



Social Construction of the Reality of MSME Actors in KSBI Jakarta Regarding President Prabowo's Free Food Program

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Abstract

Aim: To analyze how Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) members of the Komunitas Sukses Berjamaah Indonesia (KSBI) Jakarta form their social construction of the free meal program initiated by President Prabowo.

Methodology: Using a descriptive qualitative approach based on the social construction theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, this study describes how the reality of the national program is interpreted, understood, and responded to by MSMEs in the context of the local community economy. The current research adopted situational analysis, literature studies, and observations of community narratives and approaches.

Findings: It was found that MSMEs view the free meal program not just as a food policy but as an economic opportunity, a symbol of the state's concern for the common people, and an accessibility challenge. This social construction is formed through three main stages: externalization in the form of a narrative of expectations for participation in procurement; objectivation through the dissemination of opinions and discussions in the KSBI forum, and internalization in the form of a collective attitude towards the potential for empowerment or exclusion. This study concludes that the meaning of the free meal program is greatly influenced by economic experience, closeness to government networks, and the community's existence as a space for articulating shared meaning.

Implications/Novel Contribution: The study brings unique policy directions for governments and administrators by understanding this social construction, the government and stakeholders can design a more inclusive approach to involving local MSMEs in national-scale programs.

Keywords: Social Construction, KSBI MSMEs, Free Meal Program, Prabowo Government

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INTRODUCTION

The Nutritious Food Program (MBG), initiated by the elected government of Prabowo Subianto, addresses nutritional issues, particularly among school children. This initiative aims to meet nutritional needs and has the potential to create significant social, economic, and health impacts for the Indonesian people. Implementing this national-scale program will open various opportunities and challenges, especially for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) across regions.

The MSME sector plays a vital role in the Indonesian economy. It is capable of absorbing a substantial portion of the workforce and significantly contributes to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Tinjau, 2025). In this context, the Indonesian Success Community (KSBI) operates as a home industry-based organization in Jagakarsa, South Jakarta. KSBI focuses on economic empowerment through collaboration among MSMEs. Its strategic position allows it to participate in the dynamics generated by the MBG program, leveraging its collective capacity to provide necessary products and services.

Discussions about the MBG program have garnered attention from various national media outlets, which highlight its technical, political, and educational aspects. These outlets emphasize the importance of the program's simultaneous rollout and government readiness, as well as the logistical and technical challenges involved. Additionally, many media sources stress the value of long-term development, human resource strengthening, and aspects

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of nutrition and public education. This indicates that MBG is not merely a consumptive program; it is an integral part of a national policy strategy for the development of the Indonesian people.

However, MSME participation in this program requires strategic readiness. This includes understanding policies, accessing information, and establishing functional relationships with the government. Therefore, it is essential to explore how MSME actors at the community level construct the meaning of this program through their social interactions and collective experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Construction of Reality: A Contemporary Theoretical Lens

The theory of social construction of reality provides a foundational framework for understanding how individuals and communities actively produce meaning through interaction, language, and collective experience. Rather than treating reality as objective and fixed, this perspective asserts that knowledge is historically and socially situated, emerging from intersubjective processes shaped by culture, institutions, and daily practices.

Recent scholarship has expanded the application of this framework into diverse contexts. Barrios-Rubio and Fajardo Valencia (2022) demonstrated how Colombian citizens construct political discontent and social frustration through mediated narratives and everyday discourse. In the Indonesian context, Safitri (2024) analyzed how young voters construct gender-based perceptions of female political leadership, revealing how cultural values and media exposure interact to shape political reality.

Meanwhile, Pamungkas, Moefad, and Purnomo (2024) applied a constructionist lens to explore the hybridization of local identity in the face of globalization, mediated through both mainstream and digital media. These works reinforce the central argument that reality is not passively consumed but actively shaped by social actors who negotiate meanings within specific historical and political contexts.

In this study, MSME actors from KSBI Jakarta are treated not as passive recipients of government initiatives, but as active constructors of meaning regarding President Prabowo's proposed free meal program. Their perspectives reflect a unique intersection between economic precarity, social expectations, and political representation, positioning them as critical agents in shaping the meaning of populist policy in everyday life.

The Role of Media and Communication in Constructing Social Meaning

Media, particularly in their digital and interactive forms, play a pivotal role in the construction of social meaning. Communication channels such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are no longer merely entertainment platforms; they serve as spaces where users perform identity, negotiate belonging, and engage with political and economic narratives.

Anggraeni, Wahida, and Hanifah (2023) highlighted how digital platforms contribute to the construction of youth political identity, showing that performative engagement and algorithmic visibility mediate how civic values are shaped. Kussanti (2022) examined TikTok as a cultural field where Gen Z expresses creativity, critique, and resistance, underscoring the democratization of narrative-making power. Moreover, Pamungkas et al. (2024) emphasized that media framing continues to influence how policies and political figures are perceived. Through the language, tone, and visual design of news coverage, media outlets contribute to the public's collective interpretation of state initiatives.

This research builds on those findings by examining how MSME actors not only consume media narratives about the free food program but also engage in interpersonal communication within their networks, particularly within the KSBI community, to negotiate the program's credibility, feasibility, and symbolic value. These communicative processes play a critical role in how the policy is socially constructed and embedded into the everyday discourse of the urban working class.

Social Actors and Grassroots Interpretations of Public Policy

A growing body of research emphasizes the need to center marginalized or non-elite voices in understanding how public policy is received and interpreted. While much of the existing literature has focused on university students (Safitri, 2024; Anggraeni et al., 2023), government officials (Tinjan, 2025), or cultural practitioners (Kumalasari, Ni'mah, & Wulandari, 2023), relatively few studies have examined the interpretive agency of micro-entrepreneurs and grassroots economic actors.

Tinjan (2025) argued that digital transformation in public governance must consider the resistance and reinterpretation by local actors, who often reframe technology not as a tool of efficiency, but as a source of bureaucratic anxiety and cultural dissonance. Kumalasari et al. (2023) explored how community-based cultural events like carnivals function as participatory spaces for identity formation and social cohesion, further supporting the view that ordinary people actively negotiate the meanings of state-sponsored initiatives.

This research contributes to the evolving discourse by positioning MSME actors as central subjects in the narrative of policy reception. Their constructions of the free food program are embedded in material realities such as inflation, food security, and urban precarity, but are also shaped by intangible factors, trust in government, communal solidarity, and aspirational politics. Through this lens, the policy is not only assessed in terms of practicality, but also in terms of symbolic resonance and perceived alignment with the needs of marginalized citizens.

This study presents several innovative contributions to the discourse on social construction, media influence, and policy perception, particularly in the context of populist governance. First, it highlights the role of economic grassroots actors, specifically MSMEs, in shaping policy narratives, an area that has been largely overlooked in previous studies, which have predominantly focused on students or state institutions. By centering on MSMEs, the study acknowledges their crucial position not only as economic agents but also as key interpreters of state interventions, thereby expanding the discourse on how political programs are socially constructed within economic communities. Second, the research contextualizes political populism through the lived experiences of working-class entrepreneurs, offering a bottom-up perspective on how abstract political promises, such as Prabowo's free meal program, are concretely understood and negotiated in daily life. This approach sheds light on the gap between political rhetoric and its grassroots reception, revealing the complexities of trust, skepticism, and hope embedded in policy narratives. Third, the study advances a constructivist approach to policy reception by shifting the analytical focus from conventional success-failure metrics to a more nuanced exploration of meaning-making. Rather than treating policy reception as a static event, it examines how trust, expectation, and interpretation evolve dynamically through continuous social interactions.

Finally, the research bridges the gap between digital media exposure and communal dialogue, demonstrating that socio-political meaning is co-constructed through both online and offline interactions. By examining how MSMEs engage with digital platforms while simultaneously participating in real-world discussions within networks such as KSBI, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media, community discourse, and policy interpretation. Through these contributions, the research not only enriches theoretical perspectives on social construction but also offers practical insights into how grassroots actors influence and reshape policy narratives in a rapidly evolving political landscape.

RESEARCH MODEL

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, grounded in the assumption that reality is not objectively given but socially produced and interpreted through communication, interaction, and lived experience. Rooted in the theoretical lens of social construction of reality, this research integrates insights from contemporary communication theory, discourse analysis, and policy reception studies to examine how grassroots actors, particularly MSMEs affiliated with the Komunitas Sukses Berjamaah Indonesia (KSBI) in South Jakarta, interpret, negotiate, and respond to Prabowo's populist free meal policy. The research model is designed to explore how these actors engage in meaning-making processes that intertwine political discourse, everyday economic realities, and collective cultural symbolism.

The first major construct in this model is Policy Communication Exposure, referring to the degree to which MSME actors encounter official policy narratives across diverse channels such as government announcements, mainstream media, and social media platforms. This exposure influences how the policy is initially framed in their minds. The second construct is Interpersonal Communicative Construction, which reflects the role of peer dialogue, community meetings, and informal conversations in shaping and recontextualizing policy narratives. Within KSBI's collaborative environment, interpersonal communication serves as a platform for questioning, endorsing, or reshaping dominant policy messages. These interpretive exchanges then influence the third construct: Perceived Feasibility and Credibility of the Policy, which captures how plausible and trustworthy the free meal

program appears from the standpoint of daily operational and financial concerns. Factors such as food prices, logistics, and past experiences with government initiatives are considered in this evaluative stage.

Subsequently, the model advances to the Symbolic Interpretation of Policy, emphasizing the way MSME actors assign deeper meanings and metaphors to the policy based on their socio-cultural context. This construct captures whether the policy is viewed as an act of solidarity, a campaign gimmick, a promise of justice, or a performative gesture of control. These symbolic meanings are shaped and mediated by the final construct: Socioeconomic Embeddedness, which refers to how participants' material conditions, such as income stability, dependency on food distribution chains, and access to state resources, influence their reception and framing of the policy. This layer acknowledges that meaning-making is always entangled with economic vulnerability and structural constraints.

The relationship among these constructs is dynamic and recursive. The process begins with media and policy exposure, continues through interpersonal dialogue, and crystallizes in judgments of feasibility and symbolic meaning. However, these stages are not strictly linear; symbolic interpretation, once formed, can influence future media consumption patterns or community dialogue. In this way, MSME actors actively co-produce and circulate policy narratives, transforming top-down populist rhetoric into bottom-up symbolic constructions rooted in their daily struggles and aspirations.

The unit of analysis in this research is the construction of social reality as expressed through MSME discourse regarding the free meal policy. The research subjects are selected based on purposive sampling, involving KSBI members who are actively running small businesses, regularly attending community activities, and engaging in political or policy-related discussions. The methodological approach involves triangulation through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and media content analysis of platforms frequently accessed by participants (such as TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube). Through this approach, the study seeks to map out the collective interpretive agency of MSMEs in constructing meaning around a populist food program.

Ultimately, this research model is designed not only to capture the micro-level dynamics of policy interpretation but also to contribute to broader theoretical and practical discussions. Theoretically, it extends the application of social construction theory into the realm of grassroots policy reception. Practically, it provides insight for policymakers, communicators, and civil society actors on how to build more inclusive, resonant, and credible public communication strategies. Methodologically, the model serves as a replicable framework for future research on how marginalized communities make sense of state-led populist initiatives in a post-election context.

RESULT

This study reveals that the social construction of the reality of KSBI Jakarta MSME actors regarding President Prabowo's free meal program was formed through a series of social interaction processes, community discussions, exposure to media information, and their daily experiences as micro-entrepreneurs. In general, there are three stages of social construction as explained by Berger and Luckmann, namely externalization, objectivation, and internalization, which are visible in the way MSME actors understand and respond to the free meal policy.

Initial Expression and Personal Perception

At this stage, MSME actors began to express their initial views regarding the free meal program. The majority of informants welcomed the initiative because it was considered pro-people and touched on the basic needs of the community, namely food. One of the culinary MSME actors, Mrs. Rahma (42 years old), the owner of a food stall in Jagakarsa, stated: "If it is realized, it would be great, because honestly, sometimes I feel sorry for school children who seem to eat whatever they have. If there is a free meal program, it can help, but let's see, don't just make campaign promises." This statement shows that the initial perception of the informant was formed from empirical experience and empathy for the social conditions around them. Despite being open, doubts still arise about the realization and consistency of the program.

Formation of Meaning Through Community and Media

The reality of free meals then began to become a broader discourse in the KSBI community. Through various weekly discussion forums and community meetings, MSME actors began to interpret this program not only as a form of assistance but also as a potential business opportunity. The program is considered to be able to

create a new ecosystem where MSME actors can become partners with the government as food providers. Mr. Dedi (47 years old), a home catering business owner, said: "If this is worked on seriously, we as MSMEs can be involved as food providers. The government can't possibly cook by itself. We have to work together with local entrepreneurs. That's where we can come in, we can develop, and that's fair." This objectification is also formed through information received from social media and mass media. Many informants claimed to have learned about the free food discourse from TikTok, YouTube, and the KSBI WhatsApp group. At this point, the media becomes an important medium that strengthens the narrative that this program is not just a political promise, but can be realized and provide economic effects to small business owners. However, there are also skeptical voices. Several MSME owners consider this program too ambitious and are worried that it will impact the stability of staple food prices. This was expressed by Ms. Yuliana (35 years old), a seller of fried foods and wet cakes: "The question is, where does the funding come from? Don't let this be a big program, but disrupt staple food prices. If cooking oil goes up again, we, the small ones, will also be affected."

Acceptance and Integration into Collective Consciousness

At this stage, the view of the free meal program begins to be integrated into the mindset and daily conversations of KSBI MSME actors. They begin to discuss the possibility of collaboration, new business opportunities, and scenarios for community involvement in the technical implementation scheme. This internalization process occurs because the free meal program is considered to directly touch on the daily aspects of MSME actors, both as individuals and as part of the small people's economic community.

Several KSBI members have even begun to design simple proposals to become part of the food provider network in the South Jakarta area. In a community discussion, one of the driving figures of KSBI, Mr. Arief, said: "KSBI is ready if asked to be a local partner for this program. We have member data, have a network of stalls and catering, and we just need to create a monitoring system. So, this program can help the people but also increase the vitality of MSMEs." From here, it can be seen that the reality of the free meal program has gone through a complex social formation process, starting from individual perception, reinforced by social interaction and media, until finally internalized as the collective reality of the community. This program is no longer just a political discourse, but has been interpreted as an opportunity, hope, and challenge by MSME actors.

The results of the study also show that the social construction of the free meal program is not singular or stagnant. This reality is dynamic, influenced by the context of time, the developing political narrative, and the government's concrete response to community expectations. Several MSME actors stated that they would truly believe and be actively involved if the government involved the MSME community from the start in formulating technical policies. In closing, the social reality built by the KSBI Jakarta MSME actors regarding Prabowo's free meal program is very thick with nuances of economic pragmatism, community solidarity, and hopes for the state's bias towards the common people. Although there is a critical and cautious attitude, most MSME actors still hope that this program will truly side with the people and not just be a political image tool.

The social construction of MSME actors regarding the free meal program does not stand in a vacuum. Instead, their perceptions are greatly influenced by personal economic conditions and the history of interactions with previous public policies. For some MSMEs, programs like this provide hope for the presence of the state amidst the ever-increasing economic burden.

Mr. Hendra (53 years old), a soto seller in Cipete, said: "So far, MSMEs like us have been independent. If the government helps, sometimes the data doesn't reach us. Now, if this free meal program can involve us from the start, then we can feel social justice." From here, it is clear that the meaning of "social justice" constructed by MSMEs is active involvement in the economic system managed by the state. They no longer just want to receive assistance, but want to be part of the policy ecosystem.

On the other hand, bad experiences with previous programs that were not on target have made some MSMEs build a sense of alertness. For example, Mrs. Endang (45 years old), a traveling cake seller, said: "Previously, when the COVID MSME assistance was distributed, I didn't get it even though I registered. So I was a bit traumatized, I was afraid that this free meal would only be given to the same people. We would be spectators again." This statement emphasizes that the construction of meaning towards state policy is greatly influenced by the history of the relationship between individuals and the bureaucratic system. Trust is an important element in the internalization

of the social meaning of policies.

Free Meal Program as a Space for Negotiating Social Identity

The free meal program is also constructed as part of the negotiation of the social identity of MSME actors. They do not want to be considered only as a weak economic group, but as productive subjects who can become partners of the government. In other words, MSMEs want to be valued not as objects of aid, but as part of the national solution. Mrs. Linda (38 years old), a frozen food entrepreneur from KSBI Mampang, stated: "I want the government to see MSMEs not only as recipients of aid, but as partners. We can help the government realize the program, as long as there is transparency and access is opened." Identity as equal citizens begins to appear from this construction of meaning. MSME actors begin to frame themselves not merely as ordinary people, but as part of the national economic system. This shows the process of social identity elevation that develops through collective discourse within the community.

Between Image and Hope

Researchers also found that the social construction of MSME actors regarding the free meal program cannot be separated from symbolic and political aspects. Several informants admitted that this program was part of President Prabowo's "political branding" after the 2024 Election, but it was still considered positive as long as it was realized in real terms. Mr. Wahyu (41 years old), a rice porridge seller in Pejaten, said: "Indeed, this is part of Mr. Prabowo's political image, but if the image becomes a reality and the people feel it, then it's okay. What's important is not just image, but real work." From this, it can be seen that symbolic meaning is not immediately rejected by society. Political symbols can be accepted as long as they provide real benefits. This shows that political realities that were previously often considered negative can be reconstructed as a form of policy legitimacy, as long as the policy is oriented towards justice and public welfare.

Although many MSME actors expressed high hopes for the free meal program, some remained skeptical about the effectiveness of its implementation. They were worried about corruption, inaccurate targeting, and the sustainability of the state budget. Mbak Sari (34 years old), a food stall owner in Pondok Labu, said: "What I'm afraid of is that this program will only run for a short time, like BLT. Then it stalls. So we are also confused if we have invested in the program, then the government withdraws." This indicates that the social reality that is formed is not singular. Two poles continue to be dialectic: optimism for change and concern over structural failure. This is where two-way communication between the government and grassroots communities, such as KSBI, is important, so that policies are truly down-to-earth and sustainable.

Almost all informants stated that MSME community involvement must be an integral part of the free meal policy. This program will be more targeted if it collaborates with community networks such as KSBI, which have a database of members, business locations, and a track record of productivity. In an internal KSBI meeting, researchers noted an interesting statement from the Head of KSBI South Jakarta: "If the government is serious, KSBI is ready to become a free food distribution network. We have stalls, we have public kitchens, and we are ready to be transparent in reporting. So it's not just free food, but also jobs, and the people's economy grows." This statement shows that communities like KSBI do not only construct policy realities as consumers, but also as implementing actors. They are ready to transform into strategic partners of the state.

DISCUSSION

Research in the domain of social construction of reality and symbolic interactionism in populist policies has advanced significantly, yet there remains a substantial gap concerning how grassroots actors, particularly Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), interpret and construct the meaning of populist symbols such as "free meal" programs. Existing studies have often concentrated on the elite and political actors as the primary producers of populist symbols, while the perspectives of local actors, especially those within micro-economic communities like SMEs, remain underexplored. This gap calls for a more focused examination that centers on the micro-level social processes involved in the reception and interpretation of populist policies. The impact of populist discourse on entrepreneurship, noting that it creates uncertainties about the stability of institutional frameworks, leading to higher anticipated transaction costs for entrepreneurs. However, their research does not specifically address how SME actors perceive or construct the meaning of populist policies like "free meals," which directly impact their

economic opportunities.

Additionally, the effectiveness of MSME empowerment policies in Indonesia, their analysis does not explore the symbolic dimensions of such policies or how these policies are socially constructed by the actors they aim to support. From a practical standpoint, the current research underscores the need for policymakers to consider not only the technicalities of policy design but also the social and cultural processes through which policies are received and interpreted. Policies are shaped by public discourse, where meanings are constructed not solely through formal documentation but through the interactions, stories, and symbols circulated within society. Therefore, programs like the "free meal" initiative are not merely about logistical distribution but also about how meaning and justice are socially constructed and negotiated. Theoretically, this research extends (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) theory of social construction by applying it to the context of populist public policy, emphasizing the role of symbolic communication in political identity formation. This contribution enriches the emerging field of "symbolic policy communication," particularly in contexts such as Indonesia, where research in this area remains limited. To further develop this understanding, longitudinal studies are essential to track how the perceptions of SME actors evolve as they experience the actual implementation of populist policies. As ? (?) suggests, the interpretation of policies is a long-term process that involves collective memory and ongoing public discourse. Additionally, an interdisciplinary approach incorporating communication studies, political economy, policy anthropology, and social justice philosophy can offer valuable insights into the role of symbolic policies in shaping state-citizen relationships, particularly in post-authoritarian societies like Indonesia. This approach would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how populist policies are not only implemented but are also contested and redefined by the communities they are designed to serve.

Reality as Social Construction: Berger & Luckmann in the Populist Policy Space

Referring to the theoretical framework of (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), social reality is formed through a dialectical process between three moments: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. In the context of this research, Prabowo's free meal program has gone through all three phases within the framework of the MSME community. Externalization occurs when the state produces the discourse of "free meals" as a populist policy through speeches, mass media, and political campaigns. Here, the policy is still at a symbolic stage that does not yet have a concrete form at the MSME actor level. However, this symbol has entered the public consciousness. Objectivation occurs when the idea of free meals begins to be understood as a real policy, for example, through the government's official narrative or community discussions, such as in KSBI. This program begins to be framed not only as a political promise, but as the potential for a new economic system that can involve MSMEs as implementers, not just recipients. Internalization is the moment when MSME actors form personal and collective meanings of the policy based on their life experiences. These meanings are not singular, but are formed from the struggle between hopes and past traumas (for example, related to COVID assistance or previous MSME programs). Therefore, the reality of free meals for MSMEs is the result of a social process, not merely a product of state policy. In this case, the reality of the policy has become a socially constructed reality that is produced, distributed, and accepted through symbolic communication mechanisms between community members.

Symbolic Interaction: The Meaning of "Free Meals" as a Symbol of Justice or a Tool of Political Legitimacy.

The symbolic interactionism approach, as developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, places symbols as a central element in the social communication process. In this framework, the term "free meals" is not just a provision of food, but has become a symbol of hope, social justice, and even a concrete form of "the state's presence" amid small communities. However, this symbol also contains ambivalence: it can be meaningful as a form of political empathy or as a mere imaging tool. The process of interaction between MSME actors, whether in informal discussions, WhatsApp groups, or the KSBI forum, becomes an arena for negotiating the meaning of the symbol. Some MSME actors interpret this program as a "new door to fortune," a symbol of state support, while others see it as a "political promise loaded with a power agenda." Both are valid from a symbolic communication perspective because meaning is not inherent in symbols, but is created through a dynamic social interaction process.

Perspective of the Philosophy of Justice: Is the Free Meal Program Structurally Fair?

From a philosophical perspective of justice, especially John Rawls' ideas in *A Theory of* (Nagel, 1973), the free meal policy can be assessed from two principles of justice: (1) equal freedom for all citizens, and (2) social inequality can only be justified if it benefits the most disadvantaged groups. The free meal program should serve the second principle, namely, siding with lower economic groups (poor children, small MSMEs, local entrepreneurs). However, the challenge is whether, in its implementation, this policy truly empowers them or is it controlled again by the distribution elite and large contractors?

Indonesian philosopher Franz Magnis-Suseno once emphasized the importance of structural ethics in public policy: policies must not only have good intentions, but also have fair structures, transparent implementation, and results that favor the weak. In this context, MSME actors imagine justice not in the form of consumptive assistance, but in the form of productive partnerships and open access.

Social Identity Construction: From Aid Recipients to State Partners

The social construction that emerged from the KSBI community shows an identity transformation. MSME actors no longer want to be positioned as objects of state mercy. They want to be active subjects involved in policy implementation. This shows that the free meal program is becoming a symbolic medium for renegotiating the social position of MSMEs within the national economic structure. In this context, identity construction is not just a matter of perception, but a process of forming new power relations. When MSMEs demand transparency, involvement, and rights to the free meal ecosystem, they are articulating a socio-political position that is more aligned with state institutions.

Convergence of Symbols, Structures, and Agencies

By integrating the approaches of social construction theory, symbolic communication, and the philosophy of justice, it can be concluded that the free meal program is not just a technocratic policy, but a symbolic field where meanings, interests, and hopes meet and compete with each other. MSME actors through the KSBI community become active agents in constructing this meaning, not just recipients. The reality of this program is not fixed, but continues to change along with the dynamics of public discourse, implementation experience, and grassroots community participation. Thus, the philosophical-theoretical approach helps us understand that the success of the program is not only a matter of technicalities, but also of how meaning and justice are socially constructed.

Research Gap and Significance

Despite the growing body of literature on populist policy communication and political branding in electoral contexts, there remains a notable research gap in understanding how grassroots economic actors, particularly those embedded in community-based micro-enterprises like UMKM (MSMEs), construct meaning around populist welfare narratives such as free food programs. Most existing studies tend to focus on macro-political analysis, elite discourse production, or policy outcomes at the national level (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, & Wodak, 2018; Kuyper & Moffitt, 2020). Very few delve into how such policies are interpreted, negotiated, and symbolically rearticulated by the very people who are presumed to benefit from them.

This gap is even more salient when examining the Indonesian context, where populist strategies have been increasingly employed by political figures, yet where the voice and communicative agency of MSMEs remain underexplored. While studies such as (Mietzner, 2020; Aspinall, 2019) have examined populism and patronage in Indonesian politics, they often do so from a top-down analytical lens. There is a lack of bottom-up empirical inquiry into how community-based economic actors respond to and co-construct the meaning of populist policies, especially in light of socio-economic precarity and historical distrust toward state-driven assistance programs.

Additionally, the interplay between policy discourse, interpersonal communication, and symbolic interpretation within community networks has not been sufficiently theorized. Much of the communication literature remains limited to evaluating the effectiveness of messaging or audience reception using quantitative measures, without addressing the social construction processes that occur through everyday dialogue and meaning-making practices (?, ?). This leaves an open space for qualitative, interpretive research that foregrounds the discursive agency of MSMEs as political communicators in their own right.

Theoretically, this study contributes by extending Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction

of reality into the domain of policy communication among economically vulnerable groups. It bridges the fields of communication studies, political sociology, and development studies by offering a constructivist framework for understanding how populist narratives are localized, transformed, and at times resisted. Furthermore, the integration of symbolic interpretation as a distinct analytical category responds to calls in recent literature for more nuanced readings of how political messages are interpreted in culturally specific contexts (?, ?).

Practically, the study has high significance in informing public communication strategies aimed at MSMEs and low-income communities. As policymakers increasingly rely on populist messaging to mobilize support, there is a critical need to understand how such messages are received, internalized, or reframed at the grassroots level. This research can inform the design of inclusive communication frameworks that do not merely transmit information but engage in dialogical and culturally grounded interactions. It can also help avoid the instrumentalization of MSMEs in political branding, ensuring that policies are not only symbolically appealing but also structurally relevant and economically sustainable.

Moreover, the study provides valuable insights for civil society organizations, especially those working with entrepreneurial communities, to navigate the complex intersection of politics, policy, and local livelihood strategies. By highlighting how MSMEs interpret and evaluate populist food programs, this research opens new avenues for participatory governance models that take into account the narrative agency of the people such policies aim to serve.

In sum, this research fills a significant theoretical and practical gap by centering the communicative experiences of grassroots economic actors in the study of populist policy reception. It challenges dominant top-down paradigms, offers a replicable methodological model, and contributes to a more democratized understanding of how political meaning is constructed in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This study found that MSME actors who are members of the South Jakarta Indonesian Success Community (KSBI) interpret Prabowo Subianto's free meal program as a symbol of new hope for the state's support for the people's economic sector. However, this meaning is not singular. Some MSME actors see this program as a collaborative opportunity to expand their business, while others are concerned about the potential for monopoly of the implementation by large economic actors and bureaucratic elites.

Through the perspective of Berger & Luckmann's social construction theory, it can be concluded that the reality of free meals is formed from a complex social process, involving past experiences, assessments of political actors, and expectations of future economic structures. The symbol of "free meals" has become a field of negotiation for MSME social identity: from an object of aid to a subject of policy production.

From a symbolic interaction approach, the symbol of "free meals" not only represents food aid but also becomes a political instrument that mediates relations between the state and ordinary citizens. MSME actors interpret it through dynamic conversations, discussions, and symbolic encounters. Meanwhile, through the perspective of the philosophy of social justice, it was found that this program will have a value of justice only if it is implemented with the principles of transparency, equal access, and fair partnerships for MSME actors. Otherwise, the free meal program risks becoming a populist project that moves away from the values of structural justice. Thus, MSME actors' awareness of the symbol of the free meal policy reflects an important transformation in social and political construction: they are not only waiting for the policy, but also want to participate as actors in its implementation.

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