

Digital Public Relations Analysis: The Use of Influencers in Socializing The Positive Narrative of Free Nutritious Meals on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of Web 2.0 has transformed government communication from conventional top-down announcements into dynamic, interactive digital spaces. This study aims to analyze the strategic implementation of digital public relations by examining the use of social media influencers to socialize the positive narrative of the "Free Nutritious Meals" (Makan Bergizi Gratis) program. In the hyper-connected era, institutional transparency and public trust are highly dependent on how massive social policies are framed amidst digital noise and political polarization. A qualitative content analysis combined with digital ethnography was deployed to observe narrative construction, audience engagement metrics, and sentiment trends across major social media platforms. The empirical findings reveal that influencers act as crucial cultural mediators who translate complex bureaucratic policy criteria into relatable, authentic everyday language. This strategy significantly elevates public policy awareness and fosters high engagement among younger demographics. However, the study identifies a structural challenge regarding narrative saturation and algorithmic skepticism, where audiences occasionally question the authenticity of highly coordinated campaigns. These results contribute significant theoretical insights to the field of political public relations and source credibility theory within digital ecosystems. Pragmatically, this study offers tactical frameworks for institutional communication officers to balance high-reach influencer partnerships with long-term narrative authenticity and policy accountability to ensure sustainable citizen support.

Keywords: *Digital Public Relations, Influencers, Policy Framing, Free Nutritious Meals, Social Media.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary public communication landscape has undergone a radical techno-social shift with the massive penetration of the internet and social media into people's daily lives. Government public relations, which previously relied heavily on conventional, one-way broadcast media, is now required to mutate completely into a form of *digital public relations* that is interactive, tactical, and real-time. In this era of the networked society, public institutions no longer hold absolute control over the flow of information because every citizen now has the cognitive capacity and digital infrastructure to produce, disseminate, and criticize government policy narratives

(Castells, 2013). This condition creates new challenges in the form of a hyper - *connected* information environment, where messages of national strategic programs are often buried by the din of commercial entertainment content or even distorted by misinformation narratives circulating wildly in cyberspace. According to Smith and Johnson (2024), modern public organizations must be able to design *digital public relations* strategies that are not only informative but also have high visual appeal and emotional relevance to win the battle for public attention on social media.

One of the most massive and national-scale social policy programs currently being intensively promoted by the Indonesian government is the Free *Nutritious Meals* program. As a long-term strategic nutrition intervention policy targeting school children and vulnerable groups, this program carries a vital mission to reduce *stunting* rates while preparing the foundation for quality human resources towards the era of Indonesia Emas. However, the launch of such a mega-scale program is always accompanied by complex logistics, budgets, and public opinion dynamics that are prone to being drawn into a vortex of political polarization and social skepticism. Referring to framing theory, public acceptance of a state policy is determined not only by the objective quality of the program itself, but also by how information about the program is packaged, framed, and distributed to the wider public (Entman, 1993). If government *public relations* channels fail to transparently communicate the positive narrative and fundamental urgency of the Free Nutritious Meals program, the public opinion space will easily be filled with negative sentiment and wild speculation that can delegitimize the program's sustainability at the grassroots level.

Facing this complexity of communication, the use of social media *influencers* has emerged as an increasingly dominant tactical instrument in government agencies' *digital public relations strategies*. *Influencers* are no longer merely commercial figures marketing lifestyle products, but have evolved into political and social actors with the cultural authority to direct digital public opinion through their social capital and loyal *follower base*. Based on *source credibility theory*, messages delivered by individuals perceived as having a personal closeness, shared identity, and high authenticity tend to be more easily accepted and internalized by audiences than official press releases from rigid bureaucratic institutions (Hovland et al., 1953). By partnering with *influencers* from various clusters from health practitioners and celebrity chefs to family lifestyle content creators government *digital public relations* practitioners are attempting to de-bureaucratize policy language. This step is crucial for transforming cold legal documents into warm, humanistic narratives about the importance of balanced nutrition for the future of the nation's children (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Exploring the role of *influencers* in promoting the positive narrative of Free Nutritious Meals is becoming increasingly crucial given the widening digital demographic gap in information consumption today. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, have cut their reliance on traditional news media and shifted their information-seeking activities entirely to platforms like TikTok,

Instagram, and YouTube. On these short-video-based platforms, instructive and formal information delivered by government public relations is often ignored or subjected to detrimental algorithmic selection. According to a study by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media platforms operate on the basis of engagement economics, where content that sparks emotional interaction and organic conversation is prioritized by algorithmic systems for viral distribution. Through the creation of creative content in the form of live reviews of nutritious food menus, documentation of food distribution to remote schools, and educational videos on healthy cooking, *influencers* have successfully bridged this communication gap by presenting public information in an entertaining format (*infotainment*).

However, the integration of *influencers* into government *digital public relations* campaigns has not escaped intense academic debate and has given rise to empirical contradictions in the political communication literature. On the one hand, the use of *influencers* has proven highly effective in expanding the reach of policy messages and raising public awareness instantly within hours (Freberg et al., 2011). However, on the other hand, there has been strong criticism regarding the issue of authenticity and the potential for public cynicism known as *digital astroturfing*, where the public identifies influencers' endorsements as insincere paid propaganda from the authorities. When audiences realize that the positive narrative conveyed by an influencer is based on commercial contracts, this can trigger a boomerang effect that actually damages the credibility of the government program itself and massively reduces public trust (Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2020). This contradictory gap is the basis for the importance of this research, in order to dissect how the ethical boundaries, content curation strategies, and relationship management between public relations practitioners and *influencers* so that the socialization of social programs does not lose its authentic spirit.

Conceptually, this research aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the macro and micro structures of the Free Nutritious Meal narrative framing strategies employed by *influencers* on social media. The study focuses not only on superficial quantitative metrics such as the number of *likes*, *shares*, or *views*, but also on a qualitative analysis of how public sentiment is formed through the comments section and how digital resistance is negotiated by influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This phenomenon is particularly interesting because the Free Nutritious Meal program involves a highly sensitive cross-section of issues, ranging from children's health, the economic inclusiveness of local farmers as raw material suppliers, to the transparency of the state budget. Through a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of *digital public relations*, this study seeks to outline how the collaboration between sophisticated digital media management and the power of social influence can be directed to build a solid, objective, and supportive public understanding.

Ultimately, the significance of this scientific article is expected to provide a valuable theoretical contribution to the development of government public

communication literature in the post-truth era, where emotions often influence public opinion more strongly than statistical facts. Public authorities can no longer hide behind the walls of formal regulations, but must actively enter the digital arena to manage policy reputations in a humanistic and persuasive manner (Castells, 2013). Practically, the results of the analysis in this study are designed to be able to present a strategic blueprint *for* policymakers and public relations practitioners of government agencies in curating, directing, and evaluating partnerships with *influencers*. This approach is important so that the dissemination of positive narratives of national strategic programs such as Free Nutritious Meals can be carried out accountably, ethically, and able to mobilize genuine public participation for the success of the national development agenda in a sustainable manner.

REASERCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive content analysis *combined* with a digital ethnography approach. This approach is applied to deeply dissect how the positive narrative construction of the "Free Nutritious Meal" program is produced by *influencers* and how this narrative is negotiated by social media audiences. Digital field exploration was conducted during the active campaign intervention period from January to May 2026. The object of this study focuses on digital content in the form of short videos, captions, and textual interactions in the comment section on three major social media platforms with the largest penetration of young audiences in Indonesia, namely TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

The sampling technique used a *purposive sampling* method to determine the *influencer* clusters that became the research analysis units. The criteria for determining the *influencer* sample were based on three main indicators: having a minimum follower base of 100,000 users, actively uploading content related to the socialization of the Free Nutritious Meal program in the research operational timeline, and representing a variety of professional backgrounds (health practitioners/nutritionists, celebrity chefs/food vloggers, and *parenting/family lifestyle* clusters). The primary data collection process was carried out through digital documentation techniques in the form of screenshots *and* meta text copying (*data scraping*) of the main content narrative text as well as a minimum of 500 organic comments per content that had the highest *engagement rate*.

The data analysis process was carried out systematically referring to Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the initial stage, the research team conducted conceptual coding *to* group forms of narrative framing (such as health education frames, local economic impact frames, and logistics transparency frames). Next, a qualitative sentiment analysis was conducted on audience responses to map clusters of emotional acceptance (positive, neutral, or skepticism/resistance sentiment). To maintain the validity and credibility of the research data, data source

triangulation techniques were used by comparing communication patterns across social media platforms and conducting focus group discussions (*peer debriefing*) among digital public communication researchers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results of Coding Content Characteristics and *Influencer Typology*

Based on the results of data collection and content analysis *conducted* on the *digital public relations* activities of the Free Nutritious Meal program from January to May 2026, the research team successfully identified the structure of narrative dissemination based on influencer clustering. A total of 120 main content from various social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts) that met the *purposive sampling* criteria were grouped into three main *influencer* typologies. The mapping results showed that each cluster had a different narrative *framing* approach and level of audience engagement (*engagement rate*).

In general, content produced by *influencers* is able to overcome the limitations of social media algorithms by generating massive total impression reach. However, the effectiveness of converting bureaucratic narratives into genuine public acceptance depends heavily on the authenticity of each influencer’s delivery (Hair et al., 2022). To provide a comprehensive structural overview of the data distribution and digital performance metrics of this outreach activity, a summary of the coding results is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Content Characteristics Matrix and Engagement Metrics *Based on Influencer Typology*

Influence r Typology	Narrativ e Framing Focus	Domina nt Platfor m	Average Engageme nt Rate (%)	Dominant Sentiment in the Comment s Column	Key Communicat ion Challenges
Health & Nutrition ist Cluster	Educatio n on nutrition al content, <i>stunting</i> preventi on, and food menu hygiene.	Instagra m / YouTub e	6.8%	Positive (Informati ve and Appreciati ve)	The language is too scientific; the audience criticizes the reality of the portion on the ground.
Food Vlogger	The visual aesthetic	TikTok / Instagra m	11.4%	Positive- Neutral (Entertain	The issue <i>of astroturfing</i> ; it is

& Chef Cluster	s of food, the taste, the large-scale cooking process (healthy <i>mukbang</i>).			ed but Skeptical)	considered to be overly beautifying the menu (<i>overselling</i>).
Parentin g & Lifestyle Cluster	Real impact on family economy , children' s happines s, and easing of domestic burdens.	TikTok	9.2%	Positive (Very Emotional & Relatable)	Easily drawn into the realm of political polarization by organic commentator s.

Results of Sentiment Analysis and Audience Engagement Effects

Advanced content analysis was conducted by exploring qualitative metrics in the comments section to gauge how the positive narratives released by influencers *were* negotiated by the public. Of the 60,000 organic comments filtered using *data scraping* techniques, a dynamic polarization of responses was found. In the initial phase of the campaign (January-February 2026), public skepticism was at its highest (approximately 42% of comments were cynical). This skepticism centered on concerns about budget misuse, inequitable distribution, and the quality of food ingredients supplied by local vendors (Henseler et al., 2015).

However, midway through the observation period (March-May 2026), sentiment shifted toward a more positive and accepting direction. Content interventions from the *parenting* cluster, documenting the honest expressions of schoolchildren receiving nutritious food boxes, proved effective in reducing political tensions in the comments section. Positive sentiment surged to 58% by the end of May 2026. The success of this shift in opinion confirms that de-bureaucratizing messages through humanistic visual representations can transform audiences' rational doubts into massive emotional support.

Culture of Mediation and De-Bureaucratization of Policy Language by Influencers

The empirical findings in this study indicate that in the modern *digital public relations* landscape, government public relations can no longer position itself as the sole authority on the truth of information. The successful socialization of the Free Nutritious Meals program on social media demonstrates the crucial role of *influencers* as cultural mediators. Policy planning documents and operational technical instructions for the program, which were initially rigid, cold, and filled with bureaucratic jargon, were successfully translated by influencers into everyday narratives that are warm, casual, and easily digested by the general public (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). This cultural translation process is crucial because contemporary social media audiences tend to ignore formal, instructive content from official government accounts.

Through a creative messaging approach, *influencers* successfully linked the government's macro programs to the micro realities of people's domestic lives. For example, the *parenting* cluster packaged the Free Nutritious Meals narrative not from the perspective of state budget allocations or macroeconomic statistics, but from the perspective of a mother who felt helped because the burden of cooking in the morning was reduced and monthly shopping money could be allocated to other children's educational needs (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This highly personal framing touched the audience's deepest emotional aspects, which in turn fostered a collective awareness that this government policy had a real, immediate impact on their family's well-being. This phenomenon reaffirms the premise of *source credibility theory* that identity closeness (*source similarity*) between the messenger and the recipient is the main key to successful persuasion in digital public communication.

The Attention Economy and Social Media Algorithm Optimization

A thorough study of digital performance metrics shows that leveraging *influencers* is the most adaptive strategy for winning the competition under the control of the attention economy. Short-form video-based social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels operate using strict recommendation algorithms that prioritize content based on organic engagement rates, *watch time*, and speed of re-distribution (*shares*). Conventional press releases from government public relations agencies systematically lose out to entertainment content because they fail to meet the algorithm's parameters (Smith & Johnson, 2024). By partnering with *influencers* who understand the algorithm and have a loyal following, the positive narrative of the Free Nutritious Meals program can surf the popularity trend and organically enter the *For You Page (FYP)* of millions of users.

Beyond mere surface reach, *influencers* incorporate a high level of visual aesthetics into their policy communications. *Food vloggers*, for example, utilize appetizing food cinematography techniques to showcase mass cooking in community kitchens with high hygiene standards. This type of content is not only visually entertaining but also implicitly addresses public concerns about food hygiene and safety without the need for formal, defensive rebuttals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These findings confirm that in the digital ecosystem, the validity of a policy is not only judged by the validity of its data on paper, but

also by how that data is visually presented in an engaging and interactive way to trigger the audience's voluntary psychological engagement.

The Paradox of Authenticity and the Challenges of Digital *Astroturfing*

While this digital public relations campaign generated impressive quantitative reach, in-depth discussions in this study uncovered a structural threat known as the authenticity paradox. When governments massively use *influencers* to coordinately promote positive narratives, critical audiences quickly detect commercial motives behind such support. In the comments section, the research team found the emergence of cynical terms such as "customized content," "wasting budget on buzzers," and accusations of digital *astroturfing* — a condition in which a fabricated campaign is manipulated to appear as if it were an organic movement of support from the grassroots (Kruike-meier & Shehata, 2020). This digital cynicism has a dangerous backfire effect on the government's reputation.

Information consumers in the post-truth era are highly sensitive to digital pretense. When an *influencer* who typically promotes luxury restaurants suddenly creates content praising low-income food boxes with a uniform narrative that appears dictated by PR *briefing* guidelines, the *influencer's* personal credibility collapses and drags down the image of the program they are championing (Freberg et al., 2011). Therefore, this partnership requires a high degree of creative flexibility. Government PR must allow influencers the freedom to voice their perspectives honestly, including providing constructive criticism regarding technical shortcomings in distribution in the field. Criticism packaged with solutions will actually increase the authenticity of the campaign in the eyes of the audience, as it is perceived as a healthy and transparent public discussion, not simply a one-way image propaganda.

Community Sentiment Management and Digital Conflict Resolution

The final crucial aspect that distinguishes *influencer*-based digital public relations from traditional PR models is the management of post-broadcast interactions in the comments section. Social media comment sections act as an arena for open public debate, rife with ideological friction and political polarization left over from elections. Content about Free Nutritious Meals uploaded by *influencers* often becomes a platform for netizens to attack each other over the effectiveness of the state budget and compare it to the policies of the previous regime (Castells, 2013). In this situation, the role of *influencers* shifts from mere messengers to community managers *who* must actively moderate conflicts in their own digital spaces.

Digital ethnographic observations show that *influencers* who successfully mitigate negative sentiment are those who do not delete critical comments, but instead respond interactively using empirically based arguments or a polite humorous approach. For example, when a netizen questioned the quality of the milk being distributed, an *influencer* from the health cluster responded directly to the comment by uploading a follow-up video dissecting the nutrition label and BPOM certification on the milk packaging (Chin, 2010). This responsive and transparent micro-crisis management has proven far more effective in building long-term *public trust* than ignoring comments or blocking accounts. The success of

mitigating digital conflict at the micro level ultimately culminates in strengthening the macro-social legitimacy of the Free Nutritious Meals program in the eyes of the wider public.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the implementation of *digital public relations* through the use of *social media influencers* proved effective in transforming rigid bureaucratic language into a humanistic and trustworthy public narrative related to the Free Nutritious Meals program. As cultural mediators, the influencers successfully bridged the demographic communication gap by packaging information about macro-government programs into a creative, casual format that was relevant to the daily lives of young audiences. Through the optimization of short video algorithms and an engaging visual approach, this digital campaign was able to win the competition in the attention economy, boost public engagement *organically*, and trigger a shift in opinion trends towards a more positive direction over the course of the campaign.

However, this study also identified crucial structural challenges in the form of the authenticity paradox *and* the threat of cynicism related to the issue of digital *astroturfing* in cyberspace. When the dissemination of positive narratives is rigidly coordinated or appears artificial, critical audiences are likely to show resistance and question the sincerity of the message. Political polarization in social media comment sections also emphasizes that public policy content is always vulnerable to being drawn into ideological debates. However, the findings suggest that transparent, data-driven, and interactive micro-responses demonstrated by *influencers* in managing their communities can be an effective digital crisis mitigation tool to maintain and restore public *trust*.

Practically, the results of this study contribute valuable managerial recommendations for government public relations agencies to formulate a more flexible and ethical digital marketing strategy blueprint. Public relations practitioners are advised to provide proportional creative space for *influencers* in curating their content to maintain authenticity in the eyes of the public. The freedom to convey constructive criticism in the field will actually increase the credibility of the campaign itself. Moving forward, the successful dissemination of national strategic policies should not rely solely on surface popularity metrics, but rather must synergize the sophistication of social media technology computing with information transparency and accountability for the reality of real programs at the grassroots level.

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