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Impression Management and the Digital Image Gap in Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service

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Abstract. Social media has become an important platform for public institutions to construct institutional identity, communicate public services, and maintain public trust. However, the digital image presented by institutions does not always correspond to their actual operational conditions. This study examines impression management and the digital image gap in the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service (Damkarmat) through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm, using a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of the institution's official Instagram and TikTok accounts, and document analysis. Informants included institutional leaders, social media administrators, operational personnel, journalists, and members of the public who had experienced Damkarmat's services. Data were analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that Damkarmat actively employs impression management strategies through idealization, mystification, and dramatic realization to construct an image of a heroic, professional, responsive, and community-oriented institution. Social media functions as a front stage where service achievements and rescue activities are presented to the public, while operational limitations, including inadequate infrastructure, limited human resources, and increasing service demands, constitute the backstage realities. The discrepancy between these digital representations and actual operational conditions generates a digital image gap that may influence public expectations, perceptions, and institutional credibility.

Keywords: Impression Management; Digital Image Gap; Dramaturgy; Public Service Communication; Social Media.

1. Introduction

Social media has fundamentally transformed the relationship between government institutions and the public, shifting public communication from conventional one-way information dissemination toward more interactive, participatory, and transparent forms of engagement (Aji et al., 2023; Praratya et al., 2024; Swastiningsih et al., 2025; Yuan et al.,

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2023). Government institutions are increasingly expected not only to provide effective public services but also to communicate their activities, demonstrate accountability, and establish meaningful relationships with citizens through digital platforms (Ambarwati, 2020; Wanjiru, 2023). Ideally, institutional communication through social media should reflect the actual performance, organizational capacity, and service commitments of public institutions. Transparency, responsiveness, and consistency between institutional communication and service delivery are essential elements in maintaining public trust and institutional legitimacy. Arshad & Khurram (2020) demonstrate that government social media communication can contribute to perceived transparency, responsiveness, and citizens' trust, highlighting its strategic role in contemporary public governance. Similarly, Matheus et al. (2021) emphasize that digital transparency requires appropriate organizational arrangements and institutional practices rather than merely making information available online. Therefore, social media should function not simply as a promotional instrument for constructing a positive institutional image, but also as a communication mechanism that enables the public to understand the actual processes, responsibilities, and limitations of government services.

Despite these expectations, the relationship between institutional representation and operational reality is not always straightforward. Social media provides government institutions with considerable opportunities to select, organize, and present information in ways that emphasize organizational achievements, professionalism, and responsiveness. Through carefully curated photographs, videos, captions, and narratives, institutions can construct particular impressions of their organizational identity before digital audiences. This phenomenon can be understood through Naegele & Goffman (1956) dramaturgical perspective, which conceptualizes social interaction as a performance in which individuals or organizations manage the impressions they create before others. Within this framework, the front stage represents the space where actors perform according to audience expectations, while the backstage accommodates activities, preparations, and realities that are not necessarily visible to the audience (Goffman, 2016). In contemporary institutional communication, official social media accounts can function as digital front stages where public agencies perform their organizational identities through strategic visual and narrative representations. DePaula et al. (2018) demonstrate that government social media communication frequently involves symbolic and presentational exchanges, indicating that digital government communication is not exclusively concerned with conveying administrative information but also with presenting institutional identities. Consequently, a potential discrepancy emerges when the positive image constructed through digital communication differs from the operational conditions experienced by citizens, creating what this study conceptualizes as a digital image gap.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant to emergency service institutions, whose performance is frequently evaluated by the public through expectations of speed, reliability, professionalism, and the ability to respond to critical situations. The Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service (Damkarmat) provides an important empirical context for examining this relationship. As an emergency service institution, Damkarmat utilizes Instagram and TikTok to communicate its activities, document rescue operations, disseminate public information, and demonstrate its presence in responding to community needs. However, its operational responsibilities extend beyond conventional firefighting activities to include various non-fire emergency services, such as animal evacuations and other rescue operations (Hassler et al., 2024; Ivanov & Chow, 2023;

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Mandlikova & Majlingova, 2025). According to the institution's 2025 activity records, Damkarmat handled 64 fire incidents and 729 non-fire incidents, indicating that its operational responsibilities are considerably broader than the public's conventional understanding of a fire department. At the same time, the institution faces operational challenges involving limited personnel, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, geographical conditions, and the simultaneous arrival of emergency reports. These circumstances illustrate the complexity of public service delivery that may not be fully represented through institutional social media content. Furthermore, public criticism surrounding operational constraints, including a viral incident involving the institution's fleet during the security arrangements for a public demonstration in front of the Tulungagung Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), illustrates how digital representations can become a point of comparison when citizens evaluate actual institutional performance (Febrian, 2022; Munawir & Setiarni Putri, 2024). Thus, Damkarmat presents a relevant case for investigating the tension between the institutional image constructed in digital spaces and the operational realities encountered in public service delivery.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between government communication, social media, impression management, and public trust from various theoretical and empirical perspectives. Naegele & Goffman (1956) provides the foundational understanding of impression management through his dramaturgical approach, explaining how actors organize their performances to influence the impressions formed by their audiences. In the context of public relations, McFarland et al. (2023) demonstrate how impression management contributes to organizational legitimation, particularly when institutions encounter discrepancies between organizational identities and public expectations. DePaula et al. (2018) further explain that government communication through social media encompasses symbolic and presentational activities through which public institutions construct and communicate their identities. Meanwhile, Arshad and Khurram (2020) highlight the relationship between government social media communication, perceived transparency, responsiveness, and citizens' trust. Lovari & Materassi (2021) also demonstrate that social media managers in local government institutions perform an important role as intermediaries in maintaining institutional credibility and public trust. More recently, Zeng et al. (2026), through a systematic literature review, identify government social media and citizens' trust as an increasingly important research area, while emphasizing the need for more comprehensive conceptual and methodological approaches. These studies collectively establish that social media communication is not merely a technological activity but also an organizational practice involving identity construction, impression management, institutional legitimacy, and the negotiation of public trust.

Although previous studies have substantially contributed to understanding government communication and institutional image construction in digital environments, several aspects remain insufficiently explored. First, much of the existing literature emphasizes social media utilization, public engagement, transparency, and trust, while paying comparatively limited attention to the relationship between digitally constructed institutional images and the actual operational conditions of public service organizations. Second, dramaturgical studies of digital communication have frequently concentrated on individual self-presentation, political actors, and organizational image construction without sufficiently examining emergency service institutions whose public legitimacy is closely associated with their operational capacity and ability to respond to urgent

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situations. Third, the relationship between impression management and the discrepancy between digital representation and operational reality remains an important area for further empirical investigation, particularly in the context of local government institutions in developing countries. Although DePaula et al. (2018) have examined the presentational dimensions of government social media communication, and Lovari & Materassi (2021) have explored trust-building practices among local government social media managers, these perspectives do not fully explain how institutional performances on digital platforms interact with backstage operational limitations and the expectations of service users. Therefore, this study addresses an empirical and analytical gap by examining not only how public institutions construct favorable digital impressions but also how discrepancies between those representations and operational realities emerge and are managed within emergency public service communication.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and the concept of the digital image gap to examine institutional communication in the context of emergency public services. Rather than treating social media merely as a channel for institutional promotion or public information, this study conceptualizes it as a digital performance space in which institutional identities are constructed, negotiated, and evaluated by different audiences. The front-stage and backstage dimensions are employed to examine the relationship between Damkarmat's publicly displayed image and the operational conditions underlying its service activities. Furthermore, the digital image gap is used as an analytical concept to identify discrepancies between institutional representations, public expectations, and actual service experiences. This approach extends the application of dramaturgical theory beyond individual and political self-presentation toward the organizational practices of local emergency service institutions. Theoretically, the study contributes to the development of digital government communication research by connecting impression management, dramaturgical performance, and operational reality within a single analytical framework. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights for public institutions regarding the importance of transparent communication, realistic institutional representation, and consistency between digital narratives and actual service performance. Such considerations are particularly important for emergency service organizations, where institutional credibility and public trust are closely connected to the perceived reliability of their responses.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze how the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service (Damkarmat) constructs and manages its institutional image through social media and how the relationship between digital representation and operational reality generates a digital image gap. Specifically, the study examines three interconnected dimensions. First, it investigates the impression management strategies employed by Damkarmat in constructing its digital front stage, particularly through the presentation of institutional activities, visual narratives, and public service achievements. Second, it explores the backstage realities underlying these representations, including operational constraints, organizational resources, and the challenges encountered by personnel in delivering emergency services. Third, it analyzes how discrepancies between digital representations and actual service experiences emerge, influence public expectations, and are managed through institutional communication practices. By addressing these dimensions, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how public service institutions negotiate the relationship between institutional image construction and operational accountability in the digital communication environment.

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2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm to examine impression management and the digital image gap in the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service (Damkarmat). A qualitative case study design was adopted to obtain an in-depth understanding of how public institutions construct, present, and manage their institutional images through social media while simultaneously dealing with operational realities in public service delivery. The interpretive paradigm was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding the meanings, communication practices, and institutional experiences underlying the digital representations presented to the public. Goffman (2016) dramaturgical perspective served as the primary analytical framework, particularly the concepts of front stage and backstage, to examine the relationship between institutional image construction and operational conditions. Through this approach, the research explored not only the content published on digital platforms but also the organizational practices and experiences that shaped the institution's public representation.

The research was conducted at the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service (Damkarmat), focusing on its institutional communication practices through official Instagram and TikTok accounts. Data were obtained from three primary sources: in-depth interviews, social media observations, and document analysis. The informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge, involvement, and direct experience relevant to the research objectives. They consisted of institutional leaders, social media administrators, operational personnel, journalists, and members of the public who had previously interacted with Damkarmat's services. Each category of informant provided a different perspective on institutional image construction, digital communication practices, operational challenges, and public perceptions of service performance. The involvement of both internal and external informants enabled the study to examine the relationship between institutional representations and the experiences of audiences who encountered the services directly.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observations of official social media content, and documentation. In-depth interviews were carried out to explore the institution's communication strategies, the considerations underlying content production, operational experiences, and perceptions of the relationship between digital representations and actual service conditions. Social media observations focused on the institution's Instagram and TikTok content, particularly the presentation of rescue activities, institutional achievements, visual narratives, captions, and interactions with the public. These observations were intended to identify how Damkarmat constructed its digital front stage and communicated its institutional identity to online audiences. Meanwhile, document analysis was conducted to obtain supporting information concerning institutional activities, service records, operational conditions, and other relevant materials. The combination of these techniques provided complementary perspectives for understanding the relationship between the institution's publicly displayed image and the realities underlying its public service activities.

Data analysis was conducted through three interconnected stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, interview transcripts, social media observations, and documentary materials were selected, organized, and categorized according to their relevance to the research objectives. The data were subsequently presented through descriptive narratives to identify patterns of institutional impression management, backstage operational realities, and discrepancies between

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digital representations and actual service experiences. The analytical process was guided by Goffman's dramaturgical framework, particularly the distinction between front stage and backstage, while the digital image gap was examined through the relationship between institutional representations, public expectations, and operational realities. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, information obtained from different categories of informants was compared with social media observations and documentary evidence. This process enabled the researchers to develop an integrated interpretation of how Damkarmat manages its institutional image and responds to the challenges of maintaining consistency between digital communication and actual public service delivery.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are organized into three interconnected themes derived from the analysis of interviews, observations of Damkarmat's official social media accounts, and institutional documentation. These themes are examined through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, particularly the concepts of Front Stage, Back Stage, and Impression Management. This theoretical framework provides an analytical basis for understanding how public institutions construct and communicate their identities, how operational realities exist behind institutional representations, and how discrepancies between the two may emerge in digital communication practices.

The research findings indicate that the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Agency (Damkarmat) uses social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, to establish a positive institutional image as a heroic, professional, responsive, and community-oriented public service organization. However, this digital representation does not always reflect the complexity of actual service delivery. Operational constraints, including limited facilities, infrastructure, human resources, geographical challenges, and the high volume of non-fire rescue operations, create a gap between the image presented to the public and the realities experienced by personnel in the field. Based on these findings, the discussion focuses on three main themes: (1) impression management through social media as a Front Stage, (2) operational realities behind institutional representation as a Back Stage, and (3) the emergence of the Digital Image Gap and institutional strategies for maintaining public trust.

3.1. Front Stage and Impression Management through Social Media

The Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Agency (Damkarmat) strategically utilizes social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, as a *Front Stage* for constructing and maintaining its institutional identity. In Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, the Front Stage refers to the social space in which actors perform before an audience and organize their behavior to produce particular impressions. In this context, Damkarmat's social media accounts function as institutional stages where the agency presents its organizational identity through visual documentation, captions, narratives, and interactions with the public. The content published does not merely record daily activities but also communicates particular institutional attributes, including professionalism, responsiveness, courage, and social responsibility. Through this representation, Damkarmat seeks to establish an image of an institution that is consistently present and ready to assist the community in various emergency and rescue situations. The use of social media therefore becomes part of the agency's broader communication strategy for shaping public perceptions of its institutional competence and public service commitment.

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One of the most visible impression management practices is the selection of activities that emphasize the agency's contribution to the community. Rather than limiting its digital communication to fire suppression operations, Damkarmat also publishes activities involving various rescue services, including animal evacuation and assistance in emergency situations that directly affect people's daily lives. This strategy reflects Goffman's concept of idealization, in which actors emphasize socially desirable characteristics to create an image that corresponds with audience expectations. A social media administrator explained this communication approach as follows:

"We try to present activities that are close to the community so that the public knows that the Fire and Rescue Agency's job is not only to handle fires, but also various other rescue services." (Informant I2)

This statement indicates that content selection is a deliberate communication practice intended to broaden public recognition of Damkarmat's institutional responsibilities. By presenting activities that are closely connected to everyday community needs, the agency attempts to move beyond the conventional public perception of firefighters as personnel who only respond to fire incidents. The content consequently constructs a broader institutional identity in which Damkarmat is represented as a public service organization that provides assistance across different emergency and non-emergency situations. In dramaturgical terms, the agency emphasizes selected aspects of its institutional performance to make its presence, usefulness, and social relevance more visible to the audience.

Beyond the selection of activities, the second dimension of impression management concerns the way institutional messages are communicated. The research identifies the use of informative, accessible, and relatively informal language as part of Damkarmat's digital communication practices. Such language enables the institution to communicate technical public service information in a manner that can be understood by different segments of society. This approach is particularly important because emergency service information needs to be delivered clearly and efficiently, without creating unnecessary communication barriers between public officials and citizens. A social media administrator emphasized this objective:

"We try to present activities that are informative and easy for the public to understand so that they are aware of the various services that Fire and Rescue Agency provides." (Informant I4)

The statement illustrates that accessibility is an important consideration in the agency's digital self-presentation. The use of understandable language helps transform institutional activities into public information that is easier to recognize, interpret, and appreciate. From the perspective of Impression Management, the communication style contributes to the construction of an approachable institutional identity while maintaining the agency's public authority. In other words, Damkarmat attempts to balance two characteristics: institutional professionalism and social closeness. This combination enables the agency to appear not only as an official emergency response institution but also as a public service organization that is familiar and accessible to the community.

The third dimension of the Front Stage is the educational function of social media in expanding public understanding of Damkarmat's responsibilities. The research findings indicate that digital content has helped some members of the public recognize services that they previously did not associate with the fire department. This is particularly

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evident in the testimony of a service user who described a change in their understanding after accessing the agency's Instagram content:

"Initially, I thought the Fire Department only handled fires, but after seeing Instagram content, I learned that the Fire Department also helps evacuate snakes and remove rings." (Informant I8)

This testimony demonstrates that institutional self-presentation can also produce an educational effect. The digital representation does not simply encourage the public to perceive Damkarmat positively; it also introduces the wider scope of its services. Activities that might previously have been considered outside the conventional responsibilities of a fire department become more recognizable through consistent digital communication. This finding is significant because public understanding of institutional responsibilities can influence how citizens evaluate and interact with public service organizations. The more comprehensive the information presented, the greater the opportunity for the public to recognize the agency's contribution to community safety and everyday problem-solving.

The analysis of public responses presented in the manuscript indicates that the majority of comments on Damkarmat's social media content are positive and appreciative. Such responses suggest that the agency's digital communication has contributed to establishing perceptions of responsiveness, professionalism, and institutional closeness. However, these positive responses should be interpreted as evidence of audience appreciation toward the published content rather than definitive proof of overall public satisfaction with service performance. From Goffman's perspective, the Front Stage becomes meaningful because the audience participates in interpreting and responding to the performance presented by the institution. Consequently, Damkarmat's impression management is not entirely determined by the content it publishes; it is also shaped by how the public receives, interprets, and evaluates those representations. The interaction between institutional self-presentation and audience response therefore forms an important part of the agency's digital image-building process.

Table 1 Front Stage Practices and Impression Management Strategies of Damkarmat

Analytical dimension	Digital communication practice	Empirical evidence	Impression management function
Content selection	Publishing fire suppression, animal evacuation, and other rescue activities	Informant I2 explained that the agency presents activities close to community needs.	Establishing an image of a responsive and community-oriented institution.
Message construction	Using informative, accessible, and understandable language	Informant I4 emphasized the importance of presenting information that is easy for the public to understand.	Constructing an approachable institution while maintaining professional authority.
Institutional idealization	Highlighting successful rescue and evacuation activities	The manuscript identifies the publication of successful	Emphasizing desirable institutional attributes, particularly

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Analytical dimension	Digital communication practice	Empirical evidence	Impression management function
		rescue activities as part of the agency's digital presentation.	competence and responsiveness.
Public education	Introducing services beyond conventional firefighting activities	Informant I8 learned about snake evacuation and ring removal through Instagram content.	Expanding public awareness of the agency's responsibilities.
Audience response	Receiving positive and appreciative comments on social media content	The manuscript's analysis of public comments identifies predominantly positive and appreciative responses.	Reinforcing the positive institutional image presented through digital platforms.

Source: Research interviews and social media observations.

The table 1 illustrates that Damkarmat's *Front Stage* is constructed through a combination of content selection, message construction, institutional idealization, public education, and audience engagement. These practices are interconnected rather than independent communication activities, the selection of rescue-related content establishes the institution's visible identity, accessible language makes its messages understandable, and public responses provide feedback on how that identity is received. The interview statements from Informants I2, I4, and I8 provide empirical support for the relationship between institutional communication practices and changes in public understanding. Viewed through Goffman's dramaturgical framework, these findings indicate that Damkarmat actively manages its institutional impressions by emphasizing socially desirable attributes and presenting its public service activities in ways that are meaningful to the audience. Nevertheless, the *Front Stage* represents only the visible dimension of institutional performance. It does not automatically reveal the operational constraints, resource limitations, and decision-making processes behind the services being presented. This distinction provides the analytical foundation for examining the *Back Stage* in the next section.

3.2. Back Stage and the Operational Realities of Public Service

The Back Stage of the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Agency (Damkarmat), referring to the operational realities, institutional constraints, and organizational dynamics that are not always visible through its social media representations. In Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, the *Back Stage* is the space in which actors prepare for their public performances and deal with circumstances that are not necessarily presented to the audience. In the context of Damkarmat, this concept describes the actual conditions encountered by personnel when carrying out emergency response and rescue operations. While Instagram and TikTok predominantly display successful interventions, community assistance, and institutional activities, the processes behind these achievements involve complex operational demands. These include the availability of vehicles and equipment, personnel capacity, geographical conditions, weather, and the need to respond to multiple

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reports within limited timeframes. Consequently, the institutional performance visible on social media represents only one dimension of public service delivery, whereas the operational reality involves a broader set of challenges that shape the agency's ability to respond to community needs.

One of the most significant findings concerns the limitations of operational resources, particularly personnel, equipment, and the availability of emergency response facilities. These limitations influence the agency's capacity to respond to different situations, especially when emergency reports occur simultaneously or require immediate intervention. An operational informant described the discrepancy between what the public sees through social media and the conditions officers encounter in the field:

"The public often sees us from the content uploaded on social media, when in the field there are many obstacles that are not always visible, such as limited personnel, weather conditions, and the large number of reports that must be handled simultaneously." (Informant I3)

This statement illustrates that successful rescue documentation does not necessarily represent the entire operational process. The public may see the final outcome of an intervention without understanding the constraints that officers must overcome before and during service delivery. Limited personnel, adverse weather, and simultaneous reports can affect the time and resources required to complete an operation. From Goffman's perspective, these conditions belong to the Back Stage because they constitute the organizational realities that remain outside the institution's publicly presented performance. The finding therefore highlights the distinction between the visible representation of institutional responsiveness and the actual operational capacity required to achieve it.

Another important dimension of the Back Stage concerns the decision-making process involved in determining the priority of emergency responses. Damkarmat does not operate under conditions in which every report can be handled immediately. When several requests arrive at approximately the same time, officers must consider the level of urgency, the availability of personnel, and the circumstances surrounding each incident. An operational personnel informant explained this situation:

"Sometimes several reports come in at the same time. We have to determine the priority of handling based on the level of emergency." (Informant I5)

This testimony demonstrates that response time is influenced not only by the willingness or professionalism of personnel but also by the operational decisions required to allocate limited resources. Prioritization becomes an essential part of emergency service management because different incidents may involve different levels of risk and urgency. However, these decision-making processes are rarely visible in the final documentation published on social media. From a dramaturgical perspective, the prioritization process represents an important backstage activity that supports the institution's front-stage performance. The public may interpret a delayed response as an indication of poor institutional performance, even though the delay may result from the need to prioritize another incident with a higher level of emergency. This finding suggests that understanding public service performance requires attention not only to visible outcomes but also to the organizational processes behind them.

The complexity of Damkarmat's operational responsibilities is also reflected in the substantial number of non-fire incidents and rescue operations. According to the agency's 2025 institutional records cited in the manuscript, Damkarmat handled 64 fire incidents and 729 non-fire incidents or evacuations. These figures demonstrate that the agency's

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activities extend significantly beyond conventional firefighting responsibilities. Non-fire services constitute a substantial part of its operational workload and include various forms of assistance that directly affect community safety and everyday needs. This situation creates additional demands on personnel, vehicles, and equipment because the agency must maintain its capacity to respond to different types of incidents. The data also provide an important context for understanding why the operational realities of Damkarmat cannot be adequately explained through the representation of firefighting activities alone. The agency's public service responsibilities are considerably broader, and this operational diversity increases the complexity of resource allocation and service delivery.

The backstage dimension is further illustrated by the perspective of journalists who observe and report on Damkarmat's activities. Their accounts suggest that public attention is generally directed toward the successful outcomes of rescue operations rather than the operational processes and difficulties encountered by officers. One journalist explained:

"What the public usually sees are the results of the evacuation or rescue. The process and obstacles faced by officers are often not fully exposed." (Informant I6)

This statement provides an external perspective that complements the accounts of internal personnel. It indicates that the limited visibility of operational challenges is not solely a consequence of the agency's communication practices but is also related to how rescue activities are commonly documented and received by audiences. Successful interventions are relatively easy to present as visual narratives, whereas operational preparation, resource limitations, coordination, and decision-making are more difficult to communicate through short social media content. Consequently, the public may develop an understanding of institutional performance based primarily on visible outcomes. In Goffman's framework, this reinforces the distinction between the Front Stage, where successful performances are displayed, and the Back Stage, where the less visible processes supporting those performances take place.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Damkarmat's operational reality is more complex than the institutional image presented through its digital platforms. The limitations of personnel and infrastructure, the need to prioritize simultaneous emergency reports, the high volume of non-fire services, and the operational processes that remain largely undocumented constitute interconnected aspects of its Back Stage. These conditions do not necessarily indicate a lack of institutional commitment or professionalism; rather, they reveal the organizational circumstances within which public services are delivered. The findings also suggest that the successful performance displayed on social media depends on a series of backstage activities that are not always recognized by the public. Therefore, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective helps explain why the evaluation of public service institutions should not rely exclusively on their digital representations. A more comprehensive understanding requires consideration of both the institutional image presented to the audience and the operational realities that shape the delivery of services.

Table 2 Operational Realities and Backstage Challenges of Damkarmat

Operational dimension	Empirical findings	Supporting evidence	Implications for public service
Human resources	Limited personnel and multiple reports	Informant I3 described personnel	Response capacity may be constrained when

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Operational dimension	Empirical findings	Supporting evidence	Implications for public service
	requiring simultaneous responses.	limitations and numerous reports arriving at the same time.	several incidents occur simultaneously.
Operational infrastructure	Limitations involving operational vehicles and equipment.	The manuscript identifies fleet and equipment limitations as institutional challenges.	The availability of facilities influences the agency's ability to carry out rescue operations.
Environmental conditions	Weather and geographical conditions can create difficulties during field operations.	Informant I3 mentioned weather conditions; the manuscript also identifies geographical challenges.	Field interventions may require additional time and operational adjustments.
Emergency prioritization	Officers must determine which reports require more urgent intervention.	Informant I5 explained that handling priorities depend on the emergency level.	Not all reports can be handled simultaneously or immediately.
Service workload	Non-fire incidents substantially exceed fire incidents.	2025 records: 64 fire incidents and 729 non-fire incidents or evacuations.	Damkarmat must manage diverse service demands beyond conventional firefighting.
Visibility of operational processes	The public tends to see rescue outcomes rather than the processes and obstacles behind them.	Informant I6 described the limited visibility of operational processes.	Public perceptions may not fully reflect the complexity of actual service delivery.

Source: Research interviews with Informants I3, I5, and I6; 2025 institutional records of the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Agency (Damkarmat)

The table 2 demonstrates that Damkarmat's *Back Stage* consists of several interconnected operational dimensions rather than a single institutional limitation. Human resource availability, infrastructure, environmental conditions, emergency prioritization, and service workload collectively influence the agency's capacity to respond to public needs. The interview accounts provide qualitative evidence of these challenges, while the 2025 institutional records illustrate the scale and diversity of the agency's workload, particularly the predominance of non-fire services. Meanwhile, the journalist's perspective highlights how these operational realities are not always visible in public representations. Viewed through Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the findings indicate that the *Back Stage* is essential to understanding the actual conditions underlying

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Damkarmat's public performance. The distinction between what is displayed and what takes place operationally also provides the foundation for examining the next finding, namely the emergence of the *Digital Image Gap* between institutional representation and the realities experienced by the public.

3.3. Digital Image Gap and Institutional Strategies for Maintaining Public Trust

The emergence of a Digital Image Gap, namely the discrepancy between the positive institutional image constructed through social media and the operational realities experienced by the agency and the public. In the context of Damkarmat (Dinas Pemadam Kebakaran dan Penyelamatan), this gap emerges because the institution's digital communication tends to emphasize successful rescue operations, rapid emergency responses, professional personnel, and positive service outcomes. However, the realities of public service are considerably more complex than the representations presented through digital platforms. Social media content generally displays the most favorable aspects of institutional performance, while operational constraints, limited resources, technical problems, and procedural challenges receive relatively little attention. This phenomenon can be understood through Erving Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Theory, particularly the concepts of front stage and back stage. The front stage represents the institutional performance presented to the public, whereas the back stage refers to the internal activities and conditions that are not necessarily visible to external audiences. In this case, Damkarmat's official social media accounts function as a front stage through which the institution constructs an image of responsiveness and professionalism. Meanwhile, the back stage encompasses the actual operational conditions encountered by firefighters and rescue personnel. Consequently, the digital image of an institution does not always represent the entirety of its organizational reality. For example, a social media post showing firefighters successfully rescuing residents from a flooded building may generate an impression of immediate and uninterrupted service, even though the operation may have involved limited equipment, difficult access, and considerable coordination among personnel.

The Digital Image Gap also demonstrates how digital representations influence public expectations regarding institutional performance. In the contemporary media environment, audiences increasingly evaluate public institutions through information encountered on social media rather than through direct experience alone. When Damkarmat consistently publishes content demonstrating rapid emergency responses, successful rescue operations, and professional service delivery, audiences may develop an expectation that every emergency report will receive an equally immediate response. However, emergency services operate within specific procedures involving report verification, prioritization of incidents, personnel availability, equipment readiness, and geographical accessibility. This relationship can be explained through McQuail's (2010) Media and Communication Theory, particularly his discussion of media representation and the relationship between media messages and audience perceptions of social reality. Media representations do not merely transmit information; they also influence how audiences interpret institutions, events, and social conditions. Similarly, Entman's (1993) Framing Theory explains that communication selects certain aspects of reality and makes them more prominent in a message. When institutional social media content predominantly highlights successful interventions, the public receives a particular frame of institutional performance: Damkarmat as a responsive and capable emergency service provider. Nevertheless, when citizens encounter operational delays or technical

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limitations, they may perceive these experiences as contradictions to the image previously constructed. For instance, a citizen who regularly encounters videos of rapid fire suppression may question the institution's professionalism when an emergency response takes longer than expected. Thus, the problem is not necessarily the positive representation itself, but the absence of sufficient contextual information that helps audiences understand the complexities of actual service delivery.

The emergence of the Digital Image Gap became particularly visible in the viral incident involving Damkarmat's operational constraints during security arrangements for a public demonstration in front of the Tulungagung Regional House of Representatives (DPRD). The incident attracted public attention because the operational situation was perceived as inconsistent with the institutional image of responsiveness and professionalism previously communicated through the agency's official social media accounts. This situation illustrates how social media can become an arena in which institutional credibility is continuously evaluated and contested by audiences. In this regard, Goffman (2016) Dramaturgical Theory provides an important analytical perspective. When an institution performs its organizational identity through a carefully constructed front stage, unexpected situations occurring in the back stage may expose the limitations of that performance. The viral incident can therefore be interpreted as a moment when the distinction between institutional presentation and operational reality became visible to the public. Furthermore, Coombs (2007), through Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), emphasizes the importance of organizational responses in situations that threaten institutional reputation. Although the operational incident should not automatically be categorized as an institutional crisis, the public criticism generated through social media created a reputational challenge requiring an appropriate communication response. The incident demonstrates that audiences do not evaluate institutional credibility exclusively through official publications; they also compare those representations with information, experiences, and visual evidence circulating through independent digital networks. For example, a video showing operational difficulties can attract public attention more rapidly than an official publication explaining the institution's successful emergency operations. This comparison can create a reputational tension between the institution's intended identity and the public's interpretation of its actual performance.

In response to this discrepancy, Damkarmat seeks to maintain institutional credibility through more transparent communication, clarification of circulating information, and efforts to establish consistency between digital narratives and actual service performance. These strategies indicate that institutional communication should not be limited to publishing positive achievements but must also provide contextual explanations concerning operational challenges. This approach can be understood through Grunig & Kim (2021) Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations, which emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and communication between organizations and their publics. Within this framework, effective institutional communication requires organizations to listen to public concerns while providing accurate and comprehensible explanations. For Damkarmat, this means that responding to criticism should not simply involve defending institutional reputation or rejecting negative interpretations. Instead, the agency needs to explain the operational circumstances surrounding an incident, including equipment limitations, emergency response procedures, geographical difficulties, and the prioritization of emergency reports. For example, when citizens question the response time of an emergency vehicle, the institution can provide an explanation of the incident's

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chronological sequence, the resources deployed, and the factors influencing the response process. Such communication enables the public to understand that emergency services involve complex operational procedures rather than an entirely instantaneous process. Moreover, Coombs (2007) argues that crisis communication should provide appropriate information and responses according to the nature of the situation. Therefore, transparency and clarification become important mechanisms for preventing misunderstandings from developing into more serious reputational problems.

Beyond reputation management, the Digital Image Gap raises a more fundamental issue concerning institutional legitimacy and public trust. An institution may successfully construct a positive digital identity, attract public engagement, and receive favorable responses to its social media publications. However, these achievements do not automatically guarantee that the public will maintain confidence when confronted with operational problems. This relationship can be explained through Hamm et al. (2022) Legitimacy Theory, which defines organizational legitimacy as the generalized perception that an organization's actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of values and expectations. In the context of Damkarmat, legitimacy depends not only on how the institution presents itself digitally but also on whether its actual services correspond with public expectations and accepted standards of responsibility. Furthermore, Mayer et al. (1995) identify ability, benevolence, and integrity as three important dimensions underlying trust. These dimensions offer a useful framework for understanding public confidence in emergency service institutions. Ability concerns the agency's operational competence, benevolence reflects its commitment to public safety and welfare, while integrity relates to consistency between institutional statements and actual conduct. For example, the public may continue trusting Damkarmat despite encountering operational limitations when the agency communicates honestly, demonstrates concern for affected communities, and provides evidence of efforts to improve its services. Conversely, repeated discrepancies between positive institutional claims and actual experiences may gradually undermine public confidence. Therefore, institutional trust should be understood as the outcome of continuous interaction between communication credibility, organizational performance, and public accountability.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that maintaining public trust requires Damkarmat to bridge the gap between digital representation and operational reality. The institution needs to develop a communication strategy that integrates positive service achievements with realistic explanations of operational conditions. Such a strategy may involve publishing educational content about emergency response procedures, providing information about service limitations, documenting equipment maintenance and personnel readiness, and communicating the progress of institutional improvements. This approach is consistent with Jenkins & Plasencia (2024), who explains the participatory nature of contemporary media culture, in which audiences are no longer merely passive recipients of institutional messages but actively circulate, interpret, and produce information. Consequently, institutional communication increasingly takes place within an environment where public narratives can develop independently of official communication channels. In addition, Benoit (1997), through Image Repair Theory, emphasizes the importance of appropriate communication strategies when organizational image and reputation are challenged. For Damkarmat, image repair should not be understood merely as an attempt to restore a positive appearance but as an opportunity to demonstrate institutional responsibility through factual clarification, corrective action,

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and improved service delivery. For example, following public criticism concerning operational vehicle constraints, the agency could communicate the actual circumstances, explain the measures undertaken to address the problem, and subsequently report improvements in operational readiness. Ultimately, the Digital Image Gap demonstrates that public trust cannot be sustained through positive self-presentation alone. Rather, it emerges from the alignment of institutional communication, operational competence, transparency, and accountability. The most credible public institution is therefore not necessarily the one that always appears perfect on social media, but the one that remains honest, responsive, and responsible when confronted with real-world limitations.

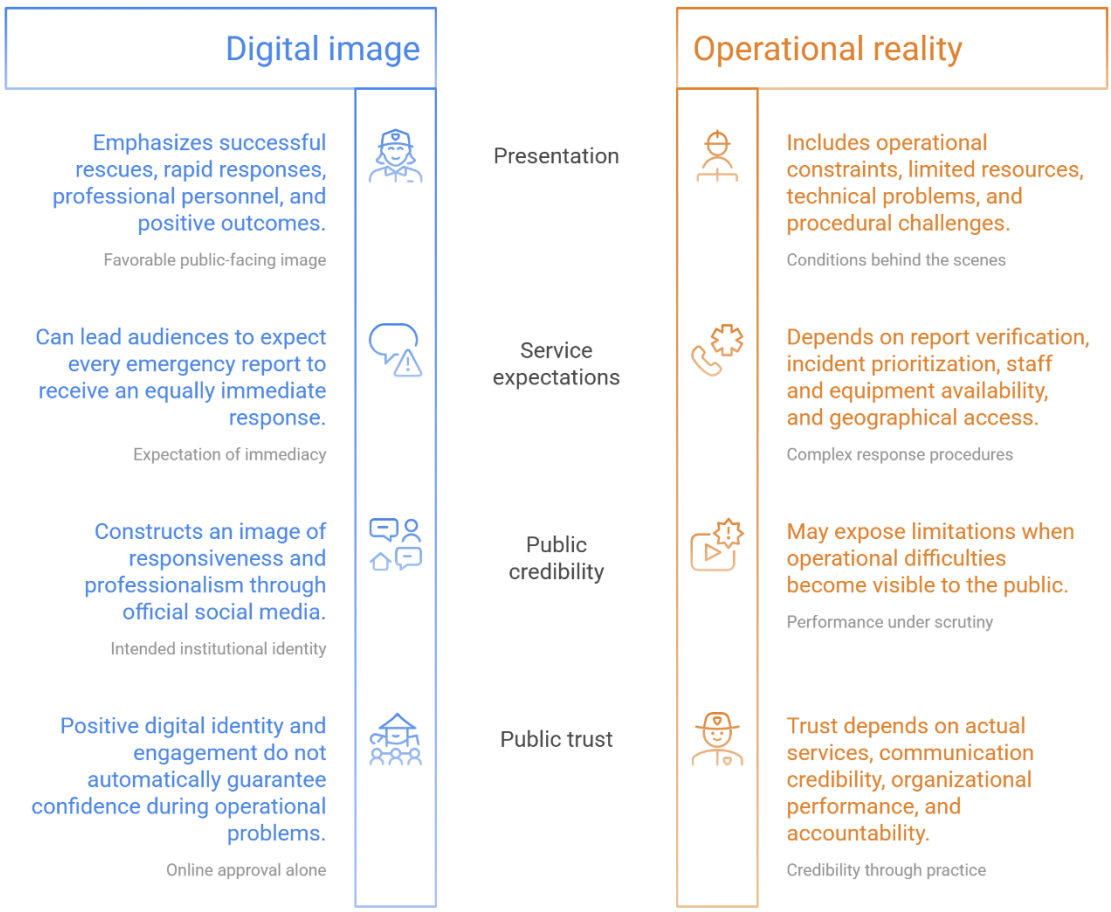


Figure 1 Digital Image versus Operational Reality: Understanding the Digital Image Gap in Damkarmat

The figure 1 illustrates the discrepancy between Damkarmat's digital institutional image and its actual operational realities through four interconnected dimensions: presentation, service expectations, public credibility, and public trust. On the one hand, the digital image emphasizes successful rescue operations, rapid emergency responses, professional personnel, and positive service outcomes, thereby constructing a favorable institutional identity through official social media platforms. However, this representation may generate unrealistic public expectations, particularly the assumption that every emergency report should receive an equally immediate response. On the other hand, operational reality involves various constraints, including limited resources, technical problems, report verification, incident prioritization, personnel and equipment

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availability, and geographical accessibility. These operational complexities may become visible during unexpected incidents, potentially challenging the institution's previously established image of responsiveness and professionalism. The comparison demonstrates that positive digital representation and public engagement do not automatically guarantee institutional credibility or public trust. Rather, public confidence ultimately depends on the consistency between institutional communication and actual service delivery, supported by organizational accountability, transparent information, and demonstrable operational performance. Thus, the figure emphasizes that Damkarmat's institutional credibility should be evaluated not merely through how the agency presents itself digitally, but through how effectively its actual services fulfill public expectations.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Tulungagung Fire and Rescue Service (Damkarmat) actively employs impression management strategies to construct and maintain a positive institutional identity through social media. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, the findings demonstrate that Damkarmat's official Instagram and TikTok accounts function as a *front stage* where the institution presents itself as a heroic, professional, responsive, and community-oriented public service organization. Through idealization, mystification, and dramatic realization, the institution selectively emphasizes successful rescue operations, rapid emergency responses, personnel dedication, and humanitarian activities to strengthen its public image. These representations demonstrate that social media is not merely an information distribution channel but also a strategic communication space through which public institutions manage how their organizational identities are perceived and evaluated by audiences.

Nevertheless, the study identifies a Digital Image Gap between the positive institutional image constructed through social media and the operational realities experienced by Damkarmat personnel and service users. While the digital front stage emphasizes successful interventions and professional service delivery, the backstage reveals various structural and operational constraints, including inadequate infrastructure, limited human resources, technical difficulties, and increasing public service demands. This discrepancy becomes particularly visible when operational limitations emerge in public situations, as illustrated by the viral incident involving Damkarmat's operational constraints during security arrangements for a public demonstration in front of the Tulungagung Regional House of Representatives (DPRD). Such circumstances demonstrate that audiences do not evaluate institutional credibility solely through official digital representations but also compare these representations with observable institutional performance and personal service experiences. Consequently, an idealized digital image may generate public expectations that are difficult to fulfill when the institution's actual operational capacity remains constrained.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective to the analysis of digital impression management in public service institutions by demonstrating how the relationship between front stage and backstage performances can produce a Digital Image Gap. The findings suggest that institutional legitimacy and public trust cannot be sustained through positive self-presentation alone but require consistency between digital communication, organizational capacity, and actual service performance. Therefore, Damkarmat needs to strengthen institutional transparency, provide contextual explanations of operational challenges, clarify information circulating on social media, and demonstrate continuous improvements in service delivery. These

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strategies are essential for bridging the discrepancy between institutional representation and operational reality. Ultimately, the credibility of public institutions should not be measured merely by how successfully they construct an idealized image in digital spaces, but by their ability to communicate honestly, respond responsibly, and maintain accountability in the delivery of public services.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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