
Student Participation in Indonesia's Free Meal Program: A Weberian Analysis

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Abstract. The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is a national policy in Indonesia aimed at improving the quality of students' nutritional intake while supporting their academic performance; however, the success of such a program is determined not only by the availability of food but also by how students interpret and respond to it in their daily social lives. This study examines the level of student participation in the MBG using Max Weber's perspective on social action. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a case study design at a public high school, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 students and supported by participation data from 80 students involved in the program, while informants were selected purposively to represent variations in patterns of engagement. Data analysis was conducted thematically and then interpreted through Weber's typology of social action, which categorizes actions into instrumental rationality, value-oriented rationality, affective, and traditional. The research findings indicate that student participation is influenced by various factors, such as discomfort when consuming packaged food (omprengan), time constraints due to school activities, personal taste preferences that do not align with the menu, parental restrictions, the habit of bringing a packed lunch, and a preference for purchasing food at the cafeteria. These varied responses reflect diverse forms of social action rooted in rational calculations, emotional drives, and established habits. These findings critically underscore that the success of school meal policies cannot be measured solely by nutritional distribution but is largely determined by how the social meaning of the program is negotiated by students as the primary actors within it.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meal Program; School Feeding Policy; Social Action Theory

INTRODUCTION

Meeting students' nutritional needs is now increasingly viewed as a critical priority in both educational development and public health policy. Adequate nutritional intake has been shown to significantly contribute to improved concentration, cognitive capacity, and student attendance at school. The World Health Organization emphasizes that malnutrition among school-aged children remains a serious barrier to educational achievement and social participation, particularly in developing countries (WHO, 2023). In this context, school feeding programs have emerged as strategic policy instruments adopted by various countries to address both nutritional gaps and educational inequities (Bundy et al., 2018). In Indonesia, the government launched the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) as a national initiative providing healthy meals at no cost to students. This program aims to improve the quality of nutritional intake, expand access to healthy food, and boost students' learning productivity. Similar practices in various countries have also shown positive results, particularly in improving attendance, focus on learning, and social cohesion within the school environment (Gelli et al., 2020; Osendarp et al., 2021). Although school meal programs such as MBG are designed as structural solutions, their effectiveness cannot be separated from the subjective acceptance of students as primary users. A policy approach that is overly focused on distribution risks overlooking the dimensions of

experience, preferences, and the social significance of food for students. Therefore, the success of such programs requires the integration of nutritional interventions with a contextual understanding of consumption practices at the micro level.

School feeding programs cannot be understood solely as technical initiatives focused on food distribution. Rather, these programs create social spaces where students interpret policies, negotiate meanings, and develop behavioral responses in their daily practices. Several studies indicate that students' acceptance of school meal programs is influenced by cultural preferences, the dynamics of peer interactions, and perceptions regarding the dignity associated with consuming free food (Illøkken et al., 2021; Singh & Dreze, 2021). This indicates that the program's success is determined not only by nutritional quality but also by how students interpret the program's existence within their social context. However, most research remains focused on nutritional outcomes, policy implementation, and administrative efficiency (Aditya & Santoso, 2023; Kusuma & Fitria, 2022), thereby tending to overlook the dimension of students' subjective experiences. This limitation is problematic because students are not merely passive recipients of policy but social actors who actively shape and negotiate meaning through their social relationships and cultural frameworks. Without understanding this perspective, policies risk being reduced to mere distribution projects that fail to address the practical realities at the user level.

Max Weber's theoretical framework of social action offers a relevant analytical foundation for a deeper understanding of these dynamics. In Weber's view, human action is not merely a mechanical response but is imbued with subjective meaning and is always oriented toward the existence of others (Weber, 1978). He distinguishes action into four ideal types: instrumental rational, value-oriented rational, affective, and traditional, which allow researchers to trace how motives, emotions, habits, and rational considerations shape individual responses to social situations (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018). When applied to the MBG context, this perspective opens the possibility of understanding that students' attitudes toward the program do not rest solely on utilitarian logic but are the result of a complex interaction between cost-benefit calculations, emotional experiences, cultural norms, and the influence of peer relationships. Thus, students cannot be reduced to mere recipients of policy but are social actors who actively produce meaning regarding state interventions within the school environment.

Nevertheless, the growing body of literature remains dominated by evaluative approaches that focus on nutritional outcomes and the effectiveness of implementation, while the dimension of students' social actions has been relatively sidelined. Some recent studies have indeed begun to address socio-cultural factors in school feeding programs, such as the study by Kristjansson et al. (2020), which highlights the link between social context and program success; the research by Aurino et al. (2022) on the dynamics of student consumption behavior in developing countries, and the study by Sumberg et al. (2021) which critiques the technocratic approach in school food policy. However, these three studies have not explicitly examined student actions as constructions of subjective meaning within the framework of classical sociological theory. This gap highlights the need for an approach that not only measures impact but also interprets how policies are interpreted and negotiated in everyday practice.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze students' social actions regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program at Sijunjung State High School 2 using a Weberian perspective. By examining students' motives, perceptions, and response patterns, this study is expected not only to enrich the sociological discourse on policy and educational welfare but also to provide a conceptual foundation for formulating policies that are more sensitive to the dimensions of subjective experience and meaning in social practices within the school environment.

METHOD

Research Design

This study was designed within a qualitative framework using a case study approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings, motivations, and dynamics of social interaction underlying students' responses to the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG). Drawing on John W. Creswell's qualitative approach, the research procedure began with defining the research focus, followed by the purposive selection of Sijunjung State High School 2 as an instrumental case, and concluded with data collection using naturalistic techniques (Creswell, 2014). Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and motives for action in a reflective manner, supplemented by the distribution of open-ended questionnaires to map broader trends in attitudes and response patterns while still allowing room for subjective expression. This process was complemented by contextual observations of daily consumption practices as a means of data triangulation. Data analysis was conducted

iteratively through stages of reduction, categorization, and interpretation, by situating students' actions within Max Weber's typology of social action namely instrumental rationality, value-oriented rationality, affective, and traditional thereby enabling a sharper understanding of the relationship between motives, meaning, and social context (Weber, 1978). In the presentation phase, the findings are organized in a narrative-analytical manner, highlighting patterns of meaning that emerge from the actors' perspectives (Verstehen), thereby not only describing phenomena but also interpreting the social constructions that shape students' consumption practices in their daily lives.

The research stages were systematically designed to yield findings consistent with the study's focus and capable of comprehensively addressing the research questions. The research process began with participant selection using purposive sampling, which involved selecting students involved in or exposed to the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) based on variations in their participation levels, thereby ensuring a diversity of social responses. A total of 24 students were involved in in-depth interviews and classified into three behavioral groups regular participation, occasional participation, and minimal or no participation to capture differences in motives and subjective meanings. To broaden the scope of the data, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to 80 students, while participatory observation was conducted over three months during food distribution and consumption to document actual practices in the field. Data collection was carried out using four main techniques: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and analysis of documentation related to policy and program implementation, which collectively enabled methodological triangulation to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Next, the collected data was analyzed by identifying recurring themes that explain the limitations on student participation, such as discomfort while eating, time constraints due to school activities, preferences that do not align with the menu, parental influence, the habit of bringing a packed lunch, and a preference for eating outside the classroom. The results of the analysis were then systematically presented in the form of a narrative description supported by tables, graphs, or charts to clarify the patterns of the findings. The discussion stage focuses on interpreting the meaning of these findings by relating them to research questions, theoretical and practical implications, and their relevance to existing studies. Thus, this entire process not only produces a description of the data but also builds an analytical argument that forms the core of the research contribution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research and data analysis show that student engagement in the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is not uniform but rather varies across different levels of participation depending on underlying motivations and accompanying social contexts. Quantitative findings from the questionnaire reveal three main patterns: consistent participation, limited participation, and low participation, which are further enriched by qualitative data from interviews and observations, thereby providing a more comprehensive picture of students' subjective experiences. Within Max Weber's framework, human action cannot be reduced to a mere reaction to external conditions but is understood as an action imbued with subjective meaning and oriented toward others (Weber, 1978). Therefore, the variations in participation that emerge reflect differences in the orientation of actions, whether based on rational considerations, values, emotions, or deeply ingrained habits. Thus, consumption practices within the MBG program not only reflect efforts to meet nutritional needs but also serve as a social space where students construct, interpret, and negotiate the meaning of the policy through daily interactions.

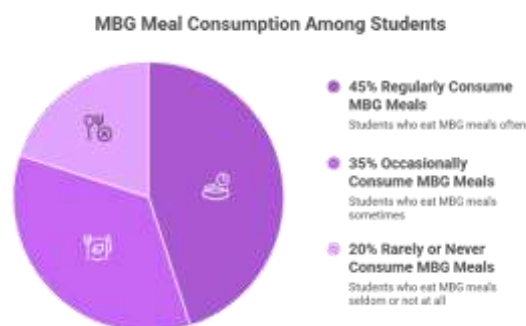


Figure 1. Distribution of Student Participation Rates in the Free Nutritious Meals Program

The diagram shows that MBG consumption among students falls into three participation patterns: 45% of students consume it regularly, 35% consume it occasionally, and 20% rarely or never consume it.

Conceptually, this distribution confirms that the existence of a program does not automatically result in full and uniform acceptance. While most students are indeed involved, the proportion of students who participate only occasionally or are barely involved at all suggests that participation in the school meal program is a social act influenced by various subjective considerations, not merely a biological response to the need for food. Thus, these data indicate that the school meal program functions not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a social experience interpreted differently by students.

From the perspective of Max Weber's theory of social action, these findings can be understood as a reflection of the plurality of action orientations. 45% of students who regularly consume MBG can be interpreted as an example of instrumental rational action, as they utilize the program's meals to save pocket money, maintain energy during study hours, or adapt to daily practical needs. However, this routine behavior is not always purely economic; for some students, consistent consumption may also indicate value-oriented rational action, for example, when they view the program as something good, beneficial, or worthy of appreciation as a form of the state's concern for student well-being. This means that routine participation rates should not be interpreted merely as an indicator of the technical success of distribution, but also as a sign that some students have attributed positive meaning to the program.

As for the 20% of students who rarely or never consume MBG, this cannot simply be interpreted as evidence of moral failure or low nutritional awareness. From a sociological perspective, this category reveals symbolic resistance and a gap in meaning between policy design and user experience. If food is perceived as "relief food," does not suit one's taste, or is consumed in situations that cause discomfort, then refusal becomes a form of affective action and, at the same time, a socially meaningful act. At this point, food is no longer merely an object of consumption, but a symbol tied to dignity, identity, and social standing among peers. Therefore, the 20% figure should not be superficially dismissed as a small number but recognized as a significant signal that some students interpret the program through a social lens distinct from the policy's intended objectives.

From the perspective of the sociology of education, these findings also confirm that schools are not neutral spaces. Schools are arenas of interaction where public policy intersects with adolescent culture, peer relationships, time management, family habits, and consumption preferences. Therefore, the decision to eat or not eat at school is always tied to a broader social context. Students' choices to consume MBG regularly, occasionally, or to refuse it entirely are, in fact, a form of negotiation between policy structures and individual agency. The program is institutionally designed from the top down, but program recipients retain the capacity to accept, postpone, select, or refuse it according to the meanings they construct for themselves.

Scientifically speaking, the 45%–35%–20% distribution underscores the crucial point that the success of a school meal program cannot be adequately measured solely by the quantity of food distributed or by administrative distribution targets. A more substantive measure is the extent to which the program is accepted as a social practice that is normal, dignified, and relevant to students' daily lives. If more than a third of students still participate only occasionally and another fifth tend to stay away, then the main issue lies not only in the food itself, but in the program's social design: how the food is packaged, where it is consumed, when it is distributed, and what meaning it holds for the students. In other words, these findings point to the view that effective school nutrition policies must be built not only on nutritional logic but also on sociological sensitivity to the meanings, emotions, habits, and social interactions of its primary users.

Students' Reasons for Limited Participation

Interviews with 24 students revealed a pattern of recurring reasons for why some of them did not consistently consume the program meals. This pattern indicates that such decisions are not merely random individual choices, but are shaped by accumulated experiences, interactions with the social environment, and the ways in which students make sense of the program they encounter. Thus, non-participation cannot be understood solely as a matter of personal taste or habit, but rather as the result of a process of social interpretation that unfolds within school life. In this context, students' responses reflect a gap between general policy design and the reality of on-the-ground practices, so that the acts of accepting, delaying, or refusing consumption become part of a process of negotiating meaning influenced by social relations, evolving norms, and their daily experiences.

1. Embarrassment in Consuming the Meal Package (Omprengan)

Some students reported feeling uncomfortable or even embarrassed when eating packaged snacks (omprengan) in the classroom, particularly because this took place in front of peers who actively or passively offered social judgments. The presence of others in the same space is not neutral; rather, it creates symbolic

pressure that influences students' decisions to participate. This is reflected in the statements, "Sometimes I feel embarrassed eating the omprengan in class because friends look at it and make jokes. It feels like everyone is watching" (Student 4), and, "Some students say the food looks like charity food, so it makes me uncomfortable eating it in front of others" (Student 12).

Max Weber's perspective on social action, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of affective action, in which individual behavior is influenced by emotions arising from social interactions and collective perceptions. The shame experienced by students does not exist in isolation but is shaped through the process of interpreting others' views; thus, the act of consuming or refusing food becomes part of an effort to maintain one's self-image within a social context. At the same time, the food provided by the program is no longer interpreted merely as an object for fulfilling biological needs, but rather as a symbol associated with certain labels, such as aid or "charity food," which has the potential to lower one's perceived status among peers. Thus, students' decisions not to consume the food reflect socially oriented actions, as Weber emphasized that actions possess subjective meaning and are directed toward eliciting social responses from others (Weber, 1978). These findings indicate that emotional and symbolic dimensions play a significant role in shaping participation, meaning that the success of the program depends not only on the quality of the food but also on how distribution and consumption practices are interpreted within the context of students' social relationships.

2. Time Constraints Due to School Activities

Several students stated that time constraints were the main factor preventing them from consuming the program meals, primarily due to the heavy workload of academic, religious, and extracurricular activities that they had to juggle simultaneously. This situation indicates that consuming MBG is not always a priority in students' daily schedules. This is reflected in the statements, "When the food arrives, I usually have to pray Zuhur and go to the mosque, so I don't always have time to eat it" (Student 11), and, "Sometimes the schedule is very tight between classes and activities, so the food ends up not being eaten" (Student 8).

Within Max Weber's framework of social action, this situation can be categorized as instrumental rational action, in which students make practical considerations regarding time allocation and activity priorities. The decision not to eat is not driven by a rejection of the program itself but rather results from a calculation of efficiency in the face of limited available time. Activities deemed more important or urgent such as religious observance or academic obligations serve as the primary guide in determining actions. Thus, this behavior reflects a goal-oriented action orientation, where individuals adjust their choices based on situational conditions and the practical consequences they face (Weber, 1978). These findings confirm that structural dimensions such as time management and school schedules play a significant role in shaping students' participation patterns; thus, the program's success depends not only on the quality or availability of food but also on the alignment between the program's implementation mechanisms and the rhythm of students' daily activities.

3. Lack of Interest in the Provided Menu

Food preferences are one of the key factors influencing how students respond to the program, particularly in determining whether the food provided will be consumed in full or left uneaten. Interview findings indicate that a mismatch between the provided menu and students' tastes or daily eating habits leads to partial participation. This is reflected in the statements, "Sometimes the menu is not something I usually like, so I take it but I don't finish it" (Student 7), and "The taste is sometimes different from what we usually eat at home" (Student 14). These statements confirm that acceptance of food is determined not only by availability but also by its alignment with sensory experiences and previously established consumption patterns.

From Max Weber's perspective on social action, this response can be understood as a combination of affective and traditional action. The affective dimension is evident in spontaneous reactions to taste and personal preferences, where sensory experiences such as taste and aroma trigger emotional acceptance or rejection. Meanwhile, the traditional dimension is evident in the strong influence of eating habits formed within the family environment, which then serve as a reference for evaluating new foods at school. Thus, students' actions are not entirely based on rational considerations regarding nutritional value, but rather on the alignment between the food provided and deeply ingrained consumption habits. These findings indicate that school meal programs directly confront established food culture structures, so the success of their implementation depends heavily on the program's ability to adapt to local preferences and students' daily experiences, rather than solely on technocratically set nutritional standards.

4. Parental Restrictions

Although not the majority, a small number of students indicated that their decision not to eat program meals was influenced by their parents' preferences and instructions. In this context, family factors serve as a normative authority that shapes students' dietary choices, particularly regarding food safety and hygiene. This is reflected in the statement, "My parents prefer that I eat food from home because they want to make sure the food is clean" (Student 16), which indicates that students' decisions are not entirely autonomous but are tied to values and considerations stemming from the family environment.

Within Max Weber's framework of social action, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of value-oriented rational action, in which behavior is based on certain beliefs considered true or important—in this case, regarding food hygiene and health standards. Students who follow their parents' guidance act not merely out of practical considerations, but because of the internalization of values that serve as guidelines in decision-making. At the same time, parental influence also indicates that students' social action does not occur in isolation but is shaped through broader social relationships, in which the family functions as the primary agent of socialization. Thus, participation in this program is influenced not only by individual factors or the school environment but also by the value systems students bring from home, which can either strengthen or limit their involvement in the MBG program.

5. Bringing Food from Home

Some students indicated that the program's food became irrelevant because they already brought packed lunches from home as part of their daily routine. This situation meant that MBG meals were no longer seen as a primary need, but merely an extra that was often given to others. This is reflected in the statement, "I already bring lunch from home every day, so I usually give the *omprengan* to my friend" (Student 21), which indicates that the decision not to consume the program's food is not driven by outright rejection, but rather by the existence of an alternative that is already available and considered more suitable.

From Max Weber's perspective on social action, this behavior can be categorized as traditional action, that is, action guided by deeply rooted customs that are repeatedly reproduced in daily life. The habit of bringing a packed lunch from home is not merely a practical practice but also reflects consumption patterns shaped by the influence of family and the domestic environment. On the other hand, the act of sharing food with friends also carries a social dimension that indicates a focus on relationships, where food serves as a medium for interaction and solidarity among students. Thus, these findings confirm that the success of the program is determined not only by the availability of food but also by the extent to which the program can adapt to established consumption practices in students' lives.

6. Preference for Eating at the School Canteen

Another factor contributing to low student engagement is the tendency to choose to eat outside the classroom, particularly in the school cafeteria, which is perceived as more flexible and socially comfortable. This choice is not solely about the food, but also about the spatial experience and interactions it offers. This is reflected in the statements, "If I go to the cafeteria, I can choose my own food and eat with friends more freely" (Student 9) and "In the cafeteria we can talk and relax more, so sometimes I skip the meal package" (Student 5). These two statements indicate that freedom of choice, a relaxed atmosphere, and opportunities for interaction are important considerations in determining students' eating habits.

From Max Weber's perspective on social action, this behavior can be understood as a combination of instrumental, affective, and traditional action. The rational dimension is evident in students' choice to obtain a variety of foods according to their preferences, while the affective aspect stems from the need for comfort and relaxation in social interactions. On the other hand, the habit of gathering and eating together with friends in the cafeteria reflects traditional action that has become part of students' social routines. Thus, the decision to forgo program meals is influenced not only by individual factors but also by the appeal of alternative social spaces that better align with their relational needs. These findings confirm that participation in the MBG program is shaped by a complex interplay of personal preferences, social dynamics, and cultural habits, and therefore cannot be reduced solely to a response to nutritional needs.

Mapping Students' Actions Using Weber's Social Action Typology

Students' responses toward the MBG program can be categorized according to Weber's four types of social action.



Figure 2. Typology of Students' Social Actions in Responding to the MBG Program

The figure illustrates the reasons students participate in the school meal program through four action orientations that can be understood within the framework of Max Weber's theory of social action. Each category indicates that students' decisions do not stem from a single consideration but are shaped by a variety of overlapping motives in their daily experiences. First, instrumental rational action is evident when students use the meals as a practical way to save pocket money while maintaining energy during learning activities. In this case, decisions are made calculatively based on the direct benefits gained. Second, value-oriented rational action is seen in students who continue to participate because they believe the program serves a good social purpose, such as promoting nutritional equity or as a form of the state's concern for students.

On the other hand, the affective dimension indicates that students' choices are also strongly influenced by emotional states, such as feelings of comfort, discomfort, liking, or disliking the food provided. These emotions often arise from direct experiences or interactions with the social environment and can either reinforce or hinder participation. Meanwhile, traditional behaviors reflect established habits, whether from eating patterns at home or routines with peers at school. These habits operate subconsciously and are often unrecognized, yet they exert a strong influence on consumption choices. Overall, this picture underscores that students' participation in the meal program cannot be explained solely through the logic of nutritional needs or economic benefits alone. Student behavior is the result of a combination of rational considerations, held values, emotional drives, and deeply ingrained social habits. Thus, programs such as MBG must be understood as complex social practices, where the success of their implementation depends heavily on the ability to accommodate the diverse behavioral orientations of students as the primary actors. This categorization demonstrates that students' engagement with the MBG program reflects multiple layers of motivation rather than a single rational calculation.



Figure 3. Mapping Students' Actions Using Weber's Social Action Typology

Diagram of Social Factors Influencing Student Participation

The interaction between different factors influencing students' behavior toward the MBG program can be illustrated in the following conceptual diagram.

The figure essentially illustrates the factors that shape student participation in the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG), with a primary focus on peer interaction as the most prominent social factor. Meanwhile, other categories such as technological, environmental, legal, political, and economic factors are marked as non-dominant, meaning that students' decisions to participate or not in the program are influenced more by social relationships and daily experiences than by macro-structural issues. Thus, this visualization shows that student participation in the MBG is more accurately understood as a micro-social phenomenon arising from school dynamics, rather than merely because of formal policy design. On the other hand, the affective dimension indicates that students' choices are also strongly influenced by emotional states, such as feelings of comfort, discomfort, liking, or disliking the food provided. These emotions often arise from direct experiences or interactions with the social environment and can either reinforce or hinder participation. Meanwhile, traditional behaviors reflect established habits, whether from eating patterns at home or routines with peers at school. These habits operate subconsciously and are often unrecognized, yet they exert a strong influence on consumption choices.

Overall, this picture underscores that students' participation in the meal program cannot be explained solely through the logic of nutritional needs or economic benefits alone. Student behavior is the result of a combination of rational considerations, held values, emotional drives, and deeply ingrained social habits. Thus, programs such as MBG must be understood as complex social practices, where the success of their implementation depends heavily on the ability to accommodate the diverse behavioral orientations of students as the primary actors.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) cannot be understood solely as an intervention aimed at meeting nutritional needs, but also as a social space where various meanings, identities, and dynamics of peer relationships intertwine and shape students' daily practices. In this context, students do not merely act as recipients of policy but as active agents who interpret the program's existence based on their experiences, values, and interactions within the school environment. These differing interpretations then result in varying levels of participation, ranging from full engagement to partial resistance, reflecting the complexity of the social processes underlying consumption behaviors. Therefore, these findings underscore the importance of a sociological approach in studying welfare programs, particularly one that places subjective meanings and everyday social interactions as key elements in understanding how policies are responded to, negotiated, and implemented in actual practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that student participation in the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is not solely determined by nutritional needs, but is shaped by social networks, peer dynamics, and daily practices that develop within the school environment. The data reveal three primary patterns of participation: consistent engagement (45%), situational participation (35%), and low or even no engagement

at all (20%). This indicates that while the program is widely accessible, students' responses to it are not uniform but highly varied depending on the social contexts they face. In-depth interviews revealed six main factors influencing students' decisions: feelings of embarrassment when consuming packaged snacks (omprengan), time constraints due to school activities, mismatched preferences regarding the menu, parental influence or restrictions, the habit of bringing packed lunches from home, and a tendency to choose food from the school cafeteria. This variety of reasons indicates that consumption practices within the program cannot be reduced to a purely biological issue but are the result of complex interactions between personal preferences, family values, social pressures, and cultural habits that shape how students interpret and respond to policy interventions in their daily lives.

Meaning and Importance of Findings

These findings confirm that the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) not only serves as a nutritional intervention but also functions as a social space where students negotiate their identities, dignity, and relationships with peers. In this context, experiences such as the feelings of shame expressed by some students indicate that the act of eating carries a strong symbolic dimension, particularly when it takes place in the presence of a social group. Food distribution practices that appear technically neutral can give rise to specific social labeling, where program food is associated with aid or a particular economic status, thereby influencing how students position themselves in the presence of others. From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon aligns with Max Weber's concept of social action, which emphasizes that individual behavior is driven by subjective meanings that are always oriented toward others (Weber, 1978). Thus, students' actions in refusing or only partially consuming MBG meals cannot be understood as a rejection of the program's nutritional value, but rather as a form of social response arising from the process of interpreting peers' views and efforts to maintain self-identity within their social environment.

Relationship Between Findings and Social Action Theory

The empirical findings of this study show a strong alignment with Max Weber's typology of social action, in which students' behavior in response to the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) cannot be separated from the various meaning-oriented motivations underlying it. Students who consistently consume program meals with the aim of saving money or maintaining energy during learning activities reflect instrumental rational action oriented toward practical goals. On the other hand, participation driven by an awareness of the program's social value as a form of welfare policy indicates value-oriented rational action. Meanwhile, experiences of shame, discomfort, or dislike toward food suggest the dominance of affective actions influenced by emotions within the context of social interaction. Furthermore, the tendency to follow peers' habits or specific eating routines reflects traditional actions rooted in behavioral patterns that have become ingrained in daily life. The simultaneous presence of these four types of actions indicates that students' responses to the MBG cannot be reduced to economic rationality alone but rather result from a complex interplay between rational calculations, emotional drives, held values, and social norms developing within the school environment. These findings are also consistent with international studies emphasizing the importance of social context in school meal programs, such as Illøkken et al. (2021), who found that student acceptance in Norway is strongly influenced by peer interactions, and Singh and Dreze (2021), who demonstrated that perceptions of social dignity and equality play a role in shaping participation in India. However, this study highlights contextual distinctiveness, where symbolic factors such as shame and social perceptions carry equal weight to rational considerations, thereby underscoring the crucial role of cultural context in shaping how students interpret the program.

Beyond these social and cultural factors, the findings also suggest the possibility of other structural factors influencing the program, such as the timing of food distribution, the quality and variety of the menu, and the classroom layout for consumption, which can indirectly shape students' perceptions of the program. Limited menu variety, for example, has the potential to gradually reduce student interest, regardless of the inherent social significance. This indicates that program design continues to play a significant role in determining participation levels. Therefore, the practical implications of this study emphasize the importance of a more contextual and participatory approach in policy implementation, such as involving students in menu selection, providing more flexible dining spaces, and integrating nutrition education into school activities. Nevertheless, this study has limitations, including a research location limited to a single school, a relatively small number of interview participants, and a focus predominantly on the students' perspective without

involving other stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and program administrators. Moving forward, further research could be developed through cross-regional comparative studies, the involvement of various stakeholders, and a longitudinal approach to observe the dynamics of changes in students' perceptions over time. Overall, these findings confirm that the success of school meal programs is determined not only by the availability and nutritional quality of the meals but also by how students interpret the program within their social lives; thus, effective policies must integrate nutritional dimensions with the social realities of the school environment.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examines students' social responses to the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) through Max Weber's perspective on social action, with the key finding that student participation is not solely determined by nutritional needs or economic considerations, but is significantly influenced by social meaning, peer interactions, and the everyday culture within the school environment. Within a Weberian framework, students' actions regarding the program can be understood through four orientations: instrumental rationality, where students consume food for cost efficiency and energy fulfillment; value-oriented rationality, where participation is driven by a positive view of the program as a welfare policy; affective actions manifesting as feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when eating in front of peers, and traditional actions reflected in the habit of bringing packed lunches or buying food at the cafeteria. Additionally, this study also identified several practical factors influencing participation, such as time constraints due to school activities, menu mismatches with student preferences, parental influence, and the availability of alternative food options outside the classroom, which collectively indicate that student engagement is shaped by a complex interplay of rationality, emotions, and social norms. Therefore, the effectiveness of a program cannot be assessed solely based on nutritional distribution but must consider the social context in which the program is interpreted and experienced by students. Based on these findings, a more adaptive implementation approach is needed, such as providing more flexible and inclusive dining spaces to reduce social pressure, involving students in menu selection to better align with their preferences, and integrating nutrition education into school activities to foster a more meaningful understanding. On the other hand, the study's limitations focusing on a single location and the students' perspective highlight the need for further research encompassing diverse school contexts, involving other stakeholders such as teachers and parents, and employing a longitudinal approach to observe the dynamics of changes in students' perceptions and participation patterns over time. This would yield a more comprehensive understanding and support the development of policies that are not only nutritionally effective but also socially sustainable.

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