

Digital Public Opinion Dynamics and Policy Legitimacy: Social Media Discourse on the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia

Mukhammad Sahlan¹

¹Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Mukhammad Sahlan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20260720>

ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (*Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG*) has emerged as one of the strategic public policies aimed at improving children's nutritional status and strengthening national human resource development. As a large-scale government program involving significant public funding and cross-sectoral implementation, MBG has attracted extensive public attention, particularly in digital media environments. Social media platforms have increasingly become spaces where citizens express opinions, debate policy effectiveness, and construct narratives regarding government initiatives. This study aims to examine the dynamics of digital public opinion related to the implementation of the MBG program and to analyze its implications for the construction of policy legitimacy. This research employs a quantitative approach through digital public opinion analysis based on social media data. A total of 2,500 public posts related to the MBG program were collected from Twitter (X) using keyword-based data extraction. Sentiment analysis and digital content analysis were conducted to identify patterns of public opinion and dominant themes emerging in online discussions. The findings indicate that digital conversations about the MBG program are predominantly

characterized by critical sentiment, particularly regarding policy effectiveness, budget transparency, and implementation mechanisms. Nevertheless, supportive opinions emphasizing the potential benefits of the program in improving children's nutritional status are also present. The results further demonstrate that social media discussions contribute to shaping the public agenda surrounding the MBG program. However, the intensity of digital public opinion does not necessarily translate into immediate policy change, as policy decisions remain embedded within institutional and political structures. This study contributes to the growing literature on digital political communication by integrating digital agenda-setting theory, opinion polarization, and policy legitimacy within a unified analytical framework.

Keywords: Digital public opinion; social media communication; policy legitimacy; agenda setting; sentiment analysis

INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is a public policy designed to improve the quality of children's nutrition and strengthen human resource development. This program has social, economic, and political dimensions because it involves large budget allocations and cross-sectoral

implementation. In practice, MBG is not only positioned as a public health intervention, but also as a strategic policy instrument of the state. Therefore, its implementation is inseparable from public supervision and response, especially in the digital space.

The development of social media has expanded the space for political participation and allowed citizens to be actively involved in policy debates ^(1,2). In this context, online discourse contributes to shaping the public agenda through a digital agenda-setting mechanism ⁽³⁾. Interaction, debate, and content production on social media have the potential to influence public perception of the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of a policy. However, public opinion in the digital space does not necessarily represent the views of society at large, as the algorithmic architecture of platforms tends to reinforce fragmentation and form echo chambers ^(4,5). This condition has the potential to trigger affective polarization in policy debates ⁽⁶⁾.

Since its announcement and implementation, MBG has become a topic of widespread discussion on social media. Criticism of the effectiveness, transparency of the budget, distribution mechanisms, and the potential for politicization of policies is growing rapidly. This dynamic shows that social media functions as a digital public sphere where people assess and respond to state policies ^(7,8)(7). In the Indonesian context, discussions about MBG on social media are inseparable from the dissemination of various information, including hoaxes that have the potential to strengthen negative public sentiment towards the program ⁽⁹⁾. In addition, visual representations and narratives circulating in the digital space also play a role in shaping public perception of policy legitimacy ⁽¹⁰⁾. Thus, social media is not only a space for the expression of public opinion, but also an arena for the formation of social meaning and the legitimacy of government policies. Although public opinion about MBG on social media seems dominant and critical,

the government continues to implement the program. This condition shows that there is a tension between the dynamics of digital opinion and the formal policy-making process. Despite the growing body of research examining the relationship between social media communication and public opinion formation, empirical studies that specifically analyze the dynamics of digital public opinion in relation to policy legitimacy remain relatively limited. Most previous studies have primarily focused on the role of social media in political participation and agenda-setting processes ^(1,3), while other studies emphasize the role of algorithmic structures in shaping opinion polarization within digital communication networks ^(5,6). However, relatively few studies integrate these perspectives within a single analytical framework that connects digital agenda-setting, public opinion sentiment, and policy legitimacy in the context of a specific public policy program. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its attempt to integrate the dynamics of digital public opinion with the analysis of policy legitimacy in the context of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia. By combining digital agenda-setting theory, sentiment analysis, and the concept of opinion polarization, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how social media communication shapes public perceptions of policy legitimacy. Empirically, this research contributes new evidence regarding the interaction between digital public opinion and the policy-making process within contemporary digital communication environments.

This study aims to analyze the trends of digital public opinion and the development of public discourse in the digital space related to the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) and examine its implications on the construction of policy legitimacy and its relationship with the formal policy-making process. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the study of digital political communication by integrating the

digital perspective of agenda setting, algorithmic polarization, and policy legitimacy in one analytical framework. Empirically, this study provides data-driven evidence on the relationship between digital public opinion and public policy dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Opinion in the Context of Digital Communication

Public opinion is a fundamental concept in the study of political communication and public policy. In the classical perspective, public opinion is understood as the aggregation of public attitudes, views, and evaluations of issues that develop in the public space ⁽¹¹⁾. In a democratic system, public opinion has an important role as a control mechanism for the government because it allows the public to assess and respond to policies produced by political institutions ⁽¹²⁾.

The development of digital communication technology has significantly changed the way public opinion is formed and disseminated. If in the era of conventional mass media, public opinion is mostly formed through one-way communication mechanisms from the media to the public, then in the digital era, public opinion is increasingly formed through horizontal interaction between social media users ⁽¹³⁾. Social media provides space for people to not only consume information but also produce and disseminate opinions on various social and political issues.

A number of studies show that social media plays an important role in increasing political participation and citizen involvement in public policy issues ^(1,2). Through digital platforms, people can express their views on government policies, participate in public debates, and build communication networks that strengthen the dissemination of certain opinions. In this context, the concept of digital public opinion emerges, namely the expression of public attitudes and evaluations mediated by digital communication platforms.

Digital public opinion has different characteristics from public opinion in conventional media. One of the main characteristics is the very high speed of information dissemination as well as the ability of users to build a wide communication network in a short time ⁽¹⁴⁾. In addition, social media also allows the emergence of various alternative narratives that are not always accommodated in the mainstream media. This condition makes the dynamics of public opinion more complex and is often influenced by various actors in the digital ecosystem.

Social Media as a Public Policy Communication Arena

Social media has developed into one of the main arenas in public policy communication. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram not only serve as a means of social interaction, but also as a space for the exchange of information and opinions regarding government policies ⁽¹⁵⁾. Through social media, people can easily express their views on certain policies as well as participate in broader public debates. In the perspective of political communication, social media is often understood as a form of digital public space that allows people to engage in political discussions in a more open and participatory manner ⁽¹⁶⁾. The existence of this digital public space expands opportunities for the public to express their aspirations and criticism of government policies. However, a number of studies show that the dynamics of communication on social media do not always result in an ideal space for public deliberation. The algorithmic structure of digital platforms often prioritizes content that is capable of generating high interactions, such as content that is emotional or controversial ⁽¹⁷⁾. As a result, conversations about public policy on social media are often dominated by polaristic narratives.

In addition, the dissemination of information that is not adequately verified can also affect public perception of

government policies. Research on digital misinformation shows that false or misleading information can quickly spread through digital communication networks and influence public opinion ⁽¹⁸⁾. In the Indonesian context, hoax issues related to public policy can also strengthen negative public sentiments towards government programs ⁽⁹⁾. In addition, the visual representation and digital narrative that develops on social media can also affect the perception of policy legitimacy in the eyes of the public ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Digital Agenda-Setting in Policy Communication

Agenda setting theory explains that the media has the ability to influence what issues are considered important by society ⁽¹⁹⁾. In this perspective, the media does not directly determine what the public should think, but the media plays a role in determining what issues are considered relevant for the public to pay attention to.

In the digital media ecosystem, this concept has developed into a digital agenda-setting, where the formation of the issue agenda is not only determined by media institutions, but also by interactions between social media users, platform algorithms, and political actors involved in digital conversations ⁽²⁰⁾. In this context, social media can serve as a space where various actors compete to shape public attention to a particular issue.

Research shows that conversations on social media can influence the public agenda by increasing the visibility of certain issues in the digital communication space ⁽³⁾. Topics that get high attention on social media are often issues that are considered important by the community. Therefore, the dynamics of communication on social media can contribute to the formation of public agendas regarding various government policies.

Polarization of Opinion and the Echo Chamber in Social Media

One of the important phenomena in digital communication is the increasing polarization of opinions on social media. Opinion polarization refers to a condition when society is divided into groups that have very different views on an issue ⁽²¹⁾. In the context of social media, the polarization of opinion is often amplified by algorithmic mechanisms that tend to display content that matches user preferences. This phenomenon is often associated with the concept of echo chambers, which are situations when individuals are exposed to more information that is in line with their own views thus reinforcing beliefs that they already have before ⁽⁴⁾. Other research shows that the structure of communication networks in social media can reinforce information fragmentation and deepen the polarization of opinion in society ⁽⁵⁾.

Polarization of opinions on social media not only affects the dynamics of political communication, but can also affect public perception of government policies. In highly polarized situations, debates about public policy often develop into conflicts of opinion that are both emotional and affective ⁽⁶⁾. This can strengthen support and rejection of certain policies without going through a balanced deliberation process.

Digital Public Opinion and Policy Legitimacy

The relationship between public opinion and public policy is one of the important issues in political and policy studies. Normatively, public opinion is often considered a factor that can influence the government's policy-making process. However, a number of studies show that the relationship between public opinion and policy is not always straightforward.

Some research shows that political institutions often have a certain degree of autonomy in the policy-making process, so policies do not always change directly in response to public opinion ⁽²²⁾. In addition, other research shows that governments often

consider various other factors, such as political interests, institutional capacity, and economic dynamics in determining policy direction ⁽²³⁾.

In the context of digital communication, the public opinion that develops on social media does not necessarily represent public opinion at large. The algorithmic structure of digital platforms tends to reinforce information fragmentation so that opinions that seem dominant on social media do not necessarily reflect the views of society as a whole ⁽⁵⁾. Therefore, it is important to understand how digital public opinion is formed and how it interacts with formal policy-making processes.

Conceptual Model of Research

Based on the literature on digital public opinion, digital agenda-setting, and opinion polarization in social media environments, this study develops a conceptual model that explains the relationship between social

media communication dynamics and the construction of policy legitimacy. Social media communication is positioned as the primary driver that triggers the emergence of digital agenda-setting regarding the MBG program. As public attention toward the issue increases, various expressions of public opinion emerge in the form of positive, negative, or neutral sentiments.

Within digital communication ecosystems, algorithmic filtering and networked interactions may amplify differences in opinion, leading to opinion polarization among users. This polarization may subsequently influence how the public evaluates the legitimacy of government policies. Therefore, the proposed model highlights the sequential relationship between social media communication, digital agenda-setting, public opinion sentiment, opinion polarization, and policy legitimacy perception.

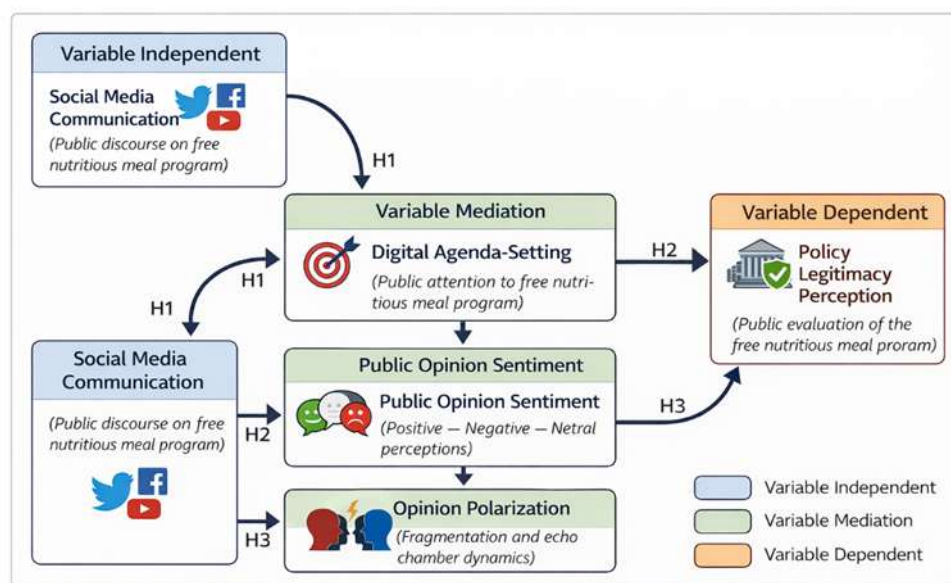


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Digital Public Opinion Dynamics on Policy Legitimacy

This conceptual model illustrates the relationship between social media communication, digital agenda-setting, public opinion sentiment, polarization of opinion, and the perception of policy legitimacy in the context of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. In this model, communication on

social media is positioned as an independent variable that reflects the public conversation regarding the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). User interaction in digital platforms allows policy issues to gain widespread attention so that they form digital agenda-settings, which is the process when an issue becomes a major topic in the public

conversation. Digital agenda-settings then influence the formation of public opinion sentiment, which represents the tendency of public attitudes towards MBG policies in the form of positive, negative, or neutral sentiments. In the digital communication ecosystem, the distribution of information is often influenced by platform algorithms that can reinforce information fragmentation. This condition can trigger polarization of opinion, which is a situation when public opinion is fragmented into groups that have different views on a policy. In the next stage, the polarization of opinion has the potential to affect the perception of policy legitimacy, namely how the public assesses the validity, effectiveness, and validity of government policies. Thus, this model shows that the dynamics of digital communication on social media not only reflect public opinion, but also play a role in shaping public perception of the legitimacy of a public policy. The relationship between variables is formulated in several research hypotheses as follows:

H1: Social media communication significantly influences digital agenda-setting related to the MBG program.

H2: Digital agenda-setting significantly influences public opinion sentiment regarding the MBG program.

H3: Public opinion sentiment significantly influences opinion polarization within digital discussions.

H4: Opinion polarization significantly influences public perceptions of policy legitimacy regarding the MBG program.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Research Approach

This study uses a quantitative approach with digital public opinion analysis to examine the tendency of public sentiment towards the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) on social media. The quantitative approach was chosen because this study aims to identify the patterns, distribution, and tendencies of public opinion that emerge in digital communication in a measurable and systematic manner. Quantitative analysis

allows researchers to process large amounts of digital conversation data so that they can describe the tendencies of public opinion more objectively ⁽²⁴⁾.

In the context of digital political communication, this approach is often used to examine the dynamics of public opinion that develops on social media through sentiment analysis and digital content analysis methods. This method allows researchers to identify the tendency of public attitudes, whether positive, negative, or neutral towards a government policy ⁽²⁵⁾. Thus, this approach is relevant to analyze how digital public opinion is formed in the conversation regarding the Free Nutritious Meal Program.

This research also integrates a digital communication analysis approach to understand how conversations on social media shape public perception of public policy. Within this framework, social media is understood as a communication space that allows interaction between users in shaping narratives and opinions on certain policy issues ⁽³⁾.

Population and Research Sample

The population in this study is all public conversations on social media related to the Free Nutritious Eating Program (MBG). The conversation includes various forms of digital content such as uploads, comments, and user responses that contain keywords related to the MBG program. Since the conversational population on social media is huge and constantly growing, this study used a sample of digital conversation data collected from social media platforms. The platform that is the source of research data is Twitter (X), because this platform is known as one of the public discussion spaces that is active in discussing policy and political issues ⁽²⁶⁾. In addition, Twitter has data disclosure characteristics that allow researchers to access public conversations more systematically.

The research sample is in the form of a collection of public uploads containing keywords related to the Free Nutritious

Eating Program, such as “MBG”, “free nutritious meals”, and “free eating program”. Data is collected in a specific period that is relevant to the dynamics of the program’s news, for example during the three months since the program began to become an intensely discussed public issue. The number of samples in this study was determined based on the number of uploads that were successfully collected during the observation period. To maintain the validity of the analysis, this study used a minimum of 1,000 to 3,000 public uploads as a sample of digital opinion analysis.

Sampling Techniques

The sampling technique used in this study is purposive sampling. This technique was chosen because the study only took data that was specifically related to the research topic, namely conversations about the Free Nutritious Eating Program on social media. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select data that is most relevant to the research objectives so that it can produce a more focused analysis on the dynamics of developing public opinion ⁽²⁷⁾. In this study, the sample selection criteria include uploads that contain keywords related to the Free Nutritious Eating Program, uploads that come from public accounts so that they can be analyzed academically, and uploads that are published within the research time period. Using this sampling technique, the analyzed data is expected to represent the dynamics of public conversations about the Free Nutritious Meal Program on social media.

Data Types and Sources

This study uses secondary data in the form of digital communication data obtained from social media platforms. The data is in the form of publicly uploaded text that discusses the Free Nutritious Meal Program. In general, the data used in this study consists of two types, including digital text data, namely social media users’ uploads, comments, and responses related to the MBG program and metadata data, which is

additional information that accompanies digital uploads such as publication date, number of interactions (likes, retweets, or comments), and user accounts. The data was used to analyze public sentiment trends and identify communication patterns that develop in digital conversations about the MBG program.

Data Collection Techniques

The research data was collected using web scraping techniques or digital data retrieval through social media data collection software. This technique allows researchers to systematically collect a large number of digital conversations based on specific keywords. The data collection process is carried out through the following stages: (1) Determination of research keywords, such as “MBG,” “free nutritious meals,” and “free eating programs,” (2) Retrieval of digital conversation data from social media platforms using data collection software; (3) Data cleaning to remove irrelevant data, duplicate uploads, and content that is not related to the research topic; (4) Text normalization, which is the process of simplifying digital text by removing punctuation, links, or symbols that are not needed in the analysis process. This stage is carried out to ensure that the data used in the analysis is of adequate quality and relevant to the research objectives.

Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis in this study used a sentiment analysis method to identify the tendency of public opinion towards the Free Nutritious Meal Program on social media. Sentiment analysis is a text analysis method used to identify attitudes or emotions contained in a digital text, whether positive, negative, or neutral ^(24,25). In this study, sentiment analysis was carried out through several stages: (1) Classification of text sentiment based on positive, negative, and neutral categories; (2) Calculation of sentiment frequency to determine the distribution of public opinion on the MBG program; and (3) Analyze digital

conversation trends to see the development of public sentiment in the research period. In addition to sentiment analysis, this study also uses digital content analysis to identify key themes that emerge in the public conversation regarding the MBG program. Content analysis is carried out by grouping digital uploads based on issues or topics that often appear in public conversations. The use of this method of analysis makes it possible to understand not only the tendency of public opinion towards the MBG program, but also the main narratives and issues that are developing in digital communication regarding the policy.

To ensure the validity of the research, the data collected through social media first goes through a cleaning and verification process so that only data relevant to the research topic is used in the analysis. In addition, the sentiment classification process is carried out using a systematic text analysis approach to minimize interpretation bias. The reliability of the analysis is also maintained by using consistent data analysis procedures and documenting all stages of data processing so that research can be replicated in similar contexts.

RESULT

Digital Conversation Data Description

The research data was obtained from public conversations on social media discussing the Free Nutritious Eating Program (MBG). Data collection was done using keywords such as “MBG”, “free nutritious meals”, and “free eating programmes”. After going through the data cleaning process, 2,500 public uploads relevant to the research topic were obtained. The temporal distribution of the data indicates that discussions regarding the MBG program increased significantly during periods when the program became a major issue in media reporting and political discourse. This pattern suggests that digital conversations about public policy tend to intensify when media coverage and political actors highlight the issue in the public sphere.

In addition to expressing opinions regarding the benefits of the program, many posts also contained criticism concerning policy effectiveness, budget allocation, and implementation mechanisms. These findings indicate that social media functions as a dynamic communication space where citizens evaluate and debate government policies.

H1: Social Media Communication Influences Digital Agenda-Setting

The first hypothesis examines whether communication on social media contributes to the formation of digital agenda-setting related to the MBG program. The analysis of digital conversation trends indicates that the frequency of posts discussing MBG increased significantly during periods when the issue received high media exposure and political attention. The intensity of public conversations demonstrates that social media interactions play an important role in increasing the visibility of the MBG issue in the digital public sphere.

These findings suggest that social media communication contributes to shaping the public agenda regarding the MBG program. When users actively discuss policy-related issues, these conversations can elevate the salience of the issue within the digital communication environment. Therefore, the results provide empirical support for Hypothesis 1, indicating that social media communication significantly influences digital agenda-setting related to the MBG program.

H2: Digital Agenda-Setting Influences Public Opinion Sentiment

The second hypothesis examines whether digital agenda-setting influences the formation of public opinion sentiment regarding the MBG program. Sentiment analysis was conducted to identify the tendency of public attitudes expressed in social media posts. Each post was classified into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral sentiment.

Table 1. Distribution of Public Opinion Sentiment on the MBG Program

Sentiment Categories	Number of Uploads	Percentage
Positive	850	34%
Negatives	1.050	42%
Neutral	600	24%
Total	2.500	100%

The results indicate that negative sentiment dominates digital conversations, accounting for 42% of the total posts. These negative opinions generally focus on concerns regarding program effectiveness, budget transparency, and policy sustainability. Positive sentiment accounts for 34% of posts and mainly reflects support for the program's objectives in improving children's nutritional status and assisting low-income communities. Meanwhile, neutral sentiment accounts for 24% of posts and primarily consists of informational content related to program implementation. The dominance of critical sentiment suggests that increased visibility of the MBG issue in digital conversations

contributes to shaping public opinion toward evaluative and critical perspectives. Thus, the findings support Hypothesis 2, indicating that digital agenda-setting influences the formation of public opinion sentiment regarding the MBG program.

H3: Public Opinion Sentiment Influences Opinion Polarization

The third hypothesis examines whether variations in public opinion sentiment contribute to the polarization of opinions in digital discussions. Content analysis of social media posts revealed several dominant themes in public conversations related to the MBG program.

Table 2. Themes of Public Conversation on MBG Programs

Conversation Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Program effectiveness	620	24.8%
Criticism of the budget	540	21.6%
Program support	510	20.4%
Political issues and campaigns	430	17.2%
Program implementation information	400	16%
Total	2.500	100%

The presence of contrasting themes such as program support and budget criticism indicates the existence of divergent viewpoints within digital discussions. Posts supporting the MBG program emphasize its potential benefits in improving children's nutritional status, while critical posts highlight concerns regarding budget allocation, implementation efficiency, and political motivations behind the program. These contrasting narratives suggest that public opinion sentiment contributes to the emergence of opinion polarization, where users are divided into groups with differing attitudes toward the policy. Therefore, the findings provide support for Hypothesis 3,

indicating that public opinion sentiment significantly influences opinion polarization in digital discussions.

H4: Opinion Polarization Influences Perceptions of Policy Legitimacy

The fourth hypothesis examines whether opinion polarization affects public perceptions of policy legitimacy. The analysis of digital conversations indicates that polarized opinions often shape how users evaluate the legitimacy of the MBG program. Posts expressing strong criticism frequently question the transparency of the policy, the efficiency of budget allocation, and the political motivations behind the

program. In contrast, supportive posts emphasize the program's potential social benefits and its contribution to improving children's health and welfare. This divergence in narratives demonstrates that the polarization of public opinion influences how individuals interpret and assess the legitimacy of government policies. Highly polarized discussions tend to produce competing interpretations regarding the validity and effectiveness of the MBG program. Therefore, the findings support Hypothesis 4, indicating that opinion polarization influences public perceptions of policy legitimacy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several important insights regarding the dynamics of digital public opinion surrounding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia. Overall, the results demonstrate that social media communication plays a significant role in shaping digital conversations, public opinion sentiment, and the perception of policy legitimacy. These findings highlight the complex relationship between digital communication environments and public policy processes in contemporary societies.

Social Media Communication and Digital Agenda-Setting

The results support the first hypothesis (H1), indicating that social media communication significantly contributes to the formation of digital agenda-setting related to the MBG program. The analysis shows that the intensity of online conversations increased during periods when the program became a major topic in media coverage and political discourse. This finding suggests that social media interactions play an important role in amplifying the visibility of policy issues in the digital public sphere.

This finding is consistent with the digital agenda-setting perspective, which argues that social media platforms can shape the salience of issues in public discourse

through user-generated content and networked interactions ^(3,20). Unlike traditional media agenda-setting where media institutions primarily determine issue prominence, digital agenda-setting involves multiple actors including citizens, political elites, and algorithmic systems that influence the visibility of information in online networks ⁽⁷⁾.

In this context, the MBG program became a prominent issue in digital conversations as users actively shared opinions, news reports, and political commentary related to the program. The rapid spread of these discussions reflects the role of social media as a digital public sphere where policy issues can gain public attention in a relatively short time ^(13,14).

Digital Agenda-Setting and Public Opinion Sentiment

The findings also support the second hypothesis (H2), indicating that digital agenda-setting influences the formation of public opinion sentiment regarding the MBG program. The sentiment analysis results show that negative sentiment dominates digital conversations, accounting for 42% of all analyzed posts. These negative sentiments are primarily associated with concerns about policy effectiveness, transparency of budget allocation, and implementation challenges.

The dominance of critical sentiment in digital conversations can be explained by the dynamics of online communication environments. Previous studies suggest that emotionally charged or controversial issues tend to receive higher engagement and visibility on social media platforms, which may amplify critical narratives regarding government policies ^(16,18). In addition, algorithmic recommendation systems tend to prioritize content that generates strong reactions, thereby reinforcing the spread of evaluative and critical opinions in digital discussions ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Nevertheless, the presence of positive sentiment in digital conversations indicates that the MBG program also receives

considerable public support. Supportive narratives generally highlight the program's potential benefits for improving children's nutritional status and addressing social welfare issues. These findings demonstrate that digital agenda-setting not only increases the visibility of a policy issue but also influences how the issue is interpreted and evaluated by the public.

Public Opinion Sentiment and Opinion Polarization

The findings further support the third hypothesis (H3), indicating that variations in public opinion sentiment contribute to the emergence of opinion polarization in digital discussions. The content analysis results reveal contrasting narratives in public conversations, including strong support for the MBG program as well as criticism of its budget allocation and implementation mechanisms.

Such contrasting narratives reflect the broader phenomenon of opinion polarization that frequently occurs in digital communication environments. Previous studies suggest that algorithmic filtering and selective exposure in social media platforms can lead to the formation of echo chambers where users are more likely to encounter information that aligns with their existing beliefs ^(4,5). As a result, discussions about public policy often become fragmented into competing interpretive communities.

In the context of the MBG program, polarization is reflected in the emergence of competing narratives regarding the policy's benefits and potential drawbacks. While some users emphasize the program's social value and welfare benefits, others focus on concerns related to fiscal sustainability and political motivations. These dynamics illustrate how digital communication networks can intensify differences in opinion among citizens.

Opinion Polarization and Policy Legitimacy

The findings also support the fourth hypothesis (H4), indicating that opinion

polarization influences public perceptions of policy legitimacy. The analysis shows that polarized opinions often shape how users interpret the credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy of the MBG program.

Users expressing negative sentiment frequently question the transparency and accountability of the policy, while supportive users highlight the program's potential benefits for improving children's nutritional welfare. These contrasting narratives demonstrate that policy legitimacy is not only determined by policy outcomes but also by the public narratives that develop within the communication environment ⁽²²⁾.

However, the results of this study also indicate that the presence of critical digital discourse does not necessarily lead to immediate policy change. Despite the dominance of critical sentiment in online discussions, the government continues to implement the MBG program. This observation supports previous research suggesting that policy-making processes are embedded within institutional structures that may not always respond directly to digital public opinion ^(12,23).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on digital political communication by integrating digital agenda-setting, public opinion sentiment, and opinion polarization into a single analytical framework that explains the relationship between digital communication and policy legitimacy. While previous studies often examine these concepts separately, this research demonstrates how they interact within digital communication environments to shape public evaluations of government policies.

Empirically, the findings provide new insights into the dynamics of digital public opinion regarding public policy in Indonesia. The results highlight the role of social media as an increasingly influential communication space where citizens

construct narratives and evaluate the legitimacy of government policies⁽⁸⁾.

These findings also suggest that governments need to pay greater attention to digital communication dynamics when implementing public policies. Monitoring public sentiment in digital environments may help policymakers better understand public concerns and improve policy communication strategies in order to strengthen public trust and policy legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the dynamics of digital public opinion regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia and examines its implications for the construction of policy legitimacy. The findings show that social media communication plays an important role in shaping digital conversations about the MBG program and contributes to the formation of digital agenda-setting in the online public sphere. The intensity of discussions on social media indicates that the MBG program has become a prominent policy issue that attracts significant public attention in digital communication environments.

The sentiment analysis results reveal that public opinion expressed in social media discussions tends to be dominated by critical sentiment related to policy effectiveness, transparency of budget allocation, and program implementation mechanisms. However, supportive opinions also emerge, particularly those emphasizing the program's potential benefits in improving children's nutritional status and addressing social welfare issues. These findings indicate that digital conversations about the MBG program are characterized by diverse viewpoints that reflect both public support and criticism.

Furthermore, the study finds that variations in public opinion sentiment contribute to the emergence of opinion polarization in digital discussions. The presence of competing narratives regarding the MBG program

illustrates how social media communication networks can amplify differences in public interpretation of government policies. Such polarization influences how citizens evaluate the legitimacy of the policy, as different groups interpret the policy's effectiveness and credibility in different ways.

Despite the dominance of critical sentiment in digital discussions, the findings also indicate that the influence of digital public opinion on policy decisions remains limited. The government continues to implement the MBG program, suggesting that policy-making processes are embedded within institutional and political structures that operate beyond the immediate dynamics of digital discourse. Therefore, digital public opinion should be understood not only as a reflection of societal attitudes but also as a communication process that interacts with broader political and institutional contexts.

Although this study provides important insights into the relationship between digital public opinion and policy legitimacy, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis relies on data collected from a single social media platform, which may not fully represent the diversity of digital public discourse. In addition, the sentiment analysis approach used in this study captures general patterns of opinion but may not fully reflect the complexity of public narratives expressed in online conversations.

Future research is recommended to incorporate data from multiple social media platforms and apply more advanced analytical methods such as social network analysis or discourse analysis. Such approaches may provide a deeper understanding of how digital communication networks influence the formation of public opinion and the legitimacy of government policies in the digital era.

Declaration by Authors

Acknowledgement: None

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: No conflicts of interest declared.

REFERENCES

1. Boulianne S. Twenty Years of Digital Media Effects on Civic and Political Participation. *Communic Res.* 2020 Oct;47(7):947–66.
2. Vaccari C, Valeriani A. Outside the bubble: Social media and political participation in Western democracies. Oxford University Press; 2021.
3. Gilardi F, Gessler T, Kubli M, Müller S. Social Media and Political Agenda Setting. *Polit Commun.* 2022 Jan;39(1):39–60.
4. Bossetta M. The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 U.S. Election. *Journal Mass Commun Q.* 2018 Jun;95(2):471–96.
5. Cinelli M, De Francisci Morales G, Galeazzi A, Quattrociocchi W, Starnini M. The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proc Natl Acad Sci.* 2021 Mar;118(9).
6. Törnberg P. How digital media drive affective polarization through partisan sorting. *Proc Natl Acad Sci.* 2022 Oct;119(42).
7. Eisenegger M, Schäfer MS. Editorial: Reconceptualizing public sphere(s) in the digital age? On the role and future of public sphere theory. *Commun Theory.* 2023 Jul;33(2–3):61–9.
8. Persily N, Tucker JA, Tucker JA. Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform. Cambridge University Press; 2020.
9. Swastiningsih S, Handoko GR, Yulianto H. Utilization of Social Media by Government Institutions to Enhance Digital Public Participation in Addressing the Free Nutritious Food (MBG) Hoax Issue. *SOSIOEDUKASI J Ilm ILMU Pendidik DAN Sos.* 2025;
10. J. S. Dari Narasi Visual ke Legitimasi Kebijakan: Persepsi Publik terhadap Program Makan Siang Gratis di Media Sosial. *RIGGS J Artif Intell Digit Bus.* 2025 Oct;4(3):7586–96.
11. Habermas J. Theory and practice. Beacon Press; 1988.
12. Page BI, Shapiro RY. The rational public: Fifty years of trends in Americans' policy preferences. University of Chicago Press; 2010.
13. Castells M. Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press; 2012.
14. Shirky C. The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs January/February.* *Foreign Aff.* 2011;90(1):28–41.
15. Boyd DM, Ellison NB. Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *J Comput Commun.* 2007 Oct;13(1):210–30.
16. Papacharissi Z. Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics. Oxford University Press; 2015.
17. Tufekci Z. Algorithmic harms beyond Facebook and Google: Emergent challenges of computational agency. *Color Technol Law J.* 2015;13.
18. Allcott H, Gentzkow M. Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *J Econ Perspect.* 2017 May;31(2):211–36.
19. McCombs ME, Shaw DL. The agenda-setting function of mass media 2. *Agenda Setting J.* 2017 Sep;1(2):105–16.
20. Meraz S. Using Time Series Analysis to Measure Intermedia Agenda-Setting Influence in Traditional Media and Political Blog Networks. *Journal Mass Commun Q.* 2011 Mar;88(1):176–94.

21. Crowell E. Erin Crowell, Sustain, Cass R. #republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media . Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017; 262 pp. South Commun J. 2018 May;83(3):207–8.
22. Grossman E. Media and Policy Making in the Digital Age. *Annu Rev Polit Sci.* 2022;25.
23. Zhuravskaya E, Petrova M, Enikolopov R. Political Effects of the Internet and Social Media. *Annu Rev Econom.* 2020 Aug;12(1):415–38.
24. Liu B. Sentiment analysis and opinion mining. *aclanthology.org*; 2012.
25. Pang B, Lee L. Opinion mining and sentiment analysis. Now Publishers Inc; 2008.
26. Kwak H, Lee C, Park H, Moon S. What is Twitter, a social network or a news media? In *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web.* ACM, New York, NY, USA. 2010;
27. Etikan I, Musa SA, Alkassim RS. Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *Am J Theor Appl Stat.* 2016;5(1):1–4.

How to cite this article: Mukhammad Sahlan. Digital public opinion dynamics and policy legitimacy: social media discourse on the free nutritious meal program (MBG) in Indonesia. *International Journal of Research and Review.* 2026; 13(5):161-174. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20260720>
