



Staging Empathy: Affective Representation in Public Communication during Disaster Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is widely regarded as a crucial element of public communication, particularly in disaster contexts that demand sensitivity toward affected communities. In digital media environments, however, empathy functions not merely as an expression of concern but also as a mediated and performative practice shaped through audiovisual representations. This study examines how empathy is constructed and performed in Instagram videos published by public actors, specifically @zul.hasan, Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, and @bramastavr1, a member of the House of Representatives (DPR RI), during the 2025 Sumatra floods. Employing a qualitative audiovisual analysis, the study examines visual, narrative, and interactional elements through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. The findings identify four dimensions of staged empathy: embodied empathy, represented empathy, relational empathy, and legitimizing empathy. These dimensions demonstrate how empathy is performed through bodily expressions, narrative construction, symbolic interactions with affected communities, and representations of institutional authority. The findings suggest that empathy functions as a performative communication practice through which political actors negotiate moral positioning and public legitimacy in digitally mediated disaster contexts. Theoretically, this study contributes to communication and digital media scholarship by proposing a four-dimensional analytical framework of affective empathy that extends existing discussions of empathy beyond interpersonal emotion toward its representational and performative dimensions in digital disaster communication.

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1. Introduction

In disaster situations, expressions of empathy from public officials are often regarded as an essential component of governmental responses to affected communities. The presence of officials at disaster sites, their interactions with victims, and the delivery of messages conveying concern are commonly understood as moral responses that reflect governmental responsibility in times of crisis. Within the context of disaster communication, empathy plays a crucial role in fostering trust and emotional connection between the government and affected communities (Reynolds & W. Seeger, 2005). Consequently, communication that demonstrates care and concern is often considered a key element in effective crisis communication management. However, such perspectives tend to frame empathy as a direct and authentic expression, without sufficiently considering how empathy may also be mediated, constructed, and produced within public communication practices, particularly in the context of digital media.



In the digital media era, the ways in which empathy is expressed have undergone significant transformation. Social media enables empathy to be not only enacted through direct interaction but also recorded, produced, and circulated in various audio-visual formats accessible to broader audiences. Documentations of officials' visits to disaster sites, their interactions with affected individuals, and narratives of concern shared via social media platforms illustrate that empathy is increasingly presented through the logic of digital visibility. In this context, empathy is not merely an emotional response to human suffering, but also a form of public communication performed before a wider audience (Papacharissi, 2016). Furthermore, within a digital media landscape driven by visibility and audience engagement, expressions of empathy may become part of performative practices that not only convey concern but also shape public image, manage perceptions, and contribute to the production of political legitimacy in the digital public sphere.

In the Indonesian socio-political context, public expectations toward political leaders often emphasize visible presence and emotional responsiveness during times of crisis. Political actors are commonly expected to demonstrate care not only through institutional policies but also through symbolic gestures of proximity with affected citizens, such as visiting disaster sites, engaging in direct conversations, and participating in relief activities. These practices reflect a broader cultural expectation of leadership that values interpersonal warmth, moral responsibility, and embodied presence in moments of collective hardship. As a result, expressions of empathy in disaster situations often become highly visible performances that signal both compassion and leadership legitimacy in the public sphere.

This phenomenon can be observed in responses to the floods that affected several regions in Sumatra in November 2025, during which a number of public officials visited impacted areas and shared documentation of their activities on social media. This study specifically focuses on video content uploaded on Instagram by Zulkifli Hasan (@zul.hasan), Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs, and Verrell Bramasta (@bramastavr1), a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI). The videos posted on these accounts display various representations of empathy in responding to the disaster, including direct interactions with affected residents, gestures of listening to public grievances, physical proximity to victims, and narratives expressing concern for the affected communities. Through this visualization, empathy is communicated not only through verbal statements but also through actions and gestures that are performed and made visible to the public via social media. The profile visualizations of both accounts are presented in Fig. 1 below.

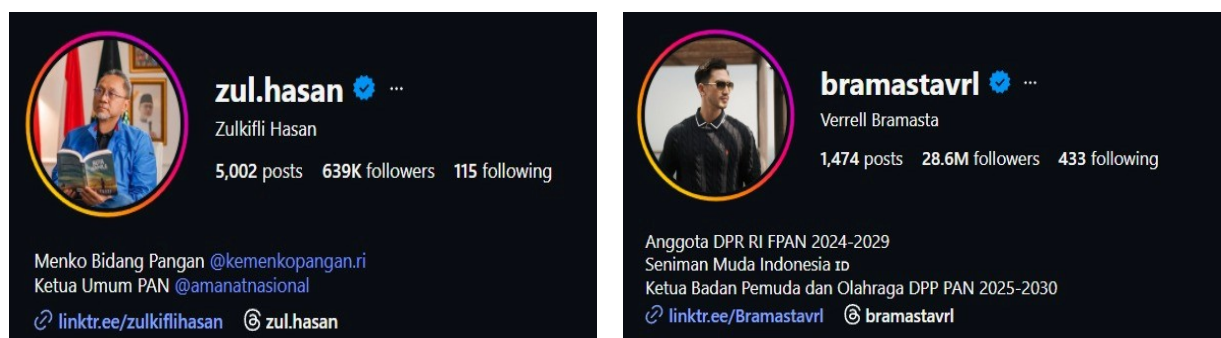


Fig. 1. Screenshot of Profile Pages of @zul.hasan and @bramastavr1

In disaster communication studies, social media has increasingly been recognized as a crucial space for shaping public communication during crises (Setiawan et al., 2026). Research indicates that digital platforms function not only as channels for information dissemination but also as spaces

for interaction between governments and affected communities (Palen & Hughes, 2018). Recent studies further demonstrate that social media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of governmental responses through visual representations, leadership narratives, and emotional expressions circulated to audiences (Coombs & Tachkova, 2024; Eriksson, 2018; Schoofs et al., 2019, 2022). However, these studies tend to position emotions primarily as elements of communication strategies or public engagement, without sufficiently examining how emotions, particularly empathy, are produced as representational practices embedded within power relations in the digital public sphere. Recent studies conducted in the Indonesian context similarly demonstrate that social media has become an important area through which public officials communicate disaster response, construct leadership narratives, and negotiate public trust during crises (Hasibuan & Lasahido, 2025; Indainanto et al., 2026; Syafitri et al., 2026).

Within the field of digital political communication, interactions of political actors on social media are increasingly understood as forms of self-presentation performed before public audiences. One recent study argues that social media enables politicians to display emotional closeness and authenticity as part of their communication strategies (Geise et al., 2025). Similarly, Ekman & Widholm suggest that social media provides a space for political self-presentation that combines personal, emotional, and performative elements in constructing leadership images within the digital public sphere (Ekman & Widholm, 2017).

From this perspective, political communication on social media functions not merely as message delivery but as a performative arena in which identities, emotions, and social relations are staged before a broad audience. Nevertheless, most existing studies focus on digital political communication in general or on information dissemination during crises. Research specifically addressing how empathy is produced and performed by public officials through audio-visual social media content in disaster contexts remains relatively limited. Although these studies provide important insights into digital disaster communication, they primarily examine information dissemination or public engagement, while limited attention has been given to how empathy itself is represented as an effective communication strategy through audiovisual performances on social media (Syafitri et al., 2026; Syam Maella et al., 2026).

The dimension of emotional representation in digital public communication—particularly regarding how empathy is displayed and performed by political actors through audio-visual content, has received relatively limited scholarly attention. In digital communication environments, expressions of empathy are conveyed not only through verbal narratives but also through bodily gestures, interactions with victims, and visualizations of officials' presence at disaster sites, which are subsequently circulated to the public. Moreover, these practices may involve the objectification of suffering, where victims' experiences become part of representations that serve to construct particular meanings, including leadership image and moral legitimacy. Thus, in disaster communication, empathy should be understood not solely as an emotional response to human suffering but also as a representational practice performed for public audiences through social media.

To examine how empathy is represented in digital public communication, this study draws on Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. Hall conceptualizes media as a space where social meanings are not merely reflected but actively constructed through representational practices that shape how events and social actors are presented to the public (Hall et al., 2024). Complementing this view, Goffman understands social interaction as a form of performance in which individuals strategically present themselves before audiences to create desired impressions (Kilvington, 2021). Applied to disaster communication,

officials' visits to disaster sites can therefore be understood as a "front stage," where empathy is enacted through bodily gestures, interactions with affected communities, visual symbols, and narratives of concern that are disseminated via social media. Through these representational and performative processes, digital public communication becomes a space where empathy is simultaneously expressed, represented, and politically performed. Beyond identifying four dimensions of affective empathy, this study contributes to communication scholarship by integrating Hall's theory of representation with Goffman's dramaturgical perspective to explain how empathy functions as emotional expression, media representation, and political performance in digitally mediated disaster communication.

Based on these perspectives, this study examines how empathy is represented and performed in Instagram videos uploaded by political actors during the November 2025 Sumatra floods. By analyzing visual, narrative, and interactional elements, this study addresses the following research question: How is empathy represented and performed through audiovisual public communication by political actors during the 2025 Sumatra flood disaster?

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using audiovisual analysis to understand how empathy is represented in digital public communication by political actors during disaster situations. A qualitative approach is chosen as the study focuses on interpreting meanings emerging from visual, narrative, and performative elements within content published on social media. Audiovisual analysis enables the researcher to examine how messages are conveyed not only through verbal language but also through visual elements such as body gestures, facial expressions, and interactions between actors within the video (Gorea, 2021).

The data consist of video content uploaded on Instagram during the flood disaster that affected several regions in Sumatra in November 2025. This study specifically analyzes content posted on the Instagram accounts of Zulkifli Hasan (@zul.hasan) and Verrell Bramasta (@bramastavrl). These accounts were selected as they represent public figures who actively shared documentation of their visits to disaster sites and presented governmental responses to the flood situation through social media.

From the overall content published during this period, three videos (ranged approximately 1-2 minutes uploaded on 30 November 2025 during the peak of the Sumatra flood response) were selected as units of analysis, consisting of two videos from @zul.hasan and one video from @bramastavrl. The selection was conducted purposively based on several criteria: First, the video explicitly shows official visits to disaster locations, second, it includes direct interaction with affected residents, and third it contains narrative and visual elements that demonstrate expressions of empathy toward impacted communities. Although only three videos were selected, each contained multiple scenes, interactions, and audiovisual representations relevant to the research objective.

Data analysis was conducted through several stages. First, each video was repeatedly viewed to identify scenes and communication elements related to the representation of empathy. Second, these elements were categorized into units of analysis, including visual, narrative, and interactional aspects. Visual elements include body gestures, facial expressions, and physical proximity between officials and affected residents. Narrative elements encompass verbal messages, word choices, and how officials explain the disaster situation or government responses. Meanwhile, the interactional aspect examines how relationships between officials and affected communities are represented within the videos. Third, open coding was conducted to label recurring patterns across these three

analytical units. Similar codes were then compared and grouped into broader conceptual themes through an inductive thematic process, while repetitive scenes that did not contribute to the research objectives were excluded during data reduction. The four dimensions of empathy, embodied, represented, relational, and legitimizing empathy, emerged from these recurring empirical patterns rather than being predetermined by theory. Stuart Hall's representation theory and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective were subsequently employed as interpretive frameworks to explain the meanings and communicative functions of the empirically derived categories.

In the interpretation stage, this study applies the representation approach developed by Stuart Hall to understand how the meaning of empathy is constructed through visual and narrative elements. From this perspective, representation is understood as a process of meaning construction through media practices, where reality is not merely reflected but actively constructed through the ways events and social actors are presented to the public (Hall et al., 2024). Accordingly, the analysis focuses on how body gestures, interactions with affected residents, and narratives of care shape particular representations of empathy in public communication.

This approach is then combined with the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman to understand how empathy is performed as part of social performance within digital public spaces. Within dramaturgy, social interaction is conceptualized as a performance in which actors present certain behaviors before an audience to construct desired impressions (Kilvington, 2021). From this perspective, social behavior is not viewed as purely spontaneous but as a practice of self-presentation involving the management of expressions, gestures, language, and interactional settings in accordance with audience expectations.

Table 1. Analytical Interpretation

Empirical Dimension	Dramaturgical Concept	Indicators in the Video	Interpretation
Embodied Empathy	Front Stage Performance	Body gestures, facial expressions, physical proximity to affected residents	Empathy is performed through bodily expressions in front of the public settings
Represented Empathy	Impression Management	Caption, framing, editing, camera angles, sequencing of scenes	Social media content strategically curates' empathy, constructing officials as compassionate and responsive public figures
Relational Empathy	Audience Interaction	Dialogue with residents, listening to complaints	Empathy is enacted through interactions that symbolically position officials as attentive and emotionally connected to affected communities
Legitimizing Empathy	Presentation of Self	Representation of care and leadership	Empathy functions as a symbolic resource for strengthening political legitimacy and public trust

Goffman outlines several key components of dramaturgy relevant to public communication analysis, including the concepts of front stage, audience, and impression management. Front stage refers to the space where actors present themselves before the public through behaviors aligned with specific social expectations. The audience, in this context, refers not only to individuals present at the disaster site but also to the broader public who consume these representations via Instagram.

Furthermore, the concept of impression management is used to understand how actors manage expressions, body language, and communication narratives to construct particular impressions before audiences. Thus, within this framework, empathy in digital public communication can be understood as part of the presentation of self, where political actors construct an image of care through various performative elements circulated to audiences. The relationship between empirical dimensions and theoretical interpretation in this study is presented in the following table (see [Table 1](#)).

3. Result and Discussion

This section presents the results of the analysis of video content uploaded by public officials on Instagram in response to the flood disaster in Sumatra in November 2025. The analysis identifies four empirical dimensions that illustrate how empathy is performed within the videos, namely embodied empathy, represented empathy, relational empathy, and legitimizing empathy. These dimensions are subsequently interpreted through the dramaturgical framework developed by Erving Goffman.

Embodied Empathy

The first dimension identified in the analysis is embodied empathy, which refers to how empathy is performed through bodily engagement in interactions between public officials and disaster-affected residents. Across the three videos, empathy is communicated not only through verbal statements but also through bodily gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and physical proximity. Officials are shown walking through flooded areas, stopping to converse with residents, bending down while listening to complaints, and maintaining attentive facial expressions that signal concern. Physical proximity is further demonstrated through gestures such as embracing residents, patting children's heads, and positioning themselves among affected communities. Rather than functioning merely as spontaneous interpersonal behaviors, these embodied actions operate as visual resources that construct emotional closeness and solidarity in digitally mediated disaster communication. Through these performances, body language becomes a representational signifier of care and compassion before online audiences. The visualization of these interactions is presented in [Fig. 2](#), which highlights examples of embodied empathy through bodily proximity, attentive posture, and facial expressions that visually communicate care during interactions between public officials and disaster-affected residents.



Fig. 2. Embodied Empathy in the Instagram Account of @zul.hasan dan @bramastavr1

The empathy displayed in the videos is further reinforced through bodily involvement in physical actions related to aid activities for affected residents. In one scene, Zulkifli Hasan is seen carrying a sack of rice while walking among flood-affected communities. In another scene, Verrell Bramasta appears to assist residents in cleaning mud inside their homes using a shovel, as well as distributing aid packages to the community (see Fig. 3). These actions indicate that empathy is not only represented through emotional expressions or verbal interactions, but also through physical engagement in post-disaster recovery activities. The act of directly delivering aid and assisting in cleaning residents' homes symbolically constructs a representation of solidarity between public officials and affected communities.



Fig. 3. Embodied Empathy in the Instagram Account of @zul.hasan dan @bramastavr1

Fig. 3 illustrates embodied empathy through officials' direct involvement in relief activities, highlighting how physical participation complements interpersonal expressions of care during post-disaster recovery. Beyond bodily gestures and physical actions, the visual appearance of the actors also plays a significant role in constructing the representation of empathy displayed in the videos. Zulkifli Hasan is seen wearing a white shirt, black trousers, and orange boots while at the disaster site. Meanwhile, Verrell Bramasta appears dressed in a tactical vest labeled "Verrell DPR RI," along with boots typically used for field activities. From a dramaturgical perspective, elements of appearance such as clothing can be understood as part of expressive equipment, which enables actors to construct particular impressions before an audience (Kilvington, 2021). Studies in political communication have shown that politicians frequently utilize visual elements such as clothing, setting, and symbolic attributes as part of self-presentation practices to construct leadership images within digital public spaces (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Enli, 2015). In this context, the white shirt worn by Zulkifli Hasan signifies simplicity and closeness to the public, while the use of a tactical vest by Verrell Bramasta conveys readiness and direct involvement in field operations. This finding is consistent with recent Indonesian studies showing that the physical presence of public officials during disaster response constitutes an important communicative symbol through which concern and responsiveness are publicly demonstrated (Hasbullah et al., 2026).

In addition, the videos incorporate audiovisual elements that reinforce the emotional atmosphere, particularly through the use of black-and-white color tones combined with melancholic background music. These audiovisual components help construct an emotional environment that amplifies narratives of suffering and empathy toward disaster victims. In this

regard, emotions are understood as a central element in shaping public engagement with social and political issues, where visual symbols and emotional narratives can strengthen the affective resonance between political actors and audiences (Mitani, 2022; Papacharissi, 2016; Schemer, 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

When interpreted through the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman, these elements can be understood as part of a front-stage performance, in which actors present specific behaviors before an audience to construct impressions of care and social proximity. The disaster site functions as a front-stage setting where officials perform not only before local residents but also before a broader audience through social media. Bodily gestures, physical actions, visual appearance, and audiovisual production collectively constitute practices of presentation of self and impression management, shaping the image of officials as present, responsive, and attentive figures in times of crisis. Thus, the empathy displayed in the videos operates not merely as an emotional expression of concern for affected communities, but also as part of a performative practice of public communication staged within digital spaces.

While these visual elements may communicate genuine concern for disaster victims, they also function as impression management strategies through which political actors construct images of responsiveness and moral leadership (Geise et al., 2025; Serazio, 2025). Rather than assuming that these performances solely reflect authentic empathy, they may also be understood as communicative practices shaped by the institutional responsibilities of public officials and the visibility afforded by social media. Political authenticity is therefore not simply an inherent personal quality but is actively produced through strategic self-presentation and mediated performances designed to resonate with audiences (Serazio, 2025). Consequently, the significance of embodied empathy lies not in determining whether these actions are genuine or strategic, but in understanding how bodily gestures, visual appearance, and audiovisual production are represented to construct particular meanings of care and leadership within digital public communication.

Represented Empathy

The second dimension identified in the analysis is represented empathy, which refers to how empathy is not only enacted through direct interactions at disaster sites but also constructed as visual and narrative representations within content disseminated on social media. In this context, empathy does not merely emerge as an emotional experience occurring in the field, but is actively produced through various representational devices, including caption narratives, visual framing, and the depiction of disaster settings that shape how audiences interpret the situation. Research on digital political communication suggests that social media function as a crucial space for political actors to construct self-representations through a combination of visual elements, narratives, and symbolic cues that influence public perceptions of leadership (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Enli, 2015; Klinger & Svensson, 2018).

One form of represented empathy is evident in the narratives of care conveyed through the captions accompanying the video posts (see Fig. 4). The captions employ emotionally charged language that emphasizes the suffering of affected residents, for instance through expressions such as “profound sorrow over homes reduced to rubble,” “the fragility of everything,” and “taking away laughter, memories, and a sense of safety.” These word choices construct an emotional atmosphere that frames the flood as a humanitarian tragedy marked by loss and suffering. The use of emotional language in digital narratives also serves to create affective connections between political actors and audiences, while potentially enhancing public engagement with the social issues being communicated (Chouliaraki, 2012; Iqani & Molokomme, 2017; Papacharissi, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).



Fig. 4. Caption Narratives in The Instagram Account of @zul.hasan dan @bramastavr1

Fig. 4 presents examples of caption narratives accompanying the Instagram videos. The captions employ emotionally charged language and collective expressions that frame the disaster as a humanitarian crisis while positioning political actors as compassionate and responsive leaders. In addition to constructing an emotional atmosphere, the captions also reveal specific discursive strategies through the use of pronouns such as “we,” “our fellow citizens,” and “I.” In the posts by Zulkifli Hasan, the use of phrases such as “our fellow citizens” and “we are reminded once again” constructs a narrative of collectivity that frames the disaster as a shared experience between the state and society. In contrast, in the captions by Verrell Bramasta, the use of the pronoun “I” emphasizes personal involvement in witnessing and responding to the crisis. In political discourse analysis, pronoun choice often functions as a representational strategy that shapes the positioning of actors within social relations and influences how they are perceived by audiences (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2013; Germadnik, 2021; Grabe, 2009).

Beyond narrative and visual framing, the disaster setting also plays a crucial role in shaping the representation of empathy. The videos feature backgrounds such as damaged houses, mud-filled interiors of residents’ homes, and devastated residential areas affected by the flood. The presence of such settings functions not merely as contextual background, but also as a visual element that reinforces the meaning of empathy performed by political actors (see Fig. 5). In media representation, the visualization of crisis spaces often serves as a dramatic element that helps construct emotional proximity between audiences and the events depicted (Chouliaraki, 2012; Pantti et al., 2012).



Fig. 5. Visual Framing of Political Communication in The Instagram of @zul.hasan dan @bramastavr1

Fig. 5 illustrates how disaster settings, including damaged houses and flood-affected environments, are visually framed to reinforce narratives of suffering and care. These visual compositions contribute to the representational construction of empathy by strengthening emotional engagement and shaping audience interpretations of political leadership during crises. Rather than merely documenting humanitarian activities, the captions, visual framing, and editing actively shape how audiences interpret political actors as compassionate and responsive leaders. From Hall's perspective, these representational choices do not simply reflect the reality of disaster response but construct particular meanings about leadership, care, and state presence. Consequently, empathy functions as a representational resource through which emotional expressions are selectively organized and communicated, enabling political actors to frame themselves as morally engaged figures within digitally mediated disaster communication.

These representations further indicate that empathy in digital public communication functions not only as an emotional expression but also as a practice of meaning production shaped by the logic of media visibility. Similar patterns have been identified in recent disaster discourse studies, which show that social media representations not only portray disaster realities but also shape public interpretations regarding state action, accountability, and civic participation (Andesta et al., 2026; Wuna & Fadillah, 2025).

Within social media environments, emotions such as empathy are not simply experienced but are actively constructed through the interplay of text, visuals, and narrative elements that shape how the public interprets an event. In this sense, empathy becomes part of a representational practice that mediates the relationship between the suffering experienced by affected communities and the audiences who witness it through media. This process demonstrates how emotions function as a central element in digital political communication, where representations of suffering and care contribute to constructing meanings of “ideal leadership” characterized by responsibility and state presence in times of crisis (Chouliaraki, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Relational Empathy

The third dimension identified in this analysis is relational empathy, which refers to how empathy is produced through the relationships constructed between public officials and affected citizens as visualized in the videos. Unlike embodied empathy, which emphasizes bodily expressions and physical proximity as visible performances of care, relational empathy focuses on the symbolic construction of interpersonal relationships through dialogue, listening, emotional responses, and reciprocal interaction. While represented empathy examines how empathy is mediated through captions, framing, and visual narratives, relational empathy centers on the communicative processes through which political actors establish emotional connections with affected communities during direct encounters.

In several scenes, the videos depict direct dialogues between public officials and affected residents who share their experiences of loss caused by the flood. For instance, when a resident recounts that their house was swept away and a family member had passed away, Zulkifli Hasan responds with expressions such as “Oh God, my deepest condolences, sir,” while wiping away tears. In another moment, he says, “Please be patient, ma’am, your house will be rebuilt soon,” as a resident explains that her home had been destroyed by the flood. These interactions not only display verbal expressions of empathy but also construct a conversational setting in which the official is positioned as a listener who directly responds to the residents’ experiences of loss (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Relational Empathy in the Instagram Account of @zul.hasan dan @bramastavr1

Fig. 6 depicts interpersonal interactions between public officials and disaster victims through dialogue, listening, and emotional responses during field visits. These communicative exchanges provide evidence of relational empathy by illustrating how emotional connections are symbolically constructed through reciprocal interaction rather than physical gestures alone. Beyond expressions of empathy, these interactions are also accompanied by statements regarding actions to be taken by the government. In one scene, Zulkifli Hasan, in his capacity as Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs, explains that the government will increase the distribution of food aid and rebuild houses that were swept away by the flood. Thus, conversations with affected residents function not only as spaces for expressing empathy but also as sites of political communication in which state actors affirm the presence of government in responding to crisis situations (Reynolds & W. Seeger, 2005; Valenzuela et al., 2018).

Relational empathy is also evident in the interactions depicted in videos by Verrell Bramasta. In one scene, when a resident cries after losing a motorcycle that served as their primary means of livelihood, he responds by saying, “Please don’t cry, ma’am, it makes me sad too,” before offering personal assistance in the form of replacing the lost vehicle. This response illustrates how empathy is not only performed as a reaction to suffering but also as a form of personal engagement that emphasizes emotional closeness between the political actor and affected citizens.

Such interactions are often understood as a form of politics of proximity, a communication strategy that highlights closeness between politicians and citizens through interpersonal interactions that appear spontaneous and personal (Enli, 2015; Lilleker, 2014). Through direct dialogue with affected residents, political actors position themselves not merely as symbolic figures present at disaster sites but as emotionally engaged listeners who respond to lived experiences of suffering.

In Indonesia, such displays of proximity resonate with cultural expectations of leadership that emphasize relational closeness between political actors and citizens. Addressing affected residents as “ibu” or “bapak,” listening to personal stories of loss, and responding with expressions of sympathy reflect communicative practices that frame leaders not only as institutional authorities but also as socially embedded figures within the community. Within disaster contexts, these relational gestures can therefore function as culturally meaningful signals of care and responsibility.

However, within the context of digital public communication, these interactions do not function solely as interpersonal exchanges occurring at the disaster site. They are also mediated representations of social relations circulated to wider audiences through social media. In other words, conversations between officials and residents serve not only communicative functions for those directly involved but also operate as visual narratives that display closeness between leaders and citizens to digital audiences, constructing images of leadership that are humanized, responsive, and attentive (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Klinger & Svensson, 2018).

The interactions presented in the videos further reveal a layered structure of relational empathy, in which empathy operates not only as an emotional response but also as a mechanism that connects personal, institutional, and public domains simultaneously (Ahmed, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2012). On one level, expressions such as “please be patient” or “my deepest condolences” represent interpersonal empathy that fosters emotional closeness between officials and affected citizens. On another level, statements about personal assistance and promises of government intervention extend this relationship into the institutional domain, where political actors appear not only as empathetic individuals but also as representatives of the state with the capacity to act.

Within social media environments, these interactions are subsequently distributed to broader audiences, transforming what is initially a localized and situational exchange into a public representation of state presence and care in times of crisis. In this sense, empathy functions not only to establish proximity between officials and citizens but also as a bridge connecting individual experiences of suffering with broader narratives of leadership and state responsibility in digital public spheres (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Geise et al., 2025).

From a dramaturgical perspective, these interactions can be understood as front stage interactions, in which actors perform particular relationships before an audience to construct specific impressions. Within this framework, affected residents are not only positioned as disaster victims but also as participants in interactions that help shape the political actors’ presentation of self as caring and responsive figures. Thus, relational empathy in these videos does not merely reflect interpersonal relations between officials and citizens but also becomes part of a broader performance of public communication in digital spaces.

In conclusion, relational empathy in these videos extends beyond demonstrating concern for disaster victims; it operates as a communication strategy that constructs symbolic relationships between leaders and affected communities (Geise et al., 2025; Kilvington, 2021). Through dialogue, emotional responses, and interpersonal interactions visualized in the videos, empathy is produced as a form of symbolic proximity that contributes to shaping images of leadership characterized by presence, responsiveness, and care in times of crisis.

Legitimizing Empathy

The fourth dimension identified in this analysis is legitimizing empathy, which refers to how empathy is not only expressed as an emotional response to public suffering but also functions to construct moral and political legitimacy for public actors within digital communication spaces. Legitimizing empathy demonstrates how the various elements of empathy performance contribute to shaping an image of leadership that is perceived as legitimate, caring, and responsive in the eyes of the public.

In several scenes, empathy does not stop at expressions of sympathy or emotional closeness but is extended through statements that emphasize the political actor’s capacity to act. For instance, in interactions with affected residents, Zulkifli Hasan not only conveys verbal empathy but also links it to policy measures and governmental actions, such as increasing food aid distribution, rebuilding damaged houses, and coordinating with local authorities. Statements such as “the government will

do everything possible to help” or “houses that were swept away will be rebuilt by the government” illustrate how empathy is intertwined with narratives of institutional authority. In this sense, empathy functions as an entry point through which the presence of the state is asserted as capable of responding to crisis situations. This finding is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that disaster communication also serves as a discursive arena in which state legitimacy and moral authority are negotiated through representations of responsiveness and public responsibility (Setiawan et al., 2026).

A similar pattern is evident in videos by Verrell Bramasta, where emotional engagement with affected residents is reinforced through the provision of personal assistance, such as replacing a motorcycle lost in the flood. Here, empathy not only builds emotional proximity but also operates as a form of concrete action that strengthens the actor’s image as responsive and solution-oriented. In political communication studies, the combination of emotional expression and tangible action is often understood as a strategy for building moral credibility, referring to the perception that political actors not only understand public suffering but are also committed to addressing it (Enli, 2015; Lilleker, 2014).

From a dramaturgical perspective, this practice can be understood as part of the presentation of self in the front stage, where actors not only display specific emotions but also manage an overall performance to construct impressions of competence and care. In this context, empathy becomes part of impression management, integrated with narratives of action, symbols of authority, and representations of proximity to the public. In other words, empathy is staged as a key element in constructing the public identity of political actors before digital audiences.

From a cultural studies perspective, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a process in which emotions play a role in the production of meaning surrounding political legitimacy. Empathy does not merely function as an affective expression but also as a representational practice that connects public suffering with morally grounded images of leadership. In this regard, visualizations of disaster victims, interactions with affected residents, and narratives of care contribute to what Lillie Chouliaraki conceptualizes as the politics of pity, where suffering is mediated in the public sphere to mobilize emotional responses while simultaneously constructing the moral positioning of those involved. Thus, empathy operates not only as a form of solidarity but also as a mechanism linking emotion to political legitimacy (Chouliaraki, 2012).

These findings indicate that empathy serves a dual function in digital disaster communication. On the one hand, it communicates solidarity with disaster victims by demonstrating emotional engagement and responsiveness to public suffering. On the other hand, it reinforces political legitimacy by positioning public officials as morally responsible and capable leaders. Nevertheless, these representations should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of strategic image management, since such actions may also reflect the institutional responsibilities inherent in public office. From this perspective, the significance of legitimizing empathy lies not in determining the actors’ actual intentions but in examining how these actions are represented, mediated, and interpreted within digital public communication (Hasbullah et al., 2026).

However, this analysis also indicates that legitimacy constructed through empathy is inseparable from the logic of visibility in digital media environments. The presence of cameras, visual framing, and the circulation of content through social media platforms enable empathy to function as a performance that can be accessed, evaluated, and responded to by broader audiences. In this context, empathy reveals an inherent ambivalence: on the one hand, it reflects genuine concern for affected communities; on the other hand, it operates as a communication strategy that reinforces the image and authority of political actors. In other words, empathy in digital public

communication serves not only as a medium of solidarity but also as a symbolic practice contributing to the production and reproduction of political legitimacy. The visibility afforded by social media also enables audiences to negotiate, challenge, or reinforce the legitimacy of political actors through their interpretations of disaster-related narratives (Triana et al., 2026). In conclusion, legitimizing empathy demonstrates that empathy in the context of disaster communication cannot be understood solely as an emotional response to public suffering. Rather, it functions as an integrated communication practice that intersects with self-presentation, social relations, and institutional narratives, collectively shaping the moral and political legitimacy of public actors in digital spaces.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that empathy in digital public communication during disaster situations is not merely an emotional response but a multidimensional representational and performative practice shaped through media visibility. By analyzing Instagram videos of political actors responding to the 2025 Sumatra floods, the study identified four interrelated dimensions of empathy, embodied empathy, represented empathy, relational empathy, and legitimizing empathy. These dimensions reveal that empathy is constructed through bodily expressions, visual and narrative representations, interpersonal interactions with disaster victims, and institutional claims that collectively shape public perceptions of leadership and care.

The findings further suggest that empathy in digital disaster communication occupies an ambivalent position, simultaneously functioning as an expression of solidarity and as a strategic performance that contributes to the construction of political legitimacy. Theoretically, this study contributes to communication scholarship by extending discussions of empathy beyond interpersonal emotion toward a representational and performative perspective. By integrating Stuart Hall's theory of representation with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the study offers an analytical model for understanding how empathy is constructed, negotiated, and communicated within digitally mediated disaster contexts.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of developing disaster communication that prioritizes ethical representation, respects the dignity of affected communities, and promotes transparent, victim-oriented public engagement rather than relying primarily on symbolic visibility or image-building. This study is limited by its focus on three Instagram videos within a single disaster context, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other platforms, political actors, or disaster settings. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine empathy across multiple social media platforms, compare different disaster events and political contexts, and incorporate audience reception perspectives to better understand how mediated performances of empathy are interpreted and evaluated by the public.

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