

ADOLESCENTS' LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL LITERACY: ENCODING ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO A TIKTOK HOAX

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Abstract

This study investigates how junior high school students construct and re-encode meanings in response to misinformation about the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* [Free Nutritious Meals] program on TikTok. It examines students' encoding patterns in the comment space, the linguistic register and multimodal features they use, and how students' perceptions of the hoax and teachers' views on digital literacy contextualize these practices. Using a qualitative case study design, this study combines content analysis of 33 TikTok comments with online interviews conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp with ten students and five teachers. Inductive analysis shows five encoding forms: emotional expression (39%), direct criticism (33%), sarcasm/irony (9%), neutral clarification (15%), and others (3%). Linguistically, 70% of the comments used digital slang. Interviews indicate varied digital literacy, while teachers reported informal classroom integration. These findings underscore the need to strengthen school-based digital literacy education to support adolescents' information resilience.

Keywords: encoding, TikTok, misinformation, adolescents, digital literacy

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana siswa sekolah menengah pertama membangun dan melakukan re-encoding makna dalam merespons misinformation mengenai program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) di TikTok. Penelitian ini menelaah pola encoding siswa dalam ruang komentar, ragam kebahasaan dan ciri-ciri multimodal yang mereka gunakan, serta bagaimana persepsi siswa terhadap hoaks dan pandangan guru tentang literasi digital memberikan konteks bagi praktik tersebut. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini menggabungkan analisis konten terhadap 33 komentar TikTok dengan wawancara daring terhadap sepuluh siswa dan lima guru yang dilakukan melalui Zoom dan WhatsApp. Analisis induktif mengidentifikasi lima bentuk encoding, yaitu ekspresi emosional (39%), kritik langsung (33%), sarkasme/ironi (9%), klarifikasi netral (15%), dan bentuk lainnya (3%). Secara kebahasaan, 70% komentar menggunakan slang digital. Hasil wawancara menunjukkan variasi tingkat literasi digital siswa, sementara guru melaporkan bahwa integrasi literasi digital di kelas masih bersifat informal. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya penguatan pendidikan literasi digital berbasis sekolah untuk mendukung ketahanan informasi pada remaja.

Kata kunci: encoding, TikTok, misinformation, remaja, literasi digital

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media platforms in Indonesia has become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives in the digital era, especially among junior high school students. One of the most popular platforms among them today is TikTok, which functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a major space for information circulation. According to the 2025 Indonesian Internet Profile Survey conducted by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), TikTok ranked as the most widely accessed social media platform in Indonesia, used by 35.17% of the national internet population, which represents a significant increase from 18.61% in the previous year (Kompas.com, August 12, 2025). The survey involved 8,700 Indonesian respondents aged 13 years and above from 38 provinces, indicating TikTok's dominance among teenagers and young adults. This phenomenon shows that TikTok has evolved into a primary digital arena, a space where adolescents obtain, share, and interpret circulating information. Given such extensive engagement, it becomes crucial to understand how young users respond to, interpret, and construct meaning from the information they encounter on this platform (Livingstone et al., 2021).

Within the national context, one of the issues that drew public attention in the digital sphere, particularly on TikTok, was the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) or Free Nutritious Meals* program, a strategic initiative of President Prabowo Subianto's administration that emphasizes the development of a superior generation as part of the *Indonesia Emas 2045* vision. This program constitutes the third national development priority, targeting 82.9 million beneficiaries including students, pregnant women, and toddlers, with an allocated budget of IDR 335 trillion. The President emphasized that MBG is not only a nutritional policy but also a mechanism for regional economic empowerment through the circulation of public funds reaching up to IDR 8 billion per village annually. This initiative is expected to improve children's nutritional quality, strengthen local economies, create new employment opportunities, and empower millions of MSMEs, farmers, breeders, and fishermen throughout Indonesia (Presidential Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025).

According to the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), the program was designed to ensure that every individual, including students, children under five, and pregnant or breastfeeding women, receives optimal nutritional intake to support the realization of *Indonesia Emas 2045* through the emergence of a healthy, intelligent, and resilient generation. Based on the 2022 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI), the prevalence of stunting in Indonesia remained at 21.6%, with a target reduction to 14% by 2024. This condition underscores the need for holistic and sustainable nutritional policies. From a global perspective, the World Food Programme (2022) recorded that more than fifty countries, such as Brazil through the *Bolsa Familia* program and Japan through its *School Lunch Program*, successfully reduced stunting rates and improved human capital quality through similar policy frameworks. Hence, the MBG program represents a concrete example of an integrated and long-term human development policy that connects nutrition, education, and economic empowerment.

However, despite the noble intentions behind the program, the digital sphere, especially TikTok, has become a space for the spread of inaccurate or provocative information concerning MBG. This condition indicates that adolescents, as active users of social media, are exposed to the rapid and diverse flow of information, which makes their ability to select and interpret messages increasingly important. Inaccurate information often develops into misinformation or

even hoaxes when it circulates widely without verification. The characteristics of social media, which allow messages to spread quickly, massively, and emotionally, further intensify this risk. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) explain that the boundary between misinformation and disinformation is often blurred, since information that is initially inaccurate can evolve into a hoax once it is strengthened by opinion or used to construct a particular narrative. In line with Tandoc et al. (2018), hoaxes are not simply false information but communicative practices that exploit users' emotions and biases to broaden the reach of messages on social media.

To examine how adolescents construct and express meaning in response to social media messages, this study draws on Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding–decoding perspective, which conceptualizes meaning as produced through socially and ideologically situated practices rather than transmitted transparently. Within social media environments, meaning-making is not solely controlled by content producers but is continuously negotiated by users through interaction, interpretation, and reinterpretation of messages. These processes are shaped by platform affordances that encourage participatory engagement, emotional expression, and multimodal communication. In the context of TikTok as a highly interactive and algorithm-driven social media platform, encoding practices extend beyond original content creation to include users' active participation through comments, duets, stitches, and other multimodal responses that employ language, emotion, humor, and visual cues. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing how junior high school students actively negotiate and rework meanings when responding to MBG-related misinformation circulating on social media. In the context of TikTok, encoding is not limited to content creators but is also enacted by users through comments that employ language, emotion, humor, and multimodal expressions. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing how junior high school students actively negotiate and rework meanings when responding to MBG-related misinformation on social media.

Recent research reinforces this view. Livingstone (2021) and Buckingham (2022) emphasize that adolescents possess cultural capacities to participate in meaning production within the digital world. Phillips and Milner (2017) identify that meme culture and online humor are encoding practices that allow young users to express social positions or critical attitudes toward public issues. Schifanella et al. (2016) show that sarcasm on social media is multimodal, combining text, images, and emojis to create complex layers of emotional and evaluative meaning. Meanwhile, Kelly et al. (2025) find that adolescents use emojis as a medium to reinforce irony, humor, or attitudes toward certain messages, making them an essential part of meaning-encoding practices. Wettstein et al. (2024) also identify the emergence of counter-speech among adolescents as a resistant encoding expression, in which they produce opposing messages in response to misleading or provocative content in digital spaces.

Furthermore, adolescents' informal linguistic style plays a crucial role in the process of assigning meaning and re-encoding information on social media. In digital communication, adolescents frequently employ slang, abbreviations, emojis, and popular culture references as expressive resources for constructing identity and social closeness (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Tagg, 2015). While such linguistic practices enable flexible and creative meaning-making, they also render communication highly contextual, emotional, and multimodal. As a result, meanings conveyed through these forms of expression often become ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, particularly when responding to public issues or unverified content.

This ambiguity of meaning creates conditions in which misinterpretation is more likely to occur, thereby increasing adolescents' vulnerability to hoaxes and misleading information

circulating on social media. Vulnerability to hoaxes intensifies when spontaneous linguistic expression is not accompanied by critical thinking and digital awareness. Adolescents who are accustomed to responding rapidly to visually driven content tend to react emotionally, often without evaluating the credibility of information sources. This pattern reflects limitations in digital literacy—especially in the ability to assess, comprehend, and verify information critically—which remains a significant challenge among adolescents (Livingstone et al., 2021; Buckingham, 2022). Therefore, strengthening digital literacy within the education system is essential to equip students with analytical and reflective capacities to navigate the complex and ambiguous landscape of digital information.

In the educational landscape of Indonesia, digital literacy holds a strategic position because it serves as a key foundation for students to live, learn, and participate in the digital era. According to the Directorate of Junior High Schools under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (*Kemendikdasmen*), digital literacy is not limited to the ability to use technology but also includes the skills of reading and writing in digital contexts, critically finding and evaluating information, analytical thinking, and ethical interaction in online environments (*Kemendikdasmen*, 2025). Digital literacy also involves the ability to understand, use, and create information through digital technologies, including the skills to research, communicate, and create responsibly in cyberspace. The ministry further highlights the importance of strengthening digital literacy as part of character development and national competitiveness. In the 2025 National Webinar on Literacy Day titled “*Digital Literacy Integrity: Building Civilized Participation*,” the ministry emphasized the urgency of fostering digital ethics and the ability to face online threats such as hoaxes and cyberbullying.

Therefore, teaching digital literacy in schools is a strategic step in forming a generation that is not only proficient in using technology but also capable of critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility in responding to the massive and complex flow of digital information. In this context, the present study is directed at understanding how junior high school students construct and encode meaning regarding the MBG hoax content on TikTok as a form of expression and meaning construction in digital spaces. Prior research indicates that TikTok users actively negotiate meanings and that Stuart Hall’s encoding–decoding framework can be applied to comment-driven interactions on the platform. For instance, Fathimah (2025) shows that audience readings of TikTok dark-romance content shift across dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions depending on content framing and narrative style, with violent themes more often rejected when presented in book-promotional formats but more readily accepted in fantasy/POV packaging. Hartwig et al. (2024) further demonstrate, in a misinformation-related context, that adolescents (13–16 years) actively assess TikTok content using video-based indicators and value transparency-oriented support, although they may not fully grasp an intervention’s limitations. However, while these studies clarify meaning negotiation on TikTok and adolescents’ credibility assessment, they do not yet explain how early adolescents encode their meanings through comment practices when responding to viral public-policy misinformation in Indonesia. Therefore, this study focuses on adolescents’ user-generated encoding strategies in TikTok comment spaces when negotiating misinformation about the MBG program.

Drawing on Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding perspective, this study examines adolescents’ user-generated encoding strategies in TikTok comment spaces when negotiating misinformation about the MBG program. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do junior high school students encode meanings when responding to MBG-related misinformation on TikTok through their comment practices?
- (2) What linguistic registers and multimodal features do students mobilize to construct these meanings?
- (3) How do students' perceptions of MBG-related hoaxes and teachers' perspectives on digital literacy contextualize these encoding practices?
- (4) What implications do these findings have for strengthening digital literacy education and information resilience among Indonesian youth?

Collectively, these research questions clarify the relationship among language use, platformed meaning-making, and digital literacy practices among adolescents, while offering evidence-based insights for digital literacy education aimed at enhancing information resilience in Indonesia.

ENCODING MEANING AND RESPONDING TO MISINFORMATION IN TIKTOK'S ALGORITHMIC SPACE

In today's digital ecosystem, users are not only information consumers but also active producers and interpreters of meaning. Social media algorithms amplify content that provokes emotional engagement, accelerating both factual and misleading information. According to Cinelli et al. (2020), this algorithmic design fosters emotional amplification, allowing messages to spread regardless of accuracy. Consequently, TikTok—with its short-form videos and behavior-based recommendations—becomes particularly vulnerable to provocative or hoax messages, as it integrates sound, visuals, and user comments that easily evoke emotional reactions.

To explain how meaning is created within digital social media contexts, this study adopts Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding perspective as its primary theoretical framework. From this perspective, meaning is understood as being actively produced through socially and ideologically situated practices, rather than transmitted transparently from sender to receiver. Media messages are therefore viewed as constructed through deliberate linguistic, symbolic, and representational choices that shape how issues are articulated and evaluated.

Within social media environments, the process of encoding is not confined to institutional content producers but is also enacted by users through their comment practices (Procter, 2021; Livingstone, 2021). Adolescents, in particular, participate in meaning production by employing diverse linguistic and multimodal resources such as direct criticism, neutral or clarificatory statements, sarcasm or irony, and emotional expression to encode evaluative stances toward circulating messages. Drawing on this framework, the present study treats TikTok comments as sites of encoding and examines how adolescents produce meanings when responding to MBG-related misinformation through their user-generated comment practices.

Hall argues that media messages are ideological constructions in which producers encode meaning through linguistic and symbolic choices. Building upon this, numerous studies emphasize that adolescents are among the most active groups in online meaning-making. For instance, Livingstone, Mascheroni, and Stoilova (2021) and Buckingham (2022) highlight that youth possess cultural agency to construct and share meanings in digital spaces. Likewise, Phillips and Milner (2017) identify meme culture and digital humor as participatory encoding practices used to express identity and social critique. Similarly, Schifanella et al. (2016) demonstrate that sarcasm operates multimodally by combining text, image, and emoji to produce layered meanings.

In addition, Kelly et al. (2025) show that emojis serve as semiotic tools for expressing irony, stance, and emotion, while Wettstein et al. (2024) describe counter-speech as a resistant encoding form in which adolescents oppose misinformation and hate speech through online discourse.

In the Indonesian context, Kurniadi (2023) discovered that provocative and persuasive language dominates adolescents' digital communication, indicating that linguistic expression serves both as interaction and identity construction. Moreover, informal features such as slang, abbreviations, and pop-culture references play a central role in encoding meaning (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Tagg, 2015). On TikTok, these linguistic features often merge with multimodal elements like emojis, stickers, and sound effects, forming discursive nodes that extend the circulation of meaning. Thus, user comments can be viewed as re-encoding practices that generate new interpretations beyond the original message.

Additionally, the algorithmic structure of TikTok significantly influences meaning production. Montag et al. (2021) and Bishop (2022) explain that its recommendation system operates through interest reinforcement, where early engagement determines the content that continues to appear. As a result, users become enclosed within filter bubbles that intensify emotional narratives without verification. This condition potentially traps adolescents in biased interpretive cycles, highlighting the importance of considering algorithmic influence when examining digital discourse and responses to hoaxes.

Equally important, adolescents' ability to encode meaning critically is shaped by their digital literacy. Livingstone et al. (2021) and Buckingham (2022) define digital literacy as the cognitive, ethical, and social competence to access, evaluate, and produce information responsibly. In Indonesia, Ford, Facciani, and Weninger (2023) reported that literacy interventions reduced misinformation sharing by 64 percent. Similarly, Putri and Rahma (2024) found a negative correlation of 20.6 percent between digital literacy and hoax dissemination among students. Furthermore, initiatives such as *Edukasi Literasi Media untuk Remaja* (JAMS, 2024) and *Pencegahan Berita Hoaks pada Kalangan Pelajar* (JAI, 2024) demonstrate that integrating digital literacy into school curricula enhances students' awareness in filtering online information.

In line with these findings, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Kemendikdasmen, 2025a; 2025b) emphasizes that digital literacy is a strategic component of the twenty-first-century curriculum, combining critical thinking, digital ethics, and social responsibility. Consequently, schools function as agents for developing reflective and responsible digital behavior. Within this framework, adolescents act as active producers of meaning, influenced simultaneously by language, technology, and context.

From the synthesis of theoretical and empirical studies above it suggests that Indonesian adolescents are active participants rather than passive recipients of media messages. They encode meaning through informal language, humor, sarcasm, and multimodal expressions on platforms such as TikTok. Nevertheless, previous research has mainly focused on hoax dissemination and message decoding, leaving the production of meaning among junior high school students particularly regarding public issues that is underexplored. In sum, prior research suggests that Indonesian adolescents are active participants rather than passive recipients of media messages, encoding meanings through informal language, humor, sarcasm, and multimodal expressions on platforms such as TikTok. However, existing work has largely focused on hoax dissemination and audience decoding, with limited attention to how junior high school students produce (encode) meanings in comment practices when responding to viral public-policy misinformation.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines adolescents' encoding strategies and the linguistic–multimodal resources they employ when responding to MBG-related misinformation on TikTok, while triangulating these patterns with students' perceptions and teachers' perspectives on digital literacy.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore how junior high school students construct meaning regarding the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* hoax on TikTok (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of students' linguistic and social experiences in digital interaction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method was considered suitable because it allows the examination of meaning construction in natural contexts and provides detailed insights into participants' lived experiences.

The data for this study were obtained from two main sources, namely TikTok comments and online interviews. The primary data consisted of comments posted by junior high school students on the TikTok account @Bidadarel, which uploaded hoax content about the MBG program. In this study, content was categorized as misinformation (hoax) based on established definitions of misinformation as false or misleading information presented without verified evidence and contradicting authoritative sources (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Specifically, TikTok videos and related comments were identified as MBG-related hoaxes if they contained claims that were inconsistent with official information released by the Indonesian government and relevant public institutions regarding the MBG program. This criterion was used to ensure analytical rigor and to avoid arbitrary labeling of content as misinformation. Tiktok comments were selected using purposive sampling to capture meaningful instances of adolescents' meaning-making. Selection criteria included: (1) explicit references to MBG-related claims identified as misinformation, (2) comments expressing evaluative, emotional, or interpretive responses to the content, (3) comments posted by accounts identifiable as belonging to junior high school-aged users based on self-disclosure and interaction style, and (4) comments posted within the same day as the original video to ensure contextual relevance. Purposive sampling was used to capture variation in linguistic expression and social meaning within digital communication (Palinkas et al., 2015).

In addition to the TikTok dataset, online interviews were conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp with ten students and five teachers from different schools. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Student participants were junior high school students who (1) actively used TikTok, (2) were aware of MBG-related content circulating on the platform, and (3) had direct experience with the MBG program at school (i.e., their school had received MBG and the student had received MBG meals). Teacher participants were selected based on (1) teaching experience at the junior high school level, (2) employment in schools that had implemented the MBG program, and (3) involvement in classroom discussions or activities related to digital literacy or online information evaluation. The inclusion of both students and teachers was intended to provide complementary perspectives on adolescents' online meaning-making practices and the educational context in which digital literacy and information resilience are developed. The interviews used a semi-structured guide consisting of eight core questions, covering students' exposure to MBG-related content, perceptions of the hoax, credibility judgments and verification practices, and perspectives on digital literacy support. In reporting the

findings, this article focuses on interview questions most directly related to students' responses to the MBG hoax, while the remaining questions served to provide contextual background and triangulate interpretations across data sources (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews were conducted synchronously (live virtual meetings) and asynchronously (chat messages) to accommodate participants' availability. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The research procedure consisted of four sequential stages. First, digital observation and data collection were conducted to identify relevant TikTok accounts/videos and document comments meeting the selection criteria. Second, interviews were conducted to validate and complement patterns observed in the comment data. Third, data coding and categorization were performed. All TikTok comments and interview transcripts were coded inductively and then organized using a coding scheme informed by Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding perspective to capture how participants constructed meanings and took stances toward MBG-related misinformation. Coding categories included direct criticism, sarcasm/irony, humor, emotional expression, and neutral clarification. From a linguistic perspective, the data were also classified into digital slang and standard informal language (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Tagg, 2015). Fourth, interpretation was conducted by comparing patterns across comment and interview data to explain students' meaning-making practices and to situate them within teachers' perspectives on digital literacy instruction.

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach (Schreier, 2020; Mayring, 2019). The analytic process included data reduction, thematic coding, interpretation, and cross-source comparison. An explicit integration step was applied by mapping convergences between (a) observed encoding patterns in TikTok comments, (b) students' interview accounts of hoax perception and evaluation, and (c) teachers' perspectives on digital literacy practices.

To strengthen interpretive validity, this study applied source and theoretical triangulation (Patton, 1999; Flick, 2018). Source triangulation compared findings across TikTok comments, student interviews, and teacher interviews, while theoretical triangulation integrated Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding perspective with youth digital literacy scholarship (Livingstone, 2021; Buckingham, 2022).

Following established guidance for internet-mediated research, all potentially identifying information was removed to minimize the risk of re-identification and harm, particularly given the involvement of minors. Accordingly, participant names, school identifiers, and TikTok usernames were anonymized and replaced with pseudonyms/codes (British Psychological Society, 2013; Franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study on how junior high school students encode meanings when responding to MBG-related misinformation on TikTok. The Results are organized into four subsections, each corresponding directly to the research questions. The findings are based on content analysis of TikTok comments and are triangulated with interview data from students and teachers.

The research data were obtained from comments posted by junior high school students on the TikTok account @Bidadarel, which uploaded content related to the hoax issue of "*Makan Bergizi Gratis*" (*Free Nutritious Meals*). The comments were selected using a purposive sampling

technique, considering their relevance to the content and their tendency to provide direct responses to the hoax message. To maintain analytical focus, only comments appearing on the same day as the video upload and listed among the top comment threads were included for further analysis. This selection aimed to highlight the initial and spontaneous reactions of young audiences toward a viral issue. In addition to the digital data, the study was complemented by interviews with students and teachers as a form of triangulation. These interviews were conducted to strengthen the understanding of how students respond to hoax-related issues and how teachers promote digital literacy within the school environment.

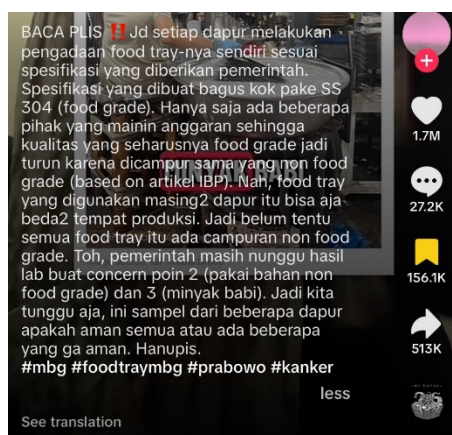


Figure 1. Screenshot of TikTok Content from the @Bidadarel Account

Before analyzing students' comments, this study first examined the characteristics of the TikTok content that served as the source of audience responses. The analyzed content originated from a personal TikTok account that regularly shared a mix of personal posts and reposted content from other users. The account was not affiliated with any official institution and functioned primarily as an individual content creator within the platform's everyday social environment. The content analysis indicated that only a limited number of posts addressed public-policy issues and contained misinformation or critical claims related to the MBG program, while the majority of uploads focused on personal and entertainment-oriented topics. Despite this, the MBG-related content attracted significant attention and generated extensive comment activity. For ethical reasons, all identifying information related to the account and its owner has been anonymized in this study.

This phenomenon indicates that the hoax content related to the *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG) program produced by the account was not a dominant pattern but rather an anomaly within its overall upload activity. Therefore, it can be concluded that the production of this hoax content was primarily intended to increase engagement and insights for the account rather than to express any consistent ideological stance or political agenda. This finding is consistent with previous literature asserting that hoax production on social media is often motivated by digital economic interests, particularly the desire to enhance visibility and audience interaction (Tandoc et al., 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Furthermore, this phenomenon supports the view of Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who argue that social media hoaxes are frequently produced not merely to spread false information but also to obtain benefits in the form of popularity, exposure, or financial gain. Thus, this analysis demonstrates that the MBG hoax content from that account primarily functions as a strategy for increasing audience engagement rather than as a

manifestation of a sustained political communication practice. This interpretation is further supported by engagement metrics indicating that the MBG-related post generated disproportionately high audience interaction, with approximately 12.4 million views, 1.1 million likes, 513,000 shares, and 27,200 comments, compared to the account's other uploads, which typically received engagement in the hundreds or low thousands.

To further understand how the hoax message was constructed, it is essential to examine the content of the post directly. The video, uploaded on August 31, 2025, is a 2-minute and 41-second clip, with the transcript presented as follows.

“Teman-teman semua diam karena ada berita tentang MBG. Jadi beberapa hari lalu, gue ketemu artikel ini. Artikelnya pakai bahasa Inggris, jadi gue jelasin concern-nya dalam bahasa Indonesia. Ada tiga poin yang mau gue highlight. Pertama, di balik tray MBG ada tulisan Made in Indonesia, dan di bawahnya ada tulisan SNI. Tapi ternyata, usut punya usut, dibuatnya di Cina. Dibuatnya di Cina, terus kenapa yang dipakai Made in Indonesia? Kedua, katanya tray itu pakai bahan non-food grade. Maksud gue, kalau ini dikasih ke anak SD—ke anak-anak sekolah—dikasi bahan non-food grade, apa orang tuanya nggak ngamuk di rumah? Ini bisa bahaya. Ketiga, Indonesia negara mayoritas Muslim. Lu mau tahu emulsifier-nya pakai apa? Katanya pakai minyak babi. Coba, minyak babi. Nah, waktu gue baca artikel ini, artikelnya bener-bener ringkas dan bagus, bahkan ada wawancara sama BGN dan perwakilan menteri kalau gue nggak salah. Tapi gue masih mau percaya. Apa memang negara kita sezalim ini? Gue masih mau percaya negara kita. Jadi ada sepercik kepercayaan dari gue bahwa mungkin ini hoaks, mungkin ada yang dilebih-lebihkan. Mungkin minyak babi itu nggak bener—mungkin tesnya di Cina kali, ya menurut gue begitu. Sampai akhirnya gue ketemu berita dari Tempo tanggal 29 Agustus. Berarti gue baru ketemu hari ini tanggal 30 Agustus, baru gue baca. Oh, dari Kemenkominfo—berarti ini beneran. Nih, lo lihat, impor beneran. Poin pertama soal SNI itu bohong, anjay. Made in Indonesia itu gimmick. Gue kira Vincent Rompis doang yang bisa gimmick, pemerintah juga suka gimmick ternyata. Udah gue bilang, regulasi pemerintah—pejabat—kadang lebih lucu dari komen. Gue gemes.”

English translation [author's translation]:

“Everyone's been quiet because there's news about the MBG program. A few days ago, I came across this article. It's written in English, so I'm explaining the concerns in Indonesian. There are three points I want to highlight.

First, on the back of the MBG tray it says *Made in Indonesia*, and underneath it there's an SNI label. But it turns out—after looking into it—it was made in China. Made in China, so why does it say *Made in Indonesia*?

Second, the claim is that the tray uses non-food grade materials. I mean, if you give this to elementary school kids—school children—non-food grade materials, wouldn't parents be furious at home? This could be dangerous.

Third, Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country. Want to know what the emulsifier is? The claim is that it uses pork oil. Seriously—pork oil.

When I read the article, it was really concise and well written; it even included an interview with the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and, if I'm not mistaken, a representative from a minister. But I still wanted to believe in the country. Is it really this cruel? I still wanted to trust it. So there was a small part of me that thought maybe this was a hoax—maybe some parts were exaggerated. Maybe the pork-oil claim wasn't true—maybe the testing was done in China, that's what I thought.

Then I came across a Tempo report dated August 29. I only saw it today, August 30, and when I read it—oh, it was from the Ministry of Communication and Information—so it was real. Look, it really was imported. That first point about the SNI label was a lie. The *Made in Indonesia* label is just a gimmick. I thought only comedians used gimmicks, but apparently the government does too. I've said it before—government regulations and officials can be even more ridiculous than comment sections. It makes me so annoyed.”

In the context of the MBG hoax presented in that TikTok content, several claims were identified as disinformation because they were not supported by technical verification or official government data. The disinformation was articulated through three recurring claims in the video, each of which can be traced directly to the creator's statements in the transcript, as follows:

MBG Tray Allegedly Manufactured in China Despite “Made in Indonesia” Label

The video explicitly claims that the MBG tray is falsely labeled as locally produced: “*di balik tray MBG itu ada tulisan Made in Indonesia... usut punya usut... dibuatnya di Cina... terus siapa yang lu pake Made in Indonesia*” (TikTok video transcript, August 31, 2025) [“on the back of the MBG tray it says Made in Indonesia... but it turns out it was made in China”] (authors' translation). This statement frames the MBG trays as entirely imported from China and implies deliberate deception through the “Made in Indonesia” label.

The claim that all MBG trays were imported from China represents a misleading oversimplification. Based on the minutes of the hearing of Commission IX of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) on October 1, 2025, the Head of the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) explained that a small portion of tray components was indeed imported during the initial phase because local manufacturers had not yet met the technical specifications required for the tray lids. However, all certification and labeling processes were conducted in Indonesia in accordance with rules of origin regulations and the Indonesian National Standard (SNI) (BGN, 2025a). Further clarification in the BGN hearing document dated September 30, 2025, emphasized that the government is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the raw material supply chain and halal certification to ensure product quality, safety, and transparency (BGN, 2025b). The evaluation includes tracing tray material sources, laboratory testing, and cross-agency collaboration with the National Agency for Drug and Food Control (BPOM) and the Ministry of Industry to supervise domestic food-grade products. These steps demonstrate that the government's corrective actions were data-driven rather than reactive to public pressure on social media.

Claim of Non-Food-Grade Trays and Health Risks to Children

The video further alleges that the trays are unsafe for children, stating: “*yang kedua, dia pake bahan non-food grade... kalau lu kasih ke anak-anak sekolah... lu kasih bahan non-food grade*” (TikTok video transcript, August 31, 2025) [“Second, it uses non-food-grade materials. I mean, if you give this to elementary school children—school kids—and you give them non-food-grade

materials] (authors' translation). The claim is amplified by a fear appeal implying severe long-term health consequences: "*Indonesia 2045 orang-orang yang bukan pinter tapi kanker* (TikTok video transcript, August 31, 2025) ["By 2045, Indonesia will be full of people who are not intelligent but have cancer."] (authors' translation).

The assertion that MBG trays failed to meet food-grade standards and posed health risks to children was unsupported by laboratory evidence. The claim was communicated through fear-evoking, hyperbolic wording that amplified perceived health risks. A BPOM report presented in the same Commission IX hearing indicated that the primary weakness in the field was not related to the tray material itself but to hygiene and sanitation practices during implementation (BPOM, 2025). BPOM confirmed that the food-container material was sourced from trusted suppliers and met the required technical specifications. Potential food safety risks were mainly associated with suboptimal washing and drying processes and the distribution of meals beyond the four-hour safety limit. BPOM therefore recommended implementing a Critical Control Point (CCP) system, providing food safety training for field workers, and using sanitation testing equipment in schools.

Allegation of Pork-Derived Emulsifiers

In addition, the video alleges the use of non-halal substances by stating: "*Indonesia negara mayoritas muslim... emulsify-nya pake apa... minyak babi... coba, minyak babi*" (TikTok video transcript, August 31, 2025) ["Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country. Do you want to know what emulsifier they use? What are those materials emulsified with? Lard Pork oil. Seriously—lard."] (authors' translation). This claim positions MBG as violating halal norms and is used to intensify moral and religious concern

However, the issue that MBG trays were produced using pork oil-based emulsifiers was officially refuted. BGN clarified that the tray production process employed neutral industrial lubricants designed to prevent machinery damage and that these materials contained no animal-derived substances. Following the stamping process, all components were washed and sterilized in accordance with the Food Safety Certification Guidelines for MBG Implementation (BGN Decree No. 52.2 of 2025). Furthermore, no laboratory evidence or BPOM test results indicated the presence of pork fat or other non-halal substances in MBG trays. BGN also explicitly reaffirmed its commitment to expediting halal certification across all stages of MBG production and distribution as part of the national food safety program (BGN, 2025b). Therefore, the claim that the trays used "pork oil-based emulsifiers" constitutes a hoax with no empirical or official data support.

Overall, the review of official government and regulatory documents indicates that the circulating claims regarding the MBG program largely stemmed from information distortion and oversimplification of technical facts on social media. Explanations provided by the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and BPOM confirm that issues concerning the tray's origin, packaging quality, and alleged non-halal content lacked empirical foundation and valid laboratory evidence. In other words, the hoaxes circulating on TikTok were not merely products of misinformation but also outcomes of digital virality and meaning reproduction, in which emotion, perception, and visual language act as reinforcing factors in message dissemination.

Within this context, the MBG hoax content functioned as a communicative stimulus that generated diverse responses from young audiences, particularly junior high school students, who expressed their reactions through the comment section. These responses did not represent passive message reception but rather demonstrated how adolescents actively reconstructed meaning in

response to public issues encountered online. The following subsections present the analysis of students' TikTok comments to illustrate how this re-encoding process unfolds through their linguistic choices, communication styles, and emotional expressions.

Encoding of Meanings in Students' TikTok Comment Practices

Building on this context, Table 1 presents representative excerpts from students' TikTok comments along with their assigned encoding categories, while Figure 2 summarizes the percentage distribution of all 33 comments across categories. This section elaborates the dominant patterns and highlights key linguistic and affective features observed in students' responses.

Table 1. Sample Categorization of Encoding in Junior High School Students' Responses to MBG Hoax Content

Account initial	Comment	Encoding Category	Encoding Practice
C1	ga butuh mbg, butuhnya kuliah gratis = "Don't need MBG, what we need is free college."	Direct Criticism	This comment reflects a shift in the meaning of MBG from a nutritional program to a symbol of non-priority policy. The adolescent re-encodes the message as a form of social criticism toward the government's development direction.
C2	Non-food grade itu apa? = "What does non-food grade mean?"	Neutral / Clarification	A question or clarification expressed without a definitive stance
C3	mbg = minyak babi gratis 😏 = "MBG = free pork oil"	Sarcasm / Irony	An ironic remark that ridicules MBG as something harmful, reinterpreting the program as a representation of public distrust toward government policy.
C4	KANN GUA JUGA UDH CURIGAAA APALAGI YG PDA BILANG RASANYA ANEH TRS ADA YG KERACUNAN ITUU = "I already had a bad feeling, especially when people said it tasted weird and someone even got poisoned!"	Emotional Expression	This comment conveys a strong affective reaction, including feelings of anger, disappointment, and fear toward the issue.
C5	yang penting baca doa dan bersyukur sama allah, gua dikasi makan gratis aja udah bersyukur gak kelaparan. = "What matters is praying and being grateful to Allah. I'm already thankful for getting free food and not going hungry."	Other / General	A general comment without indications of criticism, sarcasm, humor, or specific emotional expression.

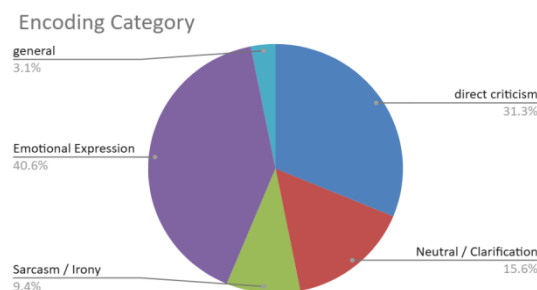


Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of 33 Comments by Encoding Category

Based on the analysis of 33 comments made by junior high school students on TikTok regarding the hoax content of the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* program, five main forms of expression were identified, reflecting the re-encoding processes of meaning among adolescents. The dominant expression category was emotional, accounting for 39% of the total comments. This finding indicates that most students responded to the content by displaying spontaneous emotions such as anger, disappointment, sadness, or doubt. These emotional expressions were typically marked by the use of capital letters, angry or sad emojis, and hyperbolic phrases such as “*TEGA BENGET*” [“so cruel”] or “*ZHALIM BGT*” [“so unfair”]. This pattern demonstrates that emotional engagement serves as the initial stage in adolescents’ meaning-construction process within digital spaces.

Furthermore, the direct criticism category ranked second, accounting for 33% of the total comments. Comments in this category represent a more reflective form of re-encoding, in which students did not merely react emotionally but also articulated critical perspectives toward the MBG policy or the message contained in the hoax content. This criticism appeared through argumentative statements such as “*ga butuh mbg, butuhnya kuliah gratis*” [“Don’t need MBG, what we need is free college”] or “*gapapa tanpa MBG; masakan mamaku lebih enak*” [“It’s fine without MBG; my mom’s cooking is better anyway.”] These responses indicate that some students were able to position themselves as active meaning producers in evaluating public issues.

Meanwhile, sarcasm or irony comprised 9% of the total comments. This expressive form typically appeared through wordplay, irony, or subtle humor that implied indirect rejection of the hoax message. For instance, the comment “*bersyukur belum dapet MBG 🤔🤔*” [“Good thing I haven’t gotten MBG yet 🤔🤔”] contains irony that blurs the boundary between humor and criticism. The use of smiling and blushing face emojis in this comment functions as an affective cue that softens the critical stance while simultaneously signaling sarcasm. Rather than expressing genuine gratitude, the emojis operate as ironic markers that juxtapose positive affect with an implicitly critical message, allowing the commenter to convey skepticism toward the MBG program in a socially acceptable and humorous manner.

The neutral or clarification category accounted for 15%, consisting of comments seeking to ask for information sources or clarify issues without emotional tone, such as “*non food-grade itu apa?*” [“What does non-food grade mean?”] or “*aku uda makan itu tiap hari 🤔*” [“I’ve been eating it every day 🤔.”] In addition, the other/general category made up 3% of the total comments and included those irrelevant to the content, such as “*yang penting baca doa dan bersyukur sama allah, gua dikasi makan gratis aja udah bersyukur gak kelaparan*” [“What matters is praying and being grateful to Allah. I’m already thankful for getting free food and not going hungry.”]

Overall, these findings suggest that adolescents tend to reconstruct the meaning of the MBG hoax through emotional and socially critical expressions, acting not as passive recipients but as active participants in digital discourse shaped by values and emotions.

Linguistic Registers and Multimodal Features in Encoding Practices

This subsection focuses on the linguistic registers and multimodal features used by students in encoding meanings through TikTok comments. The analysis shows that students predominantly employed informal language combined with multimodal elements typical of digital youth communication. The findings highlight that adolescents' language preferences reflect their digital identity and meaning-making practices in online spaces. The use of linguistic register is shown in the following table.

Table 2. Sample Categories of linguistic register in Junior High School Students' Responses to MBG Hoax Content

Account initial	Comment	Encoding Practice	Language Use
C6	sekarang rasanya beruntung karena sekolah belum dapat mbg 🤔🤔 = "Now I feel lucky that my school hasn't received MBG yet 🤔🤔"	An affective reaction expressing fear, anger, or disgust, marked by the use of textual emphasis and emojis.	General Informal
C7	PANTES AJA GUE SKIT PERUT ANYING TIAP MAKAN MBG 🤔 = "No wonder my stomach hurts every time I eat MBG 🤔"	A comment expressing explicit criticism about personal condition or experience, delivered in colloquial and emotionally charged language typical of digital youth slang.	Digital Slang

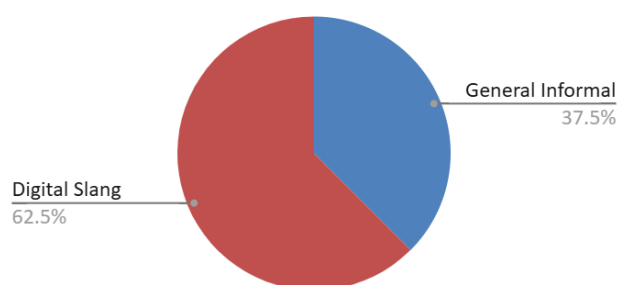


Figure 3. Percentage Distribution of 33 Comments by Language Register

In terms of language use, two main categories were identified in the students' comments: informal language and digital slang. Digital slang dominated the comments, accounting for 63.6%, indicating students' preference for a relaxed, expressive, and peer-oriented communication style. In this study, digital slang refers to nonstandard linguistic forms commonly used in online interaction, including abbreviated words, phonetic spellings, mixed-language expressions, emojis, and noncanonical sentence structures. These forms appeared at the level of words and phrases, such as "pls" for *please* or "pke" for *pakai*; at the level of mixed lexical choices, as in "non food grade amaan plis"; and at the sentence level, where meaning was conveyed through shortened or fragmented constructions combined with emojis, for example

“sekolah gw hari ini keracunan MBG plcc 🤢🤢🤢”. Compared to standard forms, which typically employ complete sentence structures and conventional spelling, digital slang prioritizes speed, emotional expression, and social closeness. The frequent combination of text and emojis further reinforces affective meaning and group solidarity among adolescent users. The use of digital slang

Meanwhile, standard informal language accounted for 36.4% of the comments and was characterized by more complete sentence structures and vocabulary closer to standard forms, though still casual in tone. Examples include “*masakan mamah dan nenek ku lebih enak,*” [“my mom’s and grandma’s cooking tastes better”] and “*sekarang rasanya beruntung karena sekolah belum dapat mbg 🤢🤢.*” [“now I feel lucky that my school hasn’t received MBG yet 🤢🤢.”]. This linguistic style was typically used by students adopting a more reflective and critical stance toward the content.

The dominance of digital slang demonstrates that the re-encoding of meaning occurred not only at the level of message content but also through the linguistic form used. The choice of nonstandard diction and digital symbols indicates that junior high school students expressed meaning through communicative styles reflecting their personality, emotions, and the unique discourse culture of the digital generation.

Students’ and Teachers’ Perspectives Contextualizing Encoding Practices

To contextualize students’ comment-based encoding practices, this study analyzed interview data from ten students and five teachers. The interview findings provide insight into how students perceive MBG-related hoaxes and how teachers address digital literacy in school settings.

Guided by an eight-question interview protocol, the analysis in this Results section focuses specifically on participants’ responses to the MBG hoax, as these directly inform the interpretation of adolescents’ re-encoding practices. The remaining interview questions served to provide broader contextual background and to support triangulation across data sources. Table 3 summarizes the key themes derived from students’ responses to the MBG hoax.

Table 3. Sample Findings from Student Interviews: Responses to the MBG Hoax Program

Respondent	Response to MBG Hoax Issue	Attitudinal Category	Re-encoding Practice
Student 1 (Public Junior High School Jakarta)	Tidak langsung percaya karena belum tentu benar [Did not immediately believe it because the information might not be true]	Selective	Shows a skeptical interpretation; the message is reinterpreted as information that requires verification.
Student 2 (Private Junior High School Jakarta)	Tanggapannya buruk, percaya pada isu bahwa MBG mengandung unsur haram. [Responded negatively, believing the issue that MBG contained non-halal elements.]	Influenced by Hoax	Re-encodes the hoax emotionally; reinforces the disinformation narrative through feelings of disgust and prejudice.

Respondent	Response to MBG Hoax Issue	Attitudinal Category	Re-encoding Practice
Student 3 (Public Junior High School Jakarta)	Tidak menanggapi serius, hanya membahas dengan teman. [Did not take it seriously, only discussed it with friends]	Neutral	Uses the hoax as a light conversation topic; re-encoding occurs within a non-formal social context.
Student 4 (Private Junior High School Malang)	Tidak percaya karena MBG di sekolah enak [Did not believe it because MBG at my school was satisfactory.]	Critical	Confirms the message through empirical experience; re-encoding is based on local reality.
Student 5 (Private Junior High School Malang)	Bisa hoaks dan bisa benar [It could be a hoax or it could be true]	Ambivalent	Re-encoding ambivalen; The dual position between belief and doubt reflects interpretive uncertainty.

Note. This table reports findings from the interview question(s) focusing on students' responses to the MBG hoax; other interview questions were used for contextualization and triangulation.

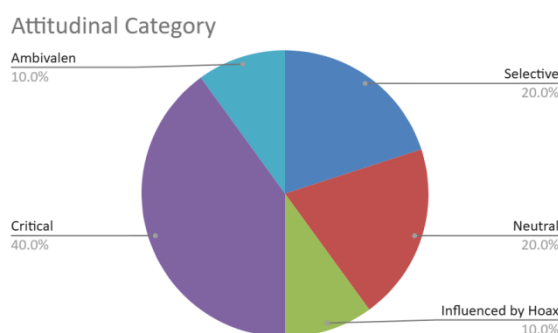


Figure 4. Percentage Distribution of Students' Responses to Hoax News about the MBG Program

Based on interviews with ten junior high school students from various schools, diverse attitudes were observed in responding to hoax issues related to the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* program circulating on TikTok. Among all respondents, 40% of students demonstrated a critical attitude toward the information they encountered on social media. Students in this category sought to verify the accuracy of information through firsthand experiences at school or by observing real situations in their surroundings. They generally stated that the MBG meals at their schools were good and safe for consumption; therefore, they did not believe the negative accusations circulating online.

A total of 20% of students showed a selective attitude toward the information they received. They noted that although information on TikTok was engaging, further verification was necessary to ensure its validity. This attitude reflects caution in processing information and awareness that not everything circulating on social media is reliable. Meanwhile, 20% of students exhibited a neutral attitude, indicating no strong emotional reaction to the MBG hoax issue. They preferred not to respond or simply treated it as a casual conversation topic with friends. Students in this category tended to be less actively involved in digital discussions and displayed neither strong belief nor outright rejection of the issue.

A smaller group (10%) fell into the ambivalent category, showing uncertainty about the accuracy of the information. These students stated that the issue "could be true, but could also be

a hoax,” reflecting a lack of confidence in assessing message credibility. Another 10% of respondents were found to be influenced by the hoax content, particularly by emotionally charged claims, such as accusations that MBG meals contained non-halal or unhygienic ingredients. Students in this group tended to believe the information without further verification.

Overall, the interview results indicate that most junior high school students have developed a tendency toward critical and selective thinking regarding social media information. However, a small proportion still displays vulnerability to emotionally provocative messages. These findings provide an initial overview of students’ awareness in confronting digital hoaxes and highlight how information literacy skills and real-life experiences influence their responses to public issues.

Following the presentation of students’ responses to the MBG hoax issue, this study further investigates the role of schools and teachers in shaping students’ critical attitudes toward digital information. The previous findings suggest that while most students exhibit awareness to verify online information, a minority remain easily influenced by provocative narratives. This condition underscores the need to understand how school-based learning fosters critical thinking and digital literacy skills among students. Therefore, interviews with teachers were conducted to gain insight into digital literacy teaching practices, strategies for addressing hoax issues, and their expectations for strengthening digital literacy education in schools. A summary of the interview findings with five teachers from various schools is outlined in Table 4 below. These data illustrate the diversity of teachers’ experiences and strategies in introducing hoax-related topics and integrating digital literacy into classroom activities.

Table 4. Sample Findings from Teacher Interviews on Handling MBG Hoax Issues in Schools and Teaching Digital Literacy

Respondent	Teaching on Recognizing Hoaxes (Whether Conducted or Not)	Digital Literacy Teaching Strategy	Expectations Regarding Digital Literacy
Teacher 1	<p>“Ya. Kami telah memberikan penjelasan kepada siswa tentang bagaimana seharusnya mereka merespons informasi yang mereka temui, seperti tidak langsung mempercayai atau menyebarkan berita negatif. Namun, mereka didorong untuk terlebih dahulu memverifikasi kebenaran informasi tersebut dengan menggunakan berbagai sumber yang tepercaya.”</p> <p>[Yes. We have provided explanations on how students should respond to</p>	<p>“Saya berusaha mengintegrasikan literasi digital ke dalam pembelajaran di kelas, misalnya dengan memberikan tugas yang mengharuskan siswa mencari informasi di internet, membuat poster atau peta konsep, serta menggunakan aplikasi digital. Saya juga mengajarkan siswa bagaimana menggunakan internet dan platform digital secara positif serta menghindari perilaku negatif di dunia daring.”</p>	<p>“Sebagai seorang guru, harapan saya adalah agar siswa dapat meningkatkan keterampilan literasi digital mereka seiring dengan perkembangan dunia digital. Namun, mereka juga perlu mengembangkan pemahaman tentang etika digital agar hoaks, ujaran kebencian, dan permasalahan serupa dapat dicegah”</p> <p>[As a teacher, my hope is that students can improve their digital literacy skills in line with the development of the digital world. However, they also need to develop an understanding of digital ethics so that hoaxes, hate speech, and similar issues can be</p>

	information they encounter, [I try to integrate digital such as not immediately believing or spreading negative news. However, they are encouraged to verify its accuracy first using various trusted sources.]	[I try to integrate digital literacy into classroom learning, for instance by assigning tasks that require students to find information on the internet, create posters or concept maps, and use digital applications. I also teach students how to use the internet and digital platforms positively and avoid negative behavior online.]	prevented.]
Teacher 2	“Tidak” [“No.”]	“itu mungkin sudah dibahas oleh guru mata pelajaran lain.” [It might be covered by other subject teachers.]	“Saya berharap siswa dapat belajar untuk memverifikasi informasi sebelum membagikannya serta memandang literasi digital sebagai keterampilan penting dan soft skill yang dapat meningkatkan pengetahuan mereka dan menunjang kesiapan kerja di masa depan.” I hope students can learn to verify information before sharing it and treat digital literacy as an important skill and soft skill to enhance their knowledge and future employability.
Teacher 3	“Ya, kami biasanya berdiskusi secara informal dengan siswa sambil berbagi pandangan tentang bagaimana menyaring pengaruh budaya asing dalam diskusi kelas.” [Yes, we usually talk with students informally while sharing ideas about how to filter foreign cultural influences during class discussions.]	“Saat ini belum ada pembelajaran literasi digital yang bersifat khusus.” [There is no specific digital literacy instruction.]	“Setidaknya, kami berharap kurikulum di masa depan dapat memasukkan literasi digital—mengajarkan siswa bagaimana bersikap, mempersiapkan diri, dan beradaptasi dengan era digital. Akan lebih baik jika materi tersebut diintegrasikan ke dalam mata pelajaran yang relevan dan selaras dengan tujuan literasi digital.” At the very least, we hope that future curricula will include digital literacy—teaching students how to behave, prepare, and adapt to the digital age. It

would be better if such content were integrated into relevant subjects that align with digital literacy.

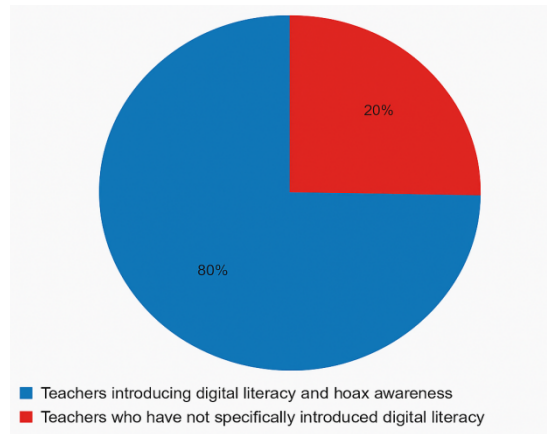


Figure 5. Percentage Distribution of Teachers' Digital Literacy Teaching Practices

Implications for Digital Literacy Education and Information Resilience

Interview data from five teachers across different regions indicate that all respondents were aware of the importance of digital literacy in education, although its implementation varied. The majority of teachers (80%) stated that they had introduced topics related to hoaxes or strategies for filtering digital information to students, either directly through classroom discussions or indirectly by integrating them into other subjects such as Indonesian Language, Civic Education (PPKn), or Information and Communication Technology (ICT). For instance, Teacher 1 explained that they taught students the importance of verifying the truth of information before sharing it.

However, a small number of teachers (20%) admitted that they had not specifically introduced hoax-related material in their classes. They noted the absence of clear curricular guidelines or policies that explicitly position digital literacy as part of the core learning competencies. In terms of strategy, three teachers described using practical approaches, such as creating posters, writing short reflective stories, or conducting discussions on viral news. Other teachers emphasized the need to integrate digital literacy into relevant subjects and to relate it to students' everyday life contexts.

Regarding expectations, all teachers stressed the importance of strengthening digital literacy through the formal school curriculum. They expressed hopes for teacher training programs and technical guidelines to help teach students how to recognize fake news and develop digital ethics. The teachers also highlighted the need for collaboration among schools, parents, and relevant institutions, ensuring that digital literacy becomes a shared educational culture rather than the sole responsibility of individual teachers. Overall, the teacher interviews reflect a high level of awareness about the importance of digital literacy, although its classroom implementation still faces challenges related to curricular structure and resource limitations.

DISCUSSION

MBG Content and the Potential for Hoaxes

The hoax content about the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* program on the TikTok account @Bidadarel illustrates how the production of digital messages plays a role in shaping public perceptions of government policy. From the perspective of Hall's (1980) encoding theory, the content creator acts as the primary encoder, representing reality through a specific ideological framework—namely, a distrust of government policy. The constructed narrative no longer merely conveys information but instead creates a new representation that triggers social emotions such as suspicion, anger, and cynicism. This aligns with Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) view that disinformation operates by exploiting emotion and social tension to reinforce false credibility.

This phenomenon demonstrates how social media algorithms amplify emotional messages through platform-based virality (Cinelli et al., 2020). In this context, the MBG hoax functions not merely as a form of misinformation but as a product of ideological encoding, positioning the national nutrition policy within a negative public discourse. Consequently, adolescent audiences active on TikTok are exposed to emotionally charged stimuli, opening space for re-encoding processes in which students reconstruct meaning based on their perceptions, social experiences, and digital environments.

Students' Responses to MBG Content

The analysis of 33 comments from junior high school students revealed diverse response patterns, ranging from emotional expressions (39%), direct criticism (33%), and sarcasm (9%) to neutral comments (15%). For example, emotional expressions such as “KANN GUA JUGA UDH CURIGAAA APALAGI YG PDA BILANG RASANYA ANEH TRS ADA YG KERACUNAN ITUU” [“I already had a bad feeling, especially when people said it tasted weird and someone even got poisoned!”] and “GILAK BGTTT KLO EMG BENER GT, ZHALIM BGT PEMERINTAH 😡” [“That's insane if it's true—so unfair of the government 😡”] (authors' translation) illustrate strong affective reactions, whereas “ga butuh mbg, butuhnya kuliah gratis” [“Don't need MBG; what we need is free college”] and “gaada mbg pun gapapa, bekal emak lebih enak” [“It's fine without MBG; my mom's cooking is better anyway”] (authors' translation) represent direct criticism. These findings suggest that students actively produced meanings rather than simply consuming information. Within Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding framework, such activity reflects negotiated and oppositional readings, through which audiences reinterpret circulating messages and construct their own understandings in the comment space.

Importantly, these comment patterns mirror students' perceptions of the hoax and their varying levels of digital literacy awareness revealed in the interviews. Students who reported not immediately trusting MBG-related claims and preferring to verify information tended to express more evaluative stances in their online responses, including neutral clarification and direct criticism grounded in doubt or comparison with their lived experience of receiving MBG at school. By contrast, strongly emotional comments often reflected uncertainty and reliance on socially salient cues (e.g., fear appeals and moral/religious framing) rather than evidence-based verification. This indicates uneven critical digital literacy competencies, where some students engaged in credibility assessment while others responded primarily through affective reactions.

The emergence of direct criticism demonstrates students' social sensitivity toward public issues, while emotional and sarcastic comments reveal spontaneous reactions to provocative content. This phenomenon aligns with Phillips and Milner's (2017) concept of memetic participation, in which young audiences use humor, irony, and emojis to reframe and remix media messages. Building on the combined evidence from comments and interviews, two broad re-encoding tendencies can be identified: (1) affective re-encoding, characterized by emotional and humorous/sarcastic expressions, and (2) evaluative re-encoding, characterized by criticism and clarification oriented toward assessing credibility. Together, these tendencies show adolescents' capacity to act as digital meaning producers, although the depth of critical reflection varies across individuals.

Linguistic Phenomena in Students' Digital Discourse

The findings further reveal that the language used by junior high school students in the TikTok comment sections demonstrates the distinctive characteristics of digital-generation communication, which is expressive, emotional, and identity-driven. Among the 33 comments analyzed, 70% employed digital slang or youth colloquial forms, such as *"MBG GUE BASI ANJ"* [My MBG's already spoiled, damn] and *"PANTES AJA GUE SKIT PERUT ANYING TIAP MAKAN MBG 🤢"* [No wonder my stomach hurts every time I eat MBG 🤢], while the remaining 30% used standard informal language, such as *"ga ngerti lg capekk 🤔"* ["I don't get it anymore, so tired 🤔"] and *"jadi....selama ini.... 🤔"* [So... all this time... 🤔]. The dominance of slang reinforces the perspective of digital discourse theory proposed by Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) and Tagg (2015), which posits that online interaction functions not merely as a communication medium but also as a performative arena where adolescents negotiate their social identity through language choice and speech style.

Within digital spaces such as TikTok, concise, humorous, and multimodal language styles serve as the primary instruments for encoding social meaning. The use of emojis, abbreviations, and playful word modifications functions not only as spontaneous expression but also as semiotic cues representing the writer's emotional and ideological stance. For instance, crying or laughing emojis are often used not to denote literal sadness or humor, but as ironic strategies—a distinctive form of re-encoding employed by young users to express criticism in a light-hearted tone.

However, these linguistic phenomena also entail consequences. The dominance of sarcastic and hyperbolic forms often obscures explicit meaning. As noted by Schifanella et al. (2016), sarcasm on social media is inherently multimodal and depends on shared contextual cues or collective knowledge within online communities. When such contextual understanding is absent, the potential for misinterpretation increases, thereby expanding the space for disinformation to circulate.

From the perspective of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory, these linguistic dynamics illustrate that students' re-encoding processes do not always result in critical readings; instead, they sometimes generate new distortions of meaning. Language, which ideally functions as a medium for reflection, can instead reinforce emotional bias when not accompanied by adequate digital literacy skills. Thus, the linguistic behavior of students in digital spaces demonstrates the dual nature of youth expression: as a form of creativity and digital identity, yet simultaneously a potential medium for misunderstanding that perpetuates the cycle of hoaxes on social media.

Digital Literacy and Teaching Practices in Schools

The subsequent findings reveal that 40% of students demonstrated a critical attitude toward the MBG hoax content, as reflected in statements such as “There must be a comprehensive evaluation and independent audit.” Meanwhile, 20% adopted a selective stance in verifying information, for instance, “I don’t immediately believe it because it might not be true.” These results indicate a growing sense of digital awareness among students, although most remain at a reactive stage when responding to viral issues. This finding underscores that digital literacy should not only emphasize technical skills in using technology but also focus on cognitive and ethical dimensions that enable students to construct meaning responsibly (Livingstone, 2021; Buckingham, 2022).

From the educators’ perspective, 80% of interviewed teachers stated that they had integrated digital literacy values into classroom learning, primarily through discussions of current issues and the practice of critical thinking in responding to online information. For example, a teacher from SMP NU Pujon explained, “Yes, in class we often remind students to be careful with hoax information, especially now that AI is advancing so rapidly and information spreads easily.” However, most of these implementations remain informal and depend heavily on individual teacher initiatives. One teacher from SMP Mahaputera shared, “Yes, we usually talk with the students about hoaxes while sharing meals. In class, it’s more about how to filter foreign cultural influences.”

Furthermore, teachers voiced the need for digital literacy to be explicitly incorporated into the school curriculum and supported through continuous professional training. The goal is to ensure that digital literacy goes beyond mere awareness and evolves into a reflective learning habit. As expressed by a teacher from MTsN 1 Bangkalan, “My hope as a teacher is that students can enhance their digital literacy skills amid today’s rapid flow of information and technology. However, they also need to understand digital ethics to prevent the spread of hoaxes and hate speech, which are increasingly common.”

Conceptually, these findings suggest that digital literacy education in schools holds strategic potential to strengthen students’ capacity for critical encoding of information—that is, consciously, ethically, and verifiably constructing new messages, opinions, and meanings. Within Hall’s (1980) theoretical framework, this ability is crucial to ensure that students become not merely media message recipients but active producers of meaning who can balance the dynamics of digital information flow. Therefore, national education policies should position digital literacy not as an additional skill but as a pedagogical foundation for cultivating resilient, critical, and ethical digital citizens.

Overall, the present study demonstrates that the hoax phenomenon surrounding the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* program on TikTok demonstrates a strong interrelation between digital message production, youth audience responses, and the state of digital literacy in schools. The encoding process carried out by content creators produces ideological representations that frame government programs as misguided policies. These representations are subsequently replicated and reinterpreted by students through emotional expressions, critical remarks, and sarcasm—signifying the process of active re-encoding, as explained by Hall (1980).

However, the dominance of affective expression and digital slang indicates that adolescents’ meaning-making processes remain vulnerable to misinterpretation, as they are not yet fully supported by reflective and verification skills. This pattern shows that the primary

challenge lies not only in the technological or cognitive aspects but also in the cultural dimension—specifically, how language and emotion shape students' perception of digital reality.

Therefore, digital literacy education in schools should aim not merely at developing media-use skills, but at fostering critical awareness and digital communication ethics. Strengthening an integrated digital literacy curriculum, providing continuous teacher training, and developing contextual learning resources are urgent steps toward this goal. Such efforts are essential to cultivate a younger generation that is not only technologically competent but also cognitively resilient and ethically grounded in navigating the flow of disinformation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study affirm that digital literacy education serves as a strategic foundation for shaping critical, ethical, and globally competitive digital citizens, contributing to the realization of Indonesia Emas 2045.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how junior high school students construct and re-encode meanings related to the *Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG)* hoax content on TikTok through the lens of Hall's (1980) encoding theory. Based on the analysis of 33 comments, the findings demonstrate that students do not act as passive recipients but as active meaning-makers who reinterpret public issues through linguistic and multimodal expressions. The dominant forms of expression included emotional reactions (39%) and direct criticism (33%), followed by sarcasm (9%), neutral comments (15%), and other general responses (3%). In terms of linguistic form, 70% of the comments employed digital slang or youth vernacular, while 30% used standard informal language. Thus, adolescents' encoding processes in digital spaces unfold through Gen Z's distinctive communication style, characterized by spontaneity, emotional engagement, and social identity expression.

The findings further indicate that these linguistic and expressive forms serve not only as reflections of creativity but also as social mechanisms for negotiating meaning and ideological stance toward public discourse. The use of humor, sarcasm, and hyperbolic language functions as a re-encoding strategy, enabling students to articulate critique without direct confrontation. However, this tendency also creates a risk of misinterpretation, as emotionally charged messages often lose contextual clarity and may contribute to the amplification of disinformation. Hence, the dynamics of adolescents' digital expression underscore the need for critical literacy skills to navigate and produce meaning in emotionally saturated digital environments.

Furthermore, the interview results reveal that while some students have begun to display critical and selective attitudes toward online information, others remain reactive to viral issues. On the other hand, teachers exhibit high awareness of the importance of digital literacy, yet its implementation largely depends on individual initiative and has not been systematically integrated into the curriculum. This situation exposes a gap between awareness and pedagogical practice, one that must be addressed through more coherent and sustainable educational policies.

In light of these findings, digital literacy education plays a strategic role in strengthening students' capacity for critical information encoding—that is, constructing new meanings consciously, ethically, and based on verification. Digital literacy should therefore be positioned as a pedagogical foundation for cultivating critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility in digital interaction. Practically, reinforcing education policies grounded in digital

literacy is essential to foster resilient, critical, and ethical digital citizens capable of navigating the complexity of today's information landscape.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges several limitations, particularly the relatively small dataset and its focus solely on text-based comments, without examining the audio-visual elements of TikTok that may also influence meaning construction. Future research is encouraged to broaden the scope by employing cross-platform and multimodal analyses, incorporating visual, auditory, and narrative dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital meaning-making practices.

Ultimately, this study offers significant implications for policy makers and educational practitioners in designing contextual, interactive, and sustainable digital literacy programs. Enhancing teachers' capacity through continuous training, developing issue-based learning modules, and integrating digital literacy within the national curriculum are crucial steps toward cultivating an intellectually reflective, ethically grounded, and digitally competent generation of Indonesian youth.

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