

‘Battleground of Philippine Elections’: Political Message Strategies of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo on Social Media



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ABSTRACT: Social media campaign has been changing the landscape of elections globally. In the 2022 Philippine electoral campaigns; massive number of messages, stories, and political marketing tactics online were used to persuade the electorate. Hence, the recent election has been the most social media-active and engaging campaign in the country’s democratic history. This paper evaluates the political message strategies of the two leading presidential bets, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. and Leni Robredo, who utilized social media heavily and served as their campaign battleground. Using a Qualitative Content Analysis of their posts and audience contents, selected materials were coded and analyzed. The study found Marcos to appeal to themes revolving around the concerns of the masses like agriculture and basic commodities. In contrast, Robredo appeared to be the more direct in addressing the policy needed to change the system of government to improve the services for everyone. This further argues that social media can persuade the electorate and involve them in co-creating content for them; thus, using an adequate platform for a specific message, either policy or non-policy related, should be planned strategically.

KEYWORDS: Electoral Campaign, Social Media, Philippine Elections, Qualitative Study, Content Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

New trends revolutionized the field of electoral campaigning, particularly on social media. Noting that the old tactics no longer persuade the electorate, politicians should develop a more engaging campaign that allows participation, relation, and connection^[6]. Strategies in politics now focus on social media, digital advertising, and messaging campaigns. The way candidates talk to the public has become more dynamic as the new media allows feedback from the electorate^[4]. The activities significantly affect the election outcome since they present political motivation across the network. By using opinion leaders and influence groups, quickly relaying the message to the target market has been crucial^[10]. These messages are essential in communicating to people to access direct feedback regarding their chances of winning. Hence, social media offers a vast opportunity as it transcends messages across platforms^[13].

Selecting proper words, imagery, and meaning helps the candidate to have the upper hand in the election since these signals make people easily convinced or provoked^[2]. It should allow the active participation of the electorate, making communication possible. A campaign that considers using the right words, marketing materials, and other advertisements to hook its target audience and persuade them affects the voters’ decision^[5]. Among the different types of social media, the social networking site (SNS) is considered unique because it allows users to display a network of connections openly^[3] and has been touted for enhanced facilitation of politician-public interaction^[15].

The two leading presidential candidates in the Philippines have a strong message; Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos calls for unity to solve social issues can resonate well with the predicament of ordinary people, while Leni Robredo aims to change the landscape of the “*trapo*” government to be an honest and accountable one is reflective of her incorruptible public record. However, the message itself is not the only dimension we consider in the elections. It is important to understand how they relay the message through social media platforms and the efficiency of messaging techniques^[9]. Various research revealed that while the content of the message is necessary, the way a candidate delivers it is even essential. How it is said can spell the difference in persuading the electorate to vote for the candidate or resist their concept. The notion that social media can constantly create ways to share messages is something strategists should be aware of^[14].

The new scenario propitiated by digital communication logically entails consequences in the political communication field and in structuring the democratic political debate^[8]. In a country like the Philippines, online participation during the election is necessary to understand the sentiments of both the candidates and the voting public. Studying online political communication

'Battleground of Philippine Elections': Political Message Strategies of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo on Social Media

measures candidates' use of platforms to engage visitors and the overall political process can expand the current understanding of this emerging phenomenon ^[16].

Certainly, political marketing through social media has transformed how potential voters engage in voting and decision-making ^[1]. This paper aimed at evaluating these patterns in social media, their political message strategies, and their platform utilization during the 2022 Philippine presidential elections.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) method to evaluate the campaign materials of two leading presidential campaigns from February to May 2022. To create relevant analysis, 220 online materials (60 Facebook posts, 100 Tweets, and 60 Tiktok videos) including the candidates and audience-curated materials were analyzed. The sample of social media materials was non-random and strategic. Through manual coding and Computer-Aided Qualitative Analysis Software (CAQAS), the findings of the emerging themes from the commonly used words, symbols, and contexts were derived.

Furthermore, this research utilized existing frameworks in online political campaign analysis, looking at candidates' policy and non-policy posting wherein the communication method can be described using political messages and images^[11].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Compare and Contrast of Election Themes

As observed, themes and political branding are integral to the Philippine election campaign. This is one of the vital messaging strategies to build a mental image of the candidate knowing the limited campaign time. It is widely practiced that an inclusive message of "togetherness" and "everyone" is both included in the campaign slogans of Robredo and Marcos as this also tackles the Filipino culture of "Bayanihan Spirit," or helping each other and winning altogether. A message rooted in tradition and social contexts is common in Philippine politics.

Both campaigns hint at a post-pandemic response as either they wanted to alleviate the status of the people (Marcos) or reform the current administration to be a responsive government (Robredo) that both will help the country that suffered from COVID-19 pandemic from health, economy, and other factors.

However, Marcos and Leni's message strategies differ in how they present the campaign. Marcos retained his political color and advocacy of unity while developing the central concept of the current trends and issues of the country. Meanwhile, to sway from the old political color (yellow) associated with her former party list, Robredo used a new campaign color (pink) and developed her grassroots approach to a more inclusive and personal related theme. It is also evident that Marcos still clings to the theme resounding his late father's message, and incorporates the same color even with the threat of controversies.

Moreover, the messaging and theme of Marcos and Robredo contrast with their overall objectives towards the government. Marcos aims to continue the projects of the former administration, including the infrastructures and foreign relations tactics. On the other hand, Robredo offered a clean government that can be transparent and accountable. Evaluating and understanding the campaign themes of both candidates can help us identify the patterns in how they communicate to the public.

B. Social Media Comparative Analysis

The themes obtained from each social media platform have been essential in understanding the key messages of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos and Leni Robredo. This section provides a comparative social media view between two candidates from Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok.

Table 1. Facebook Key Messages of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo

Candidates	Facebook Key Messages	
	Category	Themes
Bongbong Marcos	Policy	Agriculture Economic Growth Access to Basic Commodity
	Non-Policy	Unity and Togetherness Positive Campaign Connection to People
Leni Robredo	Policy	Post-Pandemic Response Socio-Political Systems Livelihood Program
	Non-Policy	Massive Support Hope Grassroots Efforts

'Battleground of Philippine Elections': Political Message Strategies of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo on Social Media

Table 1 shows the themes that emerge from the candidate's and audiences' Facebook posting using the Policy and Non-Policy related content category. In the policy campaign, both candidates targeted messages involving the masses through programs that can help them specifically with their essential commodities and livelihood program. While Robredo talks a lot about the post-pandemic response, Marcos, on the other hand, also discusses economic growth through the continuity of the former administration programs. It is still evident that Robredo always adds the idea of changing the system of the government to be more transparent so that most socio-political systems will develop. Marcos focuses on the traditional political message that Filipinos constantly hear during most political campaigns. Marcos sticks with his message of unity and togetherness as essential to helping the country. He also emphasized positive campaigns that, according to him and his supporters, inspire people rather than argue with them. Robredo also consistently offers a government that allows people to participate.

Facebook received most of the political messages related to presidential campaigns. It remained the most used social media platform among Filipino internet users; in 2022, it engaged 95.7% of internet users in the Philippines. It covers the demographics of 16-64 years old^[12]. True enough, both presidential candidates are constantly updating the progress of their campaigns on Facebook to persuade the masses; it is interesting to understand that since the platform has been the main source of information and communication for several years, the voting public heavily relies on it for election-related news and updates. Audience content is also widespread due to the capacity of social media pages and groups to disseminate information and create their narrative. Based on the number of engagements, Marcos was able to connect a lot of Filipino voters through his posts that give the visual linkage to scenarios that evoke emotions like physical contact with supporters, compassion optics, etc. Although Robredo is not lagging behind, her approach using images of campaign trails and her constant reminder of changing the government has drawn mixed reactions from the voting public.

Table 2. Twitter Key Messages of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo

Candidates	Facebook Key Messages	
	Category	Themes
Bongbong Marcos	Policy	Sustainable Electricity Social Growth
	Non-Policy	One Nation Compassion We vs. I
Leni Robredo	Policy	Marginalized Group Good Governance
	Non-Policy	Role Model Diversity Community Impact

Table 2 shows the themes that emerge from the candidate's and audiences' tweets using the Policy and Non-Policy related content categories. It is noticeable that Marcos is more technical and heavily points to the programs he has to offer, hyper-focusing on the idea of lessening electricity costs, which is an essential issue in the country. Robredo utilized the platform to engage people in topics that are otherwise neglected, like marginalized support pertaining to her campaign in the Muslim communities, and remote areas, and the support of groups like LGBTQ+. However, it is documented that during data collection, Marcos operated the Twitter space less than Robredo. Common themes emerge from his supporters linked to his positive campaign agenda wherein they repetitively mention the character of Marcos as seen in his campaign and speeches realizing that he uttered "we" more than "I." The discussion under Robredo peaked on Twitter as it combined her tweets and the netizens. Many groups have been very vocal in supporting her, including known celebrities and social media personalities.

Twitter encourages discussion and critical thinking through its features like spaces. There are approximately 10.5 million users in the Philippines, small compared to Facebook, though enough to cover a vital demographic—youth^[7]. Robredo utilized the platform well; they dominated the Twitter trends during her campaign trails. Using common hashtags like #Kakampink, #KulayRosasAngBukas, and #LeniKiko has been seen in most algorithms.

'Battleground of Philippine Elections': Political Message Strategies of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo on Social Media

Table 3. Tiktok Key Messages of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo

Candidates	Facebook Key Messages	
	Category	Themes
Bongbong Marcos	Policy	Agriculture Reform Infrastructure
	Non-Policy	Humor Massive Crowd
Leni Robredo	Policy	Transportation Government Accountability Education
	Non-Policy	Youth Efforts Plight of Common People

Table 3 shows the themes that emerge from the candidate's and audiences' TikTok social media posting using the Policy and Non-Policy related content category. Using policy optics, Marcos focuses on agriculture reform in the country, specifically on the strategic application of farm-to-plate ideas. He also reiterated that he would continue the projects started by Duterte on infrastructure. Robredo meanwhile supported education; one example is her video that talks about the systematic approach to teacher capacity building. She also highlighted the need for better policy in general. Moreover, Marcos's campaign on TikTok also incorporated humor from his supporters, and they featured his funny side during interviews. It is remarkable, on the other side, that Robredo's campaign featured her "ordinariness" through her old videos, including her walk with the Sumilao Farmers.

TikTok is an emerging social media that has altered the landscape of the 2022 Philippine elections. The platform allows creators and audiences to create and tell their stories. TikTok is a very interactive platform where a story can be re-enacted or re-told based on the content creator's perspective. A very new tool for social media campaigning that has a massive impact on information dissemination and entertainment that engages the electorate well. Many stories related to campaigns, rallies, clips of speeches, and even historical videos about both candidates were also edited to make them more appealing. Unfortunately, TikTok as a platform posed an alarming case of spliced videos and fake news during the campaign.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

It is no denying that the recent presidential election has been the most digitally engaged campaign wherein many people are showing their support for the candidates, debating online and rallying people together through content. However, as entertaining as it is, social media has been a real battleground of ideologies among supporters and candidates. It has been a polarizing message campaign during the election, whether through the massive supporters or issues circulating online.

Participation of the electorate re-shaped the whole messaging campaign as everyone might have an interpretation of each political message. Marcos sold his campaign messages online, such as a promise about agriculture and sustainable electricity, which is influential as there is an ongoing crisis to these commodities. His massive Facebook campaign that remarkably gained consistent engagement made his persuasion message even heavier and gained visibility.

Robredo is an active figure on social media and has utilized the platform to her advantage. Charging the message of hope and transparency, she engaged youths to rally for her. There has been active participation, properly framing a crusade toward a better Philippines. She was able to market the campaign to a certain extent that allowed her to cover a specific demographic and she is the Twitter leader in the election. Sending a constant message to challenge and recalibrate the old system will always spark debates and information battles on the platform, which makes her relevant.

Regrettably, neither candidate was able to maximize TikTok to their advantage. Mostly seen as an entertainment platform by politicians, but it can also generate much influence and can be used to enhance political message strategy. Although this upscales the user-generated content (UGC) to participate in the elections, the emergence of the platform adds complexity to the overall message design for future campaigns. People can now mobilize the campaign supporting a candidate through this platform, as this feature helpful tools such as live discussion and video editing.

With this tug of war, a political message strategy will only make sense if it can attain three features: (1) Message design that covers the election demographics [above 18 years old and all economic status] with consideration to social and cultural contexts, (2) Adequate platform utilization, and (3) Information that has a potential for recreation [UGC]. These provided components make a candidate visible heading to election day. This further argues that political message strategies can only work well when targeting

'Battleground of Philippine Elections': Political Message Strategies of Bongbong Marcos and Leni Robredo on Social Media

the right audience using the right platform; thus, looking at intervening factors like fake news and spliced videos are vital for consideration when planning for strategic campaign communication.

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