

The dialectical tension in police digital public relations: A case study of the Surabaya Metropolitan Police

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of social media by police institutions provides opportunities to reach broader audiences, build public relationships, and construct institutional images, while simultaneously creating greater space for public criticism and complaints. This study aims to examine the dialectical tension in the digital public relations practices of the Public Relations Division of Surabaya Metropolitan Police (Polrestabes Surabaya) in responding to public criticism through Instagram. Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) is employed as the primary analytical framework to examine how tensions between institutional representation and public meaning-making emerge, are sustained, and are negotiated, while impression management serves as a supporting perspective for interpreting institutional image construction. This qualitative study adopts an interpretive paradigm and analyzes data collected through online observation and documentation of the official Instagram account from 1 September 2023 to 30 August 2024. The findings indicate that the Public Relations Division predominantly employs action-based responses through self-promotion and exemplification, while dialogic responses remain more limited. Selfpromotion is more positively received when institutional actions communicated are directly aligned with issues raised by the public, whereas exemplification emphasizes humanitarian values and social commitment to construct a favorable institutional image. However, these strategies remain constrained by limited dialogic engagement and the absence of systematic evaluation. The findings further demonstrate tensions between institutional narratives and public meanings, particularly regarding institutional control, openness, confidentiality, and adaptive responsiveness. Thus, institutional image is not produced solely through organizational communication but is continuously negotiated through interactions between institutional narratives and evolving public interpretations.

Keywords: *digital public relations; relational dialectics theory; impression management; institutional image; public criticism; social media*

INTRODUCTION

The police are institutions with a high degree of public visibility (Pfister, S., 2019), making any negligence or misconduct by police officers likely to rapidly evolve into a public issue. Over the past three years, various cases involving police personnel have extended beyond internal organizational concerns and developed into national issues that have significantly affected the reputation of the Indonesian National Police and contributed to an atmosphere of institutional distrust. Declining public trust in Police has implications for weakened institutional legitimacy, reduced effectiveness of law enforcement, and diminished public compliance with legal norms (Verhoest et al., 2025). This condition indicates that public expectations regarding the professionalism and integrity of police officers place the institution under constant public scrutiny and criticism.

More recent national survey data reported in 2025 indicate that public trust in Indonesian National Police had reached 76.2% (Humas Polri, 2025). However, social media realities reveal a predominance of negative sentiment across various public discussions. The widespread penetration of social media and increasing public participation in online spaces have enabled individuals to become both producers and disseminators of information regarding their interactions with police officers (Awofadeju & Ewuola, 2019). These personal experiences are frequently shared through social media in the form of posts, comments, and opinions that are widely accessible to the public. Consequently, perceptions of police institutions are no longer shaped solely by official narratives but also by discursive constructions that emerge and circulate within digital environments.



Picture 1: The Public Relations Division of the Indonesian National Police (Polri) released the results of a survey conducted by Litbang Kompas
Source: <https://humas.polri.go.id/news/>

Social media has transformed the dynamics of public communication by enabling organizations to disseminate information while simultaneously opening space for institutional messages to receive rapid and direct public response. Unlike conventional organizational communication, which relies on journalists' role as gatekeepers, the user-oriented characteristics of social media allow the production, circulation, and response to messages to occur in a more open manner (Walby & Wilkinson, 2023). Social media presents a communicative space in which institutional messages can be responded to, contested, negotiated, and re-signified by audiences within the same interactive space (Jones et al., 2025). The characteristics of social media position it not merely as a channel for distributing organizational information, but also as a public arena in which institutional narratives confront various alternative interpretations constructed by audiences. For public institutions, particularly law enforcement organizations, this condition creates a complex communicative environment, as efforts to build a positive institutional representation must take place alongside public criticism, complaints, and demands for accountability (Goldsmith, 2013).

This condition becomes increasingly relevant within the context of the Indonesian National Police (Polri), in line with the growing use of social media as a means of institutional communication and the intensification of public scrutiny over police performance (Liu et al., 2020). The Ferdy Sambo case in 2022 emerged as one of the

pivotal moments that heightened public attention toward the Polri institution (Amini & Fauzi, 2023), subsequently followed by an expanding discourse on alleged violations involving police officers across various social media platforms. Public criticism was manifested through a number of hashtags, such as #1Day10knum, #NoViralNoJustice, #ViralForJustice, and #PercumaLaporPolisi, which demonstrate that social media functions not only as a space for disseminating institutional information (Amelia, 2025), but also as an arena in which the public articulates its evaluations, experiences, and assessments of the police (Sudirman et al., 2024). Within this context, messages produced by Polri are not always received uniformly by the audience; rather, they may elicit responses, interpretations, and even contestations of meaning from the public. Institutional communication on social media thus unfolds within a relational dynamic that brings institutionally constructed narratives into contact with meanings constructed by the public, thereby opening space for tension and the negotiation of meaning within digital communicative interaction.

At the regional level, this dynamic is evident in the public communication practices of the Public Relations Unit of Surabaya Metropolitan Police, which serves as a relevant case for examining the relationship between institutional narratives and public meaning-making within digital police communication. Through its Instagram account @humaspolrestabessurabaya, the institution disseminates various information regarding police activities, law enforcement achievements, public services, and community engagement. At the same time, the account functions as a space of interaction in which the public can voice comments, criticism, complaints, and assessments of police performance. The coexistence of institutional messages and diverse public responses within the same communicative space indicates that the narratives produced by the institution do not merely end at the point of information delivery, but instead acquire meaning, evaluation, and interpretation from the public (Ellis, 2021). For the institution, such responses not only reflect stakeholders perceptions and expectations, but also constitute part of a communicative dynamic that must be managed in order to sustain institutional relationships and reputation (Walby & Wilkinson, 2023). The @humaspolrestabessurabaya account thus provides a relevant empirical context for examining how institutional narratives and public interpretations confront, interact with, and shape one another within the communicative dynamics of digital police public relations practice.



Picture 2: Comment sections marked by public criticism
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CsSOW9HPDsY>

In this dynamic, the convergence between institutional narratives and public responses creates communicative tension, as it brings together the institution's interest in maintaining legitimacy, credibility, and a positive image with public demands for openness, accountability, and responsiveness (Al Mustaqim et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2025). Under these conditions, meaning regarding police performance is not entirely determined by the institution, but is instead formed through the convergence of messages constructed by the institution and interpretations offered by the public (Cullen & Williams, 2026; Liu et al., 2020). Such tension is not inherently negative; rather, it constitutes part of a relational process in which the institution and the public continuously negotiate the boundaries of information, communicative consistency, narrative control, and connectedness within digital interaction. The communicative phenomenon on the @humaspolrestabessurabaya account, therefore, cannot be adequately understood merely as a matter of the effectiveness of institutional message delivery, but must instead be viewed as a relational process involving the convergence, contestation, and negotiation of various discourses between the institution and the public.

The tension between institutional interests and public demands within digital communication aligns with the view that public relations is not solely a practice of information delivery, but also an ongoing relational process. Kent & Taylor (2002) through the concept of dialogic public relations, position dialogue as the foundation of the relationship between organizations and their publics, emphasizing the importance of user-oriented communicative practices in building relationships and mutual understanding. This perspective indicates that organizational communication unfolds through an interactive process that enables organizations and publics to respond to one another and jointly construct meaning around a given issue (Kent & Taylor, 2021). The relevance of this perspective becomes increasingly apparent in police communication on social media. Ralph & Robinson (2023) demonstrate that police communication on social media has become increasingly corporate in character, through the production of content that highlights a positive image while avoiding controversial issues, whereas Fielding (2023) identifies persistent tension between institutional efforts to maintain control over the narrative and public demands for direct engagement and response. This convergence of interests reflects the tension between the institutional need to manage organizational representation and image, and public demands for openness, responsiveness, and recognition of their experiences (Jones et al., 2025). These conditions point to the need for a perspective that regards communication not merely as message delivery, but also as a process in which multiple meanings interact, contradict, and are negotiated with one another.

This condition can be understood through Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), which conceptualizes communication as a dialogic process perpetually marked by tension between contradictory meanings (Baxter et al., 2021) that are, at the same time, mutually interdependent. From this perspective, communication is not understood as a transmission process yielding a single, stable meaning, but rather as a dynamic process that is continuously negotiated and reconstructed through interaction (Suter et al., 2024). Within this perspective, tension is not regarded solely as a problem to be eliminated (Tagadiad, 2023), but as an inherent feature of communicative relationships (Baxter, 2011), given that different parties may simultaneously hold competing expectations, interpretations, and interests.

Within the context of digital police public relations, the relevance of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) becomes increasingly evident, as the institution holds an

organizational interest in communicating competence, professionalism, public service, and responsiveness, while the public may use the same platform to voice criticism, complaints, dissatisfaction, and demands for institutional accountability. Social media enables organizational communication and public response to occur within the same communicative space (Sossini, 2026), such that institutional messages can be directly responded to, questioned, reinterpreted, or juxtaposed with alternative narratives constructed by the public (Ellis, 2021). The meaning of organizational communication, therefore, is not determined solely by the institution, but is instead formed through the ongoing convergence of institutional representation and public interpretation (Ellis, 2021). These potentially competing meanings generate dialectical tension between the image communicated by the institution and the meanings constructed by the public, such that social media can be understood as a dialectical space in which institutional efforts to construct and maintain particular meanings confront a range of alternative meanings produced by the public (González & Skigin, 2026). Under these conditions, RDT enables research to move beyond merely identifying what is communicated by the police institution, and to instead examine how institutional narratives interact with public interpretations (Suter et al., 2024), how contradictions between the two are negotiated (Baxter et al., 2021), and how such tension shapes the practice of digital public relations.

Within the perspective of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), communication is understood as a dynamic process that consistently entails tension between opposing needs or meanings, including openness–closedness, predictability–novelty, and autonomy–connection (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Within the context of digital public communication, these three dialectics provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how institutions and publics confront one another and negotiate meaning as institutional narratives interact with public demands, criticism, and interpretation. However, this study does not apply these three dialectics as predetermined categories; rather, it employs RDT as an interpretive perspective to identify the competing meanings and contradictions that emerge from the interaction between institutional communication and public response. Through this approach, the forms of tension identified in the data are understood as dialectical constructions that emerge from the empirical context of the relationship between the institution and the public, rather than as the mere application of pre-established dialectical categories.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) provides a framework for understanding the existence, dynamics, and negotiation of such tension, but does not specifically account for the representational strategies employed by institutions when confronting it. This study therefore draws on the concept of impression management as a supporting perspective to explain how institutions strategically manage particular messages, symbols, and representations in shaping audience perceptions of the organization (Steele & Blau, 2023; Zheng, 2023). In this study, impression management is used to interpret strategies such as self-promotion and exemplification as forms of institutional image construction. Positioning these two perspectives together allows this study to examine the communication of Polresta Surabaya more comprehensively. RDT provides the foundation for understanding how tension between institutional interests and public demands emerges, is sustained, and is negotiated, while impression management deepens the analysis of the institution's communicative choices in managing its self-representation, asserting its identity and credibility, and projecting a particular image to the public. Impression management is thus not positioned as an analytical framework equivalent to RDT, but rather as a supporting perspective that

elucidates the strategic dimension of the institution's communicative actions within this dialectical dynamic. Together, these two perspectives allow this study not only to identify the sources and forms of relational tension, but also to explain how the institution manages its representation amid such tension.

Prior research on police communication and social media has generally examined institutional image, public trust, community engagement, or strategic communication (Ralph et al., 2024). However, attention to how the construction of institutional image interacts with public criticism and competing interpretations within the same digital communicative space remains relatively limited (Hine & Bragias, 2021). In particular, the relationship between institutional impression management and the dialectical tension arising from public response has not yet been extensively explored within the context of digital police public relations. This gap is significant, as institutional communication cannot be understood solely on the basis of messages produced by the organization, but must also be examined in terms of how such messages confront, negotiate with, or come into conflict with meanings constructed and conveyed by the public (Cullen & Williams, 2026).

The integration of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) and impression management enables this study to examine digital police public relations through two complementary dimensions. RDT is positioned as the primary theoretical framework for identifying and analyzing how tension between institutional narratives and public meaning-making emerges, is sustained, and is negotiated within social media interaction (Suter et al., 2024). Impression management, meanwhile, serves as a supporting perspective to explain how the institution constructs, maintains, and projects its desired organizational image amid such tension (Fielding, 2023). Operationally, RDT is employed to examine moments in which institutionally constructed representations of police performance—in the form of social media content confront public responses, interpretations, or criticism that introduce alternative meanings. The analysis then attends to how the institution responds to criticism, whether such responses emphasize institutional action or direct dialogue, how the organization's positive image is constructed, and how public comments reproduce, negotiate, or challenge that image.

Based on this framework, this study does not treat public criticism merely as negative feedback, nor institutional response merely as communication strategy, but rather as part of a dialectical process in which multiple meanings concerning police performance, responsiveness, and credibility are constructed, contested, and negotiated within the same digital space. The empirical analysis begins by identifying recurring themes within public criticism and institutional communication, then mapping the relationships and tensions among these themes through Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) as the primary analytical framework. Impression management is subsequently used as a supporting perspective to deepen understanding of the strategies of image construction and projection that emerge in response to this dialectical dynamic.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the dialectical tension within the Public Relations Unit of Surabaya Metropolitan Police through communication on the Instagram account @humaspolrestabessurabaya, employing Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) as the primary analytical framework to identify how tension between institutional representation and public meaning-making emerges, is sustained, and is negotiated within digital interaction. Specifically, this study analyzes institutional responses to public criticism, their interaction with public meaning-making, and the formation of meaning regarding police performance and image throughout this

communicative process. Impression management, meanwhile, is used as a supporting perspective to interpret institutional strategies for constructing and maintaining the desired image amid this dialectical dynamic.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm, which views social reality as a dynamic, holistic construction of meaning that is continuously negotiated through interaction, rather than as a single objective fact existing independently of human meaning-making (Butsi, 2019). The interpretive paradigm understands the phenomenon under study through a process of interpreting texts, posts, and interactions occurring within digital space, rather than through measurement or hypothesis testing. This approach was selected because it aligns with the fundamental assumption of RDT that relational meaning is multivocal and continuously negotiated (Baxter, 2011), such that an in-depth understanding of how the Public Relations Unit of Surabaya Metropolitan Police designs and implements communication strategies in responding to public criticism requires the excavation of meaning, rather than merely the tabulation of category frequencies.

Data were collected through online observation and documentation of the official Instagram account @humaspolrestabessurabaya over the period from 1 September 2023 to 30 August 2024. The units of analysis comprised: (1) institutional posts, (2) public comments, and (3) institutional responses, identifiable either as direct replies to comments or as institutional responses in the form of follow-up posts identified based on their substantive relevance to criticism or complaints previously raised or debated by the public. A post was categorized as institutional responses if they contained information, clarification, action, case developments, educational content, or a narrative related to public criticism or complaints included in the study data. Temporal proximity was used as a contextual consideration, while substantive relevance served as the primary basis for determining a response. Posts lacking relevance to the criticized issue were not categorized as institutional responses. Based on these criteria, 21 posts containing public criticism and complaints in the comment sections were identified, along with 23 posts representing institutional responses, whether in the form of comment replies or follow-up posts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coding of the 21 posts containing criticism was grouped into broader themes, resulting in three empirical categories presented in Table 1. The second stage then examined institutional responses to this criticism and identified recurring patterns of institutional communication, taking into account the issues raised by the public, as presented in Table 2. Following the thematic categorization, the findings were interpreted using Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) as the primary analytical framework. The three dialectical pairs openness–closedness, predictability–novelty, and autonomy–connection (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Scharp, 2015) were employed as initial sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2019) rather than a priori empirical categories, such that the forms of tension were developed inductively from the data. Impression management was used as a complementary perspective to interpret how action-based and other institutional responses constructed preferred organizational representations, particularly through self-promotion and exemplification.

Tabel 1. Themes of Public Criticism and Complaints Based on Comment Analysis

No	Themes	Empirical Indicator	Frequency
1	Law Enforcement	Demands for legal action, arrest of offenders, criticism of unresolved criminal cases, concerns about law-enforcement performance	9
2	Maintenance of public security and order	Concerns about public disorder, gang activity, motorcycle theft, and community security	4
3	Public Service	Complaints concerning police services, complaint handling, online services, and responsiveness to citizens	8

Source: research data (2024)

The frequencies presented in the tables are used descriptively to indicate the distribution of coded instances and are not intended as quantitative measures of statistical prevalence or generalization.

Tabel 2. Thematic Analysis of the Public Relations Division of Surabaya Metropolitan Police Responses to Public Criticism and Complaints

No	Response Category	Empirical Pattern	Response Mode	Impression Management
1	Practical Operational Measures	Patrols, raids, enforcement operations, and other concrete institutional actions	Action-based	Self-promotion
2	Publication of Case Resolutions and Organizational Performance	Arrests, case resolutions, successful operations, and institutional achievements	Action-based	Self-promotion
3	Public Awareness and Preventive Education	Educational messages, preventive information, and public-awareness campaigns	Action-based response	Exemplification
4	Direct Responses to Audience Comments	Direct replies, clarification, or confirmation of case progress	Dialogic	Direct engagement
5	No Identifiable Institutional Response	Public criticism without no direct or follow-up institutional response was identifiable	Non-dialogic / communicative absence	-

Source: research data (2024)

Action Based and Dialogic Responses Criticism Respond

The findings indicate that the Public Relations Division of Polrestabes Surabaya responds to public criticism and complaints through several patterns of communication. Based on the thematic analysis presented in Table 2, these patterns encompass direct operational action, publication of case resolutions and organizational performance, enhancement of public awareness, preventive education, direct responses to public comments, and instances in which no identifiable institutional response was

found. The first three patterns indicate that institutional responses are conveyed predominantly through the publication of institutional actions and outcomes, rather than through reciprocal interaction with the public. The dominant pattern in the data can therefore be characterized as an action-based response that is, a response emphasizing concrete institutional action as a means of addressing issues raised by the public.

This action-based response is reflected in posts concerning police operations, law enforcement activities, patrols, case resolutions, institutional achievements, service information, and preventive education. Such content enables the institution to demonstrate concrete actions taken in relation to issues that also surface within public criticism and complaints. However, this communicative pattern does not always involve direct replies to individual users. Publicized institutional actions may thus substantively address public concerns, while nevertheless failing to meet the public's relational expectations for acknowledgment and direct response.



Picture 3: Complaints Regarding Unresolved Motor Vehicle Theft Reports

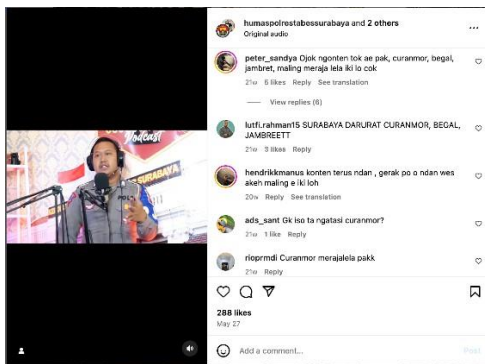
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CsSOW9HPDsY/>



Picture 4: Action-based response by Polri's Innovation in Improving Public Services through the Ilmu Semeru Application

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwocHcpvzzD/>

One example illustrating this communicative pattern is the publication of motorcycle theft enforcement activities under Operasi Sikat Semeru in June 2024. The documented posts depicted arrests, police operations, and various actions related to motorcycle theft cases issues that also recurred repeatedly in public comments and complaints. Rather than providing individual responses to users, the institution communicated its response through the publication of operational activities and case-handling outcomes. These posts received a number of positive responses from the audience and relatively few instances of criticism. This pattern suggests that action-based responses can acquire positive meaning when the institutional actions communicated are directly related to the issues of public concern. However, the qualitative data in this study cannot substantiate that these posts led to a reduction in negative sentiment or a broader diminishment of criticism.



Picture 5: Comment section marked by criticism
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C_aqc7QygUt/



Picture 6: Action-based response by publication of the disclosure of a motor vehicle theft
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C5AYEDGP13j/>

A similar pattern is also evident in the institution's response to the Ronald Tannur case. Following public criticism regarding the application of the initial indictment article, the Public Relations Division of Surabaya Metropolitan Police subsequently published information concerning the change of the indictment to provisions related to the criminal offense of murder. This post provided an institutional explanation of developments directly related to the issue then being publicly discussed and received predominantly positive audience responses. These findings indicate that action-based responses are perceived as more relevant when institutional actions bear a direct connection to the specific issues raised by the public. Nevertheless, this finding should not be interpreted as evidence that institutional communication fully resolves public criticism. Rather, audience interpretation of the institution remains shaped by the context of the issue and their own experiences with the institution.



Picture 7: Press conference on the murder case involving the child of a House of Representatives member, marked by criticism directed at the article
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2q83U8v3Fw/>



Picture 8: Action-based response by publication of the change in the prosecutor's sentencing demand against the suspect
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwocHcpvzD/>

From the perspective of Relational Dialectics Theory, this pattern reveals tension between institutional autonomy and connection with the public (autonomy-connection). The institution possesses autonomy in determining the selection, timing, framing, and publication of information (Mikkola et al., 2025), particularly when responding through institutional posts rather than through individual interaction. At the same time, public comments reflect an expectation of acknowledgment, explanation, and connectedness (Zhang et al., 2022). Within the context of Metropolitan Surabaya Police's communication, the autonomy-connection dialectic is reflected in the institution's authority to carry out its public relations function based on internal

procedures and internal competencies, while simultaneously confronting demands to build connectedness with public aspirations. Publications regarding police actions may thus represent an institutional response to a given issue, yet do not necessarily meet the public's expectations for direct acknowledgment of their specific complaints (Arshad & Khurram, 2020). This tension lies not merely in the presence or absence of a response, but also in how the institution maintains control over its communication while simultaneously responding to public demands for more dialogic and reciprocal engagement (Wukich, 2025).

Another identified form of institutional response is direct interaction, although its frequency is more limited compared to action-based responses. Over the observation period, at least three documented direct responses were identified. These responses differ from action-based responses in that they clearly address audience concerns through reciprocal interaction. They can therefore be categorized as dialogic responses, rather than as forms of self-promotion or exemplification. However, this pattern of responsiveness was not consistent, as a number of complaints received no identifiable direct reply or follow-up during the observation period. The research data also include user comments stating that attempts to contact the @humaspolrestabessurabaya account via direct message went unanswered. This finding indicates variation in institutional responsiveness, although the available data do not allow the researcher to determine whether the absence of response is attributable to deliberate avoidance, organizational limitations, or other factors.



Picture 9: Dialogic response from
@humaspolrestabessurabaya

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3UBpEzPeZa/>



Picture 10: Dialogic response from
@humaspolrestabessurabaya

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3UDoBTVUvL>



Picture 11: unidentifiable response

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3UBpEzPeZa/>



Picture 10: unidentifiable response

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C5AYEDGP13j/>

The variation among action-based responses, dialogic responses, and unidentifiable responses indicates that digital police public relations unfold through a process of negotiation between the institution's need to maintain control over its

communicative narrative and public expectations for relationally oriented engagement (Badham & Mykkänen, 2022). The dominance of action-based communication can be understood as an institutional tendency to retain control over the form and substance of its messaging, whereas dialogic response demands a higher level of engagement with the individual issues raised by users. This pattern aligns with (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) classification of organizational communication on social media, which distinguishes action-oriented messages from communication that emphasizes community engagement. The findings of this study, therefore, do not indicate that action-based response supersedes dialogic response, but rather that the dominance of the former generates ongoing tension between institutional autonomy and connection with the public (Walby & Wilkinson, 2023).

Impression Management Strategy: The Dominance of the Self-Promotion

The action-based response identified in the previous section can be further interpreted through the perspective of impression management, particularly the strategy of self-promotion. Self-promotion is an impression management tactic that highlights an institution's achievements and competence, and is commonly employed within organizational contexts (McGowan & Sekaja, 2022). Within the context of this study, this strategy helps explain how publicized institutional actions and successes are used to construct a representation of Polrestabes Surabaya as a competent and effective institution. This representation does not stand alone, however, as it interacts with the comments, criticism, and personal experiences articulated by the public (Badham & Mykkänen, 2022).



Picture 12: Press release disclosing a counterfeit currency case, inundated with comments concerning motor vehicle theft

Source:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C5AYEDGP13j/>



Picture 13: Action-based response to the arrest of a motor vehicle theft suspect, met with a range of comments (some expressing appreciation, others sarcastic)

Source:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C_aqc7QyGUt

Within the instagram content observed, self-promotion is manifested through the highlighting of successful law enforcement, case resolutions, operational achievements, and other evidence of performance. Posts concerning suspect arrests, case disclosures, evidence seizures, and Operasi Sikat Semeru in June 2024 demonstrate Polrestabes Surabaya's effort to construct an image as a competent, effective institution capable of maintaining public security. Rather than explicitly referring to criticism raised by particular users, these posts emphasize institutional action and achievement. Communication thus shifts the focus from the issues raised by the public to evidence of institutional performance (Wood & McGovern, 2021), which is presented as though it

were a response to those issues. This communicative pattern also appears to be associated with increased audience engagement and reduced negative sentiment in the comments, particularly when the content displayed is relevant to security issues experienced by the community.

Nevertheless, the presence of self-promotional content does not indicate that public issues have been fully resolved, nor that this positive image is uniformly accepted. The audience responses observed encompass both positive assessments and comments expressing personal experiences and unresolved issues. The findings also point to the importance of thematic alignment between self-promotional content and the issues of public concern. When the content displayed is not relevant to the issue at hand, such communication may instead open space for more intense criticism to emerge (Benthaus et al., 2016). Excessive reliance on self-promotion may even be perceived as an attempt to divert attention from institutional shortcomings or errors, particularly when unaccompanied by acknowledgment and handling of the issue in question (Snoussi, 2020). Within the digital environment, the audience's capacity to verify information and share personal experiences means that self-promotion strategies cannot be entirely detached from the reality of police performance as experienced by the community (Benthaus et al., 2016).

This condition reveals a tension between institutional control over the construction of a positive narrative and the public's capacity to interpret, question, or reject that narrative (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). RDT conceptualizes meaning within relationships as the product of interaction between competing discourses, such that institutional control over what is published does not automatically translate into control over the meaning constructed within the public sphere (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Within the context of this study, posts concerning successful performance may be understood by some audience members as evidence of competence, while simultaneously serving, for other audience members, as an opportunity to raise additional grievances. Self-promotion thus functions both as a strategy of image construction and as an arena in which institutional representation interacts with public interpretation (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

These findings demonstrate the complementary function of impression management and RDT. Impression management explains the use of self-promotion to construct an image of the institution as competent and effective, while RDT explains why this image nevertheless remains open to public interpretation and negotiation. Self-promotion is thus both a strategy of image construction and a space of interaction between institutional representation and audience-generated meaning. In addition to self-promotion, this study also identified the strategy of exemplification, which emphasizes the moral and social dimensions of institutional image.

The Dynamics of the Exemplification Strategy

In addition to self-promotion, the findings of this study indicate the presence of exemplification as an impression management strategy within the digital public relations practice of Polrestabes Surabaya. Whereas self-promotion emphasizes competence and successful performance, exemplification highlights moral commitment, social responsibility, and concern for the community (Procter et al., 2017). This strategy is reflected in posts concerning social visits, humanitarian activities, legal education, community service, and other activities representing the police as a caring

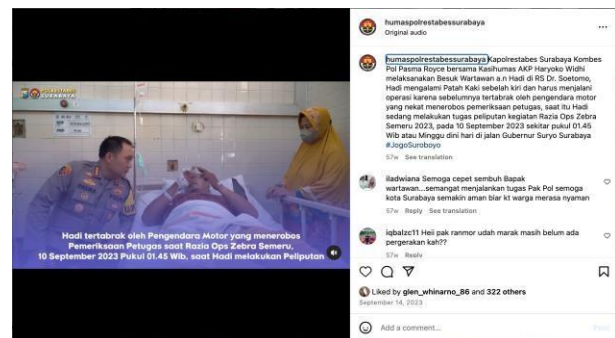
and responsible institution. A visit to a journalist who had been the victim of an incident during Operasi Zebra in September 2023 constitutes an institutional response that emphasizes concern for an individual's circumstances rather than law enforcement success. This action-based response emerged concurrently with a surge of public criticism regarding the prevalence of motor vehicle theft. Through this content, the police are positioned not merely as law enforcers, but also as an institution present within the social life of the community. Exemplification thus constructs a representation of the kind of institution the organization wishes to project (Hossain et al., 2023), particularly as a humane, responsible organization closely connected to the community.



Picture 14: Complaints Regarding Unresolved Motor Vehicle Theft Reports

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CsSOW9HPDsY/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CsSOW9HPDsY/>



Picture 5: Exemplification tactics

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C_jwUcgyWp_

These findings indicate that exemplification serves a function distinct from, yet complementary to, self-promotion. Whereas self-promotion communicates what the institution has achieved, exemplification communicates the values and character the institution wishes to project (Hossain et al., 2023). This emphasis on care, empathy, and social responsibility has the potential to strengthen the affective dimension of public perception and support the formation of trust (Hansson & DePaula, 2025). Nevertheless, the values projected through such content remain open to question when they appear alongside criticism regarding service, law enforcement, or the personal experiences of the community. Exemplification, therefore, extends the construction of institutional image beyond mere competence toward a representation of care and social responsibility.

From the perspective of RDT, this condition indicates that the connectedness projected by the institution through exemplification is not necessarily identical to the connectedness experienced by the public (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The institution may communicate care and social responsibility through strategically selected and framed activities, while the public may assess connectedness on the basis of their own experiences with institutional service and response. The meaning of exemplification, therefore, remains open to public acceptance, negotiation, or rejection (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Peter et al., 2014).

The limitations of this strategy are also evident in the content-production pattern of the @humaspolrestabessurabaya account, which largely follows the Kalender Kamtibmas, such that communication tends to be produced on a scheduled and thematic basis according to the institutional agenda. This pattern suggests a tendency for social media to be treated as a broadcasting tool rather than as a space for dialogue and public participation (Jacob & Torenvlied, 2016). (Prabowo, 2022) findings on the @Divisihumaspolri Instagram account likewise indicate the dominance of regulative,

one-way communication oriented toward the institutional agenda. Within the framework of impression management, when content concerning humanitarian action and social responsibility is not accompanied by dialogic responses to criticism or complaints, such representation risks being perceived as symbolic image management (Suryani & Fernando, 2024). The effectiveness of exemplification, therefore, depends not only on the institution's capacity to display socially valued behavior, but also on the alignment between the projected image and the public's relational experience (Hansson & DePaula, 2025).

Exemplification thus illustrates the relationship between the strategic and relational dimensions of digital police communication. Impression management explains how the institution strategically displays care and social responsibility, while RDT explains why this representation remains open to public interpretation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The limitation of this strategy lies not merely in its capacity to construct a positive image, but in the potential for misalignment between the projected image and the quality of the relationship experienced by the public.

Implications for Dialogic Police Digital Public Relations

Autonomy–Connection: Institutional Control and Public Engagement

This tension is evident in the divergence between action-based responses and dialogic responses. Institutional action may demonstrate that the police have responded to an issue in general terms, but does not always acknowledge or address the public's specific experiences (Hu et al., 2020). For example, publications regarding arrests in motorcycle theft cases may represent a law enforcement success, while users with similar experiences continue to voice their individual concerns in the comment section. Institutional narratives and public experience can thus coexist without producing a shared interpretation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). From the perspective of RDT, autonomy and connection constitute demands that are contradictory yet mutually interdependent (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The institution requires autonomy to control its representation and communicative agenda, while connection demands acknowledgment of and response to the issues raised by the public. These findings indicate that this tension is not merely a matter of insufficient response, but rather an ongoing process of negotiating institutional control and public engagement.

Openness–Closedness: Transparency and the Boundaries of Information

The second dialectical tension pertains to openness–closedness, particularly in the disclosure of information through digital public communication (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Public comments reveal demands for clarification regarding law enforcement processes, case developments, security and public order issues, and police services. At the same time, police communication operates within institutional and operational boundaries that determine what information may be disclosed (Zheng, 2023), particularly regarding ongoing cases or investigations. This tension, therefore, does not simply reflect openness or closedness in itself, but rather reflects an ongoing negotiation over the level of informational access that can be granted to the public (Steele & Blau, 2023), alongside the boundaries of information the institution needs to maintain.

This tension is also evident when information regarding case developments or

operational activities is published, yet certain issues receive no identifiable response. This condition cannot be directly interpreted as an institutional effort to conceal information; nevertheless, the absence of observable communication may still be perceived by the public as a limitation on transparency (Bertot et al., 2010). Institutional openness, therefore, is determined not only by the information that is published, but also by how the public assesses the adequacy of that information in meeting their needs. From the perspective of RDT, openness and closedness constitute demands that operate simultaneously and remain mutually interdependent (Baxter et al., 2021; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The institution must provide sufficient information to support accountability, while maintaining boundaries around information that cannot or should not be disclosed. Tension therefore arises because public expectations of openness may persist (Baxter et al., 2021; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), even after the institution has provided information within what it considers appropriate limits. The meaning of transparency, accordingly, remains open to negotiation between institutional boundaries and public demands for informational access.

Predictability–Novelty: Communicative Routine and Emerging Public Issues

The third dialectical tension pertains to predictability–novelty. The communicative practices observed reveal a relatively predictable content routine (Baxter et al., 2021; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), including the use of scheduled institutional activities and recurring themes of public security and order. This routine provides consistency in digital content production and enables the institution to organize its communication according to a predetermined institutional agenda. Predictability, in this sense, can support organizational control and the continuity of public communication.

Public criticism and complaints, however, do not always follow the institution's communicative schedule. The public may raise new issues, unexpected incidents, unresolved cases, or individual experiences not accounted for in the institution's predetermined communicative agenda. The digital environment thus introduces a degree of novelty (Wukich, 2025) that requires the institution to respond to issues as they arise, rather than solely according to a previously established communication plan. The use of scheduled communication illustrates this tension. A predetermined communicative agenda can ensure that institutional content remains consistent and is produced regularly, but it may also create a temporal gap between what the institution intends to communicate and what the public regards as urgent at a given moment. This does not mean that scheduled content is ineffective. Rather, it indicates that predictable communicative routine coexists alongside the need to respond adaptively to emerging public issues.

From the perspective of RDT, predictability and novelty represent communicative needs that are simultaneously competing and interdependent (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Predictability provides organizational stability and coherence, while novelty creates opportunities for adaptation to shifting public expectations and newly emerging issues. The findings of this study indicate that the challenge for digital police public relations lies in the capacity to negotiate both demands, rather than in permanently privileging one over the other.

Interdependence of the Dialectical Tensions

The three dialectical tensions identified in this study do not operate in isolation. Autonomy–connection concerns who controls the communicative process and how institutional control is negotiated against public engagement; openness–closedness concerns the boundaries of information disclosure; while predictability–novelty concerns the balance between communicative routine and emerging public issues. These three dialectics may intersect within particular communicative practices. Action-based response, for instance, allows the institution to retain autonomy in framing its response while simultaneously providing certain information to the public, thereby engaging autonomy–connection and openness–closedness concurrently. Likewise, scheduled communication provides predictability, yet may become less responsive when confronted with newly emerging issues. These three dialectics, accordingly, are best understood as demands that operate simultaneously within the ongoing process of negotiation between institutional priorities and public expectations.

These findings further extend the understanding of the relationship between impression management and RDT. Self-promotion and exemplification explain how the institution constructs its desired representation of competence, effectiveness, responsibility, and social commitment, while RDT explains why this representation remains open to alternative meanings generated by the audience. Institutional communication may thus shape the conditions for the negotiation of meaning, but does not fully determine the outcome of that negotiation (Baxter et al., 2021). The findings can also be situated within a broader post-structural understanding of digital public communication, in which institutional power does not operate solely through the production of official messages but also through the capacity to define, frame, and legitimize particular representations of institutional performance. However, such representational power is never complete. Public users retain interpretive agency by introducing alternative narratives based on their experiences, thereby disrupting the institution's attempt to stabilize a preferred meaning. The digital space consequently becomes a site in which institutional and public discourses coexist and compete for legitimacy. From this perspective, the dialectical tension identified in this study is not only a tension between two communication preferences, but also involves an uneven relationship of representational power: the institution possesses greater control over message production, while publics possess the capacity to contest, reinterpret, and circulate alternative meanings.

Implications for Police Digital Public Relations: Managing Rather than Eliminating Tensions

The findings of this study carry several implications for the practice of digital police public relations. The primary implication is that institutional communication should not be evaluated solely on the basis of the volume of positive content produced or the extent to which a favorable institutional image has been successfully constructed. The findings indicate that positive institutional representation can coexist with public criticism, questions, and unresolved issues. The effectiveness of digital public relations, therefore, should also be assessed in terms of the institution's capacity to recognize and negotiate the tension between institutional priorities and public expectations.

First, action-based communication remains important, as it provides visible evidence of institutional performance. Posts concerning arrests, case resolutions,

activities related to the maintenance of public security and order, and prevention programs can demonstrate that the institution is taking concrete action in response to public issues. Action-based communication, however, should not serve as a substitute for dialogic engagement. When users raise specific complaints or request clarification, direct acknowledgment and response can offer a distinct form of relational connectedness that posts about institutional performance alone may not provide. A combination of action-based and dialogic communication, therefore, may enable the institution to maintain organizational autonomy while simultaneously strengthening its connectedness with the public.

Second, the findings point to the importance of developing mechanisms for identifying and responding to emerging public issues. Public comments can provide information regarding issues not necessarily represented within a predetermined institutional communicative agenda. Monitoring such interactions can thus serve not only as a reputation-management activity, but also as a means of identifying issues requiring further communication or institutional attention. This form of monitoring is particularly relevant to the predictability–novelty tension, as scheduled communicative routines need sufficient flexibility to accommodate issues that arise unexpectedly within the digital environment.

Third, transparency needs to be understood as a negotiated practice, rather than as unbounded information disclosure. The institution may need to maintain boundaries around information concerning ongoing investigations, operational matters, or other information that cannot appropriately be conveyed to the public. However, when information cannot be fully disclosed, providing an explanation or acknowledgment of the issue, insofar as possible, can help prevent the absence of information from being perceived as indifference or unresponsiveness. This approach addresses the openness–closedness tension by recognizing that public communication requires both accessibility of information and legitimate boundaries around it.

Fourth, impression management strategies such as self-promotion and exemplification need to be complemented by space for public interaction. Self-promotion can communicate competence and effectiveness, while exemplification can communicate responsibility and social commitment. Such representations, however, remain open to public interpretation. Providing space for users to ask questions, obtain clarification, and receive responses allows institutional representation to become part of a more reciprocal relational process, rather than communication that is primarily institution-controlled.

From the perspective of RDT, these recommendations do not imply that the tensions identified in this study can or should be permanently resolved. Autonomy–connection, openness–closedness, and predictability–novelty are demands that are simultaneously competing and interdependent within digital public relations. The practical challenge, therefore, lies in developing communicative practices capable of continuously negotiating these demands as public issues and institutional conditions evolve. In this sense, effective digital police public relations is determined not merely by the capacity to produce positive narratives, but also by the capacity to manage the ongoing relationship between institutional representation and public interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that, in responding to public criticism and complaints on Instagram, the Public Relations Division of Polrestabes Surabaya predominantly

employs action-based response through the strategies of self-promotion and exemplification, while dialogic response was found in more limited numbers. Self-promotion primarily constructs institutional representation through competence and successful performance, while exemplification emphasizes care, social responsibility, and humanitarian values. The image constructed through these two strategies, however, does not always align with public experience and interpretation. From the perspective of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), this condition reveals tension between institutional control and connectedness with the public, between openness and the boundaries of information, and between communicative routine and the need to respond to newly emerging issues. This study thus positions RDT as the primary framework for explaining how meaning regarding police performance is negotiated between institutional representation and public experience, while impression management helps explain how such representation is strategically constructed. The study did not identify an observable mechanism for systematic evaluation of public feedback within the documented communication.

Based on these findings, improving digital public relations practice within police institutions—particularly in responding to public criticism and complaints—requires several strategic measures. First, the development of a comprehensive communication protocol to govern responses to public inquiries, information management, and communication regarding uncertainty on social media. Such a protocol needs to distinguish between issues that can be addressed through direct clarification and issues requiring coordination with relevant organizational units or subject to restriction on grounds of investigative confidentiality. Second, strengthening the human resource capacity of the Public Relations Division through continuous training in technical, analytical, dialogic, and strategic competencies, including the ability to monitor and interpret public feedback. Third, the periodic evaluation of communication programs to assess not only content performance, but also public response, recurring criticism, and the alignment between institutional narratives and public experience. Fourth, the development of mechanisms to ensure that evaluation outcomes are integrated into communication planning and decision-making, so that evaluation does not remain merely an administrative function. Taken together, these measures indicate that strengthening digital public relations requires a shift away from communication that is predominantly scheduled and image-oriented, toward an adaptive process that connects monitoring, dialogue, evaluation, and organizational learning. Such an approach does not require the institution to eliminate the tension between institutional representation and public demands, but rather encourages the institution to manage and negotiate that tension more responsively, while continuing to uphold legitimate needs related to operational confidentiality.

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