International Journal on Science and Technology (IJSAT)

E-ISSN: 2229-7677 ● Website: www.ijsat.org ● Email: editor@ijsat.org

Secure and Robust Data Hiding in RGB Images using Steganography

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Abstract

In the contemporary era of digitization, safeguarding confidential data is more critical than ever before. This work presents a simple and secure steganography system for concealing secret messages within RGB images through the Least Significant Bit (LSB) replacement technique. For added security, the messages are encrypted with the Fernet algorithm prior to concealing, making them incomprehensible even if unearthed without the proper key. The system facilitates easy encoding and decoding of messages with custom encryption keys without affecting the original appearance of the image. The system supports various image formats, and hence it offers flexibility in its applications. Moreover, the system includes user registration and role-based access control for different levels of permissions to provide secure usage. For enhancing reliability, strong error handling mechanisms are included, lowering the chances of failure and guaranteeing smooth running. A database has also been incorporated to log encoded and decoded messages so that secure tracking and auditing of use can be maintained. Made resilient to actual world challenges such as noise addition and compression, this method provides an efficient, effective, and secure means for personal, corporate, and military communications, making it possible to maintain confidential and tamper-free data exchange.

Keywords: Steganography, Least Significant Bit (LSB), RGB Images, Fernet Encryption, Data Hiding, Secure Communication, Image Processing, Role-Based Access Control, User Registration, Error Handling, Encryption Key, Data Security, Image Formats, Database Logging, Cybersecurity, Confidential Data Exchange, Information Hiding, Robust System, Image Compression, Noise Resilience.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an age of unpreceentned digital interconnectedness, secure information sharing has never been more essential. Both organizations and individuals increasingly struggle to defend confidential information from illegitimate access, eavesdropping, and tampering. Though traditional encryption schemes encrypt plaintext into unmeaningful ciphertext, they tend to advertise the mere presence of secret messages. Steganography solves this weakness by hiding the existence of confidential information altogether, inserting it inside ostensibly innocent carrier files.

This paper presents an improved steganographic system that uses the Least Significant Bit (LSB) substitution method to conceal encrypted messages in RGB images. In contrast to most current implementations, our method pairs the stealth of steganography with the security of contemporary cryptographic protocols, namely the Fernet symmetric encryption scheme. This two-layer protection guarantees that even if the existence of concealed information is revealed, the information itself cannot be accessed without the correct decryption key.

The system developed goes beyond simple steganographic implementation in that it includes several practical features required for real-world deployment. Some of these features are a user interface, role-based access control features, extensive error handling, and integration with databases for secure logging and auditing. The system is also set up to provide a high level of imperceptibility—upholding the visual quality of the carrier images—while exhibiting resistance against popular attacks like the addition of noise and compression.

By solving the technical, usability, and security problems at the same time, this research makes an original contribution to information security by offering a viable solution applicable in applications from personal privacy preservation to corporate data protection and military communications.

II. Literature Review

Steganography has been widely researched as a method of safe transmission of data, making it possible to hide secret data inside digital media like images, audio, and video. One of many steganographic methods, the Least Significant Bit (LSB) substitution technique, is one of the easiest and most common methods because it is simple to implement and causes negligible degradation to image quality [1]. Yet, LSB-based techniques are vulnerable to visual and statistical attacks, which motivated researchers to find new techniques like adaptive LSB substitution and edge detection-based embedding in order to enhance security and stealthiness [2][3].

In order to augment the security of secret data, scientists have combined cryptographic techniques with steganographic procedures. Symmetric encryption algorithms, including AES (Advanced Encryption Standard) and DES (Data Encryption Standard), have been widely employed to encrypt messages prior to their insertion into images so that they become indecipherable even when extracted [4]. Recently, the Fernet encryption algorithm, a symmetric encryption with intrinsic authentication, has also been favored for its ease of use and robust security aspects, providing data confidentiality and integrity [5]. The integration of encryption and steganography—commonly called cryptosteganography—enables a double-layer security measure, rendering data transmission more attack-resistant [6].

Access control and authentication processes are another important building block of secure steganographic systems. It has been indicated in studies that Role-Based Access Control (RBAC) must be implemented so that only specified users are able to encode, decode, and extract confidential messages [7]. Through role-based permissions, systems can prevent unwanted access and ensure security, especially in high-level applications like military communications, company data security, and personal secret messaging [8]. Secure user authentication, such as multi-factor authentication (MFA), has also been investigated to deter unauthorized access and enhance system security [9].

Making sure the system is robust against image degradations is another important area of study. Most steganographic schemes are vulnerable to degradations such as image compression, addition of noise, and format conversion, which compromise the hidden information and make it irretrievable. Researchers have come up with solutions like error detection and correction codes (Hamming codes, Reed-Solomon codes) to counteract these threats, so that messages are retrievable even in bad scenarios [10]. Moreover, steganography based on deep learning has also been a promising area, utilizing neural networks to maximize embedding techniques for enhanced security and resistance against detection attacks [11][12].

Current steganography systems also include secure logging and auditing features to monitor encoding and decoding operations. Keeping a database of transaction logs increases system transparency for monitoring and forensic analysis in the event of security violations [13]. Research has highlighted the importance of blockchain technology for secure logging, where tamper-proof evidence of data transactions is maintained, and this can further improve trust and accountability in steganographic systems [14].

This project extends these developments by combining Fernet encryption, LSB-based steganography, RBAC for user access control, and error-handling mechanisms into an easy-to-use system. To enhance usability and reliability, the system has support for multiple image formats, incorporates strong error-handling mechanisms, and has a secure database for logging encoding and decoding operations.The suggested solution provides high security, usability, and robustness and is a trustworthy tool for secure communication in different fields, such as personal, corporate, and military applications.

III. METHODOLOGY

The suggested steganography system integrates encryption with image-based data concealing to secure message delivery. The process has several phases: message encryption, image steganography (substitution of LSB), user authentication, and data extraction (decryption and decoding). There is a confidentiality, integrity, and usability guarantee in every phase.

A. Message Encryption using Fernet Algorithm

Before being inserted into a picture, the secret message is encrypted via the Fernet encryption algorithm to guarantee that even when the concealed information is uncovered, it will still be incomprehensible unless it is decrypted using the right decryption key.The encryption process follows these steps:

1. Convert the plaintext message MMM into bytes.
2. Generate a symmetric key KKK using the Fernet key generation method.
3. Encrypt the message using:

$$C=E_K(M)$$

where:

- C is the encrypted ciphertext.
- $E_K(\cdot)$is the encryption function using key K.

4. The ciphertext C is now ready for embedding into the cover image.

B. Image Steganography using LSB Substitution

The ciphered message is placed in an RGB image via Least Significant Bit (LSB) substitution. The method changes the least significant bit of the color channel of every pixel to contain binary data without noticeably changing the image.

The embedding process follows these steps:

- Convert the encrypted message CCC into a binary stream $B=\{b_1,b_2, ..., bn\}$
- Choose an RGB image with dimensions H×W.
- Modify the least significant bit of each pixel's RGB values as follows:

$$P'_{(i, j)}=P_{(i,j)}-(P_{(i,j)} \mathrm{mod} 2) +b_k$$

where:

- $P_{(i, j)}$ is the original pixel value at position (i,j).
- $P'_{(i, j)}$is the modified pixel value after embedding.
- b_k is the corresponding bit from the encrypted message.

Repeat until all bits are embedded, resulting in the stego-image Is.

C. Role-Based Access Control (RBAC) for Security

To prevent unauthorized access, the system incorporates Role-Based Access Control (RBAC), assigning different user roles:

- **Admin:** Full control over encoding, decoding, and logs.
- **User:** Limited access to encoding and decoding functions.

Access is granted based on authentication credentials, ensuring that only authorized users can perform encoding and decoding operations.

D. Message Retrieval and Decryption

To extract the hidden message from the stego-image:

1. Extract the LSB bits from the stego-imageIs to reconstruct the binary stream B′.
2. Convert B′ back into ciphertext C′.

3. Decrypt using the stored encryption key K:

   M′=DK(C′)

   where:

   - D_K (·) is the decryption function using key K.
   - M′ is the retrieved plaintext message.

4. The recovered message M′ should match the original message M, ensuring successful encoding and decoding.

E. Mathematical Model of System Reliability

To assess the robustness of the system, error handling is implemented to detect and correct potential transmission errors. The probability of successful message retrieval is given by:

Ps=1−Pe

where:

- Ps is the probability of successful extraction.
- Pe is the probability of error due to image compression, noise, or distortion.

Error correction methods, such as **Hamming codes**, can be integrated to improve Ps by detecting and correcting bit-flip errors.

With the incorporation of Fernet encryption, LSB-based steganography, RBAC to secure users, and error-handling mechanisms, this project promotes high security, reliability, and usability for safe data communication. The method safeguards sensitive messages securely from unauthorized viewing while preserving the visual integrity of the original image.

I. Flow of the Application

Below is a step-by-step workflow of the application:

This diagram shows how a secret message is hidden inside an image securely using encryption and steganography. The process happens in three main steps:

1. **Input Layer**

   - A secret message is taken as input.
   - The message is encrypted so that even if someone finds it, they can't read it without the correct key.
   - A cover image (a normal image) is selected to hide the message inside.

2. Processing Layer

- The encrypted message is embedded into the cover image using a special technique called Least Significant Bit (LSB) substitution.
- This changes tiny details in the image that are not noticeable, so the image looks the same.
- The result is a stego-image (an image that secretly contains the message).

3. Output Layer

- The stego-image is saved and can be sent to the receiver.
- When the receiver gets the stego-image, they use the correct decryption key to extract and read the hidden message.

Final Output

- The receiver successfully gets back the original message without anyone else knowing it was ever hidden inside the image.
- This process helps in secure communication where messages need to stay private and undetectable.

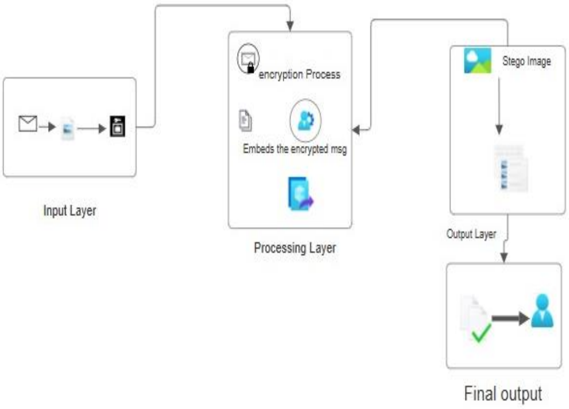


Figure-1: Architecture of Image Steganography

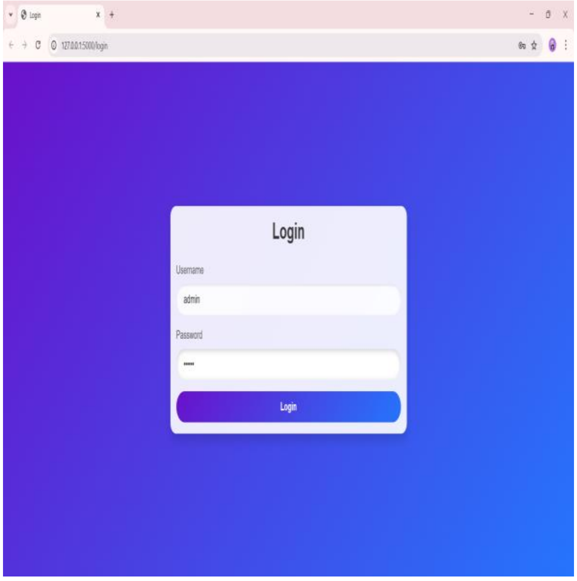
IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. User Login Page Interface

This **login page interface** serves as the authentication gateway for users, allowing them to access a system securely. It features a **simple and intuitive design**, supporting both **traditional username-password login** and **social login options** (Google and Facebook). The page is styled with a modern **gradient background**, with the form enclosed in a light-colored container for better visibility.

- **Username & Password Fields:**
  - Users enter their credentials into the text fields.

  - The password is masked for security.
- **Login Button:**
  - Once the user inputs credentials, clicking the **Login** button triggers authentication.
- **Sign-up Link:**
  - If a user doesn't have an account, they can click **Sign up** to create one.



Login

Username

admin

Password

••••

Figure-2: User login page interface

B. Dashboard Page for Image Steganography

The dashboard serves as the main interface for users to interact with the Steganography App, providing options to encode, decode, and track activity logs.

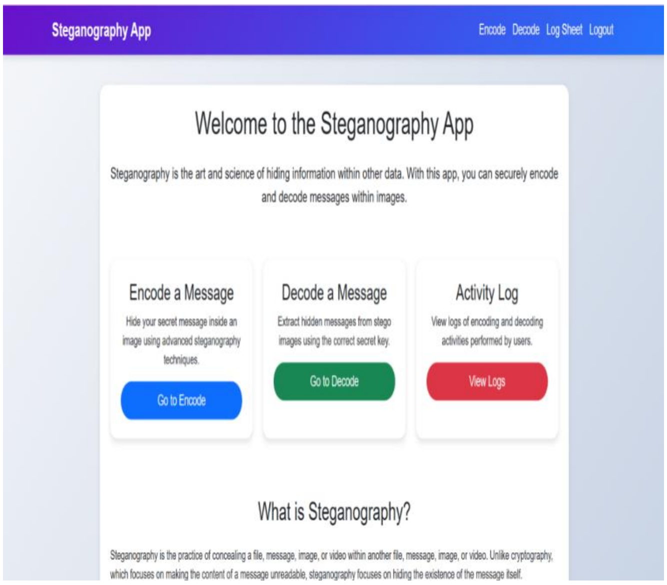
Key Sections:

1. **Navigation Bar:**
   - Contains links to Encode, Decode, Log Sheet, and Logout options for easy access.
2. **Main Section:**
   - Welcome Message explaining the purpose of the app.
3. **Feature Cards:**
   - Encode a Message (Blue Button): Hides secret messages inside images.
   - Decode a Message (Green Button): Extracts hidden messages using a secret key.
   - Activity Log (Red Button): Displays a history of encoding and decoding activities.
4. **Footer Section:**
   - Provides a brief explanation of steganography and its significance.

Backend Overview:

- Uses LSB steganography to hide messages in images.
- Fernet encryption ensures message security.
- Database logging tracks encoding and decoding activities.
- Session management for secure access control.

This dashboard offers a user-friendly and secure way to manage hidden communication efficiently.



Welcome to the Steganography App

Steganography is the art and science of hiding information within other data. With this app, you can securely encode and decode messages within images.

Encode a Message

Hide your secret message inside an image using advanced steganography techniques.

Decode a Message

Extract hidden messages from stego images using the correct secret key.

Activity Log

View logs of encoding and decoding activities performed by users.

What is Steganography?

Steganography is the practice of concealing a file, message, image, or video within another file, message, image, or video. Unlike cryptography, which focuses on making the content of a message unreadable, steganography focuses on hiding the existence of the message itself.

Figure-3: Dashboard Page for Image Steganography

C. Encode the Image with Secure Message and Secure Key

This page allows users to embed a secret message inside an image using steganography and encryption techniques.

Key Components:

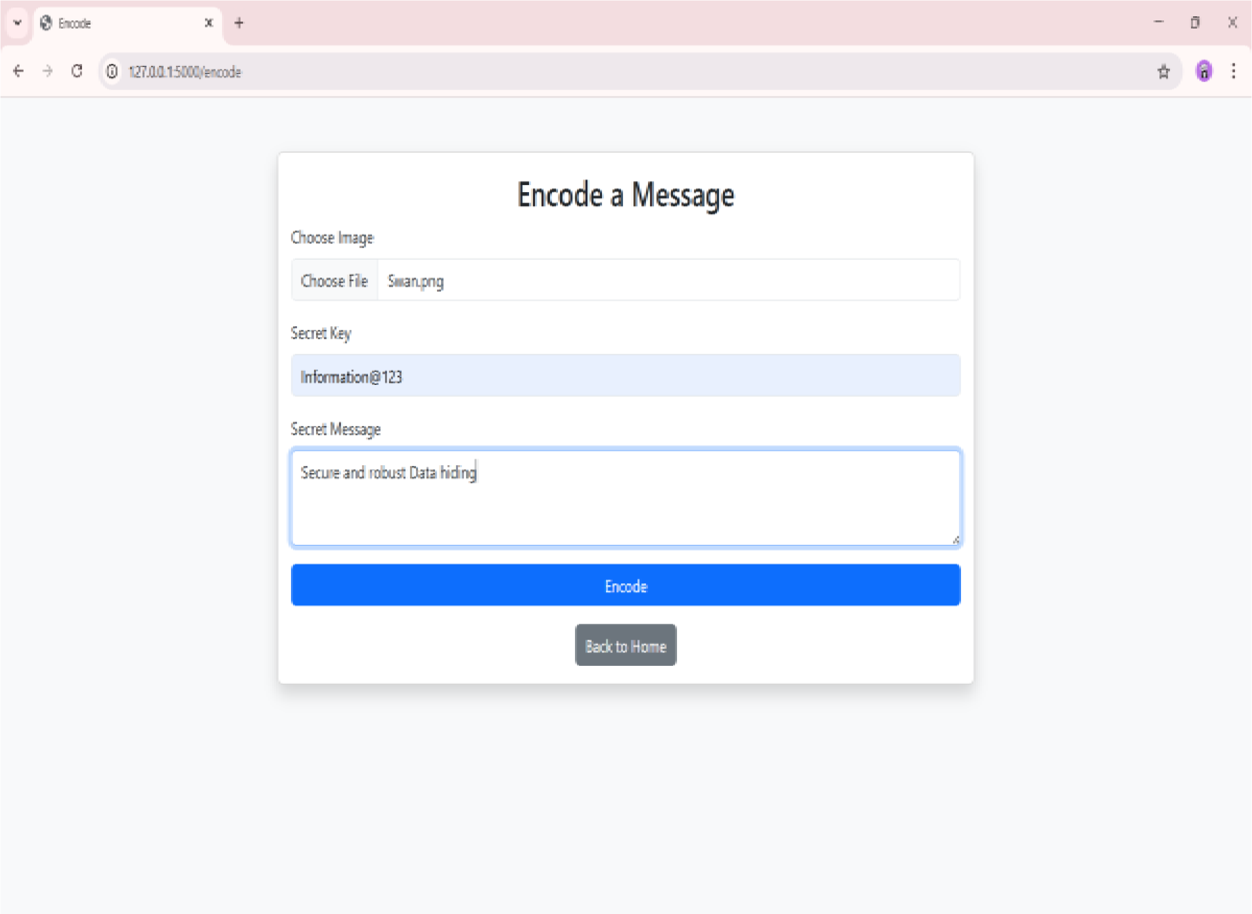
1. **Choose Image:**
   - Users select an image file (e.g., .jpeg) in which the secret message will be hidden.
2. **Secret Key:**
   - A user-defined **encryption key** (e.g., secure@123) is required to encrypt the message before embedding it in the image.
   - Ensures that only users with the correct key can extract the hidden message.
3. **Secret Message:**
   - The text input where users enter the message they want to hide inside the selected image.
4. **Encode Button:**
   - Clicking the **"Encode"** button triggers the **encryption and embedding process** using **Least Significant Bit (LSB) steganography**.
   - The system encrypts the message with **Fernet encryption** before embedding it into the image.
5. **Back to Home Button:**
   - Navigates back to the main dashboard.

Backend Process:

1. **Encryption:**
   - The secret message is first encrypted using the **Fernet encryption algorithm**.

   - Encrypted message = E(Key, Message)
2. **Steganography (LSB Encoding):**
   - The encrypted message is embedded into the **least significant bits** of the image pixels.
   - **Equation:**Modified_Pixel = Original_Pixel - LSB + Message_Bit
3. **Image Output:**
   - A **stego image** (image with the hidden message) is generated and saved.

This page provides a **secure and user-friendly interface** for encoding secret messages within images for confidential communication



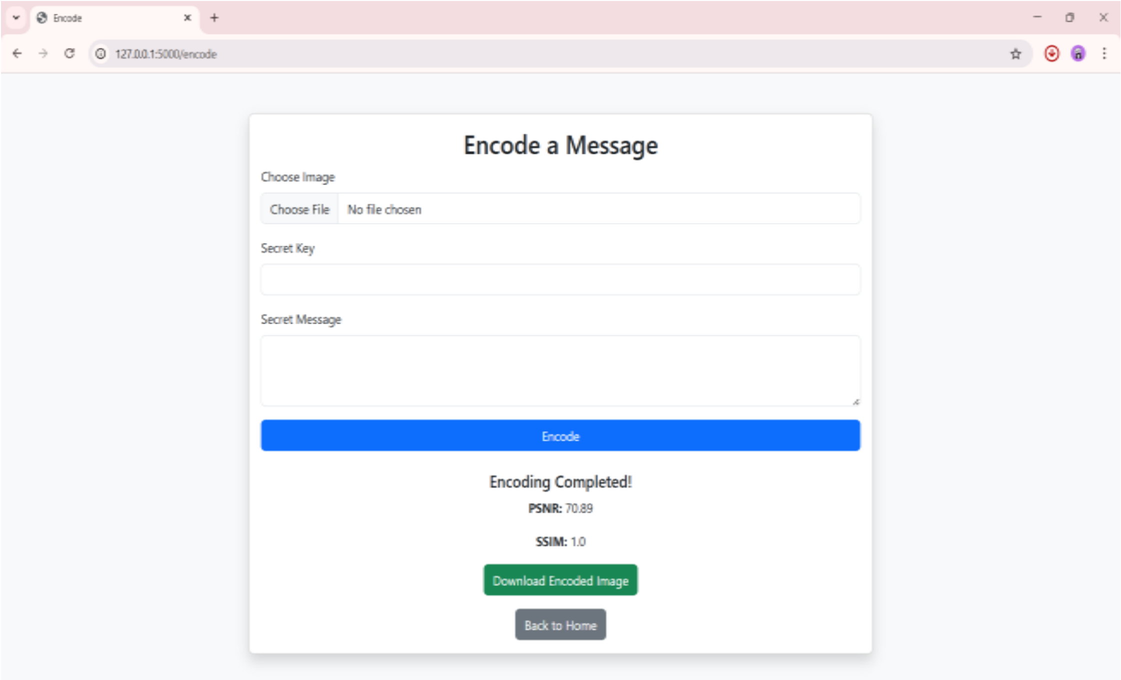
Encode a Message

Choose Image: Swan.png

Secret Key: Information@123

Secret Message: Secure and robust Data hiding

Figure-4:Encode the Image with Secure Message and Secure Key



Encode a Message

Choose Image

Choose File No file chosen

Secret Key

Secret Message

Encode

Encoding Completed!

PSNR: 70.89

SSIM: 1.0

Figure-5: Visible Results of Visible Quality Metrics

D. Decode a Secret Message with Image and Secret Key

The "Decode a Message" screen is designed to extract hidden messages from steganographic images. It consists of the following key elements:

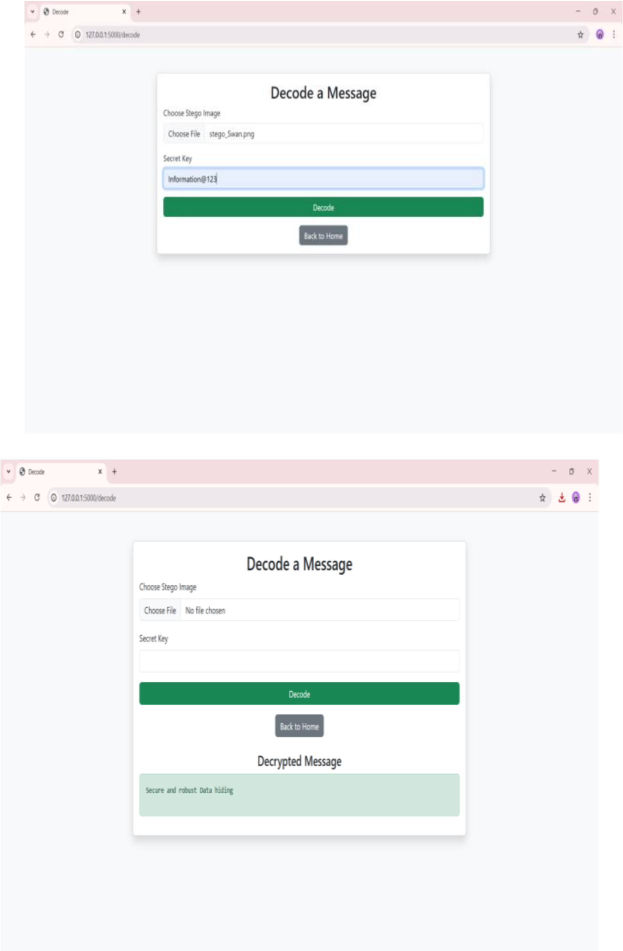
1. **Choose Stego Image**:
    - The user uploads a stego image (an image that contains a hidden message).
    - The file input field allows selection of the image file.
2. **Secret Key Input**:
    - The user enters the secret key used during the encoding process.
    - This key is required to decrypt and extract the hidden message.
3. **Decode Button**:
    - Once the user uploads the stego image and enters the correct secret key, clicking the "Decode" button triggers the decoding process.
4. **Decrypted Message Display**:
    - If the correct stego image and secret key are provided, the hidden message is extracted and displayed in the "Decrypted Message" section.

Functionality:

- The system extracts the hidden message from the stego image using steganographic decoding techniques.

- If the correct key is provided, the message is successfully decrypted and displayed.
- If the incorrect key or an invalid image is used, decoding may fail, preventing unauthorized access to the hidden message.

Figure 6: Decode a Secret Message with Image and Secret Key.



Decode a Message

Choose Stego Image

Choose File stego_Swan.png

Secret Key

Information@123

Decode a Message

Choose Stego Image

Choose File No file chosen

Secret Key

Decrypted Message

Secure and robust Data hiding

V. Conclusion

This project effectively deploys a safe and accessible steganography system to provide confidential data transmission through the incorporation of encrypted messages within images. Utilizing the Least Significant Bit (LSB) replacement approach, the system efficiently conceals information while maintaining the visual aspect of the image. The incorporation of Fernet encryption further provides security such that even if the concealed message is revealed, it will still be impossible to read using the wrong decryption key.

To enhance security and usability further, Role-Based Access Control (RBAC) is employed, limiting unauthorized access and granting various permission levels to users. The presence of a logging mechanism provides secure tracking and auditing of encrypted and decrypted messages. In addition, error-handling mechanisms contribute to system reliability, ensuring ease of operation even under adverse conditions like the addition of noise and image compression.

This method is a practical, efficient, and secure solution for numerous applications, such as personal communication, business data protection, and military message sending. Possible future developments might involve deep learning-based adaptive steganography, steganalysis attack resilience, and blockchain implementation for improved security and transparency.

In conclusion, this project demonstrates an effective and scalable steganography system, ensuring confidential, tamper-proof, and secure data exchange in real-world applications.

VI. Acknowledgements

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest exists.

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