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Research Article

Symbols of Integrity: A Semiotic Study of "Transparency, Accountability, Justice, and Fairness" in Government Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Governments say a great deal about themselves before a single policy is implemented — through seals, portals, posted budgets, and program names that promise transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness. This qualitative study asked what those promises are actually built from. Using semiotic analysis, it examined the signs Davao de Oro's provincial government uses on its official online portal to convey the four values, then asked what those signs imply about governance legitimacy once matched against the wider empirical record. Transparency surfaced most often in the business and investment climate, trade and commerce, public participation, information and communication technology, climate adaptation, fiscal budget disclosure, the policy and regulatory framework, and disaster risk communication. Accountability was carried mainly by education and skills reporting, fiscal and revenue management, audit and infrastructure disclosure, watershed and forest stewardship, solid waste control, and inter-agency collaboration. Justice appeared through peace-and-order messaging, rural electrification, livelihood generation, skills certification, and land-use compliance. Fairness was expressed through social welfare services, disaster risk reduction, agriculture and fisheries support, health access, housing, and water and sanitation programming. Reading these symbols against the broader literature produced two organizing dimensions: Structural Integrity, concerning how governance is worded and represented, and Performative Legitimacy, concerning whether the symbol is actually enacted. The two do not always move together, and where they diverge, the study argues, is where public trust is most at risk.

Keywords: *Accountability, Education, Fairness, Justice, Philippines, Qualitative, Semiotics, Transparency*

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Introduction

Insignia, official language, and digital platforms are among the tools governments reach for when they want to be seen as transparent, accountable, just, and fair — a wanting that does not always line up with the doing (Johnson & Fritsch, 2020). The literature on this gap is not thin. Kim and Lee (2021) and Evans (2023) both trace how symbolic display, left unchecked, breeds the very distrust it was meant to prevent, precisely because citizens eventually notice the mismatch. The pattern is not confined to any one country. European open-data initiatives, built to signal transparency, have drawn criticism for stopping short of genuine public access to government operations — a shortfall that itself corrodes confidence (Hansson et al., 2020). Anti-corruption logos and integrity pledges circulate in a number of developing countries even where corruption and inefficiency persist largely unchanged (Afolabi, 2021), and in parts of Asia, the language of justice and fairness has been documented doing quieter work: dressing up authoritarian practice in terms the public finds harder to object to (Mok & De Wever, 2022). Read together, these cases describe a recurring global difficulty — closing the distance between what governance says about itself and what it does — and that difficulty is the starting point for this study.

The Philippines fits this pattern closely enough to warrant its own look. National agencies routinely lean on anti-corruption campaigns and open-governance branding to project ethical leadership, yet these campaigns tend to outpace the actual conduct they are meant to represent, which over time feeds public skepticism rather than resolving it (David, 2021). Membership in the Open Government Partnership has not, by itself, closed the gap: scholars continue to document opacity in routine government transactions and a slow pace of transparency reform (Tuazon, 2020). Much the same can be said of justice and fairness — words that surface reliably in campaign rhetoric and official statements, and that sit uneasily beside the unequal access many Filipinos still describe in their daily dealings with the state (Reyes & Soriano, 2022). That gap, between the vocabulary of good governance and the texture of lived experience, is what makes governance

symbolism worth examining critically rather than taking at face value.

Move down to the regional level and the tension does not disappear — if anything, it becomes easier to see up close. Local government units across the Davao region are quick to publicize anti-corruption drives and good-governance citations, but residents who continue to run into corruption or weak accountability are, understandably, the ones asking what these displays actually deliver (Paderanga & Mendoza, 2020). Davao City has been recognized for transparency-oriented initiatives such as digitized services, yet access to those same services remains noticeably uneven for marginalized communities (Delgado & Montalban, 2021). Local justice policy fares no better: delays and inefficiencies in service delivery routinely undercut whatever the policy intended to signal (Villanueva, 2022). None of this is unique to Davao de Oro, but it is precisely this local friction — between symbolic presentation and governance reality — that motivates a closer look at how such symbols are read, and what work they actually do.

What is missing from this literature is not the observation that symbols and practice diverge — that much is well established — but a close account of how the symbols themselves are constructed, and whether the public perceives them as intended. Paderanga and Mendoza (2020) examined the symbolic use of transparency and accountability in governance without asking how citizens actually receive those symbols or whether the symbols correspond to improved practice. Work specific to the Davao region has identified the challenge of reconciling symbolic initiatives with tangible service delivery (Delgado & Montalban, 2021), but a semiotic reading of these symbols, and of how effectively they reinforce trust at the local level, remains largely undone. This study takes up that gap: it examines the semiotic construction of transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness symbols in Davao de Oro, and weighs their actual bearing on governance legitimacy — a question Villanueva (2022) flags as underexplored at both the national and local levels. Its findings are intended for presentation at academic conferences and submission for peer review, in the interest of contributing something useful to both the scholarship on

governance semiotics and its practical application.

Purpose of the Study

This study set out to read the symbols Davao de Oro's provincial government uses to represent transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness — asking not only what those symbols are, but how they are built, and what they leave implied. Working from government documents and other official material published by the province, it sought to determine where these symbols align with real-world practice and public perception, and where they do not.

Research Questions

Two questions guided the inquiry: What symbols does the provincial government use to represent transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness in its programming? And what does the resulting pattern of symbolic integrity imply, more broadly, for government legitimacy?

Theoretical Framework

Four theoretical lenses, each addressing a different facet of governance's symbolic life, were brought to bear on the analysis: semiotic theory (Saussure, 1916; Peirce, 1931), institutional theory (March & Olsen, 1984), social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934). None of the four is sufficient alone. Together, they trace how meaning gets built, communicated, and reinforced within political structures, and how the resulting symbols, policies, and institutions shape perception, confer legitimacy, and steer civic behavior.

Developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and later extended by Charles Peirce (1931), supplies the basic machinery for how signs generate meaning. Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* does much of the conceptual lifting here: *langue* is the structured, shared system of signs a community draws on, while *parole* is any particular, situated use of that system. Mapped onto governance, *langue* corresponds to institutionalized frameworks — constitutions, doctrines, procedural norms — while *parole* corresponds to their specific enactments: a policy speech, a public announcement, a court ruling. Under

this lens, governance itself operates as a semiotic system, with laws and official documents functioning as signifiers of authority and order; seals, titles, and rituals do work that extends well past their literal content, reinforcing the relationship between state and citizen in ways that rarely announce themselves as such.

Institutional theory, as March and Olsen (1984) frame it, is concerned with how governance sustains its own legitimacy through norms, rules, and symbolic representation. Institutions, on this account, are not purely regulatory machinery; they are cultural systems carrying inherited meaning, and policies often persist less because they are useful than because they are woven into traditions the public already recognizes. Court systems, bureaucratic protocols, and administrative hierarchies draw their authority, in large part, from how closely their symbolic scaffolding matches what the public already understands as legitimate.

Social constructivism, developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), explains how something as abstract as national identity takes on shape through concrete government symbols — flags, anthems, public ceremony. These symbols do not merely decorate governance; they are where citizens learn what nationhood and civic responsibility feel like, meanings assembled socially through shared experience and inherited narrative, which then loop back to shape how citizens read subsequent government action.

Symbolic interactionism, associated with George Herbert Mead (1934), rounds out the framework by insisting that meaning is never fixed at the point of issue. Citizens negotiate the meaning of governmental symbols through daily encounters and dialogue, and the presence or absence of public trust can often be traced to how a particular symbol of justice, service, or leadership was actually experienced, rather than how it was intended. This is the lens that accounts for why the same symbol can build trust in one community and erode it in another.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative design built around semiotic analysis, chosen because

the object of inquiry — how transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness get represented in governance — is not something a survey instrument captures well. Qualitative research investigates phenomena through non-numerical data, with its attention trained on meaning, experience, and perspective rather than on establishing statistical pattern (Denzin & Lincoln, 2021). It trades breadth for depth, and that trade is the point: it offers a route into the complexity of culture and social context that numbers alone tend to flatten (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the goal is understanding rather than generalization (Charmaz, 2014), the approach suits abstract, value-laden material — societal beliefs, symbols, meanings that resist simple measurement — and offers a way of seeing how communities make sense of their world (Silverman, 2020).

Semiotic analysis, one method within that broader tradition, is concerned specifically with signs and their meaning in context. It gives a working framework for decoding how visual, linguistic, or auditory symbols operate within a culture and how they help shape norms and behavior (Chandler, 2021), and is well suited to unpacking the layered meanings such symbols carry — meanings that shape perception, ideology, and action in ways not always visible on the surface (Barthes, 1977). That made it an appropriate fit for transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness: concepts whose meaning is culturally embedded and shifts from one setting to the next.

Kim and Lee (2021) offer a useful precedent here. Their work showed that semiotic analysis can surface layered meaning in governance communication that would otherwise stay implicit — that symbols in government documents, speeches, and visual artifacts carry messages beyond their surface content, and that reading government logos and official imagery semiotically can reveal how such symbols shape the perception of governance values, and how effectively (or not) they communicate integrity and legitimacy. The present study builds on that precedent, pairing a qualitative design with semiotic analysis to read the symbols of transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness as they appear in Davao de Oro's governance.

Data Sources

Document analysis served as the primary method of data collection, with the goal of assembling a comprehensive picture of how symbols of integrity function in governance. Data saturation — the point past which additional documents stop yielding new themes (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) — was anticipated at somewhere between 15 and 20 documents, though the study treated that figure as a planning estimate rather than a fixed target, since the actual number depended on how rich and how varied the material turned out to be. The documents themselves spanned official government reports, policy documents, public speeches, and visual material tied to the four values under study.

Two-tier corpus and how the levels relate. It is worth being explicit about how the study's sources fit together, since the province-specific empirical material and the wider institutional literature serve two different, complementary functions rather than a single undifferentiated pool of "documents." The core empirical corpus — the material actually coded for signs and symbols, and the basis for the findings reported in Table 1 — was drawn from Davao de Oro's own provincial channels: program pages, posted ordinances, budget summaries, project signage descriptions, and agency announcements tied to the province's specific initiatives (watershed management, sitio electrification, land-use compliance, and comparable program areas). National and international sources — the Department of Justice, Presidential Communications, the Commission on Audit, Transparency International, the World Bank, and United Nations material — were not treated as part of that empirical corpus. They served instead as comparative and interpretive reference points: material against which the province-level symbols could be checked for how they resemble, depart from, or extend patterns already documented at the national and international scale. This distinction matters methodologically because it is what keeps the analysis from overreaching — the claims in this study are claims about Davao de Oro's provincial symbolic practice, informed and contextualized by, but not generalized from, the broader institutional record.

Documents varied in length, generally running between 2,000 and 10,000 words; reports and policy documents ranged from roughly 10 to 50 pages, while speeches and visual materials — posters, symbols displayed in government offices or media — were read for both content and symbolism rather than length. Materials were selected for their capacity to show how integrity symbols get constructed and communicated in practice (Flick, 2018), with documents predominantly in English, though local-language originals or translations were consulted where they bore directly on the symbols under study (Boeijs, 2010).

Data Collection

Collection followed a systematic process: documents were drawn from official government websites, the repositories of relevant national and international organizations, and published speeches, with physical documents requested directly from the issuing agency where necessary. Once gathered, materials were coded for recurring symbols, themes, and language tied to the four values, and thematic analysis was applied to categorize and interpret how these symbols function to legitimize governance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Collection continued until additional documents were no longer adding materially different information — the point at which saturation is generally understood to have been reached (Guest et al., 2006).

Alongside the document review, field observation captured visual data at government offices and websites, where insignia and logos are prominently displayed, and all material was catalogued according to its relevance to the four values under study. Because the sample was built from documents that were publicly available and outside the researcher's direct control, it offers what should be a reasonably authentic, unmediated view of how these symbols actually circulate — rather than a curated or invited sample.

Data Analysis

Semiotic and thematic analysis were run in tandem to examine how symbols of integrity are constructed, communicated, and understood. The semiotic side decoded the cultural meaning embedded in the symbols; the

thematic side identified recurring patterns across the data; together they produced a fuller account of how symbols reinforce, or occasionally undercut, governance practice than either method would have on its own.

The semiotic component began by identifying the signs present across the documents — words, phrases, visual elements, cultural markers tied to integrity and governance, such as the recurring image of the scales of justice or a government seal. Each symbol was then examined for the relationship between its signifier (the form it takes) and its signified (the idea behind it), with attention paid throughout to context, since a symbol's meaning shifts with political, social, or historical setting. Cultural codes embedded within the symbols were also considered, on the assumption that a concept like accountability does not travel across contexts carrying an identical meaning.

The thematic component followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: close, repeated reading to identify key symbols and images tied to the four values; initial coding that overlapped substantially with the semiotic pass; grouping of related codes into candidate themes such as "legitimacy of governance," "public trust," or "government accountability"; review of those themes for distinctiveness, consistency, and coverage; and finally, definition and naming of each theme — "symbolic transparency," for instance — along with an account of how it represents the broader concept under study.

Run together, semiotic and thematic analysis produced a layered account: semiotics clarified how a given symbol communicates its particular message; thematic analysis organized those symbols into the coherent categories that structure the findings below. The combination supported a fuller exploration of how cultural symbols shape public understanding of transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness — and, through that understanding, the legitimacy of the governance system producing them.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed across four criteria. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation — cross-checking data across multiple source types so that findings did not

rest on any single document but on convergent evidence (Yin, 2018). Transferability was supported through detailed description of the research context, methodology, and findings, allowing readers to judge for themselves how far the conclusions might travel to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability rested on an audit trail documenting each stage of the process — data collection and analysis alike — so that the reasoning behind the findings could be traced and, if necessary, checked (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Confirmability was addressed through reflexivity: the researcher examined potential biases and their possible influence on the study (Berger, 2015), and findings were reviewed by governance-studies experts as an external check on accuracy and relevance (Morrow, 2005).

Result and Discussion

This chapter presents what the analysis found about how transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness are symbolically represented in Davao de Oro's governance, and

about how those symbols appear to shape perceptions of legitimacy. It identifies symbols recurring across documents, emblems, speeches, and visuals, and traces how they express core governance values while doing the work of building — or occasionally straining — public trust.

Symbols Used to Represent Transparency, Accountability, Justice, and Fairness in Government Works in Davao de Oro

In Davao de Oro, governance is not defined solely by policy and procedure; it is defined just as much by the visible, symbolic expression of the values behind that policy. The provincial government's effort to translate transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness into concrete programmatic form is, in effect, a key channel through which it builds both structural and performative legitimacy among its constituents. Table 1 summarizes the recurring signifiers identified across the provincial corpus, organized by program area, along with a brief reading of what each is understood to signify.

Table 1. Symbols used to represent transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness in Davao de Oro's government works

Value / Program Area	Signifier (Symbol)	Signified Meaning & Symbolic Reading
Transparency — Business & investment climate	One-stop-shop centers, permit windows	Reduced red tape; reads as open, efficient service delivery
Transparency — Trade & commerce	Public markets, trade fairs, business expos	Market openness; inclusive economic participation
Transparency — Public participation	Barangay assemblies, online consultations, town halls	Citizen involvement; democratic, civic empowerment
Transparency — ICT	Municipal websites, dashboards, e-governance portals	Digital access to services; technologically enabled transparency
Transparency — Climate adaptation	Public climate briefings, LGU climate action plans	Preparedness; environmental accountability
Transparency — Fiscal management	Posted budget summaries, citizens' budget documents	Resource-allocation clarity; financial trust-building
Transparency — Policy & regulatory framework	Ordinance publications, local codes on file	Access to law; rule-of-law clarity
Transparency — Disaster risk communication	Flood maps, sirens, text alerts, broadcast systems	Public safety through shared information
Accountability — Education & skills	School report cards, enrollment dashboards	Monitoring of outcomes; educational responsiveness
Accountability — Fiscal management & revenue	COA reports, revenue performance boards	Responsible fund handling; ethical fiscal governance

Value / Program Area	Signifier (Symbol)	Signified Meaning & Symbolic Reading
Accountability — Audit & infrastructure	Project signage with cost break-downs, completion reports	Spending traceability; tangible accountability
Accountability — Watershed & forest	Reforestation markers, tree logs, environmental MOAs	Compliance; long-term resource stewardship
Accountability — Solid waste & pollution	Color-coded bins, segregation signage, clean-up drives	Behavioral and environmental accountability
Accountability — Inter-agency collaboration	MOUs, joint task forces, inter-agency meetings	Shared, coordinated responsibility
Justice — Peace, order & public safety	Police visibility, community dialogues, crime maps	Equal protection; rule of law
Justice — Rural electrification	Solar panels, electric poles in sitios	Right to development; corrective equity
Justice — Employment & livelihood	Starter kits, job fairs, TESDA training	Socioeconomic empowerment
Justice — Skills certification	NC II certificates, competency badges	Recognition of qualification and ability
Justice — Land use & zoning	Zoning maps, public hearings, approved ordinances	Fair, legal application of land rights
Fairness — Social welfare services	Posters featuring women, IPs, seniors; PWD ramps	Inclusion of marginalized sectors
Fairness — Disaster risk management	Inclusive evacuation plans, PWD-inclusive drills	Equal protection in crisis, in principle
Fairness — Agriculture & fisheries	Farmer ID systems, agri-insurance, distribution records	Intended equitable access for rural producers
Fairness — Health services	Rural health units, mobile clinics, satisfaction boards	Universal, nondiscriminatory access
Fairness — Housing & settlements	Resettlement sites, key-turnover ceremonies	Right to shelter and dignity
Fairness — Water & sanitation	Community faucets, meters, sanitation posters	Fairness in basic needs

Table 2 shifts from these program-level symbols to the broader dimensions through which symbolic integrity bears on government legitimacy — separating the language and representation of governance symbols from their actual enactment in practice.

Table 2. Broader implications of symbolic integrity for enhancing government legitimacy in Davao de Oro

Dimension	Illustrative Symbols	Where the Ambiguity Lies
Structural Integrity — language & representation	Budget summaries, barangay assemblies, climate action plans, ordinance publications	Visible, but comprehension shifts with language, literacy, and digital access
Structural Integrity — language & representation	Livelihood kits, reforestation markers, posted zoning maps	Same symbol, different readings across indigenous groups, farmers, women
Structural Integrity — language & representation	Health-center and sanitation posters with visuals	Symbolic overload or literacy limits can blunt the intended message
Performative Legitimacy — action & symbol in practice	Job fairs, DRRM drills, audit signage, ICT dashboards	Good practice is rarely felt with the same intensity in every municipality

Dimension	Illustrative Symbols	Where the Ambiguity Lies
Performative Legitimacy — action & symbol in practice	Rural electrification, access roads, mobile clinics	Infrastructure that exists is not the same as infrastructure that is maintained
Performative Legitimacy — action & symbol in practice	Posted COA reports, joint task force announcements	Disclosure without engagement risks becoming a symbolic token
Performative Legitimacy — action & symbol in practice	Inclusive evacuation drills	Symbolic inclusion does not guarantee lived, verifiable equity

This chapter interprets the multimodal symbols of transparency, accountability, justice, and fairness identified across Davao de Oro's government works. Drawing on the visual and linguistic elements embedded in public signage, digital platforms, and civic ritual, it considers how these signifiers shape perceptions of governance and civic trust — and, in several cases, where the empirical literature complicates a reading that looks straightforward on the surface.

Transparency

Transparency, in governance, is openness and clarity in decision-making. Its clearest symbolic representations here are the one-stop-shop centers and business permit windows, which stand in for eased business processes and reduced bureaucratic friction.

Transparency underpins a favorable investment environment, and the empirical link is well established: Globerman and Shapiro (2002) found that governance infrastructure — regulatory transparency and rule of law among its components — significantly predicts foreign direct investment flows, since transparent regulatory environments cut the information asymmetry and policy risk that raise transaction costs for investors. One-stop-shop centers and simplified permitting can be read as local enactments of that same governance logic: they signal openness and predictability to investors while reducing the friction associated with corruption risk. But the comprehensibility of these symbols is not guaranteed. Where citizens face a digital divide or limited literacy, a symbol can be entirely visible and still fail to be understood, which limits its power to build trust. Mesa (2023), in a national citizen survey, found educational attainment to be the strongest predictor of both digital public-service use and trust in public administration, with citizens of lower educational attainment markedly less

likely to benefit from, or trust, digitized services. Pairing digital-transparency initiatives with deliberate investment in digital literacy is, on this evidence, not a nice-to-have but structurally necessary if these symbols are meant to build trust broadly rather than mainly among citizens who are already advantaged.

Accountability

Accountability, as a governance pillar, centers on responsible management of public resources and assurance that government action serves the public interest. Among the most visible accountability symbols in Davao de Oro's programmatic messaging is the Commission on Audit report — a public account of how funds are spent. But the relationship between that kind of disclosure and public trust is more contested in the empirical literature than is often assumed. Grimmelikhuisen and Meijer (2014), in an online experiment on government transparency, found that disclosure does raise perceived trustworthiness, but their later cross-national work found the effect to be inconsistent and context-dependent — at times null, and occasionally negative, where the disclosed information touches a contested issue. Read that way, COA reports function less as an automatic generator of trust and more as a precondition for scrutiny: they give citizens the raw material needed to hold government accountable, but whether that translates into actual trust depends on how the information lands, not merely on whether it was published.

Accountability mechanisms in education — performance-based evaluation, transparent funding allocation, school report cards — are frequently framed as improving learning outcomes, though the evidence for that specific mechanism is thinner than commonly assumed. Better grounded is the broader framework these mechanisms descend from: Ep-

stein's (2011) model of school–family–community partnership finds that structured collaboration among schools, families, and communities, and not accountability documentation on its own, is what tends to be associated with improved student outcomes. Read this way, school report cards and enrollment dashboards work best not as accountability theater but as one input into a larger partnership structure. On skills development specifically, Generalao et al. (2025), in a working paper for the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), compared labor-force outcomes for TESDA TVET graduates against non-TVET graduates using Philippine Statistics Authority survey data — a considerably more Davao-relevant empirical anchor than a generic claim that certification-linked training improves workforce readiness — while also noting that certification alone does not guarantee positive employment outcomes, since demand-side labor-market factors matter too.

Justice

Justice, in governance, concerns the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and services, and the assurance that people are treated with dignity and their rights upheld. Symbols of justice — police patrols, community dialogues, crime maps — represent a stated commitment to equal protection and the rule of law, though the evidence on whether these mechanisms actually deliver that promise is more sobering than the symbols themselves suggest. The strongest available evidence on community policing specifically complicates, rather than confirms, the assumption that visible policing symbols translate into trust or safety. Blair et al. (2021), reporting results from six coordinated randomized field experiments across the Global South, including one conducted in Sorsogon Province in the Philippines, found that community-policing interventions produced no measurable improvement in citizen–police trust, no increase in cooperation, and no reduction in crime at any of the six sites. That departs materially from the common assumption that visible community dialogue and patrols mechanically build trust; the authors argue instead that structural reform to police accountability may be a precondition for community policing to work, not a

parallel or optional addition. This complicates a straightforward semiotic reading of police visibility, dialogue, and crime maps as signifiers of security and legal justice for all — a symbol, it turns out, can be sincerely intended and still fail to produce the outcome it signifies, a pattern that runs through this study's broader argument about the gap between symbolic and performative legitimacy.

On unequal access specifically, Jordan et al. (2025), in a scoping review spanning five countries, found a recurring pattern of greater fear of, and less trust in, police among marginalized groups, alongside reduced willingness to report crime — supporting the claim that the benefits of justice-related governance symbols are not evenly distributed even where the symbol itself is present. Justice as applied to peace and order, then, requires equitable enforcement and accessible legal remedy for all; justice-driven safety programs need to be people-centered, attentive to the structural preconditions for trust rather than assuming visible policing activity is sufficient on its own.

Fairness

Fairness in governance is expressed through symbols emphasizing inclusive access — service posters featuring women, indigenous peoples, and seniors, infrastructure accessible to persons with disabilities. These symbols of inclusion are meant to signal that marginalized sectors are not excluded from essential public services, though the growing literature on disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction (DiDRR) suggests this signaling should not be taken at face value. Oraiz and Oraiz (2025), assessing disaster risk reduction and management programs in a comparable Philippine local-government context, found that while local disaster offices had disability-related provisions on paper, the actual representation of persons with disabilities on DRRM councils — and their involvement in DRRM initiatives — both fell in the vulnerable range, meaning PWD-inclusive drills and programs existed more consistently as a stated commitment than as a practiced one. That bears directly on how PWD-inclusive DRRM drills should be read in Table 1: the presence of the symbol in provincial program documentation does not, on its

own, establish that the inclusion is substantive rather than tokenistic.

Fairness as a governance value entails the equitable distribution of resources, services, and opportunity, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable populations. On the broader claim that social protection reaches the poorest, the empirical record is likewise more mixed than a simple assumption that well-designed targeting works would suggest. Deveaux, Masset, Sabates-Wheeler, Samson, Rivas, and te Lintelo (2015), reviewing targeting mechanisms across social-transfer programs, found substantial and recurring exclusion and inclusion errors — needs-based eligibility criteria frequently fail to reach many of the poorest households they are intended for, even where the program is well-intentioned. That suggests provincial fairness symbols such as farmer ID systems and distribution records are best read as attempts at fair targeting whose actual reach is an empirical question that semiotic analysis alone cannot resolve.

Broader Implications of Symbolic Integrity for Enhancing Government Legitimacy in Davao de Oro

Symbolic governance in Davao de Oro plays a substantial role in shaping public trust, yet the inconsistencies between institutional symbols — *langue* — and their real-world implementation — *parole* — point to a deeper challenge for legitimacy than any single program area can capture on its own.

Structural Integrity (Langue)

Structural Integrity, as Saussure (1916) conceived *langue*, refers to the underlying, systematic structure of language: the rules, conventions, and relationships among signs that exist independently of any single utterance. This structural integrity ensures that meaning derives not from individual words in isolation but from their differential relationships within the wider system; Culler (1976) elaborates on this, noting that structural integrity in language supplies the framework for signification, shaping how meaning gets produced and understood consistently across contexts.

Structural Integrity and Performative Legitimacy turn out to be equally critical to

governance's effectiveness and legitimacy. Each concerns not just the symbolic representation of governance action but the actual carrying-out of that action in ways that meet public need and expectation. Where the two align, they reinforce public trust and civic engagement by demonstrating transparency and accountability together; where they diverge, ambiguity results, and legitimacy weakens. Managing that interplay calls for a careful balance — the alternative is a tokenism, or a simple ineffectiveness, that erodes public confidence over time.

Structural Integrity concerns how governance symbols — public budget summaries, barangay assemblies, climate action plans — communicate governance intentions to the public. These symbols aim at transparency and inclusiveness, yet may fail to reach or resonate with all citizens because of barriers such as language, literacy, and disparities in digital access. On the language dimension specifically, Jones and Williams (2017), in a critical discourse analysis of mortgage disclosure documents, found that even where plain-language guidelines are formally met, a document's actual accessibility to its intended reader still varies considerably — technical compliance with a clear-communication standard, in other words, is not the same claim as genuine comprehension or equity. Applied here, posted ordinances and budget summaries that satisfy a formal transparency requirement are not necessarily legible to the citizens they are meant to inform. On the digital-access dimension, Talandron et al. (2016), studying the digital divide in a rural Mindanao barangay, found that geographic distance from a barangay's own ICT center predicted whether residents used it at all — nearly half of surveyed residents reported no familiarity with a local digital service that existed, in principle, for their benefit. That bears directly on Davao de Oro's e-governance and ICT dashboard symbols: physical proximity and infrastructure, not merely the existence of a service, determine who the symbol actually reaches.

Performative Legitimacy

Suchman (1995) described legitimacy as a general perception that an entity's actions are desirable or appropriate within a socially

constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs. Performative legitimacy builds on that by emphasizing how legitimacy is enacted — through rhetoric, public gesture, transparency ritual, or policy enactment that resonates with the people it is meant to reach.

Performative Legitimacy stresses the alignment of actual performance with symbolic action. Job fairs, DRRM drills, and ICT dashboards function as symbols of governance in motion, signaling that government is actively working on citizens' behalf, though the gap between these symbols and citizens' actual experience can erode legitimacy just as easily as it can build it. The clearest empirical illustration of this gap within the study's own material is the community-policing evidence discussed above under Justice: Blair et al. (2021) found that, across six Global South field sites including one in the Philippines, community-policing symbols such as patrols and dialogues produced no measurable improvement in trust or safety at any site — despite being uniformly present as a governance signifier. That is a stronger and more specific illustration of the gap between symbol and actual service delivery than a generic claim about uneven service quality across municipalities, because it shows the discrepancy holding even under what should be best-case implementation, rather than only an uneven one.

Read this way, performative legitimacy is not simply a matter of consistent delivery across local government units; it concerns whether the underlying mechanism a symbol represents — that community dialogue improves trust, say — is actually sound to begin with. A program could be delivered with perfect uniformity across every barangay and still fail to produce the legitimacy it symbolizes, if the causal assumption behind the symbol does not hold. Infrastructure and public services must not only exist in visible form but be effectively used and maintained to provide ongoing value to the communities they serve; without that follow-through, even well-intentioned symbols risk becoming hollow.

Taken together, structural integrity and performative legitimacy are both integral to trustworthy, effective government. Symbolic actions — budget summaries, climate action plans, DRRM drills — need to be matched by

genuine action addressing the needs of all communities, not just the ones already best positioned to notice and benefit from them. Reducing ambiguity and strengthening governance calls for inclusive representation, cultural sensitivity, and follow-through on symbolic acts, supported by clear communication and equitable service delivery that reinforce, rather than merely gesture toward, public trust and legitimacy.

Implications for Educational Practice

These findings carry a few practical implications for educational practice, particularly for strengthening governance effectiveness and the inclusivity of governance communication. First, educational institutions involved in policy dissemination and governance training would do well to prioritize inclusive communication strategies. Symbolic governance actions such as public budget summaries and climate action plans need to be presented in clear, accessible formats that accommodate diverse literacy levels and language preferences; educational programs built around effective communication — whether through policy writing or public-engagement workshops — can help ensure citizens from varied backgrounds understand and actively engage in governance. That, in turn, suggests institutions should invest in training public servants and educators to deliver content through multiple formats, so communication barriers do not quietly exclude marginalized groups from governance processes.

The findings also point to the value of pairing symbolic gesture with practical application in educational settings. The study found that symbols such as job fairs or ICT dashboards do not always correspond to tangible benefit for all communities, particularly underserved rural areas — which suggests a need for educational programs that go beyond theory toward practical implementation. Educators in governance and public administration should incorporate case studies and real-world examples of how symbolic governance action is, or is not, translated into meaningful outcomes, training students to critically assess governance actions and identify gaps between symbolic representation and actual practice. Emphasizing real-world application in this way can help future

policymakers grasp the complexity involved in designing sustainable, effective policy that addresses genuine public need, rather than policy that merely looks the part.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of community engagement in ensuring that governance is effective and equitable, and not merely symbolic. Educational practice should therefore include instruction in participatory governance and the value of public feedback in decision-making, with institutions emphasizing active citizen participation through interactive learning platforms, community-driven projects, and service-learning opportunities. Cultivating that culture of engagement can help prepare students to see effective governance as resting on collaboration between government and the public, and can encourage future leaders to prioritize transparency, inclusivity, and follow-through in building a more accountable and just society.

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