such conditions, welfare programs may be evaluated less according to intended objectives and more according to expectations regarding governmental credibility. Discussions surrounding costs, inefficiency, or prioritization often become indirect expressions of broader distrust toward institutions (van der Meer, 2016). Digital communication environments amplify these dynamics. Critical narratives circulate rapidly and repeatedly, increasing visibility of scepticism while enabling collective reinforcement of interpretations. As a result, social media platforms increasingly function as arenas where legitimacy is negotiated through symbolic interactions rather than formal policy evaluation.

For welfare initiatives such as MBG, meme production may therefore reveal more than humorous reactions. Memes potentially reflect underlying judgments regarding governance quality, state responsibility, and institutional trust. Understanding these symbolic negotiations

becomes essential because policy success depends not only on implementation outcomes but also on public perceptions surrounding legitimacy and fairness.

METHODE

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine how internet memes construct public narratives and policy perceptions regarding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG). Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for investigating symbolic meanings, interpretive processes, and the ways digital users negotiate social and political realities through online content (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Rather than measuring public attitudes quantitatively, this study seeks to understand how memes communicate criticism, scepticism, and interpretations surrounding welfare policies.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What broader social, economic, and political issues are referenced within MBG-related memes?
2. How do internet memes construct narratives concerning MBG implementation, institutional performance, and policy legitimacy?
3. What dominant public narratives emerge from the meme corpus regarding perceptions of MBG?

The analytical perspective draws upon narrative approaches that understand meaning as socially constructed through stories, symbolic representations, and recurring interpretive patterns (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2020). Within digital environments, memes often function as fragmented communicative forms capable of condensing broader political and social concerns into simplified representations (Literat & van den Berg, 2019; de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Consequently, memes in this study were interpreted as narrative expressions reflecting collective perceptions toward governance and welfare policies. The research site consisted of Instagram, selected due to its prominence as a visual social media platform where memes, satire, and public commentary frequently circulate. Data collection was conducted through manual searches using the keywords "MBG", "meme MBG" and "makan bergizi gratis". The dataset focused on memes uploaded during 2026, corresponding to periods of intensified online

discussion regarding MBG implementation and public reactions toward the program.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify content considered most relevant to the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). Memes were included when they fulfilled the following criteria:

1. Explicitly referred to MBG policies, implementation, budgeting, institutional performance, or public responses;
2. Included humorous, satirical, ironic, or critical elements;
3. Demonstrated relatively high engagement indicators (e.g., likes, comments, reposts, or visible interactions);

Memes lacking identifiable connections with MBG or containing ambiguous meanings without contextual relevance were excluded. Following screening and curation procedures, 32 memes were retained for analysis. The emphasis on highly engaged memes was intended to capture content that achieved greater visibility and potentially reflected broader public resonance within digital discourse (Milner, 2013).

The analysis was conducted through iterative reading and coding processes emphasizing contextual interpretation and recurring narrative patterns embedded within the meme corpus. The first stage involved examining whether selected memes contained identifiable references to broader policy-related issues surrounding MBG. During this stage, attention was directed toward themes associated with public spending, budget allocation, educational priorities, welfare policies, implementation challenges, food quality concerns, taxation, institutional accountability, and governmental communication. The purpose of this initial analysis was to identify external references, namely broader social, economic, or political debates invoked by individual memes. In several cases, a single meme simultaneously referred to multiple issues, reflecting overlapping public concerns regarding MBG.

The second stage focused on reconstructing the internal narratives embedded within each meme. Rather than describing visual content alone, the analysis aimed to interpret the implicit story communicated through textual and symbolic elements. Interpretation centered on understanding what was occurring within the meme, what broader meaning was implied, and how MBG was represented through satire, criticism, irony, or humor. This process treated memes

as narrative fragments capable of condensing wider perceptions regarding governance, institutional performance, and welfare policies (Murray, 2003; de Saint Laurent et al., 2021).

The third stage involved coding recurring narrative characteristics across the dataset. Coding was conducted iteratively and developed around several analytical dimensions, including the broader issue addressed by the meme (*external reference*), the implied story or interpretation communicated (*internal narrative*), the communicative tone expressed through satire, criticism, irony, or humor (*tone*), and the institutions or actors implicitly evaluated (*narrative target*). These categories were subsequently compared across all memes to identify recurring narrative configurations.

Repeated comparison between coded categories enabled the emergence of broader narrative patterns or dominant scenarios. Several scenarios appeared consistently throughout the corpus, including narratives portraying MBG as a source of fiscal burden and budget anxiety, a reflection of institutional distrust, an example of policy misprioritization, evidence of implementation failure, or a form of political symbolism. Rather than being interpreted as isolated themes, these scenarios were understood as collective public narratives through which social media users negotiated perceptions of MBG, governmental legitimacy, and welfare governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Memes

Table 1. List of Dataset

Meme ID	External Reference	Internal Narrative	Tone	Narratives Target	Preliminary Scenario
M1	Budget allocation	MBG seen as absorbing funds from other priorities	satire	government	Fiscal burden
M2	Criticism legitimacy	Critics of MBG portrayed as justified	sarcasm	officials	Institutional distrust

M3	Political statement	Claims about hunger/intelligence mocked	irony	officials	Political symbolism
M4	Oversight	Weak regulation and no investigation	criticism	BGN/government	Institutional distrust
M5	SPPG expansion	Expansion rendered absurd	humor	program	Political symbolism
M6	Education vs MBG	Education ignored while MBG prioritized	satire	government	Policy misprioritization
M7	Education funding	MBG chosen over free education	irony	government	Policy misprioritization
M8	National priorities	MBG continues despite larger crises	satire	government	Political symbolism
M9	Economic crisis	MBG persists amid economic threats	dark humor	government	Fiscal burden
M10	Corruption	Good MBG impossible amid corruption	criticism	political elite	Institutional distrust
M11	APBN	MBG drains state budget	satire	program	Fiscal burden
M12	Food quality	Quality perceived to decline	criticism	implementers	Implementation failure
M13	Business opportunities	MBG creates opportunistic business	humor	entrepreneurs	Economic opportunity
M14	Teacher salary	Teachers neglected versus MBG	satire	government	Policy misprioritization

M15	Employment	Jobs more urgent than MBG	criticism	government	Policy misprioritization
M16	Taxes	Tax increases linked to MBG	satire	government	Fiscal burden
M17	Employment	MBG prioritized over jobs	irony	government	Policy misprioritization
M18	Food poisoning response	Officials attack critics	criticism	BGN	Institutional distrust
M19	Dropout students	School access ignored	satire	government	Policy misprioritization
M20	Motor procurement	Policy inconsistency mocked	sarcasm	BGN	Institutional distrust
M21	Public funding	Support falls if citizens pay	irony	public	Fiscal burden
M22	Safety incidents	MBG associated with accidents/poisoning	dark humor	program	Implementation failure
M23	IT budget oversight	Authorities ignore irregularities	criticism	government/KPK	Institutional distrust
M24	Low meal budget	Insufficient portions linked to cuts	criticism	implementers	Implementation failure
M25	Crisis handling	Image management over accountability	satire	BGN	Institutional distrust
M26	New agency costs	Extra bureaucracy seen wasteful	criticism	BGN	Fiscal burden
M27	Program cuts	Reduction mocked as irrational	sarcasm	government	Fiscal burden

M28	Poisoning cases	Authorities minimize incidents	criticism	officials	Implementation failure
M29	Ramadan continuity	Continuation seen illogical	humor	government	Political symbolism
M30	MBG for elderly	Mixed reaction to welfare expansion	ambivalent	government	Policy extension
M31	Positive-content incentives	Buzzer culture over jobs	satire	government	Political symbolism
M32	Poisoning numbers	Repeated incidents normalized	criticism	institutions	Implementation failure

Source: Processed by Authors

The analysis examined 32 MBG-related memes collected from Instagram and selected based on thematic relevance and visible engagement levels. As presented in Table 1, criticism-oriented and satirical content dominated the dataset, indicating that memes concerning MBG were primarily used to express evaluative judgments rather than support for the policy. The prevalence of criticism suggests that digital humor frequently functions as an alternative channel through which users negotiate dissatisfaction, scepticism, and perceptions regarding government performance.

Across the corpus, memes rarely discussed MBG solely as a nutritional intervention. Instead, they connected the program with broader issues, including educational priorities, state budget allocation, taxation, institutional accountability, employment, and implementation controversies. This pattern indicates that public interpretations of MBG extend beyond welfare objectives and become intertwined with wider concerns regarding governance and distributive fairness.

Table 2. Memes Category

Category	Frequency	Percent
Fiscal burden	7	21,9

Institutional distrust	7	21,9
Policy misprioritization	6	18,8
Political symbolism	5	15,6
Implementation failure	5	15,6
Economic opportunity	1	3,1
Policy extension	1	3,1

Source: Processed by Authors

Table 3. Memes Tone

Tone	Frequency	Percent
Criticism	10	31,2
Satire	9	28,1
Irony	4	12,5
Sarcasm	3	9,4
Humor	3	9,4
Dark Humor	2	6,2
Ambivalent	1	3,1

Source: Processed by Authors

The coding process further showed that MBG-related memes were largely dominated by narratives emphasizing fiscal burden and institutional distrust, each representing 21.9% of the analyzed corpus, followed by policy misprioritization, political symbolism, and implementation failure (see Table 2). The prominence of these scenarios indicates that public interpretations of MBG extend beyond discussions of nutrition policy and increasingly reflect skepticism toward governmental priorities, implementation capacity, and institutional accountability. Supportive or opportunity-oriented narratives appeared only marginally, suggesting that meme circulation surrounding MBG functions predominantly as a medium of criticism and policy evaluation rather than endorsement. Furthermore, communicative tones were dominated by satire, criticism, irony, and sarcasm (see Table 3).

External References and Narrative Construction

Coding results demonstrate that MBG memes consistently referred to broader social and political issues rather than isolated program outcomes (see Table 1). Several recurring external references emerged, including concerns regarding education funding, budget prioritization, welfare spending, food quality, taxation, institutional transparency, and implementation capacity. For example, memes comparing MBG expenditure with educational funding implicitly construct narratives of policy competition, where public resources are perceived as limited and government priorities become subject to evaluation.



Source: Instagram

Figure 1. Memes Comparing MBG Expenditure with Education or Teacher Welfare

E-ISSN: 3031-8629
P-ISSN: 3032-3258
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Similarly, memes addressing implementation failures or poisoning incidents construct broader assumptions regarding institutional competence and administrative preparedness.



Source: Instagram

Figure 2. Memes about failures of the program

These external references contribute to meaning construction by positioning MBG within debates concerning governance quality rather than nutrition policy alone. Consequently, memes operate not merely as humorous artifacts but as condensed commentaries on broader policy issues.

Dominant Public Narratives (Scenarios)

The coding process identified five recurring narrative scenarios emerging across the corpus (see Table 2). The first dominant scenario framed MBG as a fiscal burden and source of budget anxiety, where memes questioned spending priorities and associated MBG with pressure on public finances.

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Source: Instagram

Figure 3. Memes about Fiscal Burden

The second scenario centered on institutional distrust, portraying government agencies or policy implementers as lacking transparency, accountability, or competence.



Source: Instagram

Figure 4. Memes about Instituional Distrust

A third recurring narrative presented MBG as evidence of policy misprioritization,

particularly when compared with educational issues, employment, and structural socioeconomic concerns.



Source: Instagram

Figure 5. Memes about Policy Misprioritization

The fourth scenario involved implementation failure, focusing on logistical problems, food quality, and safety concerns.

E-ISSN: 3031-8629
P-ISSN: 3032-3258
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Source: Instagram

Figure 6. Memes about Food Quality

Finally, several memes constructed MBG as political symbolism, implying that visibility and promotion exceeded substantive implementation.



Source: Instagram

Figure 7. Memes about Political Simbolism

Taken together, these scenarios indicate that MBG memes rarely evaluate nutritional objectives directly. Instead, they construct broader narratives concerning legitimacy, governance capacity, and institutional trust.

Discussion

Memes as Public Criticism and Informal Political Communication

The findings indicate that MBG memes function beyond humor and increasingly operate as forms of informal political communication. Rather than expressing opinions through conventional channels, social media users employ satire, irony, and symbolic references to evaluate policy decisions and institutional performance. Similar observations suggest that meme creators increasingly act as political communicators capable of influencing public discourse and shaping interpretations of governance. Memes contribute to participatory political culture by transforming ordinary users into active interpreters of policy issues (Ahmed & Masood, 2024; Mihăilescu, 2024).

This pattern reflects broader shifts in digital participation where engagement with governance no longer depends exclusively on institutional mechanisms. Political expression increasingly occurs through everyday online practices, including parody, visual commentary, and meme production. Such practices reduce barriers to participation while simultaneously expanding opportunities for criticism and symbolic resistance (Alafnan, 2025). Meme circulation facilitates political awareness and engagement, although it may also reinforce selective interpretations and ideological clustering (Pranata & Widyatama, 2025).

Importantly, criticism toward MBG should not automatically be interpreted as rejection of welfare interventions. Many memes criticize implementation, priorities, or accountability rather than nutritional assistance itself. This distinction suggests that meme-based criticism may function as demands for more credible governance rather than opposition toward social welfare policies (Tri Indah Rezeki et al., 2024).

Welfare Policies, Policy Legitimacy, and Public Acceptance

The tendency of memes to compare MBG with educational funding, employment

opportunities, or other social priorities indicates that public evaluation of welfare policies extends beyond intended objectives and includes judgments regarding distributive fairness. Policy legitimacy is closely associated with whether citizens perceive governmental decisions as fair, responsive, and aligned with collective priorities (Puluhulawa, 2022). Welfare programs frequently encounter scepticism when resource allocation is viewed as inconsistent with urgent societal needs. Consequently, narratives portraying MBG as misplaced prioritization may reflect concerns regarding governance choices rather than rejection of welfare principles (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Fee & Jia, 2025).

The prevalence of policy misprioritization narratives also suggests that welfare acceptance is conditional. Citizens may support redistribution while simultaneously questioning implementation capacity or opportunity costs. Under such conditions, legitimacy becomes negotiated through public discourse rather than determined solely by policy objectives. Repeated circulation of satirical criticism may further normalize skepticism. Once policies become associated with waste, inefficiency, or controversy, public legitimacy may weaken despite intended social benefits (Rifki & Basit, 2026). Memes will contribute not only to criticism but also to longer-term perception formation.

Why Fiscal Burden and Institutional Distrust Appear Simultaneously

One of the strongest patterns emerging from the corpus is the coexistence of fiscal burden narratives and institutional distrust narratives. This relationship suggests that criticism toward MBG is not primarily about expenditure size but about confidence in institutional capacity.

Citizens may tolerate expensive welfare programs when institutions are considered competent and transparent. However, identical expenditures become controversial under conditions of low trust. The combination of high spending and low institutional confidence tends to generate perceptions of policy risk (DePaula & Hansson, 2025).

This pattern indicates a deeper narrative structure, high public expenditure with a weak institutional trust will perceived governance inefficiency. The findings imply that public reactions toward MBG may reflect accumulated skepticism regarding governance quality rather than isolated judgments concerning the program itself. Social media environments can intensify

cynicism toward institutions and amplify distrust through repeated exposure to critical narratives (Archontaki et al., 2024).

Moreover, meme circulation enables distrust to become socially shared. Critical interpretations are reproduced, reformulated, and normalized within digital spaces, gradually transforming individual dissatisfaction into broader collective narratives concerning institutional credibility.

Satire, Symbolic Governance, and Public Resistance

Satire emerged as one of the dominant communicative tones across the corpus. Humor in this context appears less oriented toward entertainment and more toward symbolic resistance. Through exaggeration and irony, memes expose perceived inconsistencies between governmental narratives and lived realities (Muya & Onyinge, 2026). Several memes implied that MBG was accompanied by promotional discourse or optimistic messaging that appeared disconnected from implementation controversies. This finding relates to debates regarding symbolic governance, where visibility and communication become more prominent than perceived outcomes. When public communication emphasizes promotion while implementation remains contested, skepticism may increase (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023). Under such conditions, satire functions as corrective discourse, enabling citizens to challenge official narratives without direct confrontation.

Research on meme-based political communication similarly highlights the role of humor in delegitimizing authority and questioning institutional claims. Thus, satire should not be interpreted merely as online humor but as a symbolic mechanism through which citizens negotiate accountability and express dissatisfaction with governance processes.

Implications for Government Communication

Communication strategies emphasizing only positive outcomes may be insufficient for maintaining legitimacy in highly participatory digital environments (Bouckaert & van de Walle, 2003). Public evaluation increasingly depends on transparency, responsiveness, and visible accountability. Meme-based criticism indicates that citizens assess policies through multiple dimensions including implementation consistency, fairness, budgeting transparency, and institutional credibility. Consequently, welfare communication focusing exclusively on promotion

risks intensifying skepticism when controversies remain unresolved. Ignoring memes as trivial online entertainment may overlook broader concerns regarding legitimacy and trust. Meme narratives potentially function as informal indicators of public perception, revealing anxieties that conventional evaluation mechanisms fail to capture (Milner, 2012). Debates surrounding MBG appear to concern not only food provision but also broader questions regarding state capacity, policy priorities, and institutional trust. This suggests that welfare policies increasingly operate within digital environments where legitimacy is continuously negotiated through participatory communication practices (Mergel, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study explored how internet memes circulating on social media construct public narratives surrounding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) and how these narratives reflect broader perceptions of governance and public policy. The findings indicate that memes operate beyond their commonly perceived role as humorous digital expressions. Instead, they function as symbolic communicative spaces through which users evaluate governmental decisions, negotiate meanings, and articulate concerns regarding policy implementation and institutional performance.

Across the analyzed corpus, recurring narratives concerning fiscal burden, institutional distrust, policy misprioritization, implementation failure, and political symbolism emerged as dominant interpretive patterns. The persistence of these scenarios suggests that public discourse surrounding MBG is shaped less by the substantive objective of nutritional improvement and more by questions related to transparency, accountability, resource allocation, and governmental competence. In this sense, reactions toward MBG appear to reflect broader evaluations of state capacity and policy credibility rather than isolated responses toward a single welfare initiative.

An important implication of these findings lies in the relationship between institutional trust and policy perception. Narratives portraying MBG as financially burdensome frequently appeared alongside skepticism toward implementing institutions, indicating that concerns regarding expenditure become more salient when accompanied by doubts about governance

quality. This pattern highlights that acceptance of welfare policies is not determined solely by intended benefits but also by perceptions of fairness, responsiveness, and institutional legitimacy.

The study further demonstrates that memes constitute meaningful forms of informal political communication within participatory digital environments. Through satire, irony, and symbolic simplification, social media users translate complex policy debates into accessible narratives capable of reinforcing or challenging collective understandings. Consequently, meme circulation should not be dismissed as trivial online behavior. Instead, it may offer insight into emerging public concerns that conventional policy evaluations or formal surveys fail to capture.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the growing literature on digital political communication by extending meme studies toward the domain of welfare policy and governance, areas that remain comparatively underexplored. The findings also support the usefulness of narrative-oriented approaches in examining how fragmented digital artifacts contribute to broader public interpretations of legitimacy and trust.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The analysis focused on a relatively limited corpus of Instagram memes collected within a specific temporal context, which may not fully represent wider online discourse across platforms or periods. Future research could expand comparative analysis across different social media platforms, policy issues, or national contexts, while also incorporating audience reception to better understand how meme narratives influence attitudes toward public programs. Overall, this study suggests that discussions surrounding MBG extend beyond debates over food provision or welfare delivery. They increasingly represent negotiations over legitimacy, governance, and institutional trust, demonstrating how policy perception in contemporary societies is shaped not only through implementation outcomes but also through digitally mediated public narratives.

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