THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE OF FILIPINO MEMES

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to determine the Top 30 political memes in 2022 as well as describe their semiotic features and identify the cultural realities reflected in these memes. It also aimed to discover the usage of memes to convey meanings to the readers. It utilized a qualitative descriptive research design, specifically semiotic analysis to interpret the features found in the memes and to reveal what cultural contexts are behind those images. The analysis revealed the following notable semiotic features from the memes based on the Theory of Signs by Pierce: sign, object and interpretant. Several themes on cultural realities were also reflected considering the Social Semiotics Theory by Van Leuween including: *electoral dilemma as a product of complex factors, branding politicians according to a single positive or negative trait, skin color and beauty standards are subjects of humor in politics, politics intersects with celebrity culture, and normalization of corruption through humor.* Indeed, despite the infamous critique of their formality memes are effective communication mechanisms in stirring up significant discussions both in the online and offline community among Filipinos.

KEYWORDS: linguistics, memes, semiotic analysis, political memes, Philippines.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the world of technology comes the existence of memes. Such technologies embed most of the key features that seem to characterize new media artifacts such as culture, networks and even virality. One of the powerful tools in modern communication is the emergence of the political memes blending humor, satire and symbolism to comment on current events and ideologies. As they rapidly spread across social media platforms, these memes shape public opinion reinforce biases and engage audiences in both serious and lighthearted discussions about complex political issues.

In this regard, the study of Soriano and Cornelio (120-139) examines how political memes became a tool for young people to engage in political discourse during the 2016 Philippine elections, both empowering them to voice opinions and inadvertently contributing to the spread of misinformation. They also argue that while memes offer an accessible platform for participation, studying political memes also provides insights into how digital culture influences political discourse, the spread of information and misinformation and the formation of community identities around shared beliefs. With this, the impact of examining political memes highlighted the multifaceted role in shaping contemporary political narratives.

Meme is coined as an idea or a behavior. It is an idea specifically a social idea or a cultural symbol that is virtually transmitted. It also shares practices from one mind to another in a form of a speech, writing, gesture or ritual. Most of the modern memes today have the intention to be funny, or otherwise, ridicule publicly a human behavior. Other memes can be expressed through expressions shown verbally, can be seen in videos, and some have deeper and heavier contents. Memes may not be recognized by what purpose it serves because it is used mostly for entertainment purposes (Gil 1). With this, memes were not given serious attention specifically in the field of academics. As a matter of fact, Korff (Calimbo 1-20) emphasized that internet memes may highlight a societal issue and their viral presence contributes a lot in developing social consciousness on the internet users, making memes enable the creators to express their receptions and reactions to pressing social issues.

It has been suggested that a sudden explosion on what is considered to be fundamentally human pertains to the consciousness, language, culture, and intellect that serves as a consequence of a human's evolved capacity to imitate. The driving force for this explosion, specifically the cultural explosion was the generation of a second environmental space in which memes drove the biological selection as well as the genes. Memes are known to be replicators in a cultural unit which are under the Darwinian evolutionary principles analogous to a gene but a more distinct replicator in its own right (Heylighen and Klaas 215 - 230).

Today, internet memes raise increasingly legitimate cases during web-based and mobile applications whereby users rescind their awareness about dynamic feeds, popup boxes and ever changing off-topic sections of forums (Huntington 92-98). Having the difficulty in understanding and getting involved in the latest trend today which are "memes" have become a bit of a problem in our society especially the ones who are very active with their social media life. If these phenomena that our society has been facing wouldn't mind knowing its true purpose, it may result to misleading information and may cause a lot of problems in the future (Razdan, Akshay, Lalmuansangkimi 45 - 60.)

In the Philippines, political memes raised concerns about their role in spreading misinformation and shaping public opinion. The study of Gozum and Feliciano (85 – 100) highlight how political memes are frequently used as tools for "information warfare" with various groups deploying them to influence perceptions and manipulative narratives in the public sphere. They also emphasized how memes can effectively disseminate false information, reinforce stereotypes and deepen political divide. This misuse of memes as a form of digital propaganda poses significant risks to informed political discourse as audiences may accept and share misleading content without critical analysis.

Meanwhile, the researcher has observed that meme-sharing has been done by students and it is a trend now especially in one of the big colleges in Tagum City. They tend to share memes for its humor but little do they know or little do they care that some memes are associated with issues that are supposedly not tolerated. In addition, as the researcher read some related literature about memes she has not arrived at any study that viewed the other side of a meme. Therefore, the researcher decided to conduct this research study to know and reveal all other hidden issues associated with memes.

This study is anchored on the theory of Signs by Peirce (9 – 119) who opined that signs are basically composed of three inter-related components: a sign, an object and an interpretant. The sign serves as a signifier which can be an utterance, a word or a smoke (signals a fire). An object represents whatever is signified. An example of the notion of sign is the word tree, while the example for the object is the plant tree that we associate to the word tree. Letters T, R, E and E in the word TREE do not really have a meaning itself, but it constitutes or represents the physical plant tree. Lastly, the interpretant is thought of as the understanding we assign to the sign. This can be applied to media studies, exploring how signs are used to create meaning in different media contexts (Santaella 169-181).

Moreover, a sign may be classified as an "icon," an "index," or a "symbol," according to its relation with its dynamical object. An icon (such as a picture, image, model, or diagram) is a sign that demonstrates the qualities of its dynamical object. An index or "seme" (such as a clock, thermometer, fuel gauge, or medical symptom) is a sign that demonstrates the influence of its dynamical object. A symbol (such as a trophy, medal, receipt, diploma, monument, word, phrase, or sentence) is a sign that is interpreted as a reference to its dynamical object. This is the second "trichotomy of signs." An icon corresponds to the category of firstness, an index corresponds to the category of secondness, and a symbol corresponds to the category of thirdness (Pierce, qtd. in Bergman).

This study is also hinged to the Theory of Signs of Saussure in 1959 who introduced sign as a composition of two important terms, namely the "signifier" and the "signified". The "signifier" refers to the sound-images or linguistic signs, while the "signifier" refers to the associated object or concept on the given signifier. Moreover, Saussure cleared out that both the "signifier" and the "signified" should not be necessarily relative or logically connected. This theory also explores the application and implication in language, culture and communication (Barthes; Culler; Eco; & Harris).

Another theory that is used to support this study is the Social Semiotics Theory in which Van Leeuwen views as a form of enquiry that comes into its own when it is applied to specific problems and is therefore not pure theory, not a self-contained field but applicable (Halliday 263-272; Lacerna & Bacasmot) and necessarily multidisciplinary. In this foundational work, Kress and van Leeuwen propose that visual communication operates as a language with its own grammar, emphasizing how cultural and social contexts shape the meaning-making process. They even argue that images are not neutral but actively construct realities, making visual semiotics a powerful tool for social interpretation.

The idea of memes is central to the analysis undertaken in this study, but the concept of meme itself has been conceptualized and defined in different ways by different people. Even though the term "meme" itself was only coined in 1976, the intervening years have seen the popular understanding and use of the meme concept undergo several amendments and alterations. It is therefore helpful to trace the development of the meme idea from its

inception to its popular understanding today. The history and development of meme can be divided into two epochs: memes understood as theoretical units of cultural transmission, and memes understood as particular internet artifacts (Chandler).

Meme is used to describe the flow and flux of culture. It is implied as a social counter to the quality which in science is considered to be strongly determined as an individual trait. It has a genuinely long and a fairly disputable history inside the organic sciences and all the more as of late in the social sciences and humanities. In the Selfish Gene, Dawkins starts with the preface saying, "the greater part of what is uncommon about man can be summed up in single word culture''. For Dawkins, social advancement has outperformed natural development as a determinant of human conduct, so a focal point is expected to comprehend that specific determinant (Dawkins, qtd. in Milner).

Back then, internet memes were spread through an electronic mail or known as the e-mail and discussion forums and it would take weeks or even months just to reach a larger audience. Today, memes are spread through the power of social media wherein it can reach such a wide range of audience in just one click away. Once it reaches a critical mass, it jumps from one popular media to another and spreads even farther with the help of the coverage of television, newspapers and even magazines. The lifespan of an internet meme is sometimes brief and its popularity fades as the content loses its novelty. But, not all memes are life because some had so much impact on the pop culture that somehow became a classic (Rouse 123 - 140).

Meme is considered to be a virtually transmitted social idea that is passed on from one individual to another. It is known to be a worldwide phenomenon and spreads fast like a virus. It behaves like an infectious disease that transfers from one person to another through the use of social media. As a matter of fact, memes can be deep in meaning or quite too obvious. Most of the memes nowadays are being transmitted by millennials aging from the 20s because they are the group who are more aggressive, hyper and too in love with social media that it would come to an extent that they can't live without it (Gil).

Internet memes are salient artifacts for critical media studies for several reasons. For one, these memes are a relatively recent discursive form that has yet to be analyzed in-depth by communication researchers. Another significant aspect of these Internet memes is the ease in which they are created and disseminated. After a person has uploaded a new background image for a meme, sites called "meme generators" archive the image and anyone can access the site, select the background image and type in text to be superimposed. Once a meme is generated it can be posted in any number of places online, including social networking sites, discussion forums, and specialized web sites that primarily function as meme aggregators (Chandler).

However, one theorist suggests that memes are not spread by just mere imitation of a human behavior. He stated that memes spread throughout as schemas which came from the shared values and beliefs. Furthermore, despite the confessed disadvantages being stated, memes may also have advantages for they served as an opportunity, a vehicle for a propagation and a source to compete for (Plotkin; Blackmore qtd. in Murray 200-215).

The existence of memes made the internet lively and it has something to do with the active participation of the users who creatively share online items like remix, parody, trending pictures and videos. Striking and funny memes are the good food for an internet culture molded by sharing viral online items and creative participation. On the other hand, though meme is practically basic, others may have their own meaning in understanding a certain meme making it more complicated. It uses pictures with words to express and give ideas to others (Aslan, qtd. in Tuncer).

It is conceivable to think about a science which contemplates the part of signs as a feature of social life. It would frame some portion of social psychology, and consequently of general psychology. We might call it semiology (from the Greek semeîon, 'sign'). It would research the idea of signs and the laws administering them. Since it doesn't exist yet, one can't state for sure that it will exist. But it has a privilege to exist, a place prepared for it ahead of time. Phonetics is just a single branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will find will be laws appropriate in semantics, and etymology will in this manner be doled out to a plainly characterized put in the field of human learning (Saussure, qtd. in Chandler).

All sorts of memes have been rising up especially on social media. Every human being that gets to interact daily on social media can see a meme but not all are knowledgeable enough to identify that what they regularly see is called a "meme". They just usually identify it as a picture having a certain message, as simple as that. Also, some have been using memes to entertain other people or to communicate with others but they don't exactly know that

what they have been exchanging is some sort of an internet phenomenon. It is conveniently and humorously brought a change in the way which people communicate now on the internet.

Internet memes sometimes transcend the virtual world into the actual. They are referenced in daily conversation and can manifest as intangible cultural artifacts and sometimes even as tangible artifacts. Although such an integral part to contemporary social life for billions of people the world over, the virtual and actual artifacts which manifest from the intangible cultures – the memes – spreading inexorably across computer and satellite networks can easily be lost if intentional efforts are not taken to preserve them for posterity (Farokhmanesh 44-61).

Internet memes consist of not just the flow of images between individuals, but the flow of ideas and ideologies as well. When one group controls the use of a particular image, they are also able to control its associated ideologies as well. Typically, this can be thought of as a relationship between a dominant group or dominant culture, and subcultures that split off from it (Hebdige 246-272). A dominant culture is generally able to control the use of images and propagate their associated ideologies. By controlling images and what they symbolize, dominant culture can exert control over subcultures. Hebdige argued that through the commodification of images and symbols, a dominant culture could prevent subcultures from threatening their dominant position.

The main purpose of this study was to determine the Top 30 political memes in 2022 as well as describe its semiotic features and identify the cultural realities reflected in these memes. It also aimed to discover the usage of memes to convey meanings to the readers. Since the researcher used semiotic analysis as a tool in identifying the meaning conveyed by these memes, there were no participants involved in this study. However, the basis of gathering these memes was from different websites subject for validation from the experts for reliability and validity purposes.

This study would add to the growing body of knowledge about the usefulness of the Semiotics theory in studying memes because it is a qualitative-interpretative that focuses on signs and texts in a given study. It plays a great role on every system of signs and whatever the substance and limits it has whether it is on images, gestures, voices, setting, objects, music, or the combination of all of those. Through this study, the researcher and the readers should be able to acquire suitable information that would enable us to understand how memes are utilized. Specifically, this study aimed at providing answers to the following questions, to wit: What are the semiotic features of Filipino memes in social media? And, what cultural realities are reflected in these memes.

The researcher is confident that this qualitative study would add to the importance and significance of memes in our society. It is through this study that the researcher was able to obtain information about the linguistics or the language of memes, the cultural realities reflected in these memes and the reasons of using memes to convey meaning. Additionally, this knowledge would be helpful for *social media* users. Thus, this study would let every social media user to use memes not just for advertisements but also on conveying meaning or message to other people. *Content creators* can also be considered beneficiaries of this study as insights into meme dynamics can increasingly shape public discourse, understanding their structure, linguistic elements and emotional appeal allows these creators to engage audiences more effectively and responsibly. Moreover, the 21st *century teachers* can use memes as their visual aids especially those who are teaching philosophy because even memes are humoristic, still some of which do have influential meanings behind it. Lastly, this study would somehow assist other *researches* in the future who are interested to conduct a study related to memes. It will lend them a hand on identifying the semiotic features of memes that needs further study and investigation. Therefore, whether you are making your own meme on meme generator is "trivial" or not, the next time you actually do replicate or produce a meme, you could see yourself transmitting culture rather than simply wasting your time.

The focus of this qualitative study was to analyze top 30 Philippine political memes from this website https://blog.sulit.ph/funny-election-memes-for-2022-philippines-election/ with regards to the semiotic features and the cultural realities reflected on these memes. The study sought to know how to capture both the content or the meaning behind the text and images that are being delivered by the memes through the use of semiotic analysis and its supporting theories. This study however did not mean that there were no weaknesses and limitations on this study. For instance, during the collection of data wherein the researcher primarily used semiotic analysis, it cannot be guaranteed that it would suffice the needed data. That is why the researcher needed the help of the experts to validate and assure that the data presented are well reviewed. However, due to the small sample of data, results may not be generalized and cannot adequately support claims of having achieved valid conclusions.

2. METHOD

Data Sources

This semiotic analysis made use of secondary data gathered through selected Filipino memes found in different social media like wheninmanila.com and different social media sites and pages. Martins et.al (1-4) claimed that any material obtained by others from any community domain is categorized as secondary data. These are usually free and inexpensive to access and can provide a strong foundation for any research once value and usefulness are adequately assessed. It refers to a data set not directly gathered by the author (Boslaugh 2-10). It pertains to information gathered by others that can be used for new methods of inquiry and for which it was not primarily and initially intended (Vartanian 4-6).

In this study, there are 30 political memes gathered and are subject for interpretation. These memes were used as data sources to identify the semiotic features such as the sign, object and interpretant. No participants were involved. Instead, this used memes commonly found in the internet as data sources. Morrow (98) describes this type of sources as a stretch of natural language produced by real users or writers designed to convey a specific purpose. Further, Gilmore (97-118) claims that these data sources produced in the natural communication process, reflect the situation, the participants, social and cultural communication and the purposes of the communicative act.

Materials and Instrument

This qualitative – semiotic analysis utilized 30 Filipino political memes. These 30 memes sufficed this analysis as Clarke and Braun (40-45) suggested that 10-100 materials are needed for data saturation when using secondary sources in qualitative research (Fugard and Potts 669-684).

During the conduct of this study, the researcher carefully set criteria in selecting political memes as tools for interpretation and analysis to ensure they accurately represent the objectives of the study. First, relevance to the political context is essential; chosen memes should directly relate to specific political events, figures or issues pertinent to the focus of the study. Memes should also demonstrate widespread engagement, as high levels of shares, likes or comments can indicate their impact and resonance with the audience. Additionally, the researcher considered diversity in themes and sources, selecting memes from various social media platforms to capture a broader range of perspectives. The meme's interpretability is equally important; their content, humor and symbolism should be accessible enough to allow for consistent interpretation but complex enough to offer meaningful insights into political sentiments and cultural narratives. Lastly, ethical considerations such as avoiding memes that target or harm individuals or groups, ensure the analysis respects the dignity and privacy of all parties involved.

From these gathered documents, the researcher focused the analysis on the semiotic features through the lens of Pierce's Theory of Sign. This theory was highly useful for identifying and analyzing the semiotic features of the political memes as it provides a framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and interpreted through signs. Each sign type helps determine how audiences interpret the meme's intended message – whether through sign, object and interpretant. By breaking down these semiotic features, the researcher can better understand how political memes convey complex messages quickly and effectively, shaping public opinion through shared cultural references and visual cues.

On the other hand, Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Theory became an instrument in identifying and understanding the cultural realities reflected in these memes. Signs and symbols are not just neutral carriers of meaning but are embedded with social values, ideologies and cultural norms. This allows the researcher to examine political memes as more than simple visual messages, interpreting them as complex reflections of cultural attitudes, beliefs and power dynamic within society.

Design and Procedure

In order to have a better and in-depth analysis of the semiotic features of Filipino memes, the researcher utilized a qualitative descriptive research design. Creswell (124-130) defines qualitative research as a method of inquiry that aims to create a comprehensive, primarily narrative account to aid the researcher in understanding a social or cultural phenomenon. Additionally, qualitative research is a scientific study that entails investigation that looks for solution to a query. It draws from naturalistic inquiry which purports a commitment to studying something in its natural state to the extent that is possible within the context of the research arena. Thus, there is no pre-selection of study variables, no manipulation of variables and no prior commitment to any theoretical view of target phenomenon.

In addition, the researcher also used a semiotic analysis as a tool for interpreting data as it focuses on examining signs and symbols to uncover deeper cultural meanings and societal messages. According to Chandler (13), semiotic analysis involves studying both the *denotation* (the literal meaning) and *connotation* (the implied meaning) of signs within a text or image, helping researchers understand how audiences derive meaning from different elements. This method is particularly useful in analyzing digital content like memes, where cultural symbols, colors and humor play significant roles in conveying complex ideas quickly and accessibly. By decoding the embedded meanings within visual and textual symbols, semiotic analysis provides insights into how collective values and ideologies are shaped and reinforced within a community. This approach ultimately allows researchers to delve into the deeper cultural narratives and influences that underlie surface-level communication.

The researcher gathered data through selected Filipino memes found in different social media like wheninmanila.com and chosen Facebook pages. After the collection of the said data, the researcher began to categorize and analyze each meme according to its type. After sufficient information was collected, content analysis was used to interpret and code the data. The Theory of Signs by Pierce was applied by the researcher to understand the meaning incorporated in these memes.

Semiotics is the only linguistic feature that would be the best approach in analyzing memes because the other approaches would not be enough to support the true purpose of memes. Milner explores how memes serve as a form of public discourse, where both visual and textual elements combine to convey layered meanings that reflect and shape cultural and political sentiments (Milner). Moreover, this analysis was validated by experts specifically in Applied Linguistics to ensure the credibility of this study as well to establish a reliable data for this study.

Interpretation is one of the most important characteristics of a qualitative study because it allows the researcher to draw his own conclusions (Stake). Since data analysis in qualitative research is a continuous process (Mertens), the researcher remained involved in analyzing data throughout the data collection period. The analysis during the data collection was guided by certain themes or categories relevant to research questions. According to Constas (Vaismoradi et. al), category development is the fundamental step of data analysis in qualitative studies. In order to get a better understanding of the topic before beginning the data collection process, related literature to identify categories were reviewed that fall under semiotic features and cultural realities represented by Filipino memes.

After data collection was completed, reviewing of data started. According to Bodgan and Biklen (Bryman & Burgess 1-17), data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and enable you to present what you have discovered to others. Therefore, during the process of data analysis, particular episodes, events, phrases, and ideas with the intention of broadening understanding and creating a connection with the research question was carefully looked into. To identify further categories and subcategories, the method of content analysis was applied.

A line-by-line analysis of documents was done after reading these documents for several times (Strauss and Corbin). This type of analysis is a technique that allows the researcher to closely examine each part of a text to identify key themes, patterns and meanings. This is essential for gaining in-depth insights, particularly in qualitative studies involving documents and transcripts. The categorization process by transferring the emergent themes onto paper and then organizing them by relevant questions and major themes were done manually. Phrases and words for the identification of any emergent themes and subcategories were also used. After looking at the consistencies of these themes, categories whose frequency was higher in terms of their occurrences during the data collection processes were filtered out. Thorough examination of the categories' relevance to the present research questions was done.

In connection, Maykut and Morehouse described this format as: carefully reading and coding each data piece, organizing each data piece into categories, comparing each new data piece to existing categories to determine whether the new data fit into existing categories or fall into new categories, looking for emerging themes within each category and repeating the process for finding the most salient features.

The researcher performed the following steps in analyzing the data as to mention: familiarized data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed the themes, defined and named themes, and constructed the report through content analysis. Be that as it may, human error is very associated with content analysis, since there is the hazard for researchers to misinterpret the information accumulated, along these lines creating false and questionable conclusions (Krippendorff & Bock, qtd. in Meyer).

Data reduction is a crucial step in qualitative research that involves simplifying, organizing and focusing on raw data to make analysis more manageable and meaningful. As Miles, Huberman and Saldana explained, data reduction is not merely about cutting down data volume but about transforming complex, unstructured data into a concise, organized form that highlights essential patterns and themes (Miles et al. 12). This process involves coding, summarizing and categorizing information, allowing the researcher to distil large amount of data into a coherent structure that facilitates deeper interpretation. By selectively condensing the data, the researcher can focus on relevant findings that directly contribute to addressing the research questions, making data reduction a foundational technique in qualitative analysis (Miles et al. 13). In this method, the researcher asked the help of an expert, a data analyst particularly in handling, sorting, and organizing voluminous qualitative data to merge, manage, sort, and categorize data in easier way.

To answer problem number one, the researcher analyzed the semiotic features and sorted them out according to the emerging categories and themes. To help keep with the coded data, the researcher constructed a table and listed all the categories with sub-categories identified. The categories that have been used in the coding of data on semiotic features were given but not be limited to this only since it is possible that other features will come out during the coding process. If there were features that cannot be classified on the broader categories, then they were clustered together at one equally important semiotic feature. Also, similar categories were clustered so that there will be manageable categories remain. Analysis through content analysis and direct observations was used to further support perceived features.

To answer problem number two, the researcher come up with a content analysis which was validated by panel of experts. Documents and observations were analyzed based on the themes that came out during the process of categorization and coding to extract further culture realities implied by such Filipino memes.

Considering that this study used secondary data, giving utmost importance to the confidentiality and secrecy of the data is necessary. Considering ethical issues is vital in conducting the study using qualitative research to balance the latent research risks and benefits (Arifrin 30-33). Shenton (60) mentioned the different criteria for achieving the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Four criteria should be observed, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hasson et al. 1008-1015 and Shenton 65).

In establishing and achieving trustworthiness, the researcher followed and used the concepts of Shenton (65). Hence, the researcher employed the four important criteria in assuming trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in this study (Curtin & Fossey qtd. in Ngundu).

In addressing *credibility* in the study, the researcher used several techniques which ensure the qualifications and experience of the researcher, thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny, examination of the previous research findings, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, persistent observation and referential adequacy that would be of great help in building confidence in the truth of the findings. It also deals with the question how congruent the findings are with reality (Shenton 63-75).

In this study, the researcher prefers Gephart in terms of *conformability*. To him, conformability is concerned with the issues on biases and prejudices on the researcher aside from the reader's own roadway to track the data and interpretations presented. The researcher can give her own biases and viewpoints about memes and its semiotic features. Nonetheless, it is our full responsibility to be conscious of our own reflections and reactions. If these presumptions occur on the conduct of the study, bracketing and reflexivity are applied. Videos, transcripts, and all other documents available were kept so that it can be presented to an interested party who would like to look at the original sources or transcripts (Guba & Lincoln 221-240).

Lastly, *dependability* is an assessment of the quality of the integrated process of data collection, data analysis and phenomenal explanation. Conformability is where we make sure that all the original materials used were kept. In here, it measures how well the inquiry's findings are supported by the data collected (Guba & Lincoln 221-240; Shenton 63-75).

To observe ethical considerations in the study, the researcher used the basic ethical principles from the Belmont Report (1979), namely: These are the principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice. Further, the University of Mindanao UMERC principles were used as a guide by the researcher to have a smooth conduct of the study following their comments and suggestions. Since this study only utilized secondary data and no participants were involved, this ensures that deceit is not committed. Further, the result of the study benefits the institution where the researcher is also a teacher and to other teachers as well. The school can provide interventions

and seminars on how memes are relevant to their lives and how it affects their living as well as on the students for them to be knowledgeable as to when and how to use these memes properly and appropriately.

The researcher ensured that this study was originally created by herself and that all the essential components of the study such as designs, semiotic features, analysis and interpretation were authentic and reliable and were subjected to deeper scrutiny by the panel members as experts in the field of Applied Linguistics. The researcher's name at the beginning of the paper ensures that readers may know who conducted the research and should get credit for it. Further, this allows future researchers and readers to raise concerns if they have questions about the methods, semiotic features and the interpretation of results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the results and discussion of the comprehensive semiotic analysis conducted on the memes which are taken as the subjects of this study.

The Semiotic Features of Filipino Memes

There are 30 political memes which proliferated in social media during the 2022 national elections that are semiotically analyzed in this part according to their semiotic features. The analysis is based on the Theory of Signs by Pierce which opined that a sign is basically composed of three inter-related components. In this section, the chosen political memes were grouped, analyzed, and discussed according to the said three components: *sign*, which serves as a signifier like an utterance; *object*, which represents whatever is signified; and the *interpretant* which is the understanding we assign to the sign.

Sign

The political memes that fall under this category are basically the ones that have the element responsible for signification as their defining feature. Here, the element emphasized in the meme is the most crucial to its functioning as a signifier. Pierce also used the words "representamen", "representation", and "ground" for this element. According to Pierce (99), a sign is anything that stands in for something else to convey meaning to someone. The following memes belong to this group:

Meme # 1: Ganito sa Pilipinas

The semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual symbols and textual elements to create caricatures of each personality, highlighting specific traits or issues associated with them. The use of images depicting the politicians in various emotional states (e.g., angry Isko Moreno, crying Ferdinand Marcos Jr., seemingly mad Rodrigo Duterte, wide-eyed Leni Robredo, brain symbol for Manny Pacquiao, dancing Bong Revilla, and disbarred Larry Gadon) is a semiotic feature that serves to emphasize certain characteristics or reactions associated with each individual.

Political memes serve as a critical communication tool on social media, offering satirical perspectives on politicians' actions and public images. These memes often highlight controversies, criticize excessive self-promotion, and expose perceived incompetence of political figures (Effendi). In addition, this form of satire also serves to humanize, ridicule or question political authority and convey complex social commentaries quickly. Shifman (99) also discusses how memes, especially those involving political figures emphasize and exaggerate certain traits, behaviors or actions allowing for both humor and critique. Overall, the semiotic features in this meme work together to create satirical representations of the mentioned personalities, offering a critical perspective on their actions, controversies, and public images.

Meme # 2: Blacksmith

Further, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the four images portraying a made-up conversation) and textual elements (the supposed dialogue) to mock and make fun of Senator Nancy Binay's intelligence based on her skin color, while portraying Senators Grace Poe and Risa Hontiveros in a superior or condescending light. This provides a context about Senator Nancy Binay being at the receiving end of bashing and mockery due to her skin color. The meme takes advantage of this context and uses a fictional conversation to further ridicule and belittle her, playing on negative stereotypes.

In connection, the use of memes can also have potentially negative effects. Some memes utilize images from violent or sensitive contexts, disconnecting them from their original meaning for the sake of humor, which may contribute to desensitization (Sanchez). The meme appears to be made for entertainment purposes but does so at the expense of demeaning one senator and portraying the others in a superior light. Smith (150) also notes that discrimination based on skin color persists in political spaces, influencing both public perception and the treatment of politicians of color, often in ways that reinforce racial hierarchies. Such memes can contribute to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and negative attitudes towards public figures, and it's essential to be mindful of the impact they may have on individuals and communities.

Meme # 3: Red talaga ang leader

Moreover, the semiotic feature depicted in this meme is the use of visual elements (multiple edited photos) and textual elements (the translated text "Red has always been the leader") to draw a comparison between the positioning of the Power Rangers in the image and the political context of the 2022 national elections. The description provides context about the political situation during the 2022 national elections, where supporters of President Marcos emphasized his supposed leadership and dominance over his opponents, particularly Leni Robredo, who was associated with the color pink.

Research suggests that internet memes have become a significant medium for political participation and campaign messaging during elections. They combine visual and verbal elements to generate humor, frame candidates, and influence voter behavior (Tella). This was also supported by Jamieson (243) which explains that the choice of medium, whether television, radio or digital platforms, profoundly influences the style and effectiveness of campaign messaging, often tailored to resonate with target audiences. Overall, the meme uses the imagery of the Power Rangers to humorously depict the positioning of candidates based on their campaign colors and the assertion of President Marcos's dominance in the elections. It reflects the use of pop culture references and visual symbolism to comment on real-world political situations.

Meme # 4: Isko Mestiso

On the other hand, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (two contrasting pictures of former Manila Mayor Isko Moreno Domagoso) and textual elements (the labels "Isko Moreno" and "Isko Mestiso") to highlight the differences in his appearance related to his skin color and the implications of using the term "mestiso" in the Philippines. It is typically used to describe individuals with mixed heritage, particularly those with Western ancestry. By using the term "Isko Mestiso" and portraying Isko Moreno with a visibly lightened skin tone, the meme comments on the implications and cultural associations related to appearance and notions of beauty and social status.

In this regard, political memes serve as powerful tools for cultural expression and social commentary, particularly in relation to appearance, beauty, and status. Memes function as discursive formations that echo ideological representations in cyberspace (Souza). They often require readers to employ gendered, classed, and raced classificatory knowledge, reinforcing social inequalities through a process of "spectatorial girlfriendship" (Kanai). Overall, the meme likely aims to spark a conversation about societal beauty standards, racial identity, and the influence of appearance on public perception and politics.

Meme # 5: No classes on election

Furthermore, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (photos of a man who seemed overjoyed for public school students and a man who seemed saddened for private school students) and textual elements (the labels of students in public school and private school) to contrast the experiences of students during the election season in 2022. The description provides context about the election, where public school teachers served, and public schools were used as voting precincts, leading to the suspension of classes in public schools. This context helps explain why the man in the photo for public school students seemed overjoyed, possibly due to the excitement of participating in the electoral process, while the man in the photo for private school students seemed saddened, likely because of the suspension of classes and potential disruption to their school routine.

Research proves that voting locations can influence voter behavior and turnout. Schools used as polling places have been associated with increased support for education-related initiatives (Berger et al. 8846). The use of schools as voting locations has historical roots in early 20th-century educational reforms, which aimed to expand the role of schools in communities (Reese 431). Overall, the meme likely aims to comment on the impact of the elections on different student populations and the reasons behind their different emotional responses. It reflects the use of imagery and labels to convey a message about the educational context during the election period.

Meme # 6: Tagline

The semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (photos of the six presidential frontrunners) and textual elements (the labels on their respective photos) to contrast the descriptions given to the candidates, particularly the negative remark associated with Bongbong Marcos Jr. The description provides context about the 2022 national elections and the six presidential frontrunners. It highlights the contrast in how the candidates are described in the meme, with positive attributes given to five of them and a negative remark related to Bongbong Marcos Jr.'s name and political family background.

To support, during the 2014 Brazilian elections, memes were used to evaluate candidates' performances through social commentary on digital media (Chagas 173). Similarly, in the 2015 Nigerian presidential election, memes were employed to generate humor and frame candidates, often negatively portraying opponents while positively representing favored candidates (Tella). Overall, the meme likely aims to comment on the perception of candidates and how certain aspects, such as family background and political name recognition, can influence public opinion and discussions during election campaigns.

Meme # 7: Daan

Moreover, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of textual elements (labels on the eight photos) with the common theme of the word "daan" or "way" in English, to create a meme that comments on different individuals, political slogans, and situations related to the concept of a "way" or path. For example: Brother Eli Soriano, leader of Ang Dating Daan, represents his religious sect. The late former President Noynoy Aquino's label "Tuwid na Daan" refers to his famous political slogan promoting good governance and a straight path; Former President Rodrigo Duterte's label "Bubulagta ka sa daan" alludes to his strong stance on killing criminals and drug addicts; Former Vice President Jejomar Binay's label "namigay ng limang daan" mocks the accusation of vote buying during the presidential elections; Former Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile's label "walang pinagkatandaan" humorously references his old age; Senator Grace Poe's label "nasaan ang daan" questions the path she is taking or her stance on certain issues; Former Senator Mar Roxas's label "itutuloy ang tuwid na daan" refers to his alignment with the continuity of Noynoy Aquino's policies; The activists' label "hinaharangan ang daan" indicates their act of disrupting the road, suggesting their protest or activism.

In relation to this, internet memes have emerged as a powerful tool for political discourse, combining humor and satire to communicate political messages and criticisms (Kulkarni). These memes often use contrasts, binary oppositions, and code violations to create humor that deconstructs dominant political ideologies and exposes societal issues (Calimbo, 2016). Overall, the meme uses humor and irony to make observations about political figures, slogans, and social issues related to the concept of a "way" or path in Filipino culture.

Meme # 8: Halalan 2022 Prediction

Further, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of humor and playful commentary on the indecisiveness of Filipino voters during the 2022 national elections, caused by the early predictions released on social media. It likely employs comedic elements to make light of the situation and create a relatable and amusing scenario for the audience. The meme indirectly comments on the influence of social media on voter behavior. Early predictions and various information circulated on social media platforms can shape public perception and decision-making during elections.

Additionally, social media has transformed modern election campaigns, enabling new practices and influencing voter behavior (Kim et al.). Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are used differently by politicians, with each serving distinct purposes in political communication (Stier et al. 50). Parties employ social media to engage voters, though their adherence to election programs on these platforms varies (Lehrner). Overall, it aims to entertain the audience while also making a lighthearted observation about the complexities of voter behavior in the context of social media-driven election campaigns.

Meme # 9: I don't wanna vote

The semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of a visual element (the photo of a boy crying madly) and textual elements (the label "But I don't wanna vote! I don't like any of these people!") to comment on the nonchalant attitude of many Filipinos towards voting during the 2022 national elections. The description provides context about the nonchalant attitude of many Filipinos towards voting during the 2022 national elections. Social media was flooded with numerous campaign posts expressing both positive and negative things about the famous frontrunners, which might have contributed to some people's disillusionment or lack of enthusiasm towards the candidates.

In connection to this, meme creators exhibit diverse characteristics, including promoting candidates, countering negative issues, raising critical awareness, or simply creating chaos (Dewi). The 2014 Brazilian elections were notably dubbed the "elections of memes," highlighting the phenomenon's growing importance in political communication (Chagas). Overall, the meme likely aims to highlight the sentiment of frustration or indifference

towards the available candidates, using humor and the image of a crying boy to emphasize the emotion. It reflects the use of humor and imagery to comment on the broader social and political context surrounding the elections.

Meme # 10: Solid North vs. Solid Waste

Meanwhile, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (photos of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and former Vice President Leni Robredo) and textual elements (labels "solid north" and "solid waste") to create a comparison between the two candidates during the 2022 Presidential elections, highlighting their respective portrayals by their supporters. The description provides context about the "solid north" mantra used by Marcos's supporters to refer to his supposed widespread support in the northern part of the country. It also mentions that it is common among his supporters to exaggerate negative descriptions of Leni.

Overall, the meme likely aims to highlight the contrasting portrayals of the two candidates by their respective supporters. Visual and textual elements play a crucial role in shaping political discourse during election campaigns. Research has shown that multimodal rhetoric in political advertisements can evoke personal experiences and cynicism in viewers, leading to critical distancing and deliberative embedding of emotional responses (Kjeldsen & Hess 327). Social media platforms have become key channels for disseminating visual content, including photos, infographics, and videos, which can influence voters' perceptions of candidates (Towner). It reflects the use of visual and textual elements to make a point about the campaign rhetoric and the polarizing nature of political discussions during the election season.

Meme # 11: Bayang Magiliw

In addition, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (former Senate President Tito Sotto's head in two different photos) and textual elements (the references to the Philippine National Anthem's title "Lupang Hinirang" and its first line "Bayang Magiliw") to create a meme commenting on Sotto's mistake in his statement and previous plagiarism allegations. The description provides context about the meme being related to Sotto's mistake in referring to the Philippine National Anthem incorrectly and the previous plagiarism allegations against him.

In fact, memes have become a significant medium for information sharing and shaping narratives, particularly during crises and controversies. They can effectively highlight errors or scandals in a lighthearted manner while referencing past events (Chen Ling et al. 1). Viral memes often contain close-up images, characters, and evoke emotions, making them powerful tools for conveying messages. Overall, the meme likely aims to highlight the error in a lighthearted manner while also referencing past controversies. It reflects the use of humor and visual elements to comment on political figures and their actions, even though it may be taken out of context or exaggerate the situation for comedic effect.

Meme # 12: Trump and Marcos

Likewise, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of textual elements to create a fictional dialogue between businessman and former US President Donald Trump and Philippine President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., commenting on the historical context of the Marcos family's rule and their alleged actions. The humor in this meme arises from the fictional exchange and the irony of a former US President expressing excitement over a political figure associated with controversial actions. The meme likely also carries a critical undertone, commenting on perceptions of political leaders and their past actions.

Research indicates that political memes serve as critical tools for commenting on political leaders and their actions. Kristensen and Mortensen analyze memes during the COVID-19 crisis, revealing how they both critique and inadvertently affirm populist leaders like Trump and Johnson, complicating their role as counter-narratives. Overall, the meme likely seeks to entertain, while also offering a critique on how political figures are perceived and discussed in both national and international contexts.

Object
The political memes that fall under this category are basically the ones that have their subject matters as their defining features. The object can be anything discussable or thinkable, a thing, event, relationship, quality, law, argument, etc. It emphasizes the part of the sign relation which causally determines the sign and mediately the interpretant.

Meme # 13: Man with a messy hair

The semiotic feature depicted in this description is the combination of visual and textual elements in a meme. The visual component of the meme depicts a man with a messy hair and a poker face which could be interpreted as a representation of the state of confusion or uncertainty surrounding the election. The messy hair could signify

disorder or chaos, while the poker face could symbolize the inscrutability or hidden agendas of the candidates. The textual component, "Voting in this election is like trying to pass a test with no right answers," further reinforces the message by drawing a parallel between the difficulty of making an informed choice in the election and the challenge of answering a test question without a correct option.

In connection to this, the use of memes in elections highlights the challenges voters face, including ambivalence and uncertainty in candidate evaluation. These factors can lead to more negative evaluations, particularly among less politically sophisticated individuals, and may increase the likelihood of memory-based processing when assessing candidates (Mcgraw et al. 421). Overall, this meme employs visual and textual elements to convey a critical perspective on the 2022 Philippine national elections, highlighting the challenges and uncertainties faced by voters in selecting a candidate.

Meme # 14: I believe I can fly

Meanwhile, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the photo of five Philippine Senators) and textual elements (the text "I believe I can fly" in all caps) to mock Senator Nancy Binay's outfit and draw attention to the criticism she received on social media for her attire. The description provides context about Senator Nancy Binay receiving bashing and mocking on social media for her outfit, with some netizens comparing it to a "hot-air balloon." The meme takes this context and uses it to make a humorous statement through the quoted text on the photo.

In light of this, political memes have become a significant form of online political expression, with creators often aiming to mock politicians and influence public opinion. These memes can lead to increased political participation and emotional responses towards candidates (Halversen & Weeks) The meme likely aims to highlight the scrutiny and mockery that politicians, especially public figures, can receive for their fashion choices in the age of social media.

Meme # 15: Yes to vlog, no to debates

Further, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the infamous image of a man holding hands with his supposed partner but gazing at another woman who passed by) and textual elements (the labels "Bongbong Marcos," "interviews," and "some cooking vlog") to comment on Bongbong Marcos's behavior during the 2022 national election season, particularly his evasion of debates and formal fora while frequently appearing on vlogs.

In support, research suggests that memes can be seen as expressions of public opinion, offering social commentary on candidates' performances (Chagas 173). The widespread use of memes in political campaigns, particularly on social media, has also raised concerns about the potential for information manipulation and the spread of hoaxes (Sofian). They represent a unique form of political discourse in the digital age. Overall, the meme likely aims to draw attention to the perceived lack of transparency and accountability in his campaign strategy, using humor and irony to make its point.

Meme # 16: Toga

Furthermore, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (four 2022 Presidential aspirants wearing their graduation togas) and textual elements (the text in the meme) to comment on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s controversial claims about his degree and graduation. The description provides context about President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s claims regarding his degree and graduation, which had been a heated topic during the 2022 elections. Marcos claimed that the special diploma he received from Oxford University was equivalent to an actual degree. However, fact-checking sources contradicted his claims.

Recent research explores the use of humor and irony in addressing political controversies and public statements. Studies have examined ironic and humorous comments on social media (Hirsch 40), political cartoons, satirical television shows, and the broader impact of political satire (Brock 281). Findings suggest that indirect expressions, particularly irony, are often used to criticize politicians and damage their public image. In political cartoons, irony serves various functions, including oppositional, reinforcing, and complicating roles (Yanti & Fitri). Overall, the meme likely aims to humorously point out the absence of Marcos in the photo of the four aspirants wearing graduation togas, suggesting a playful reference to his controversial educational claims. It reflects the use of humor and irony to address political controversies and public statements during the election season.

Meme #17: Shooting star

On the other hand, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the image of former Vice President Leni Robredo wishing on a shooting star) and implied motion (the shooting star reversing direction upon hearing the wish) to create a humorous and playful commentary on the politician's aspirations and

the notion of wishful thinking. The humorous twist with the shooting star implies that the wish may not come true, playfully poking fun at the idea of wishful thinking in politics.

Literatures provide that political imagery and humor play a significant role in shaping public perception of politicians and political events. Memes, as playful and humorous expressions, can both challenge and reinforce political power structures while creating shared identities or increasing polarization (Mortensen & Neumayer 23-67). Overall, it uses playful imagery to convey a light-hearted message about the challenges and uncertainties of political ambitions.

Meme # 18: White-gold or black-blue

Similarly, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of a visual element (the photo of the dress drawing debates on its color) and textual elements (the text indicating "white-gold or black-blue" and the label on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s photo) to create a comparison between a trivial debate and a serious accusation. The description provides context about President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s photo and the label "wala kaming ninakaw na ganyan" (translated to "we didn't steal anything like that"). It mentions that the President's family has been the subject of numerous trials over ill-gotten wealth during his late father's presidency, indicating a serious accusation of corruption against the Marcos family.

Additionally, the meme likely aims to criticize the focus on insignificant matters while there are more pressing and substantial issues that deserve attention and scrutiny. It reflects the use of irony and comparison to make a point about the priorities of public discourse and the importance of addressing significant matters over trivial ones. In connection, memes have become a significant form of communication in the 21st century, often employing irony and humor to convey messages (Guimarães). Research has explored various aspects of irony in memes, including its types, functions, and interpretations. Studies have identified verbal and situational irony in memes, with verbal irony being more prevalent (Lestari).

Meme # 19: Huwag nang magtanong

In this meme, the semiotic feature depicted is the use of a visual element (the picture of former Vice President Leni Robredo holding her finger to her mouth) and textual elements (the text explaining that she shushed the media and invited them for snacks) to create a commentary on Robredo's gesture and her intentions during the press conference. The description provides context about the press conference where Robredo made the gesture and the intention behind it. It explains that the gesture was not meant to evade questions but to change the mood after a lengthy press conference.

In connection, image memes have become a significant form of online communication, combining visual and textual elements to convey specific messages and emotions. Research has shown that memes can emphasize semantic content in social media discussions and correlate with the affective nature of topics (French 80). The language of internet memes is characterized as visual, succinct, and engaging, inviting users to participate through posting, sharing, and remixing (De la Rosa-Carrillo & León). Overall, it reflects the use of visual and textual elements to convey a specific incident and its context accurately.

Interpretant

The political memes that fall under this category are basically the ones that bear the following defining features: first, focused on the understanding that can be reached of the sign/object relation and emphasizes the translation or development of the original sign; and second, the sign used certain features to determine the interpretant highlights its way of signifying the object to generate and shape the audience's understanding of it.

Meme # 20: Tatakbo Ulit

The semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of contrasting images and textual elements to satirize President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's response to losing the 2016 vice presidential election and his subsequent actions. It combines textual and visual elements to criticize President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's response to the election loss and the subsequent actions he took in the aftermath. The meme likely uses irony and satire to comment on his persistence in seeking electoral victory and his unsuccessful attempts to challenge the election results through protests.

In this regard, post-election protests are particularly prevalent in regions like the former Soviet Union, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, accounting for over 60% of such events worldwide in the past 30 years (Chernykh). Overall, the meme underscores the complex interplay between elections, protests, and political stability in democratic processes.

Meme # 21: Leni vs. BBM smile

Additionally, this next meme depicts the use of visual elements (photos of President Bongbong Marcos and former Vice President Leni Robredo) and textual elements (the translated text above the photos) to comment on the divisive nature of the 2022 Presidential election and the intense online debates surrounding the two frontrunners.

It combines visual representation and textual commentary to depict the polarization and passionate debates surrounding the two main candidates during the 2022 Presidential election. The meme likely aims to humorously criticize the heated online discussions while acknowledging the strong support each candidate received on social media platforms.

Relative to the discussion above, recent studies highlight the increasing political polarization and its impact on democratic processes. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, supporters of opposing candidates exhibited an "objectivity illusion," believing their views were unbiased while perceiving opponents as biased (Schwalbe 21-28). This illusion predicted subsequent polarization and antipathy towards political adversaries. Analysis of Twitter conversations during presidential debates revealed a U-shaped pattern of polarization, with interactions between opposing views leading to confrontation rather than belief revision.

Meme # 22: Tito Unseen

Also, in this meme, the semiotic feature depicted is the use of visual elements (the photo of former Senate President Tito Sotto in a black leather jacket) and textual elements (the texts "Tito Sen" and "Tito Unsen" below the photo) to create a play on words and humorously convey the idea of "Tito Unseen." The use of a black background on the right side of the image, where Tito Sotto's photo is missing, further reinforces the idea of "Tito Unseen." The contrast between the black background on both sides of the image creates a visual pun that complements the wordplay in the texts.

According to Vasquez and Aslan, the humor in memes frequently relies on multimodal interactions between text and images, incorporating wordplay, register-based humor, and semiotic blends with other popular memes. Overall, the meme likely aims to entertain viewers with its witty and clever use of visual and textual elements.

Meme # 23: Palamura vs. Panot

Meanwhile, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the image of a sophisticated woman) and textual elements (the quoted text) to create a comparison between blaming former President Duterte for children growing up profane and humorously questioning why the same people do not blame late former President Noynoy Aquino when their children grow bald. provides context about former President Duterte being infamous for his use of profanities and former President Noynoy Aquino being known for his

baldness. The meme plays on these well-known traits of the two presidents to create a humorous comparison between the reasons people blame them for certain outcomes in their children's lives.

In relation to this, memes have emerged as a powerful tool for political criticism and social commentary, particularly during election periods (Putra et al.). They serve as a means to highlight inconsistencies in politicians' statements and actions, often using wit and irony to convey their message (Heiskanen). Overall, the meme aims to draw attention to the inconsistencies and double standards in public criticism and perception of politicians, using wit and irony to make its point.

Meme # 24: Hindi pa rin maibabalik

Furthermore, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (photos of then Vice-Presidential aspirants Leni Robredo and Bongbong Marcos) and textual elements (the text balloons indicating their supposed statements) to juxtapose the accusations and controversies surrounding their candidacies. provides context about the accusations against Leni Robredo and Bongbong Marcos. Robredo was accused of leveraging her late husband's legacy for political gain, while Marcos was accused of seeking to regain his family's wealth associated with his father's controversial regime.

Fubara explicates that meme have become a popular form of digital communication, employing humor and irony to convey messages on social media platforms. These internet-based contents often use sarcasm, witticism, and puns to present satirical commentary on various topics, including politics, culture, and current events (Junior et al.). Memes function as dynamic strategies for discussing controversial social issues through comedic satire, often criticizing or supporting particular viewpoints (Lestari et al.). Overall, the meme uses humor and irony to present the accusations in a satirical way, highlighting the criticisms and perceptions surrounding the candidates' motivations for running for office.

Meme # 25: How will 2022 elections play out

Furthermore, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (photos from the blockbuster movie Lord of the Rings) to create a comparison between young voters and middle-aged ones during the 2022 national elections, highlighting the perceived differences in numbers and strength between the two groups. provides context about the 2022 national elections and the comparison made in the meme between young

voters and middle-aged ones. The meme likely aims to humorously depict the contrasting attributes of the two age groups in a playful and lighthearted manner.

In support to this, literatures suggest that memes have become a significant medium for political commentary, particularly during major events like the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the Occupy Wall Street movement. These memes often incorporate pop culture references to convey light-hearted yet pointed observations on political dynamics (Wurst, 2021 Overall, the meme uses pop culture references to convey a light-hearted commentary on the political dynamics related to different age groups of voters.

Meme # 26: In-charge

Another one, in this meme, the semiotic feature depicted is the use of visual elements (pictures of President Ferdinand Marcos and Senator Imee Marcos) and textual elements (the labels on their respective photos) to contrast their campaign messages and actions during the 2022 election season. The description provides context about Senator Imee Marcos's active participation and collaboration with controversial director Darryl Yap during the election season. The videos they produced were perceived by the camp of Leni Robredo, who was President Ferdinand Marcos's then-closest opponent, as hateful and mocking.

According to Tella, memes often contain humor and utilize both visual and verbal elements to construct specific frames for candidates. Social media platforms serve as primary channels for disseminating these memes, which can quickly spread and potentially manipulate information (Sofian). Overall, the meme likely aims to comment on the disparity between President Ferdinand Marcos's promise of not engaging in hateful campaigning and Senator Imee Marcos's involvement in producing controversial videos that were viewed as mocking by their political opponents. It highlights the contradictions and complexities within their campaign strategies and actions.

Meme # 27: You have my respect

Meanwhile, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (a photo from the movie Avengers Endgame showing Thanos slaying the Avengers) and textual elements (the supposed dialogue between former President Duterte and Human Rights Lawyer Chel Diokno) to create a dark-humored commentary on their relationship and their respective stances. The description provides context about Diokno being a critic of Duterte's policies, particularly those related to human rights. It also points out that despite Duterte's radical remarks on killing criminals, he has not said anything about killing his critics.

On top of that, memes can exaggerate events for comedic purposes, potentially trivializing or distorting public perception (Wurst). However, they also facilitate conversation between diverse positions, creating a polyvocal public discourse (Milner 34). The use of popular culture in memes enhances their visibility and longevity, while allowing for flexible expression of political stances (Kirner-Ludwig). Overall, the meme likely aims to comment on their differing stances and political positions, using a pop culture reference (the Avengers Endgame scene) to add a humorous and satirical twist to the dialogue. It reflects the use of humor and irony to make a point about the relationship between political figures and their critics.

Meme # 28: Sonny Angsimple

Further, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (two separate pictures of Senator Sonny Angara) and textual elements (the labels "Sonny Angara" and "Sonny Angsimple") to create a wordplay and contrast between the senator's appearance and his last name. The description provides context about the senator's last name, "Angara," and how it sounds similar to the Filipino word "ang garà," which means sophisticated. The meme uses this context to create a playful and humorous contrast between the senator's last name and his casual appearance in the second photo, hence the label "Sonny Angsimple."

Additionally, memes have become a prevalent form of online communication, often used to express humor and convey political messages. Research shows that people tend to use memes with close friends to make conversations more relatable and fun, effectively expressing emotions in a light-hearted manner (Park 387). Memes play a significant role in disrupting and reimagining politics through humor, potentially creating togetherness but also increasing polarization (Mortensen & Neumayer 2367). Their creative use extends to advertising, where marketers skillfully alter original memes to create amusing juxtapositions and humorous effects (Bury). Overall, the meme likely aims to use light-hearted humor to make a playful observation about the senator's name and appearance. It reflects the use of wordplay and visual contrast to convey a humorous message about a public figure.

Meme # 29: Filipinos' Cry

Meanwhile, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the photos and text) and textual elements (the label "All the Filipinos: No" with multiple letters o's) to create a humorous and exaggerated representation of public disagreement with the idea of Bongbong Marcos becoming the new President of the Philippines. The description provides context about the meme's content being taken out of context, as the current President was elected by over 31 million Filipinos, the largest number in any election in the country's history. This context suggests that the meme's portrayal of "All the Filipinos" shouting "No" to Bongbong Marcos becoming President is not an accurate representation of the election results.

Research suggests that political memes are subject to biased cognitive processing, contributing to a polarized media environment (Huntington 194). Memes play a role in co-constructing polarized positions in political discourse, highlighting assumptions in both official and oppositional rhetoric (Flores & Martínez Guillem). The playful nature of memes allows them to disrupt and reimagine politics humorously, but they can also demarcate boundaries between political groups, potentially increasing polarization (Mortensen & Neumayer 23-67). Overall, the meme likely aims to use irony and exaggeration to comment on the polarizing nature of political discussions and public sentiments. It reflects the use of humor and playfulness to express a perspective on political matters, even though the representation may not accurately reflect the actual election results.

Meme # 30: Kasalanan ng Ama

On the other hand, the semiotic feature depicted in this description is the use of visual elements (the combination of photos) and textual elements (the texts explaining the comparison) to create a commentary on the selective attribution of political issues and connections to different individuals based on familial relationships and political associations. The description provides context about the meme being a common rebuttal from supporters of former Vice President Leni Robredo to claims made by her opponent's supporters. The meme addresses the disconnect between how issues are attributed based on familial relationships and political associations.

In relation to the framing of political issues in media, including memes, can influence how viewers attribute responsibility for these issues. Episodic framing, which focuses on individual events or actors, tends to elicit individualistic attributions of responsibility, potentially obscuring the role of governmental actors and weakening political accountability (Iyengar 59). This disconnect between how issues are attributed based on familial relationships and political associations is often addressed in political memes. Overall, the meme likely aims to criticize the selective attribution of issues and connections by highlighting the inconsistencies in how different politicians are judged based on their familial ties and affiliations. It reflects the use of visual and textual elements to convey a political message and commentary on the double standards observed in political discourse.

Cultural Realities Reflected in Filipino Memes
This section presents a categorization of the chosen memes according to the Filipino cultural realities that they reflect. Each meme was analyzed and grouped according to their core ideas. From the core ideas, the interpretation on what cultural realities were reflected by the memes are revealed. Themes were generated afterwards. The following are the themes that emerged:

Electoral Dilemma as a Product of Complex Factors
The first cluster of political memes reflect the various intertwined factors which in one way or another, influence Filipino voters' preferences and even their decision to vote. These memes reflect the following cultural realities:

the complexity of the country's political landscape, personalistic politics, the influence of family and community, historical context, and the influence of media and information accessibility. The memes express the common Filipinos' struggle in choosing candidates in elections within a political environment that usually highlights fame and personality over substance or affective qualities rather than cognitive ones. In a 2023 study conducted by Oliva (27-46) on understanding and explaining the electoral dilemma in Mexico and Brazil, it was discovered that electoral behavior is influenced by a complex interplay of factors. Voters face dilemmas between honesty and competence, with affective components often outweighing cognitive ones in decision-making.

Meme # 13 Man with a messy hair

Meme # 9 I don't wanna vote

The dilemma in choosing who to vote is also affected by factors such as history, media representations, and even socioeconomic variables which come into play commonly through the electoral promises of candidates. On a wider view, these findings reflect the complexity of electoral systems. A study by Ishiyama (157–176), highlighted the impact of the complexity of electoral systems to voter coordination which make it harder for voters to reach balance. Electoral systems significantly shape political outcomes, including representation, party systems, voter turnout, and political stability (Ishiyama 157–176).

Branding Politicians According to a Single Positive or Negative Trait
The second cluster of political memes portray the reality in Philippine politics of commonly perceiving candidates according to a single positive or negative trait which arises from the culture of personalistic politics. These memes reflect the following cultural realities in the country: personalistic politics, celebrity culture among politicians, and limited trust in institutions. Research on political branding and candidate perception reveals that voters' assessments of politicians are influenced by both positive and negative trait associations. When candidates are described positively in only one dimension (warmth or competence), people tend to assess the complementary dimension more negatively (Koch & Obermaier 972–995). Positioning politicians based on associative affinity can help define their image and link it to voters' decisions (Cwalina & Falkowski 152–174).

Meme # 1 Ganito sa Pilipinas

Meme # 7 Daan

These lead to the ironic evaluation among politicians by voters more on their superficial charm or personality instead of assessing what a candidate or his or her party really has in store for the community or the nation. Globally, democracies are experiencing increased levels of personalism, which is associated with negative outcomes such as higher populism, democratic erosion, and political polarization (Frantz et al. 94–108). This trend is facilitated by new technologies and digital tools. The durability of clientelism in democratic societies is partly due to the reliability of personal relations over public institutions (Calimbahin 233–248).

In addition to these, media sensationalism also plays a crucial role in the brand a candidate will be known for as this branding either strengthens or erode the public's trust over a certain politician. However, aside from the strong influence of media, the public's limited trust in institutions like survey platforms or political analysts also forepart in the branding of politicians by the people. Research on Philippine politics reveals complex dynamics affecting trust in institutions. On the contrary, Pernia revealed that authoritarian values paradoxically enhance institutional trust, challenging traditional democratization views. Meanwhile, celebrity culture among politicians significantly

influences public opinion, with less educated citizens showing higher confidence in celebrity-dominated media institutions (Radiamoda et al.).

Politics Intersects with Celebrity Culture
The third cluster of memes reveal the ironic culture in Philippine politics of according celebrity status among politicians. These memes reflect the following cultural realities: visual communication and status, media and celebrity influence, and humor and satire in political commentary. This facilitates the significance of dressing up and looking good as a form of non-verbal communication to convey status, authority, and even values. This visual representation and celebrity culture is further amplified by the media leading to the idea that the politicians' fashion choices are indicators of character and even their suitability to lead. In short, dressing up becomes a heated subject of humor, satire, forging discourse within the community.

Celebrity culture plays a significant role in Philippine politics and society. Research shows that celebrities frequently run for and win public office, even with limited political experience (David & Atun 351-371). This phenomenon is driven by parasocial relationships, where audiences develop illusory intimacies with celebrities through media consumption (Centeno 441-484). This celebrity culture is deeply embedded in Philippine democracy and consumption ideals, reflecting and reinforcing social classifications (Centeno 441-484; Radiamoda et al.). These findings highlight the complex interplay between celebrity culture, media, and political processes in the Philippines.

Meme # 28 Sonny Angsimple

Meme # 14 I believe I can fly

On the other hand, the two memes in this cluster both subjects skin color in the discussion. The first one being a supposed bullying attempt on Senator Nancy Binay's skin color, while the second one is witty word play on Isko Moreno's last name with two of his pictures in different exposure/brightness level on the side. These means that despite the ongoing campaign and advocacies globally on fighting against racism and colorism, skin color continues to be a subject of humor in the country, with Filipinos' historically-rooted preference for people with lighter skin because of colonial ideals. The phenomenon of colorism affects both African American and Mexican American communities, rooted in historical contexts of slavery and colonization, and continues to impact people of color in contemporary society (Hunter). These further reflects that beauty standards still prevail and continue to influence the perception of the people even in the political context.

Normalization of Corruption Through Humor
In the Philippines, Filipinos are very much problematic about corruption however, they seem to not take discussion on it seriously. The cluster of political memes under this theme reflect the ongoing normalization of corruption in the Philippines through the use of humor which reflects a widespread cynicism and worse, distrust towards political institutions. These memes reflect the following cultural realities: normalization and insensitivity, cynicism and distrust in leadership, and even cultural critique and social commentary. Meanwhile, these memes serve us cultural critiques in a way, emphasizing systemic issues particularly corruption, bring it into light to foster discussion.

Meme # 24 Hindi pa rin maibabalik

Meme # 18 White gold or black blue

Research on corruption and humor reveals complex dynamics in normalizing and challenging corrupt practices. Humor can play a role in both normalizing and de-normalizing organizational corruption, offering potential for anti-corruption strategies (Lennerfors). When corruption becomes an "open secret," a second-order normalization process may occur among non-corrupt onlookers, leading to the tolerance of corruption rather than its direct normalization (Fleming et al. 191 - 224). However, the use of humor in anti-corruption protests can be ambiguous, simultaneously signaling grassroots creativity and resistance while potentially reproducing conservative hierarchies. This ambiguity highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how protest humor articulates democratic politics and achieves shared enjoyment (Dumitrica 181 - 197).

Negative Campaigning in Philippine Elections
This set of political memes reflect the deeply rooted culture of negative campaigning in the Philippines. These memes express a lot of the rivalry-based politics that we have here in the country which frequently spurs the reasons why many subscribe to discrediting their rivals just to win the race. In addition, these are also indicative of the long-seated patronage politics, leading to factionalism which easily influences a certain group's view of the opponents and facilitate negative campaigning to gain upper hand. Depending on their strategies, candidates may use derogatory methods to refute or confirm these negative perceptions. Overall, these memes reflect the following cultural realities: hugely competitive political environment, historical legacy of patronage and factionalism, colonial influence on political discourse, and perception of political power and influence.

With reference to, negative campaigning in the Philippines and globally is a complex phenomenon with various implications for democratic processes. Research indicates that negative campaign messages are prevalent across multiple media platforms, including political advertisements, news, and social media (Crigler et al.). On the contrary, while often criticized, research suggests that negative campaigning can serve important informational purposes. Mattes & Redlawsk argued that negative ads provide valuable information to voters that might not otherwise be revealed. Similarly, Polborn & David (351-371) propose that negative campaigning can facilitate more informed voter choices by efficiently transmitting information about candidates.

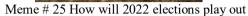Meme # 10 Solid North vs Solid waste   Meme # 26 In-charge

Pop Culture Influences the Political Discourse in the Philippines
Movies and TV shows offer a way to escape from the challenges of everyday life in the Philippines, including social and political issues. The incorporation of scenes from these media into political memes reflects a desire to inject familiarity and humor into discussions that are otherwise serious or divisive. These political memes further reveal the merging of entertainment and politics in the country, showcasing how cultural elements are utilized to involve the public in political discussions and criticisms, pointing to the evolving media environment. They utilize this cultural familiarity to provide commentary on contemporary happenings, analyze political figures, and convey messages in a relatable and accessible manner through the use of scenes from movies and television shows. These reflect the following cultural realities: the influence of pop culture, escapism and entertainment, visual and cultural literacy, and the blurring of lines between entertainment and politics.

Meme # 25 How will 2022 elections play out

Meme # 3 Red talaga ang leader

In today's culture, there is a noticeable convergence between politics and entertainment. TV shows and music play a significant role in helping people comprehend and participate in political matters (Duncombe 543 - 555; Street et al). Instead of alienating the public, entertainment can encourage the development of critical media skills and influence how we perceive ourselves and others (Thompson 83-90). For young people, popular culture acts as a significant source of knowledge about the world, helping to form identities and evaluate power structures (Street et al). Contrary to concerns about television's negative impact on democracy, new political entertainment programs may actually contribute to shaping a changing civic culture, with audiences actively engaging with both TV content and public life.

Historically-rooted Polarization Due to Politics

This cluster of memes express two main cultural realities in the Philippine political context. First is the long-existing polarization and second one is the issue on political dynasty and familism. The Philippines has experienced historical political divisions due to a combination of historical events, socioeconomic factors, ideological discrepancies, and cultural impacts. These dynamics persist in shaping Filipino politics, impacting election outcomes, policy discussions, and societal unity. A study conducted in 2018 revealed that the Philippines' political polarization has been influenced by different factors, such as populist leadership and historical background. For instance, from 2000 to 2010, the Estrada and Arroyo administrations saw a polarization crisis due to power conflicts between populist and oligarchic factions (Arugay & Slater 122 - 136).

Furthermore, Philippine politics is often dominated by political dynasties, with influential families holding substantial influence at both local and national levels. The popularity of two strong candidates or parties may stem from familial connections, patronage networks, and inherited political power, further solidifying a culture of family loyalty and political continuity. In fact, studies reveal that in Philippine politics, powerful families with a long history of influence control significant power both locally and nationally (Purdey et al. 328 - 340). These families, which combine family, politics, and business, have traditionally used public institutions to accumulate private wealth. The dominance of political dynasties in the legislature is especially noteworthy, with more than 60% of House members being from such families since 1987 (Tusalem & Pe-Aguirre 359-386). These dynasties utilize various adaptive tactics to uphold their control in congressional politics (Teehankee).

Meme # 23 Palamura vs panot

Meme # 30 Kasalanan ng ama

The dynamics of polarization in the Philippines are distinctively shaped by its postcolonial past, resulting in sociolinguistic divisions between local discussions on community safety and global discussions on democratic principles (Uyheng & Montiel). These results underscore the intricate relationship between populism, social media, and historical backgrounds in influencing political polarization in the Philippines.

Education Discourse is Always Touched in Philippine Politics
This next cluster of memes illustrates the non-negotiable place of education discourse in the Philippine politics. This discussion around education in political memes highlights the importance placed on meritocracy and effective leadership. Political memes can evaluate or commend candidates based on their educational accomplishments, indicating a link between academic qualifications and governance competence. Several studies revealed that memes in the political sphere are a potent tool for criticizing leadership and influencing public conversations. They provide a non-traditional avenue for discussing politics, distinct from conventional media outlets, as noted by Lalancette and Small (2020). Through the use of humor techniques such as sarcasm, puns, and exaggeration, memes effectively communicate political messages, as highlighted by Bamgbose (2021).

Meme # 11 Bayang Magiliw   Meme # 16 Toga

However, political memes depicting education can perpetuate elitist and populist narratives in Philippine politics, with well-educated candidates being portrayed as disconnected elites, and less educated candidates being depicted as more relatable to the average Filipinos. On another note, memes related to education in politics might also draw attention to societal worries regarding the quality of education, availability of educational opportunities, and the necessity for educational reform. These memes reflect wider societal ambitions for improved education policies and results. They further reflect the following cultural realities: meritocracy and competence, elite vs. populist narratives, and the challenges in the education sector.

Studies examining the educational backgrounds of politicians present conflicting results. Some research indicates that higher education may draw in certain demographics, such as educated women, to pursue political roles (Atkinson et al., 2016), while others argue that changes in electoral systems can result in a decline in politicians' educational levels (De Benedetto et al., 2018). Nevertheless, this influence is seen as less significant compared to other characteristics such as gender or criminal history. The discussion also encompasses whether there should be a mandatory minimum level of education for political candidates (Kumar, 2023). In general, while education is frequently viewed as an indicator of the quality of politicians, its impact on political effectiveness and economic advancement remains a complex issue that necessitates further investigation.

4. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUDING REMARK
Implication for Practice
This study on the semiotic landscape of Filipino memes has significant implications especially in fields such as communication education and digital media. Political memes as a form of modern digital rhetoric are powerful tools that can influence public opinion, shape political identities and even sway election outcomes. For communicators and media professionals, understanding the impact and spread of these memes is crucial for developing effective messaging strategies particularly in managing or counteracting misinformation. Educators can also leverage political memes to engage students in discussion about media literacy, encouraging critical thinking about sources, intent and the subtleties of digital humor. Furthermore, policy makers and social media platform might consider establishing guidelines or fact-checking initiatives for politically charged content to ensure a balanced and informed digital environment.

In the field of linguistics, this scholarly work revealed several findings that would be helpful in positioning memes – despite the infamous critique of their formality – as a medium of communication and stirring up significant discussions both in the online and offline community. The findings particularly the semiotic features of the political memes that had been greatly consumed in the country, can be a vital point in exploring the communication mechanisms in social media among Filipino users. In addition, in sociolinguistics, this study also has several implications primarily on the cultural realities these memes reflect based on their content and how they are expressed, and on the relationship of Filipino's creation and consumption of social media content and the pressing social issues in the country. As political memes continue to shape online discourse, these implications underscore the need for proactive approaches in guiding their responsible use and mitigating their potential for spreading divisive or misleading information.

Implication for Future Research
Political memes offer rich opportunities for future research particularly with a greater focus on their linguistic features. Memes often employ language that is concise layered with meaning and filled with cultural references, making them a unique form of digital communication that reflects and shapes political discourse. Future research could delve into how specific linguistic elements – such as slang, humor, irony and intertextual references – convey political stances or reinforce ideological beliefs. Additionally, analyzing variations in language across different platforms or cultures could shed light on how memes adapt to distinct audience expectations and social norms. Understanding these linguistic nuances may reveal patterns in how people interpret political messages, opening new insights into how language in memes influences public opinion and voter behavior. This approach also encourages interdisciplinary research, bridging linguistics, political science and media studies to explore the evolving role of language in digital political communication.

Since it has been found out that memes in the Philippines, particularly on the topic of politics, reflect various cultural realities which are also related to the social issues that are pressing in the country, further researchers may directly focus on the cultural realities reflected and the social issues depicted by these memes now through both semantic analysis of the texts contained in the memes, and semiotic analysis of the semiotic features they have. Further studies can also use the findings of this scholarly analysis as a springboard for conducting sequential exploratory researches delving more into the relationship of the common Filipino social media users' extent of meme-sharing or consumption and the level of their awareness or consciousness of pressing social issues. Such social issues which are consequentially revealed by the exploration of the reflected cultural realities of these memes can be good points of discussion after a through semiotic analysis.

Concluding Remarks
The Philippines is undoubtedly among the top countries in terms of every day social media exposure as Filipinos are largely reliant on these platforms for various daily aspects such as communication, news, shopping, and most of all, entertainment. This study focused on the semiotic landscape of Filipino memes which serve three primary insights to the researcher: First, indeed, Filipinos have their obvious escapist tendencies by exposing themselves too much on the entertainment aspect of serious and controversial political narratives; Second, memes, as simple and unserious as they may seem, are effective in getting important messages across to Filipinos; and third, the advent of technology truly facilitated the distinct creativity and innovativeness even of the common Filipino social media users who can serve both as a meme creator and consumer.

During the conduct of this study, the researcher also encountered a variety of potential biases and limitations that can impact the depth and validity of the study. One major challenge is selection bias since choosing specific memes or platforms may exclude significant portions of the meme landscape creating an incomplete sample. Additionally, the researcher's personal cultural or political background can shape how she interprets the often-subtle messages or humor embedded in memes, introducing interpretation bias. Memes are highly context-dependent and frequently rely on sarcasm, irony or symbolism, making it easy for the researcher to misinterpret meanings based on her own perspective or cultural understanding. Temporal limitations also pose a challenge; memes are often tied to current events or trends, meaning their relevance can fade quickly complicating longitudinal studies. Ethical and practical constraints such as restricted access to content within private online groups and varying terms of service across social media platforms add further barriers. These factors make it essential for the researcher to remain vigilant against biases, consider multiple interpretations and be transparent about the limitations of this study to ensure a well-rounded and objective analysis.

These things, after a rigorous scholarly analysis, led the researcher to two main conclusions: Memes, with their semiotic features, should not be undermined in terms of its communicative power particularly in social media in the digital age; and political memes, though often soaked in entertainment, are not devoid of sense as they speak much on Filipino cultural realities that could be systematically deeply-rooted or are still arising, both positives and negatives.

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