

RESEARCH REPORT

Political Economy of Covert Influence Operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections

Fatima Gaw | Jon Benedik A. Bunquin | Samuel I. Cabbuag
Jose Mari H. Lanuza | Noreen H. Sapalo | Al-Habbyel B. Yusoph

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July 2023



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Executive Summary

This report investigates the political economy of covert influence in the 2022 Philippine Elections, with a focus on social media influencers involved in covert political campaigning.

This interdisciplinary research (1) examines political influencers and peripheral actors in the field engaged in political campaigning using qualitative field research methods, (2) maps and evaluates evidence of their participation in covert influence operations through computational social science methods, and (3) estimates political spending on the presumed commissioned influencers through economic modeling.

Our research is the first empirical work to produce an assembly of data-informed approximations of the scope and scale of the political economy of covert influence operations. Specifically, it is the first to estimate the economic ‘cost’ of commissioned influencers for electoral influence operations in the Philippines.

It also provides a complex but nuanced account of influencers as ‘gray’ political actors who exercise agency in their complicity to covert political campaigning given commensurate economic and political incentives. Amidst undocumented transactions and opaque operations, our research establishes multiple, cross-platform proxy measures of malicious political influencing, beyond established detection mechanisms.

We find that thousands of political influencers are presumed to be commissioned to perform covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine Elections for top national positions, funded by massive financing by political intermediaries in a largely unstructured and unregulated economic market characterized by asymmetrical political relations.

1. Political logics govern economic transactions in political influencing

The field of political influencers transmute the established norms of promotional industries into a shifting marketplace of political leverage. Unlike commercial influencer marketing, political influencers do not follow a normative set of rates and they set their prices based on their social capital, political notoriety, and ability to promote their clients' agenda. Premiums are offered to influencers who are willing to switch political camps or double down on posting during the campaign season. Influencers with small to modest following are contracted on an ad hoc basis, while prominent influencers are employed under politicians' payroll. All these transactions are not based on contracts and are not protected by non-disclosure agreements. They are facilitated by intermediaries and consultants on behalf of politicians.

2. 1,425 influencer accounts exhibit multiple evidence of covert political campaigning

Based on expansive public digital data subjected to 18 multi-dimensional indicators of covert influence operations, there are approximately 1,425 influencer accounts across social media platforms who engaged in covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine Elections. The majority of these influencers are on video-based, creator-friendly platforms such as YouTube (587) and TikTok (544), followed by Facebook (207) and Twitter (87). These political influencers can be categorized into seven types, with each employing a distinct set of strategies to perform political influence. Their strategies are platform-specific as well: YouTube for hyper-partisan news and information, TikTok for algorithmic manipulation, Facebook for disinformation amplification, and Twitter for politicized interaction.

3. An estimated PhP 600 million to 1.5 billion was spent on political influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections

The estimated political spending on covert political influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections for presidential and vice-presidential candidates is PhP

600 million to 1.5 billion (USD 10.9 million to 27 million). The conservative estimate accounts for influencers who are in a 'retainer' model, while the normative estimate follows a pay-per-post model. Other factors that may influence pricing outside of these estimates include: political ideology, reputational risk, campaign roles, discounted packages, and influencer performance and negotiation skills. Our estimates also do not include platform monetization, which is another significant economic incentive to campaign for a politician, as well as opportunity costs by the labor performed by 'volunteer' influencers.

Our report emphasizes the need to materialize and scrutinize the political economic infrastructure that facilitates covert influence operations to fully comprehend the extent of the problem. We propose research, policy, and industry recommendations to expand our purview of interest beyond 'fake news' and disinformation and towards the structures and regimes of political manipulation.



CHAPTER 1

Political economy of covert influence operations in the Philippines

This chapter introduces our research on the political economy of covert influence operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections. It establishes the missing link between the clients, labor, and products of organized political manipulation and presents our distinct interdisciplinary approach in mapping the political economic structures that define this link. It puts a spotlight on covert political influencers as complicit ‘gray’ actors in covert influence operations and explains the significance of investigating them in materializing this obscured enterprise of manipulation.

New norm in political campaigning

Disinformation has become a linchpin of Philippine politics. It has ceased to be another political tactic for leverage and has become a necessary political scheme to take and hold power. The political conditions of the country partly enabled it to take root—such factors include weak political institutions,¹ declining public trust in media,² and unregulated platform economy³ among others. **It is the rise of the disinformation industry, however, that propelled the covert manipulation of public opinion as a dominant political strategy.**

Research has documented the local industrial complex that operates propaganda and disinformation campaigns in the Philippines, from the chief architects to micro-influencers, fake account operators,⁴ and hyper-partisan media.⁵ Former President Rodrigo Duterte's administration has even institutionalized a version of the operation within the government through in-house social media workers⁶ in offices such as the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) and Philippine National Police (PNP).⁷ Politicians are the main clients of this industry,⁸ and this client list is expanding from national to local politicians looking for political advantage. Many other similar enterprises such as troll farms and dark public relations (PR) agencies have thrived as well with more politicians outsourcing the dirty work to these specialists.⁹

Equally organized as the backend operations are the networks of propaganda accounts online that perpetuate falsehoods and manipulative narratives in the service of particular political agendas. Duterte has formed a formidable network of

1 Hutchcroft and Rocamora, "Strong demands and weak"; Teehankee, "Clientelism and party politics"; Tadem and Tadem, "Political dynasties in the Philippines."

2 Newman et al., "Digital News Report 2022"; Estella and Löffelholz, "Media Landscapes: Philippines."

3 Soriano and Gaw, "Broadcasting anti-media populism"; Arguelles, "From self-regulation."

4 Ong and Cabañes, "Architects of networked disinformation."

5 Lanuza and Arguelles, "Media System Incentives."

6 Ong and Tapsell, "Demystifying disinformation shadow economies."

7 Feldstein, "Social Manipulation and Disinformation."

8 Bradshaw and Howard, "The global disinformation order"; Ong and Cabañes, "Architects of networked disinformation"; Elemia, "Stars, influencers get paid."

9 Silverman et al., "Disinformation For Hire"; Bengali and Halper "Troll armies, growth industry."

accounts on Facebook since the beginning of his presidency,¹⁰ some of which were taken down by Facebook for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior in 2020.¹¹ Many of them, including newly created ones, continued to promote his propaganda on his war on drugs,¹² assault on media and progressive groups,¹³ and foreign policy,¹⁴ among many other issues that propelled and maintained his popularity. The same network has also arguably benefited the recent campaign of his daughter, sitting Vice-President Sara Duterte.¹⁵

Incumbent President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. has his own disinformation networks that mainstreamed the whitewashed legacy of his father, dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr.,¹⁶ which later became the premise of his campaign’s rallying cry of *Babangon Muli* (We will rise again). Marcos Jr.’s propaganda operations expanded across platforms, exploiting the long-form videos of YouTube¹⁷ and the trendy short videos of TikTok¹⁸ to reach audiences of different ages and different attention spans. Research by the Philippine Media Monitoring Laboratory found that the merger of Duterte and Marcos’ entrenched networks of political manipulation has allowed the Marcos-Duterte tandem to dominate online discourse during the 2022 Philippine Elections.¹⁹

The demand for propaganda work is at its peak during elections. Research has documented that disinformation and manipulation have become more rampant from the 2016 Philippine General Elections to the 2019 Philippine Midterm Elections,²⁰ if not normalized in the 2022 Philippine Elections. Throughout the years, deceptive strategies have also evolved from the classic ‘fake’ news playbook to more subtle manipulation techniques.²¹ **While propaganda campaigns still promote false**

10 Sinpeng, Gueorguiev and Arugay, “Strong fans, weak campaigns.”

11 Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior.”

12 Alba, “How Duterte Used Facebook.”

13 Tapsell, “Divide and rule”; Chua and Soriano, “Electoral Disinformation.”

14 Arugay, “Foreign Policy & Disinformation Narratives.”

15 Bunquin et al., “Digital Public Pulse.”

16 Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence”; Mendoza, “Networked propaganda.”

17 Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence.”

18 Mendoza, “Philippine Elections 2022.”

19 Bunquin et al., “Digital Public Pulse.”

20 Ong, Tapsell and Curato, “Tracking Digital Disinformation.”

21 Ong et al., “Parallel Public Spheres.”

information,²² there is more proliferation of coordinated amplification of partisan messages, organized attacks against opposing candidates,²³ and politicization of non-political spaces.²⁴ Influence operations is the pertinent term to refer to these broader but highly organized mechanisms to manipulate public opinion, including but not limited to disinformation and propaganda²⁵ (see Box text 1).

In this research, **we define covert influence operations as organized and well-funded operations that orchestrate concealed, disguised, or opaque activities intended to manipulate public opinion.** Covert political campaigning is one form of influence operations specific to elections. It aims to influence the public's voting behavior through organized political manipulation. We are interested in materializing these covert influence operations as they become embedded in the portfolio of election strategies, complementing aboveboard campaigning (advertising, media, and rallies) and magnifying age-old fraudulent election practices (vote buying, backdoor deals, and election-related violence).

22 Ong, Tapsell and Curato, "Tracking Digital Disinformation."

23 Rubio, "Robredo biggest fake news victim."

24 Bunquin, Cinco and Urrea, "Cloaked politics."

25 Bradshaw, "Influence operations and disinformation."

BOX TEXT 1.

Influence operations vs. disinformation

Influence operations are the “collection of tactical information about... the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent”²⁶ This is a broader frame that includes but is not limited to disinformation and other forms of media manipulation. In the context of the Philippine elections, influence operations are a kind of strategic communications that aim to hack attention, mobilize audiences, and influence electoral outcomes.²⁷ **Influence operations, as a conceptual anchor, allow us to scrutinize campaign strategies that do not directly deceive through false claims or defy content regulations but nonetheless exploit the same regulatory loopholes while recalling or relying on the same ideas and sensibilities of disinformation.**

Disinformation is defined as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit”.²⁸ It is a kind of media manipulation for political interests or media content that is false, harmful, and deliberately disseminated. **Influence operations go beyond disinformation by blurring the lines between whose interests are driving the media content and by casting doubt on the authenticity of the content and the intention behind its diffusion.** It can take the form of multimedia content that does not explicitly use false claims to promote propaganda or attack opponents but still refers to the same meta-narratives previously used in disinformation campaigns.

26 Rand Corporation, “Influence operations.”

27 Ong et al., “Parallel Public Spheres.”

28 High level Group on fake news & and online disinformation, “A multi-dimensional approach.”

While influencers have been mobilized in the Philippines in the context of disinformation promotion,²⁹ their communicative strategies and propaganda tactics can be more accurately characterized within the influence operations framework. Influencers have a unique promotional advantage since they leverage their strong relationships with their audiences to perform political influence work, without resorting to deceptive narratives or opaque strategies. Working in concert with larger influence operations, influencers and their strategic influence help campaigns evade detection and regulation. Their political promotion and endorsements can be labeled as opinions and personal preferences to deflect responsibility but are strategically linked to propaganda talking points and disinformation-based claims. **There is a distance in their complicity since their support for a politician is presented in the guise of political participation, or as another profitable side gig not necessarily out of malicious intent.**

Assembling the political economy

This research investigates the political economy of covert influence operations—the interplay of political actors, interest groups and institutions, and economic actors, enterprises, and markets that produce and perform covert influence operations. Existing research provides us with partial knowledge about the workings of disinformation campaigns from the backend,³⁰ but much of it remains elusive, especially given their now broader scope of manipulation. More critically, **influence operations are designed to be obscured and always partially unknown to protect the special interests of the actors and entities involved**, from the reputation of big name politicians to the business viability of dark PR enterprises.

29 Soriano and Gaw, "Platforms, alternative influence"; Ong and Cabbuag, "Pseudonymous Influencers".

30 Ong and Cabañes, "Architects of networked disinformation"; Ong, Tapsell and Curato, "Tracking Digital Disinformation"; Elemia, "Stars, influencers get paid"; Bradshaw and Howard, "The global disinformation order".

This deliberate scheme to be secretive and hidden means that there would always be a missing link between the political entities that commission influence operations, the labor market that supplies this service, and the material products of political manipulation rampant in digital spaces (see Figure 1). Without direct evidence or full admission of complicit actors, it is futile to have a complete picture of the political economy of influence operations.

Our research proposes that there is a different way to define that link—not through directly exposing the system but through an assembly of data-informed approximations. From a wide set of unknowns, we narrow our focus to what are known variables and employ *triangulation* or the process of using multiple data points and methods to arrive at our evidence. We intend to define the link by (1) finding a common thread among the varying components of the political economy, which in this case is focusing on the economic infrastructure behind the political machinery, and by (2) setting its boundaries through context-building, scoping work, and estimations.

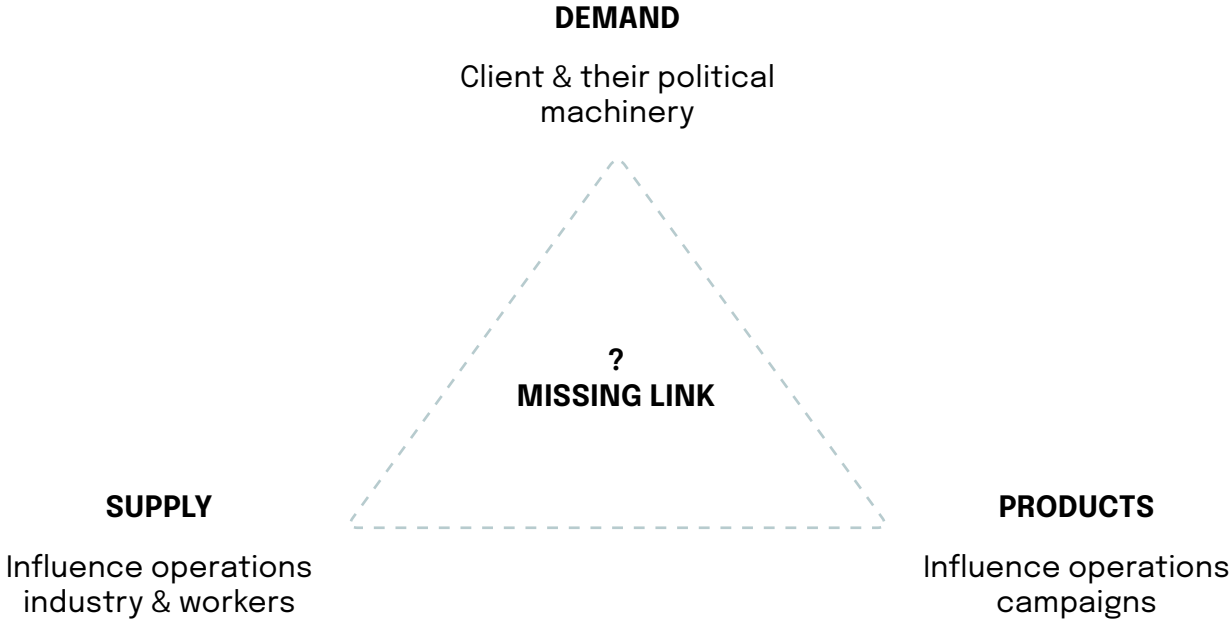


Figure 1. Missing link in the political economy of covert influence operations

Client-Labor. In the context of elections and politics, more broadly, politicians and their allies are in the position to benefit from covert influence operations and have the capacity to finance it with billions of their campaign funding. Campaign finance reports in the Philippines notoriously underestimate the actual amount of money spent by candidates³¹ and fail to account for non-advertising spending,³² and this large but hidden stash is at their disposal to whoever can help them win.

However, the client's engagement with the political economy of covert influence operations is indirect and often undetectable. Politicians have intermediaries to commission influence operations outside of their campaign team.³³ Their transactions are also all off-book and undocumented, making it difficult to have any tangible proof of their arrangements.³⁴ This incognito set-up allows clients to have plausible deniability running influence operations, making it possible for involved actors to evade accountabilities and fend off suspicions.

Labor-Products. The industry has been expanding its scope given the increased demand for specialized services such as influence operations. Despite this growth, this line of work remains clandestine given their obligatory allegiance to their clients and the morally compromising character of their job.³⁵ This obscures the numerous actors involved in influence operations and the extent of their complicity.

The same obfuscation happens in their execution of the manipulation work. Many of the accounts do not engage in clear-cut disinformation, straddling the gray area between political influencing and political expression.³⁶ Methodologically, there is no conclusive way to identify them with their

31 Miranda, "A Disproportionately Unequal Playing Field."

32 Salazar, "Robredo leads, Marcos snubs."

33 Ong and Cabañes, "Architects of networked disinformation"; Ong, Tapsell and Curato, "Tracking Digital Disinformation."

34 Ong and Cabañes, "When disinformation studies meets"; Ong and Tapsell, "Demystifying disinformation shadow economies."

35 Ong and Cabañes, "When disinformation studies meets."

36 Starbird, DiResta and DeButts, "Influence and improvisation."

increasingly sophisticated strategies outside of troll and bot detection techniques. Since many of these accounts are fake or hidden behind personas, it is almost impossible to trace back deceptive content to its producer.

Clients-Labor-Products. The links between clients and labor, and labor and products, are already ambiguous, and more so the link that ties the three aspects of the political economy together. Apart from the complications of empirically getting data to draw this link, existing knowledge about the matter is in silos and can easily be disputed for lack of concrete evidence.

What is indisputable is that these political operations are bound by economic transactions, and putting things into economic terms allows us to have a common vocabulary to make this link visible and *real*. These political economic operations also involve *some* number of actors leaving *some* traces of their political activities, supported by *some* amount of funding. There is material evidence to work on, and there is a creative way to weave them together to create an approximate account of the political economy of covert influence operations.

Influencers as political operators

Our research agenda is to define the links that form the political economy of covert influence operations in the Philippines. Within this broad field, we begin our investigation by focusing on social media influencers and their participation in covert influence operations.

Influencers are defined as “anyone who gains fame in social media and uses this fame as a vocation or livelihood.”³⁷ The term traditionally refers to influencers posting lifestyle content such as food, fashion, and travel, but it soon expanded to include many other categories, including political influencers. Political influencers remain a nascent category of influencers in scholarly literature, but they have been studied early on in the Philippines³⁸ (see Box text 2).

37 Abidin, “Influencer extravaganza.”

38 Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence”; Ong and Cabbuag, “Pseudonymous Influencers.”

Previous research and investigative journalistic work have established influencers' critical role in covert influence operations, especially during election season.³⁹ Of all the other actors engaged in this line of work, influencers are the most visible given their public-facing persona and large number of followers. **Their political manipulation work is also characterized by its “complexity, nuance, ‘grayness’”⁴⁰ and thus pushes the “limits of the frame ‘disinformation’”.**⁴¹ According to reports, influencers are among the most well-paid in the hierarchy of propaganda and disinformation workers,⁴² with salaries documented to range from 10,000 to 250,000 Philippine Pesos (PhP) or 200 to 5,000 United States Dollars (USD) in 2017.⁴³ We only expect that the rates have significantly gone up given the increasing demand for influencers to join and amplify political campaigns and influence operations.

Influencers are also a strategic starting point for the researchers because influencer marketing has established economic frameworks in the advertising and PR industry. They provide ‘rate cards’ for brands and services who want to collaborate with them,⁴⁴ and some of them even have their influencer agencies to negotiate with potential clients on their behalf.⁴⁵ Given the covert nature of influence operations, this kind of economic information is not available for researchers, and perhaps not even to political clients. However, these economic frameworks can serve as a baseline or reference in our analysis given parallel mechanisms in influencer marketing within and outside the industry.

39 Ong and Cabañes, “Architects of networked disinformation”; Ong, Tapsell and Curato, “Tracking Digital Disinformation”; Elemia, “Stars, influencers get paid.”

40 Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence.”

41 Ong and Cabbuag, “Pseudonymous Influencers”.

42 Ong and Cabañes, “When disinformation studies meets.”

43 Elemia, “Stars, influencers get paid.”

44 Anymind, “Influencer marketing.”

45 Nacar, “The Philippines’ influencer marketing.”

BOX TEXT 2.

Social media influencers and politics

Influencers in the Philippines have crossed over from exclusively being in the corporate realm to the political arena.

Research has documented the increased participation of influencers from the 2016 to the 2019 and 2022 elections.⁴⁶ Celebrity and Facebook influencer Mocha Uson with millions of followers is one of the big name influencers who campaigned for Duterte in 2016, alongside blogger RJ Nieto or more known as *Thinking Pinoy*, and blogger and academic Sass Sasot on her Facebook page, *For the Motherland*. Opposition candidate Mar Roxas in the same election also has Twitter and Facebook influencer Jove Laurio or more known as *Pinoy Ako Blog* (“I am Pinoy Blog”) in support of his campaign. The mobilization of influencers further expanded in 2019 Philippine Midterm Elections through the use of micro- and nano-influencers—in particular, “*pseudonymous*” influencers or those with no talking heads to minimize scrutiny and evade accountability.⁴⁷ More and more political influencers have also emerged beyond the large social media platforms and into emerging ones such as TikTok, which allowed them to operate with less attention from the mainstream media and subject to less stringent content moderation.⁴⁸

Social media influencers are used not only to campaign for their candidate clients but also to seed misinformation and disinformation in the larger influence operations. Influencers on YouTube were identified to promote historical disinformation about the regime of dictator Ferdinand

46 Ong and Cabañes, “Architects of networked disinformation”; Ong, Tapsell and Curato, “Tracking Digital Disinformation; Elemia, “Stars, influencers get paid; Ong et al., “Parallel Public Spheres.”

47 Ong and Cabbuag, “Pseudonymous Influencers.”

48 Lanuza, Fallorina, and Cabbuag, “Understudied Digital Platforms.”

Marcos Sr. to help rehabilitate the Marcos family name,⁴⁹ while some YouTubers have been key propagandists for the state's anti-media crusade against ABS-CBN, Rappler, and other prominent media organizations.⁵⁰ These influencers have also been mouthpieces to delegitimize and attack political opponents and other camps, packaging snide, often personal remarks against them within supposed political commentary. They are key to manufacturing political divides among their followers and viewers by using partisan coded language (e.g., *Pinklawan*, *DDS*, *CPP-NPA*, etc.) already established by mainstream politicians and personalities.⁵¹

As discussed in Chapter 2, this pattern of social media influencers engaged in political campaigns and state propaganda has become commonplace, harnessing their vernacular expertise of platforms and fostered relationships with audiences to bridge politicians to citizens. They are enmeshed in politics not only in their involvement in influence campaigns but also in their employment in the national government, such as the case of Mocha Uson and Trixie Cruz-Angeles,⁵² and in partisan media outlets. As more individuals discover the profitability of creating political content, political influencers—not officially part of influence operations—are also an emerging category of influencers, who are also indirectly performing (free) political labor for politicians while being subsidized by platform incentives.⁵³

49 Soriano and Gaw, "Platforms, alternative influence."

50 Soriano and Gaw, "Broadcasting anti-media populism."

51 Chi, "CHR calls out SMNI."

52 Sabillo, "Mocha Uson appointed"; Patag, "Lawyer, vlogger Trixie Cruz-Angeles."

53 Rappler, "DOCUMENTARY: Ang Bagong Media."

Covert political influencing in the 2022 Philippine Elections

This research takes a deep dive into influencers and their involvement in the political economy of covert influence operations in the Philippines. Specifically, we focus on their political and economic structures influencing the 2022 Philippine Elections.

We have the following objectives:

- **To develop an interdisciplinary methodology** to account for the complexities of the political economy of covert influence operations in the Philippines
- **To examine the political economic conditions** of influencers and their engagement with political campaigns and influence operations
- **To map evidence of covert political campaigning** among influencers across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok during the 2022 Philippine Elections
- **To estimate the economic cost** of mobilizing influencers for covert influence operations in 2022 Philippine Elections

The study engages in a pioneering interdisciplinary, multi-method approach to bridge some of the empirical gaps in linking the clients, political influencers, and the products of influence operations. The research is the best attempt so far to produce an assembly of data-informed approximations of the scope and scale of the political economy of covert influence operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections.

Our research is divided into three phases, which is also how the rest of the report is structured (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Phases of the research

PHASE 1:

Political economic landscape of influence operations

The first phase interrogates the political economic conditions of influencer work for political clients using digital ethnography and key informant interviews. It sets the ‘big picture’ of the field of covert political influence work by ethnographically analyzing the cross-platform social media campaigns of the top national candidates in the 2022 Philippine Elections and where influencers come into play. Then, we interviewed influencers and peripheral actors such as campaign managers, political consultants, PR specialists, and other influence operations workers that are involved in their work.

Phase 1 is designed to provide the lay of the land and inform our assumptions about covert political influencer work for Phase 3 by characterizing their political economic transactions (contracts, scope of work, criteria for engagement, rates and fees, other economic sources, etc.). The findings of Phase 1 are discussed in Chapter 2 of the report.

PHASE 2:

Covert political influencers detection on social media

The second phase maps the multi-dimensional evidence of influencers engaged in covert influence operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections using computational communication methods using digital data from four social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. It develops a comprehensive framework for identifying influencers participating in covert political campaigning based on three dimensions of 18 indicators of known deceptive and manipulative strategies and their amalgamations. We identified influencers that exhibit anomalous characteristics and outlier behavior from the rest of the accounts analyzed. We argue that the presence of these indicators exemplifies their involvement in covert influence operations.

Phase 2 generated a list of covert political influencers for Phase 3 based on this evidence of participation in organized political manipulation and

the extent of their influence on their audience and extent of engagement in such work (follower count, post count, duration of engagement, candidate supported, etc.). You can find the details of the methodology and the findings of Phase 2 in Chapter 3.

PHASE 3:

Economic modeling of the cost of covert influence operations

The third phase builds an economic model that estimates the cost of political influencer engagement within covert influence operations during the 2022 Philippine Elections informed by the data from the first two phases. It builds its economic assumptions based on the findings on the field by Phase 1, supported by data on influencer rates in the industry to calculate its baseline prices. Then, it runs the model based on the quantitative estimates from Phase 2 to produce estimates of the cost to commission influencers for covert political campaigning.

Phase 3 presents estimated political spending on covert political influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections outside of the publicly reported campaign spending and budgets. The basis of the calculations for Phase 3 can be found in Chapter 4.

Phase 1 and 2 operate parallel to each other, with Phase 1 canvassing the political economic landscape to set the boundaries of the covert influence operations in relation to political influencers, and Phase 2 triangulating methods to identify covert political influencers and defining their involvement in political manipulation that informs the economic valuation of their work. Their findings form the basis for the estimates of Phase 3 on the political spending on covert political influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections.

The research aims to ‘scope out’ the political economy of covert influence operations starting with influencers to materialize the obscured and insidious machineries of manipulation that elude researchers, journalists, and government

regulators alike. The discourse on propaganda and disinformation work remains at a conceptual level and often nebulous form, and this hinders concrete and meaningful critique and interventions. By surfacing them from “below the radar”,⁵⁴ we provide institutions, civil society, and citizens with the artifacts, models, and currencies of influence operations to interrogate complicit actors in manifest and evident ways to aid in the development of regulatory frameworks and monitoring projects and the enactment of regimes of accountability and governance.

54 Abidin, “From “networked publics,” 1.



CHAPTER 2

Influencers and the political economic landscape of influence operations

This chapter discusses the broader context of influence operations in the Philippines, weaving the literature on disinformation studies, influencer cultures, and political marketing in the country. In particular, we look at social media influencers engaging in political promotional labor during the 2022 Philippine Elections. We first locate the influencers within the historical entanglement of promotional culture in Philippine politics and in its contemporary trajectory towards influence operations. We then detail our findings on political influence work during the elections, expounding on its distinct terms of engagement, social logics, platform strategies, and market conditions, which later informed the assumptions of our economic modeling in Chapter 4.

Key findings

- Influencers are in high demand and are offered a premium to participate in political campaigns, due to their folk expertise and cultural familiarity with the platforms where they operate. They also monetize their political engagement through platform creator programs and other incentives, on top of other financial gains.
- Political influencer marketing distinctly departs from commercial influencer marketing in terms of contract structures and the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). Contracts can either be on a retainer basis (mostly reserved for prominent influencers) or on an ad hoc basis (mostly the default for influencers with small to modest followings), subject to continued renewal depending on content engagement.
- There is no normative set of rates in the political influence market. Influencers can set their pricing at the onset, based on their social capital, historical performance, and political notoriety. Their willingness to engage in incendiary language and aggressive behavior publicly is part of this compensation calculation. Moreover, higher offers are available for influencers who are willing to change political camps, as well as those who agree to support the candidate during the peak of the campaign season.
- Influencers who perform voluntary promotional work consider the value of labor as a contribution to their preferred political candidate.
- Anonymity is critical—the clients, the intermediaries, and the influencers themselves transact with various configurations of anonymity to evade risks, scrutiny, and regulation. For larger political operations and more established influencers, transactions are based on familiarity and existing relationships.

Promotional culture in Philippine politics

Social media influencers engaged in politics are contemporary iterations of promotional culture in Philippine politics. Philippine political culture has always been personalistic, evidenced by the prominence of celebrity political endorsers,⁵⁵ celebrities-turned-politicians,⁵⁶ and the practice of political celebrification,⁵⁷ more broadly. The rise of digital media has shifted these practices from securing media personality endorsements to engaging self-made, niche social media influencers. **Now, influencers repackage politicians as brands and politics as brand cultures⁵⁸ by treating electoral campaigns as races for content popularity rather than programmatic necessity.** While influencers' promotional labor itself is not new, there are new textures to its performance when transposed to political contexts.

Influencers are a highly attractive tool for political campaigning since they possess particular characteristics and abilities that allow for covert messaging. Capitalizing on more organic and familiar relationships in interest-oriented online groups, influencers create spaces for refracted publics:

“Refracted publics allow users and their content to avoid detection by non-target human eyeballs and machine vision, to promote deflection to smokescreens or alternative attention bait, and still facilitate the dissemination of messages in an expansive and accessible way. This usually occurs through private groups, locked platforms, or ephemeral contents. In essence, the cultures of refracted publics are shaped by circumvention and ‘off-label uses’ (Albury & Byron, 2016) and allow users to remain ‘below the radar.’”⁵⁹

In other words, the political power of influencers lies in their capacity to be covert, unlike obtrusive advertising or blatant manipulation.

55 Abinales and Amoroso, “State and Society.”

56 David and Atun, “Celebrity Politics.”

57 Pertierra, “The new media, society.”

58 Banet-Weiser, “*Authentic TM.*”

59 Abidin, “Internet Celebrity.”

Influencers’ ability to foster such public culture enables contemporary political campaigns to engage in controlled interactivity, or the idea that politicians rely on interactive content on social media to create more engaging and involved relationships with audiences, and eventually mobilize them along various degrees of political support.⁶⁰ Audiences themselves become citizen marketers⁶¹ producing amateur political promotional content, whether through comment section engagements, through reposts, or through original content such as posts, memes, and videos. Political influencers facilitate and enable the mobilization of publics to become not only active citizens and voters but also extensions of the political machinery itself.

Political influencers in their performance of promotional labor, functioning as both lightning rods for political campaign capital and firehoses of political messaging, render themselves as prominent actors in contemporary electoral campaigns and propaganda, and politics, more broadly.

Terrains of contemporary political influencing

The 2016 Philippine General Elections shifted the norms of political campaigning in the country. Former President Rodrigo Duterte’s campaign strategically leveraged social media not only by mobilizing publics who resonated with his law-and-order platform⁶² but also by running disinformation and covert influence campaigns.⁶³ **These campaigns were neither flukes nor one-offs but have built the groundwork for a new regime of propaganda.**

The fundamental research in the report, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*⁶⁴ exposed the disinformation-for-hire industry in the Philippines. It outlines that a hierarchy of workers composed of chief architects from the advertising and PR industry, digital influencers, and community-level fake account operators

60 Stromer-Galley, “Presidential Campaigning.”

61 Penney, “The Citizen Marketer.”

62 Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, and Arugay, “Strong Fans, Weak Campaign.”

63 Bradshaw and Howard, “Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers.”

64 Ong and Cabañes, “Architects of Networked Disinformation.”

orchestrate disinformation campaigns for local political clients. Influencers are strategically positioned in the middle, not only in this hierarchy but also in the disinformation campaign playbook by both promoting positive branding and supporting digital black ops. Mocha Uson is one such example of an influencer building cultural resonance for politicians and heightening social divides. She was a champion of Duterte by amplifying his political messaging, promoting deceptive narratives, and vilifying other candidates and traditional political elites in the 2016 Philippine Elections. She continued to do so during his administration through her Facebook page, *Mocha Uson Blog*.⁶⁵ Uson enjoyed immense notoriety and was rewarded with consecutive government appointments ranging from roles such as ‘social media consultant’ to more bureaucratic positions in agencies both related and unrelated to her background. Other influencers have enjoyed similar career trajectories through hyper-partisan content and disinformation, exemplifying the rewarding possibilities for political influencers.

The 2019 Philippine Midterm Elections saw the rise of micro- (10,000 - 50,000 followers) and nano-influencers (1,000 - 9,999 followers) as the main actors in disinformation operations, in contrast to the macro-influencers of 2016. **With magnified public scrutiny and visibility of disinformation actors, political camps and political marketing operators sought more ‘undetectable’ influencers.** They shifted to engaging micro- and nano-influencers who are better at micro-targeting audiences with contrived authenticity and salient political messaging, thus providing “greater engagement and affinity”.⁶⁶ Their smaller following and lowkey engagements allowed them to better infiltrate communities while avoiding detection and monitoring. Despite their smaller individual reach, they were valuable key opinion leaders within more organic online communities. These interactions produced stronger parasocial bonds and more hidden interactions tucked away in closed and private Facebook groups. Together, these influencers exploited platform affordances and weak campaign finance laws to seed disinformation and/or divisive political content in support of specific political candidates.

65 Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, and Arugay, “Strong Fans, Weak Campaign.”

66 Ong et al., “Tracking Digital Disinformation,” 21.

As a testament to their efficacy, political influencers have not only become mainstays in political campaigning but have also evolved to employ different strategies and logics in their conduct of political promotion. In the 2022 Philippine Elections, politicians and academics function more like influencers in conjunction with more established influencers, while new influencer categories emerged from new platforms and political contexts.⁶⁷ Influencers themselves acknowledge their influence over politics and national affairs. After the 2022 Philippine Elections, influencers supporting then-candidate Marcos Jr. formed the now defunct United Vloggers and Influencers of the Philippines (UVIP). Representing a partisan counterpart of the Malacañang Press Corps, the organization lobbied to have exclusive if not preferential access to the Malacañang for political content creation.

The establishment of influencers as key campaign actors in the past two elections has also introduced new logics to their work arrangements within covert influence operations, as well as to the market conditions of commissioning political influencers among interested political clients.

67 Ong et al., "Parallel Public Spheres."

Interrogating the concept of political influencers

Influencers have been documented to participate in political campaigns in the Philippines in various ways: From their diverse promotional strategies⁶⁸ to their interactions and relationship with platforms⁶⁹ to the kind of information they contribute in the ecosystem.⁷⁰ However, the concept of *political influencer* remains ambiguously defined due to the clandestine nature of influence operations in Philippine politics. Who is involved, in what capacity are they involved, for how long is their involvement, and under what terms will they be involved, are all difficult to ascertain with regulatory loopholes and tight-knit relations between the political elite and the media elite. **Broad definitions that rest on content creation, audience consolidation, and corporate brand relationships⁷¹ seemingly neglect either the influencers who do not really create content for corporate sponsorship but get tapped for political work, or the influencers who, by design, operate in niche and more targeted communities for more organic relationships.⁷²**

These conceptual caveats mean two things. First, we need to be open to a fluid and relational understanding of political influencer as a category of political actor. We see this as a dynamic role strategically employed at opportune moments, rather than a static identity. This is partially supported by the most recent definition of political influencers:

“...we define political influencers as content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform. Political influencers may do so with the purpose of exerting political influence over their audience members, to perform allyship for a political or social cause (Wellman, 2022), to access monetary or other gains, or combinations thereof. Political influencers can be distinguished

68 Ong and Cabañes, “Architects of Networked Disinformation”; Ong, Tapsell, and Curato, “Tracking Digital Disinformation”; Ong et al., “Parallel Public Spheres”; Ong and Cabbuag, “Pseudonymous Influencers and Horny.”

69 Soriano and Gaw, “Broadcasting anti-media populism”; Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence.”

70 Lanuza, Fallorina, and Cabbuag, “Understudied Digital Platforms.”

71 Shtern, Hill, and Chan, “Social Media Influence”; Hund, “The Influencer Industry.”

72 Ong, Tapsell, and Curato, “Tracking Digital Disinformation”; Woolley, “Digital Propaganda.”

from influencers in other content domains ‘in their willingness to associate their online influence with political and social causes’ (Goodwin et al., 2023, p. 1616).⁷³

In this definition, anyone integrating political or social causes in their content, whether exclusively or in a limited capacity, either as a main source of income or as a side gig, is considered a political influencer. However, **its broadness and porousness also allow actors to exploit it, either to use it to disguise more nefarious activities or dispute this label when placed under scrutiny.** While this definition recognizes the nuances of performing work as political influencers, it does not capture specific forms of political influence operations that exploit this definitional looseness. For example, only measurable proxies such as follower counts and costs can be approximated in covert operations, and actual impact on political attitudes and behavior is only assumed.

This leads to our second point: There are still a lot of unexplored dimensions of what it means to be a political influencer. Echoing recent scholarship, political influencers are vastly understudied and still require further research into their actual place in the politicization process.⁷⁴ **In the Philippines, covert political influencing also begs for heightened academic attention that can shed light on the processes and practices within this profitable industry vis-a-vis political operations.** How might we provide a nuanced definition of political influencer with actual measurable variables that can show influence? How might we study the political economy of influence operations done behind closed doors? What logics and practices drive the covert influence operations employed during Philippine elections? The presence of measurable proxies assumes the presence of professional labor contingent on its measurement. How embedded is covert political influencing in a quickly professionalizing influence industry? How opaque are these processes and practices and who benefits from this opacity?

73 Riedl, Lukito, & Woolley, "Political Influencers," 2.

74 Wasike, "I Am an Influencer"; Bause, "Political social media influencers"; Casero-Ripolles, "Influencers in the political."

Methodology: Online and offline fieldwork

We underscore the need to approach the topic of influence operations qualitatively. **While quantitative approaches can approximate costs of running media manipulation campaigns, it does not inform us about what agreements take place between actors, how prices are negotiated, how influencers are approached, and how they create content.** Hence, the qualitative methods employed in this study—desk research, digital ethnography, and key informant interviews—helped in explicating the ‘backstage’ of online influence operations.

The ‘fieldwork’ for this chapter began in our Facebook timelines. Our digital ethnography focused on the top three presidential and vice-presidential candidates, following the Pulse Asia Survey released before the day of elections in May 2022. However, since digital ethnography recommends researchers to ‘follow the medium,’ we also made observations of other candidates’ online activities, especially when we were led to their pages by our earlier observations. We were keen on exploring official campaign messaging as well as the online activities and strategies of each political camp. We observed the top five posts (posts with the highest number of reactions) of the candidates initially on Facebook, and later on moving further into Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, from October 1, 2021 to May 7, 2022. These platforms were chosen to be analyzed for the digital ethnography as these were platforms where the candidates ran their official campaigns. YouTube was not included since it banned political ads in the 2022 Philippine Elections.⁷⁵ Some of the details we monitored on these platforms were the number of reactions or likes, the engagements, and the ensuing comments. We also kept an eye on posts that used official campaign hashtags, whether they were from influencers or campaign volunteers.

Additionally, we looked for influencers who either engaged frequently with the official candidates’ posts and had high engagements, or those who were not necessarily engaging frequently but created their own content with high

75 [Rappler.com](#), “Google pausing election ads.”

engagements. Insights from this initial foray informed and structured our interview guides and helped us list down possible interviewees. We also wrote online ‘field notes’ that contained data of all the observed posts, a textual description of the multimedia content, key observations regarding the comments in the post, a link to the screenshot of the post, and additional remarks.

Following the conceptual leads from our digital ethnography and field notes, we then scheduled online and face-to-face interviews with influencers and other peripheral actors from July 2022 to March 2023. Table 1 shows a summary of our interview respondents. We interviewed a total of 21 actors, 11 of whom are influencers who were involved in the May 2022 campaigns of our selected candidates.

We deemed it necessary to interview a wide array of actors involved in influence operations to obtain a sketch of the processes and strategies of the covert industry. While the influencers provided us important details regarding their scope of work, terms of engagement, rates and fees, and income and earnings, the conversations with campaign managers (one for a presidential candidate, one for a vice-presidential candidate, and two for partylist candidates) expounded on the rationale behind key campaign messaging, campaign budgets, and general campaign strategy. Meanwhile, the consultants we interviewed, most of whom came from big consultancy, election survey, and PR firms, provided a general overview of campaign and election trends. Our conversations with them allowed us to triangulate our data, ensuring validity and integrity.

In our conversations with the aforementioned actors, we deliberately used a semi-structured interview guide and a story-telling interview style to allow them the space to suggest directions for our conversations. The interview questions focused on the nature of their work and general role in political campaigns, their day-to-day tasks in relation to their role, the process of planning and creating content or campaign messages, and industry rates. We also compared monetary insights from the influencers, political consultants, and campaign manager interviews with actual data gathered from the Facebook Ad Library as well as the declared campaign expenditures submitted to the Commission on Elections (COMELEC).

Taken together, the interviews helped us uncover qualitative data that dialectically informed quantitative aspects of our report as well as succeeding iterations of qualitative data gathering and analysis.

TABLE 1.

Interview respondents' profile

CODE	RESPONDENT	SEX AND AGE	CATEGORY
R1	Respondent 1	M, 27	Influencer
R2	Respondent 2	F, [redacted]	Influencer
R3	Respondent 3	M, 31	Influencer
R4	Respondent 4	M, 43	Influencer
R5	Respondent 5	M, 31	Influencer
R6	Respondent 6	F, 33	Influencer - Volunteer
R7	Respondent 7	M, [redacted]	Influencer
R8	Respondent 8	M, 34	Influencer
R9	Respondent 9	M, 51	Influencer - Volunteer
R10	Respondent 10	F, 28	Influencer
R11	Respondent 11	M, [redacted]	Influencer
R12	Respondent 12	M, 24	Campaign staff
R13	Respondent 13	F, 30s	Campaign manager (Partylist candidate)
R14	Respondent 14	M, [redacted]	Campaign manager (Presidential candidate)
R15	Respondent 15	F, 57	Campaign staff

CODE	RESPONDENT	SEX AND AGE	CATEGORY
R16	Respondent 16	F, 33	Campaign staff
R17	Respondent 17	M, [redacted]	Political consultant
R18	Respondent 18	M, [redacted]	Political consultant
R19	Respondent 19	F, [redacted]	Ad agency consultant
R20	Respondent 20	M, [redacted]	Political campaign operator or “troll”
R21	Respondent 21	M, [redacted]	Political consultant

The fieldwork for our research was carried out not without any challenges. Given that we had no scholarly playbook to reference while investigating covert influence operations, we had to shift gears every so often to adjust to the challenges of qualitative research.

One difficulty we encountered involved the identification of political influencers. Since a taxonomic reference for political influencers has yet to be established, we heavily relied on our online observations and field notes, especially regarding the candidates’ and influencers’ online content and behavior during the campaign season, to come up with a list of potential interviewees.

Another major drawback was the glaringly low response rate to the interview invitations: Only 16% of invited interviewees signified their intent to participate in the research. **This low turnout might be partly attributed to the nature of political influence work and the risk to the livelihood of influencers, especially those who are part of political campaigns that require client confidentiality.** Since their livelihood relies on tacit non-disclosure, they might have considered the risk of participating in the study may have their identities exposed, which will then lead to economic and political vulnerabilities such as industry blacklisting or even political retribution. There were several cases of participants agreeing to be interviewed at first, but then withdrew their acceptance later on. This usually happened after

we sent them the participant information sheet, which explicitly articulated the objectives and rationale of the project, and the informed consent form.

Apart from the risks to the influencers' livelihood, the project also put the research team members in precarious situations. We have received hostile emails from invited interviewees, some containing antagonizing messages based on their assumptions of our political leanings. We explained to them that the purpose of the interview is for research and academic purposes only, and is unrelated to the researchers' personal politics. When the conversation online continued to be disagreeable, we opted not to respond to them to protect ourselves and our team from undue antagonism.

In sum, the challenges encountered by the researchers reveal the delicate nature of research on influencer operations. Many invited interviewees refused to participate in the study, presumably because of perceived threats to their livelihood. Meanwhile, the threats and harassment from some influencers exhibit the deliberate opacity of influencer operations, with the former keen on maintaining the obscurity of their transactions and agreements to protect their livelihood and reputation.

Covert influence operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections

In this section, we discuss our findings from our digital ethnography, interviews with various actors involved in covert influence operations, and analysis of secondary data. **Ultimately, we illustrate that political influence work has a different texture from traditional propaganda work and from celebrified political promotional labor.** By describing the actors, the nature of their engagements and tasks, the factors that enable the political influence industry, and the secretive nature of these engagements, we show how covert influence operations have become a staple in Philippine elections.

During the 2022 Philippine Elections, new kinds of influencers relied less directly on explicitly false and harmful content, and more on content that used coded language signaling disinformative sensibilities. This meant that content became

more familiar and resonant as it drew from already-existing disinformation, but the form it took did not necessarily qualify it for content moderation. Emergent platforms like TikTok also created new ways to campaign, relying on the platform's affordances enabling evidence collages (i.e., the overlaying of images and texts presented as evidence)⁷⁶ and more unpredictable algorithmic recommendations to spread disinformation by making all users potential disinformation audiences regardless of their identified content preferences. For instance, while the official TikTok account of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. is popular with 1.7 million followers as of the time of writing, the most popular posts come from supporters, focused on creating lifestyle feel-good and aspirational posts and on whitewashing the Marcos family image.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, other influencers took to more direct promotional labor online and offline, working on a combination of traditional endorsements such as hosting campaign rallies, and more modern online endorsements such as YouTube vlogs, talk shows, and professionally produced attack skits.⁷⁸ Digital political campaigning has now gotten an even larger share,⁷⁹ showing that influence operations have become a more central aspect of contemporary Filipino political campaigns during elections.

From our interviews, the most common tasks of influencers who were tapped or invited to be a part of campaigns could be categorized under the following:

- **Amplification**, which entails sharing or boosting predetermined campaign content to their own networks and followers, such as hashtags, campaign messages, and video projects
- **Creative promotion**, which entails making their own campaign content and sharing to their own networks and followers

76 Krafft and Donovan, "Disinformation by Design."

77 Mendoza, "Philippine Elections 2022."

78 Ong et al., "Parallel Public Spheres."

79 Ong, Tapsell and Curato, "Tracking Digital Disinformation."

- **Debunking**, which entails participating in multimedia campaigns to debunk false claims and propaganda or to respond to rival accusations and truth claims
- **Opine**, which entails weighing in on hot issues of the day, including political topics or topics concerning political candidates (Note: Mostly used by independent vloggers relying on monetization)
- **Personal appearances**, which entails includes a variety of tasks including hosting campaign rallies and events online and offline or conducting house to house campaigns
- **Auxiliary tasks**, which entails other soft skill-dependent tasks such as translating campaign materials or funneling donations and other resources from supporters to the campaign centers

We found two broad kinds of political influencers: *volunteer influencers* and *commissioned influencers*. Volunteers are those who engage in promotional labor without direct material gain, and sometimes with possible cost. Commissioned influencers are those who receive direct payments for their promotional labor, or receive lower payments packaged with immaterial incentives such as insurance agreements- favors or bonuses received when political clients win. **Since both kinds of influencers operate high-follower accounts on social media platforms, we also expect that they monetize their political content engagement through platform incentive schemes.** Many of those we interviewed identified as volunteers for the candidates they supported. When asked about the value of their promotional labor or the opportunity costs of their promotional labor during the campaign season, answers from volunteer influencers ranged from PhP 150,000 to 1,000,000 (USD 2,707 to 18,047).

However, it would be inaccurate to think that all online personalities who worked as political influencers volunteered or engaged in promoting for principle alone. Many of our respondents mentioned awareness of other commissioned influencers from opposing political camps. Other influencers were tapped instead by civil society organizations to engage in paid political influence work, such as popularizing fact-checking content, but wanted the engagement to be undisclosed. **Several of our respondents said that there are influencers, vloggers, and internet celebrities**

who could be “bought” for a wide range of prices, some as steep as millions. As one respondent said,

“Kung sikat ka, ikaw ang magse-set ng price. So halimbawa, si [redacted]. Si [redacted2]. Sila yung mga paid vloggers. Though hindi naman sila vloggers, si [redacted2] journalist siya. Pero, alam na alam ng tao na paid vlogger siya. Hindi ko siya sinisiraan ah. Yan yung usapan. Malaki talaga ‘yan. Millions ang binabayad sa mga ‘yan. Kasi sikat sila, sikat sila.” (R18)

(If you’re famous, you get to set the price. So for example, [redacted] and [redacted2], they are paid vloggers. Although [redacted2] is not really a vlogger since they are a journalist. But everyone knows that they are a paid vlogger. I’m not trying to defame them, that’s just the deal. They are paid a lot. Millions are paid to them because they are famous, they are well-known.)

This demonstrates the power of influencers to determine market rates. They have the upper hand in the field because of their follower size, notoriety, and perceived ability to shape online conversations.

In order to understand influencers more, we had to look at the larger campaigns first. From this, **we learned that the 2022 Philippine Elections also involved other covert adjacent non-influencer players in the influence operations.** These adjacent actors contributed to how influence operations were shaped, by informing campaigns which audiences should be targeted or which messages should be seeded, by identifying which influencers can best serve their needs, or by amplifying existing campaign messages covertly. One of our participants led a team of creatives as trolling content creators, responsible for making memes and attack videos that either discredit the opponent or support their candidate. This respondent chanced upon this gig as a freelancer, and the clandestine structure of the arrangement made it so that they only knew the middleman, never the actual financier of the operation. This respondent led a team of four to five others who engaged in what they described as troll work, and earned PhP 20,000 (USD 360) a month in exchange for 40 videos or short form content per month. They also said this was an open secret in the advertising and PR industry, where big ad agencies were hired by political camps for publicity work.

We also had respondents who produced information necessary to design political campaigns, but whose compensations may not necessarily be reported campaign expenditures. Our interviews with two survey and political consultancy firm executives showed how campaign teams relied on polling results and firm briefings to narrow down their target demographics which, in turn, affect what messages they put out. These firms have particular politicians as their usual clients, who hire them to do either standard or customized surveys and brief them about possible campaign adjustments based on the survey data. These services command millions of pesos. One respondent stated that subscribing to standard surveys costs somewhere between PhP 3 to 5 million (USD 53,931 to 89,886), while nationally representative custom surveys would cost between PhP 7 to 10 million (USD 125,840 to 179,772). From this, we can infer that political campaigns do not simply go in blindly when they engage in campaign messaging and influencer boosting. There are prerequisite research tasks that entail even more costs prior to influencer contracts.

We also interviewed a political campaign strategist who helped in planning strategies during the past elections. One example of a strategy was to get in touch with a person connected to a mega-influencer attacking their client and make the person a paid informant. Through this, our respondent learned that the mega-influencer was frustrated about a politician's delayed payments. Our respondent then reached out to the influencer with a very generous offer to switch sides, which the influencer accepted. As a bonus, this influencer also stopped attacking another politician upon learning that our respondent handled that campaign as well. These vignettes exhibit not only media expertise but also covert industry know-how about getting information on target influencers and knowing how much it takes to make influencers switch sides.

On the whole, we learned from our digital ethnography that political campaigns in the Philippines evolved over the course of the campaign period, but the evolution was messy for most camps. There was a palpable absence of uniform messaging in official campaign posts, with the exception of the Unity campaign by Marcos Jr. This was confirmed by some of our interview respondents, who noted that the campaigns they worked for were mostly unorganized and gave only broad campaign

line instructions while leaving influencers to shape it more freely in their content. Influencers for the most part function more as message amplifiers rather than mobilizers of public support from new audiences via original content creation.

All in all, this means that while strategies for influence operations continuously innovate,⁸⁰ political campaigns that rely on influencers and other social media campaign strategies are slow to adapt. Their actual use of political influencers in the Philippines is still rather rudimentary. While political campaigns are strategic in how they choose which influencers they want to approach, how these influencers are folded into the actual campaign is less so. Influencers are only given vague or generic instructions, which leaves much of their execution to the discretion of the influencer. While this makes content more authentic, it also frustrates influencers who see how overall this creates incoherent campaign messaging. To be clear, this is not a call for celebrations but a warning. Influence operations in the Philippines are already deeply troublesome as it is, but when campaigns become more adept with political influencers and social media campaigning then it can make political campaigns much more worrisome for, if not harmful to, our democracy.

We provided an overview of how influence operations were used in the 2022 Philippine Elections in the next sub-sections. While superficially, political influencing seems to be the logical evolution of traditional media-centric celebrity endorsements in the age of social media, there are differences in what factors and considerations shape the act of influencing itself, as well as differences in how it reconfigures public discourse. Political influencers rely less on the same kind of fame used by traditional celebrity endorsers, and more on social media strategies that exploit regulatory gaps and social media affordances. Instead of traditional name recognition driving audience engagements, political influencers rely on contrived authenticity, virality, spectacle, and sometimes even incendiary language to ramp up attention.

80 Ong,Tapsell and Curato, "Tracking Digital Disinformation.":Ong et al., "Parallel Public Spheres."

This has implications for electoral reform and campaign dynamics. We provide a conceptual toolkit that offers a glimpse into the political economy of the influencer industry and interrogates what practices and features enable the effortless adoption of influencers to current political campaigns. In particular, we examine the contracts, logics, platform strategies, and market conditions for influence operations. These building blocks provide insights on how covert political influencing is carried out in the Philippines.

Contracts

“If you’re asking me if there’s a written contract, there’s none. So it’s actually very discreet. There’s no email, no paper trail except for a Viber group chat that I have with her...who has told me in confidence...that they have also funded other bloggers.” (R18)

Through our interviews with influencers, PR professionals, political consultants, and campaign managers, we found that while much of the actual aspects of promotional labor between commercial and political influencing overlap, the contract structures and engagements differ. Most of the differences revolve around the use of NDAs, the lengths of engagement, and the bases for measuring the impact of the influencer.

Compared to commercial influencers, political influencer contracts are less standardized, often lacking an official written contract or NDA. In some cases, the promotional labor happens even before political camps approach them (i.e., the political camp notices the successful promotion of a candidate by an influencer prior to getting in touch with them). In others, transparency and brand association is not a desired component for either the campaign or the influencer. One of our respondents mentioned that they transacted with a very well-known political influencer while inside a Ferris wheel in a mall, to shift from attacking to praising a particular politician. The engagement was worth PhP 500,000 (USD 9,090) a month, and also included luxury vehicles as tokens.

In spite of the huge amounts of money involved, our respondents thought that they did not need written contracts since the outputs can easily be verified. When the campaign center sees the influencer's content, it can readily confirm the delivery and performance of the influencer. But more importantly, no one wants to be affiliated openly with this kind of promotional labor, and influencers and campaign teams alike also do not want to be openly associated with each other. For the influencers, it goes against their content's appeal based on contrived authenticity. For campaign teams, it forces them to confront their secretive ad overspending during campaigns. This speaks to the unique arrangements between influencers and campaign teams. **There is a certain level of trust hinged on both the influencer's desire to be paid and the reputational risk to both the influencer and the campaign team.** This aspect demonstrates one difference between political influencers and non-political influencers. While both influencers need to perform authenticity, political influencers need to evoke friendship⁸¹ with their audience, which in turn requires a higher degree of contrived authenticity. In this case, this means their **promotional labor must be seen as authentically representative of their own values, and not a form of paid endorsement.** Thus, openness about compensation is a reputational risk.

Lengths of engagement also differ between influencer marketing and political marketing. Usually, brand campaigns have a specified promotion period only, and influencers are only tapped to engage during this time. Outputs are discussed and finalized during the negotiation stage, and expectations are mutually agreed upon. Package deals characterize the obligations during the entirety of the contract—whether posts should be static or dynamic, or should be videos or photos and captions; whether promotion includes appearances or online promotion only; whether or not influencers can engage in particular activities that brands may be wary of. All of these terms have clear timeframes.

This is also not necessarily the case for political influencers. **For volunteers and non-affiliated political influencers, they often decide when they want to create**

81 Goodwin et al, "Political Relational Influencers."

content or engage in promotional labor. They see their work as influencers as either a side gig or a main income source. Thus, promotion overlaps with opining about the hot issues of the day, justified by claiming that they did research beforehand or that they are not authoritative sources on the issue for broader audiences, but just doing their usual brand of relational conversation with their local followers. There are no contracts since they are not directly tapped. Their schedules and commitments are determined by their commitments to other brands they are endorsing. Any contracts of engagement are only there to establish non-disclosures.

For some big-name influencers, their engagements can be long-term as they are often kept on retainers. There are no contracts but depending on what the political camp needs, influencers are instructed on what kinds of content should come out. As long as the political camps pay, the influencers stay. Scorned influencers or those with unpaid outputs can be pirated by the opposing camps to flip the script and praise those they previously attacked. This continues until the political camps decide otherwise or until the influencers transfer to other camps. Meanwhile, **other engagements do not need NDAs anymore since knowledge of the association between the influencer and the campaign will produce what one of our respondents describes as a “Mexican stand-off”, or the mutually assured destruction of both their image and reputation.** Thus, both parties exercise silence even after their contractual obligations have already ended.

Another arrangement we learned was that for influencers with smaller followings or for smaller operations, campaign operators would sometimes hire them on a trial basis. Since the relationship is output-based, operators first instruct these influencers to create or launch a particular content aligned with their messaging. Operators then monitor whether the content clicks with the target audience. This determines whether they will hire the influencer for longer engagements. We observed this optimization strategy being employed by both an official political campaign operator and an underground troll operation leader. In both instances, audience engagement with the content determined whether the content creators were retained or let go.

Lastly, contracts for political influencers have different bases and impact measurements than commercial influencers. For commercial influencing, brands have their own key performance indicators (KPIs), and our interviews with marketing professionals show that there is no single universal set of KPIs applicable to all brand campaigns. Follower size, reach, likes, saves, comments, image fit, conversion rates (proportion of audiences converted into buyers from engaging with your content), discount code redemptions, and trackable URLs are just some of the factors we uncovered that determine whether commercial influencers are good for business. For political influencers, this is not necessarily the case. As mentioned earlier, the presence of content itself is already sufficient verification for political campaigns. Moreover, while image and virality are considered, other metrics such as engagement per minute and relatability to target demographics are factored into the calculation. The influencer's performative prowess to attack political rivals is also highly valued. One political campaign strategist respondent said just as much when distinguishing between what they look for in commercial influencing versus political influencing:

"[Influencers] are angsty, you want the angst...again political PR, or persuasion for that matter is always a two-handed discipline. There's an open hand that always pulls up and there's a fist that should smite your enemies. For corporate, maybe the fist is not too tightly winded but it's the hand pulling up but for political clients we need equal measures of pulling up and smiting." (R18)

With these arrangements, it is visible that contractual arrangements for political influencers share some aspects with those of traditional commercial influencers but are distinctly different in many regards. The political work of campaigning is reshaped as it is passed through the sieve of commercial logics, which we further discuss in depth in the next section.

Logics

“Pagka mataas naman po ang ‘click per rate’, yung 100,000 views mo makakakuha ka na agad dun ng minimum of \$100. Kaya depende ho talaga sa engagement.” (R4)

(If you have a high “click per rate”, like hitting 100,000 views, you can easily make at least \$100. So, it all really depends on social media engagement.)

Logics are the structured set of reasonings that frame actions. **For influencing, the operative logic is profit.** Influencers persuade their audiences to consume a particular product or act in a particular way, which benefits a particular brand or company. This in turn makes influencers valuable. Influencers derive value from their ability to produce brand engagements. This ability is measured by various bases for impact and success discussed above. Influencers use these bases to leverage their accounts in the eyes of brands, whether through actual figures or through eye tests. According to a known influencer we interviewed, their engagement rates did matter but their quality of work also attracted brands, which for them was a source of pride:

“People started seeing it. The other agencies will be like ‘ay ano masipag siyang gumawa’ so they would be like ‘let’s set him for the next.’ One of my biggest client last year was [redacted]. I would have like eight projects in a month. Those were different agencies because gusto na ako ng [redacted] kasi when they say ‘may hosting tayo ng event’...I do my best.” (R1)

(People started seeing it. The other agencies will be like, “Oh, he’s really hardworking,” so they would be like, “Let’s set him for the next.” One of my biggest clients last year was [redacted]. I would have like eight projects in a month. Those were different agencies because [redacted] liked my work and invited me for another hosting event”... I do my best.)

But these influencers had to start somewhere. The influencers and marketing professionals we interviewed all mentioned that in the beginning, when influencers are still trying to grow their own image, they almost always have no leverage in negotiating rates and simply accept what is offered. At that stage, they might not

be aware yet if they are being underpaid. But as their following grows and their endorsements translate to sales, they get to be more assertive with their rates. Clearly, for commercial marketing, some semblance of accomplishment with conversion is a prerequisite for influencers to negotiate. There is also a sense of industry professionalization since negotiations are based on hard metrics and quantifiable bases, indicative of commercial logics of profit.

Despite having the same logical texture of profit, political influencing differs because the bases for negotiation are less established, and the influencers seem to have more power to dictate rates even at the outset. The same influencer quoted above also got offered a sizable sum for a premature campaigning gig with a politician they were supportive of, but they were unsure about who was actually paying for the campaigning gig. After asking for a higher price, the camp refused and the influencer did not push through with it. They were fine with declining since they were going to support that campaign later anyway, but they did not want to be tagged as political influencers that could be bought. Clearly, there is a different logic in play, as profit was secondary to authenticity and independence.

For volunteer influencers who did not profit from political campaigning, commercial influencing logics still determined their participation in the campaign. Their commercial influencing engagements determined what degree of participation they can commit to in political influencing. Their brand partnership options became filtered due to associational preferences with politicians and political values. That said, political motivations were more decisive for the influencers we interviewed. Their choice to endorse a particular candidate was their expression of a moral vote, a principled political action transcending their profession's orientation to be open to diverse brands. Our respondents also indicated that they were aware of influencers and other artists who did the opposite and agreed to campaign for other politicians because of hefty payments that secured their families' needs despite not actually believing in that candidate's platforms and principles. For these influencers, it was a negotiation between survival and principle, justified by the divergence between their actual ballot and their promotional labor.

On the other hand, **commissioned political influencers set their prices based on notoriety alone.** They were able to dictate exorbitant prices because while commercial influencers relied mostly on their social capital to convert sales, political influencers rely on both social capital as well as inflammatory speech and discursive performances to shape political conversations online. Whereas commercial influencers are simply paid to promote a brand and proclaim its quality, **political influencers are paid to do one or a combination of the following: amplify content, disparage competition, sow doubt, or spin narratives.** Since these outcomes can be done not only with the influencer's follower size but also with their performance, there is more leeway for political influencers to leverage their rates and work arrangements. Simply put, the nuances in the outputs shape the differences in work logics despite both setups being profit-oriented.

There are also differences in the degree of personal brand mobilization. In commercial influencing, personal branding is considered in the engagement. Brands select influencers classified along tiers and ensure that the influencer image fits with their campaign. This is not always the case for political influencers. **Anonymity becomes a useful resource for both safety and ability to push more partisan commentary and promotion.** Moreover, some influencers are tapped not because they are prim and proper, but because they are aggressive. This incentivizes some influencers to use incendiary language and pile on aggressively. There is also a difference in the logics of credibility for political influence operations. The notion of credibility differs depending on the political camp and their overall approach to the elections. Some influencers are deemed more credible—and by extension more authentic—when they are more educated, formal, or truthful in their content. These influencers tend to be aligned with the more progressive and liberal candidates.

Meanwhile, some influencers are deemed more credible than others when they are more vicious and incendiary in their language, or when their content is more aggressive. These influencers communicate credibility via unfiltered authenticity. For both kinds of influencers, they lend their particular brand of credibility as a resource to the politician's campaign when they engage in promotional labor.

One kind of influencer that applies profit logics to political campaigning differently is the monetizing vlogger. These kinds of influencers ride platform algorithms by regularly creating content about the most talked about issues of the day. Especially during elections, these vloggers constantly search the web for popular news or talking points concerning politicians, then create informal videos that do not necessarily create truth claims but nonetheless forge sturdy online communities. These make them attractive targets for political campaign teams, but since there are plenty of vloggers like them, their main consideration and source of profit is platform monetization. **They would also offer their services to campaign teams as well, in the hopes that they get commissioned too.** This incentivizes them to create clickbait and/or popular content which triggers audience curiosities, hoping that if they generate enough audience engagement, political operators will notice and hire them. Hiding behind informality and claims of opinion-sharing, these vloggers ignore journalistic ethics and professionalism in content creation, further complicating an already-complex and divided online public sphere. So while profits and motivations do determine what content should be about, what determines its form is shaped more by the platform affordances available to the influencer.

This shows that there is a need to consider differences between payable costs and monetizable incentives when studying the political economy of covert influence operations. If the ultimate goal of scholarship on influence operations is to undo its harm to democratic processes, then we need to understand that both platforms and actors incentivize influence operations. **Disinformation-for-hire thrives from direct payable costs because there are politicians who demand the service and marketing, advertising, and PR professionals willing to supply such services. Platform incentives provide pathways for latent income, making it attractive for individuals to also pursue influence operations online even if independently.** Ultimately, a profit-driven media logic serves as fertile ground for influence operations and any sincere effort to combat this needs to consider alternative logics before anything else.

Platform strategies

“...because broadcasting is simultaneous. I use Streamyard so that when I am live on Facebook, I am also live on YouTube.” (R4)

Due to the increased scrutinizing attention to social media influencers given by academics and non-academics alike, it is pivotal to explore how social media platforms afford influence operations and social media manipulation, and how influencers exploit platform affordances to scale up political promotional labor. We are informed by affordance theories and how affordance is used in explaining social phenomena through social media platforms and their different features and logics.⁸² Affordances here refer to the “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object”.⁸³ Specifically, we follow what Jenny Davis⁸⁴ argued that technologies, including social media platforms, requests, demands, encourage, discourage, refuse, and allow different lines of actions. Because of this, we look at different platform strategies that influencers and other political actors use in covert political influencing.

One pertinent affordance is the easy editing and openness of highly customized, personalized, spectacularized content as anyone can use any tool allowed by the platform. In the case of TikTok, since there is a limit of 10 minutes for content, influencers must maximize that limit to curate their content. This is where vernacular creativity⁸⁵ is mobilized as a platform strategy. Many of the influencers include their own personal branding or persona in their content. TikTok continues to be more popular in the Philippines in recent years,⁸⁶ so much of the content tends to be shorter in form. This is also the case with Instagram and Facebook reels.

82 Treem and Leonardi “Social Media Use”; Davis, “How Artifacts Afford”; Hutchby, “Technologies, Texts and Affordances”; Van Dijck and Powell, “Understanding Social Media Logic.”

83 Hutchby, “Technologies, Texts, and Affordances.”, 444.

84 Davis, “How Artifacts Afford.”

85 Burgess, “Vernacular creativity and new media.”

86 Kemp, “Digital 2023: The Philippines.”

“The video is Bongbong giving Sara a windmill pin for unity, and what we did was say, ‘what do you mean unity? You’re punching people!’ Then we put the video of her punching the sheriff. Then someone said to me that it got 500,000 (views).”
(R20)

This creative strategy, which to an extent subverted the personal branding strategy of the candidates, was used by influencers to ‘stir’ and provoke both camps. It is effective in a humorous way to recall the candidates’ personalities and histories beyond what they achieve to project in the campaign advertisement. By speaking to their audience using live videos on TikTok, they can educate more openly about the candidates and directly interact with the audience. This also afforded influencers an opportunity to directly interview senatorial candidates in live videos on their own terms. This is important because the relational aspect of influencing is strengthened with more interactions between the influencer and their followers, maximizing contrived authenticity and making them more salient information sources.

Another pertinent affordance is monetization in platforms. Many of our influencer respondents are monetized on YouTube and some are monetized on Facebook. They also earn from doing live videos on Facebook and TikTok and receiving ‘Facebook stars’ or ‘TikTok coins or diamonds’ from the viewers which they can exchange for a currency. This is important to note since the Philippines is not yet included in the TikTok Creator Fund,⁸⁷ so while there are a plethora of TikTok influencers in the Philippines, these influencers are not monetized on the platform. One influencer earns by getting stars and being monetized by going live on Facebook and YouTube simultaneously through the streaming platform, Streamyard. This feature of going live on multiple platforms allows the influencer to earn on both platforms. While their account got demonetized because of various reasons such as reposting other people’s content, they were able to earn on the platform. **The platform strategy here by influencers is to earn on the platform while doing political influencing** as with some of our respondents who post their commentaries on YouTube and

87 TikTok, “The TikTok Creator Fund.”

Facebook and earn through Facebook stars and YouTube AdSense. They select hot issues of the day and then they share their comments on them.

The third affordance we wanted to highlight is instantaneous communication and the ability to flood posts on the platform. We observed many video clips from speeches, that were being reposted by different users on TikTok, were also cross-posted on Facebook. This attention hacking⁸⁸ has been an important platform strategy that influencers are using both in the traditional marketing side and political influencing side. Traditional influencer marketing entails making content that sells the product and delivers the message. In political influencing, volunteer influencer respondents told us that they do a series of explanations on their videos and reply to comments to help explain their reason for supporting a candidate and to invite others to join them in the campaign. They also relied on particular sensibilities characteristic of snarky young and gay humor to gauge whether a particular content will be successful in hacking online conversations and shaping discourse.

Our political consultant respondent mentioned that **Facebook is king, and it has been one of the central battlegrounds on political influencing alongside TikTok.** In the past election, these two platforms were pivotal in many conversations, and we can see through our digital ethnography and interviews the ways in which political persuasion, attention hacking, and polarization persist in these platforms. The consultant also mentioned that the reason **YouTube continued to be influential is because of the traffic from Facebook, and campaigning on Twitter and Instagram has little to no bearing on election results.** The influencer respondents do get sponsorships and engagement on all the mentioned platforms and while some have more engagement on Instagram given the fact that their branding is focused more on lifestyle content, they recognize the importance of Facebook and TikTok. They do acknowledge the necessity of learning how to navigate these platforms, especially TikTok as the newer player in the field, notwithstanding the conflicting political discussions during the election season.

88 See Marwick and Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation"; Boyd, "Hacking the Attention Economy"; Ong and Cabbuag, "Pseudonymous Influencers and Horny."

Market conditions

“But for a TikTok influencer, you will spend anywhere from PHP 5,000 to 30,000 [USD 90 to 545] per content. It could be a song, spoken word, dance, and rarely are outright testimony. They will do some schtick or a comedy skit.” (R18)

Unsurprisingly, how the industry defines what is acceptable political campaigning practices shapes what political influencing innovations and outcomes we get. **When the advertising and PR industry allow opaque operations and open secret engagements without industry-wide self-regulations, media manipulation and influence operations are incentivized to fold in more clandestine engagements benefiting the political elite while marketing professionals profit.** State regulation is not ideal especially in the Philippines, since legislative opportunism is a real concern⁸⁹ and may do more harm than good when the regulators themselves are the beneficiaries of the problem needing regulation to begin with. Thus, in such an unfettered market, influencers, firms, and political campaigns freely explore and stretch the definitions of what practices are accepted by the industry, resulting in media manipulation operations that are more difficult to discern, much less regulate.

In our interviews, all influencers have dabbled with different ways of earning on the platform. In our interview with an ad agency consultant, we learned that influencers earn through: (1) x-deals collaboration, wherein the brands give products to the influencers after posting content, (2) paid collaborations, wherein the brands will pay the influencers, and (3) seeding, where they give products for the influencers to try without any sure post.

“It takes a lot of effort to film a YouTube video because that takes a lot of editing and that’s the most expensive. The most expensive I encountered was more than 300k last year...but yeah, for a YouTube post, it can go really high.” (R19)

89 Ong, “Southeast Asia’s Disinformation Crisis.”

Collaborations depend on the brand's budget, but it also depends on the engagement and following of the influencers. In the quotation above, the ad agency consultant said that YouTube is the most expensive given the length of the content the influencer has to produce. One influencer respondent mentioned that they even hire an editor to produce good quality content since they have to conceptualize, write scripts, and shoot the video, before doing the post-production editing. They also said that their managers negotiate their rates with the brand clients so they can receive more remuneration. Other influencer respondents manage to negotiate their rates as they learn from other influencers, but they started from low rates and even x-deals to start forming rapport with brand clients. Because of negotiations, they were able to raise their rates per post and other packages.

In the context of political influencing, **the political consultant does not have a threshold on spending for influencers given the general lack of contracts**, as discussed earlier in the chapter. For TikTok influencers, one post can cost from PhP 5,000 to 30,000 (USD 90 to 545). This could be a song, or dance, or anything but not a testimonial. One influencer charged them PhP 3 million (USD 55,000) for one short video, but they said it was worth it because of the engagement received by that video alone. **The influencer has the upper hand and can demand more from the clients given the urgency of the political campaign and the tension with nearing election day.** In this sense, political influencing follows commercial logics: Political campaigns seek out influencers who can create the most impactful engagements, and influencers can negotiate based on their ability to convince campaigns of what they can offer.

Timing also matters to the market. One influencer respondent mentioned that they were offered to create neutral content for PhP 25,000 (USD 495) at the start of the election period. Then the offer started going up as election day nears.

“The team of [redacted] offered me PhP 25,000 (USD 495) at the start of election (period) but I said no. Three months before the start of the election they offered me PhP 50,000 (USD 977), I said no. Last two months of the elections, they offered me PhP 250,000 (USD 4,872) but I said no.” (R5)

Since particular emotional appeals are more effective at different times during the campaign,⁹⁰ directing influencers to heighten particular sentiments at the right time with the right messaging can make voter conversion more likely. Our digital ethnography showed how over time campaign messaging evolved based on public responses as well as the opposing camps' messaging. Interviews with political influencers showed how they also changed promotion content over time—either due to the campaign team's request or due to their own preferences.

Finally, anonymity along multilevel engagements scaffolds much of the market structure. The hierarchical architecture of networked disinformation that Ong and Cabañes⁹¹ uncovered during the 2016 Philippine Elections still appears to be the standard operating model.

“I got approached by a friend who is also in media and said someone is looking a person who could form a team and will do content for election. I asked what's the catch and they said, ‘Well, you will be a troll’...They said there will be money from somewhere not part of any party who just wants to stir things up.” (R20)

For the leader of a small-scale troll operation we interviewed, they were approached by an individual within their network, asking them if they wanted to form and manage a small team of creatives who will make content funded by an anonymous individual supportive of a particular politician. These creatives are tapped to create comedic and memetic content similar to influencers, but they do not seed the content themselves. Instead, they submit all content to the intermediary, who then deploys the content in coordination with the financier. Our respondent proceeded to contact five creatives who all worked separately, so they only knew our respondent. Our respondent only knew the creatives and the intermediary, who in turn only knew our respondent and the financier. This example highlights how influence operations can have different complexions but all benefit from obscured operations and anonymity. **These multiple levels of anonymity act as a form of security**, as expounded on by our respondent:

90 Ridout and Searles, “It’s my campaign.”

91 Ong and Cabañes, “Architects of Networked Disinformation.”

“...I was not scared if I will get hit outside, because they do not know me and I will not be tracked. I was laughing that even if they find my team, no one else will get caught. So, the team members are secured.” (R20)

However, for bigger operations and more established influencers, familiarity and existing relationships seem to forego this hierarchy. **Political campaign teams can now directly tap influencers without going to PR firms and instead gauge preferences based on notoriety and status derived from years’ worth of propaganda work.** Meanwhile, influencers themselves can now dictate prices for their services. And yet, despite mutual knowledge of each other, all parties maintain silence and feign ignorance about these relationships due to fears of mutually assured destruction of their reputations, as discussed earlier in the chapter. For an endeavor relying on authenticity and relatability, any semblance of ingenuity can spell failure.

Ultimately, while plenty of influencers and content creators were publishing political content online during the 2022 campaign period, the market for political influencing was not as competitive as it looked superficially. These influencers are classified by tiers according to their follower size, audience demographics, and actual image. They are then further filtered by camps through political leanings or affiliations. What emerges is only a handful of macro-influencers as options for each political camp. **Since the market is not competitive and the services of the influencers are premium, influencers get to dictate market rates more.** For more discreet and covert influence operations relying on anonymity and pseudonymity, we can only infer that the market is more competitive because it opens up more opportunities to more diverse influencers, but we cannot claim certainty precisely because of the hidden nature of these operations.

This is a recurring trend in this report: We can only provide an assemblage of data points held together by informed assumptions because much of what happens, happens in the shadows. An example can be seen in Box text 3, where official government documents redact what should be readily available campaign finance information. These gaps are the argument: What we cannot see and know for sure are there by design, exploited for political gain at the expense of transparency and

accountability in electoral campaigns. **Therefore, any political economic inquiry into disinformation and media manipulation operations in the Philippine elections cannot ignore what is purposefully excluded and obscured.**

BOX TEXT 3.

Hiding the cost of political influencing

We looked at the campaign spending of the top five presidential candidates, the top three vice-presidential candidates, and the top 12 senatorial candidates. Using data from the candidates' statements of contributions and expenses (SOCEs), media entities' summary report of advertising contracts (SACs), official ad expenditures recorded in the Meta Ad Library, and insights from our interviews, **we found that higher declared spending on campaign ads did not always lead to electoral success.** However, we should be cautious in investigating campaign ad spending because of various obstacles that **prevent the public from knowing the true value of campaign costs.**

For example, the SOCE of presidential candidate Isko Moreno Domagoso showed that his campaign was worth PhP 243 million (USD 4.4 million).⁹² From this, SACs show that PhP 77 million (USD 1.4 million)⁹³ was spent on television ads aired at one major television network; while PhP 133,054 (USD 2,402) was spent on Facebook ads through his official page. However, this still does not account for other online ads run by unofficial pages, as well as undisclosed influence operations. Despite investing approximately 32% of his campaign budget (around PhP 77 million) on advertising, Domagoso only placed third. In contrast, the eventual winner Bongbong Marcos declared his campaign worth to be PhP 623 million (USD 11.2 million)⁹⁴ allocating PhP

92 SAC records show that the Isko campaign team spent PhP 242,626,988.71 for their entire run.

93 Exactly PhP 76,672,276.10 spent on television ads.

94 SAC records show that Bongbong Marcos spent a total PhP 623,230,176.68 for his entire campaign.

COMMISSION ON ELECTIONS
May 9, 2022
National and Local Elections
Summary Report of Advertising Contracts

FORM
SAC

NAME OF MEDIA ENTITY: GMA NETWORK, INC. STATION/OFFICE: [REDACTED]

Name of Authorized Representative: BARRA JOB TITLE: JOSE VENTURA CLINORACON: [REDACTED] DIRECTOR: [REDACTED] JOB TITLE/POSITION: COUNSEL

Office Address: [REDACTED] Telephone/Mobile No.: [REDACTED]

E-mail Address: [REDACTED]

CONTRACT DATE	CONTRACT NUMBER	RECEIPT NUMBER	NAME of PAYER/CLIENT/AD AGENCY (Paid For Ad)	NAME of CANDIDATE or PARTY (Political Ad Beneficiary)	CONTRACT PARTICULARS (medium, period, frequency, duration, time slot, etc.)				ATTACHMENTS TO THE ADVERTISING CONTRACT (Copy of Official Receipt, IC, RC, SP, other election forms)	AMOUNT/ VALUE
					Program	Time slot	SP	# of Spots		
[REDACTED]										

Figure 3. A summary report of advertising contracts from GMA Network, Inc.

40.3 million (USD 728,000)⁹⁵ to television ads while allocating PhP 1.2 million (USD 20,900)⁹⁶ to Facebook ads. Again, without accounting for unofficial page ads and undisclosed influence operations, Marcos roughly spent 6.65% of his budget on ads, amounting to nearly PhP 41.5 million.

Even if we include other undisclosed campaign expenses, there are indications that these reported figures are lower than the actual amount spent. This is not at all new in the Philippine election landscape, as other academic works⁹⁷ and journalistic accounts⁹⁸ also discuss. A campaign

95 Exactly PhP 40,290,773.6 spent on television ads.

96 Exactly PhP 1,154,998.50 spent on Facebook ads.

97 Aceron and La Viña, "Democratizing Election through Campaign."

98 Ilagan and Simon, "Covering Campaign Finance."

manager for a 2022 national election candidate openly admitted during our interview that actual spending exceeds declared amounts. Since regulations are weak, porous, and exploited by politicians, there is space for discreet influence operations in campaign budgets. The state's commitment to transparency is also superficial, as evidenced by the redaction of several data lines in certain SACs despite the freedom of information law in the country. Only a few lines per document are shown when requested documents are provided. Figure 3 shows a copy of a COMELEC-issued SAC for GMA Network Inc., currently the biggest television and media network in the Philippines. With this kind of policy environment, it becomes understandable how certain influencers get paid PHP 3 million (USD 53,932) for a single short video—there is no mechanism to demand transparency either from the influencer or the campaign team.

Given the structural factors enabling covert influence operations as well as the lucrative business brought by ads in the attention economy, and considering the data from our interviews, document analyses, and digital ethnography, **we can claim that campaign overspending is still highly rampant and unfettered, and that a huge portion of these expenditures goes towards undisclosed influence operations.** Adding all of the figures from our data shows that influence operations and campaign expenditures can easily exceed COMELEC-prescribed campaign spending limits and even reach upwards of PHP 1 billion (USD 18 million).

Chapter summary

In this chapter we provided a broad overview of contemporary political influence operations in the recent Philippine elections. Tracing the process for evolving political campaigns from traditional celebrity endorsements and legacy media-centered air wars to increasing reliance on social media campaigning and political influencers, we outline the differences in how these campaign strategies materialize and what conditions were necessary for that shift to occur. We also established that there is a difference between political influence work and commercial influence work. This difference is established along four different dimensions: (1) the nature of contracts, (2) the logic of the influence work itself, (3) the platform strategies used in the actual influence work, and (3) the market conditions that frame engagement structures.

We also outlined what covert political influence operations looked like in the recently concluded 2022 Philippine Elections. We identified and described common tasks for political influencers and provided ethnographic accounts of how these tasks actually figured into the campaigns. **Taking all of these together, we provide a rich contextualization of influence operations and operator-influencer engagements by showing how these bonds are formed, how campaigns evaluate influence work, and how influencers negotiate their involvement in political campaigns.** These help shape the bounds of what we can assume to know about influencer spending during political campaigns, as accounted for in the estimation framework discussed in Chapter 4.



CHAPTER 3

Influencers and covert influence operations on social media

This chapter expounds on our multi-dimensional approach to identifying influencers who are suspected to engage in covert political campaigning on social media in the 2022 Philippine Elections. After subjecting our data to multiple indicators, we produced a list of influencers whose network, behavior, and content are argued to be evidence of their participation in covert influence operations. This list of presumed commissioned influencers and the corresponding information about their follower reach, posting activities, and partisan positions inform our economic modeling in the next chapter. We characterize seven types of political influencers based on their repertoire of manipulative strategies.

Key findings

- Based on our 18 indicators, we determine 1,425 influencer accounts are presumed to engage in covert political campaigning across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. There are at least 584 unique influencers who might operate multiple accounts across the platforms.
- Video-based platform influencers dominate the list, with most of the covert political influencers being on YouTube (587) followed by TikTok (544). Despite being the largest platform in the Philippines, Facebook only has a relatively small number of influencers involved in covert political campaigning (207). Twitter has the least number of complicit influencers (87).
- Presumed commissioned influencers engage in platform-specific performance of organized political manipulation: high visibility hyper-partisan news recommendation on YouTube, hashtag-driven conspiratorial and manipulative content on TikTok, wide-reaching disinformation and partisan antagonism on Facebook, and misogynistic and prejudiced political interactions on Twitter.
- There are seven types of covert political influencers who engage in a distinct set of manipulation strategies: (1) 'amateur' commentators and curators, (2) hyper-partisan influencers, (3) 'stan' accounts, (4) trending influencers, (5) alt-news and entertainment media, (6) mainstream popular influencers, and (7) polarizing influencers.

Detecting covert influence operations

Disinformation researchers have been able to develop compelling methods and measures in detecting ‘fake’ news, trolls, and bots in digital networks (see Box text 4), but not for identifying influencers involved in clandestine influence campaigns. **Influencers are a category of manipulative actors that are generally considered neither inauthentic as they often present their ‘real’ selves in their digital identity, nor coordinated in the same vein as automated and industrial operatives.**⁹⁹ Their manipulation work is often indistinguishable from the ‘organic’ political activities of partisan supporters and communities. This performance of authenticity along with their microcelebrity status in digital communities make influencers more appealing to audiences but more elusive for researchers to ascertain their complicity in covert political operations.

Most quantitative studies that systematically recognize actors in influence operations often rely on singular indicators such as coordination or content, while others use multiple indicators but are focused on specific activities such as fake news sharing and astroturfing or the orchestrated mobilization of seemingly ordinary citizens to sway public opinion.¹⁰⁰ **These approaches are successful in identifying clear-cut and evident patterns of manipulation but generally fail to account for elaborate, hybrid, and ambiguous strategies and tactics.** For example, several studies point to the emerging strategy of deploying non-political accounts in political influence operations, blurring boundaries between politics and entertainment, and targeting unassuming audiences.¹⁰¹ Influencers fall in this ‘gray’ category of complicit actors and there are no straightforward indicators that delineate influencers who are participating in covert political operations and those who genuinely partake in political discourse.

99 Woolley, “Digital Propaganda: The Power of Influencers”, 115–29.

100 Keller et al., “Political Astroturfing on Twitter”, 1–25.

101 Bunquin, Cinco and Urrea, “Cloaked Politics”; Ong and Cabbuag, “Pseudonymous Influencers”; Giglietto et al., “It Takes a Village.”

Among quantitative studies that identify influencers to be part of these campaigns, influencers are often conflated with other actors in the disinformation network.¹⁰² Most of this research work also presumes the culpability of the influencers by their choice of cases that are already manipulative in character (i.e., Internet Research Agency influence operations in the 2016 United States Elections) or by the influencers' explicit association with malicious personalities or organizations (i.e., politicians known to heavily spread disinformation). In some cases, influencers' role in covert political operations is conspicuous, especially for specific forms of state-sponsored propaganda and issue-based disinformation. However, such assumption excludes many others who might engage in subtle political influence on a wider scope of topics during seemingly non-consequential political moments, as well as influencers whose prominence is within niche communities. **These approaches may lead to overestimation of influencer engagement through reliance on indicative but inconclusive evidence, as well as underestimation by focusing only on the 'popular' influencers.**

Developing and refining mechanisms for systematically detecting influencers involved in covert influence operations is critical not only in identifying complicit influencers in these campaigns but also in locating them in the larger political economic structure that underpins these operations. Covert political influencers are as much campaign operatives as they are service providers for clients, and they are expected to have entered this enterprise on the basis of mutually beneficial exchange of political work for economic gain. More importantly for this research, we are interested in substantiating the link between their organized and malicious activities online (measured through quantitative indicators derived from social media data) and their compensation and economic incentives to perform such work (inferred from market rates and adjusted for conditions specific to political influencing). As such, **our research design is meticulous and deliberate in identifying influencers who notably exhibit characteristics of covert influence operations, and are thus presumed to be commissioned to work under such operations.**

102 Starbird and Wilson, "Cross-Platform Disinformation Campaigns"; Soares and Recuero, "Hashtag Wars: Political Disinformation."

BOX TEXT 4.

Influence operations detection approaches

There are different quantitative approaches to identifying malicious actors in social media. These studies range from bot detection, troll detection, identifying influencers, and uncovering information operations campaigns.

Bot detection, troll detection, and influencer identification use similar methods but with different goals, with most research on these using analysis of account behavior, network analysis, and automated feature-based detection using machine learning.

A lot of the studies on bot detection are anchored on social bots' increasing sophistication wherein the lines have become blurry between human and bot behavior.¹⁰³ Network studies on this topic focus on analyzing social graphs with the assumption that bots interact more with other bots while authentic and legitimate accounts engage less frequently with inauthentic bots.¹⁰⁴ Although, some studies on bot detection also incorporate other components together with network indicators to identify suspicious accounts. Typically, this involves the account's behavior involving the rate of how fast an account accumulates friends or how often they post.¹⁰⁵

Troll detection, meanwhile, focuses on identifying trolls—malicious actors which disrupt online interactions and incite negative emotions and aggravate other users, regardless if this is done by social bots or by humans with anonymous accounts.¹⁰⁶ Network analysis is used to identify these accounts through analyzing the positive or negative relationship

103 Ferrara et al., "The Rise of Social Bots."

104 Ferrara et al., "The Rise of Social Bots"; Cao et al., "Aiding the Detection"; Yang et al., "Uncovering Social Network Sybils"

105 Yang et al., "Uncovering Social Network Sybils."

106 Fornacciarì et al., "A Holistic System"

of one user to another, crafting a ‘friends and enemies’ network with the assumption that trolls have more ‘enemies’ and are more unpopular. However, network studies on this topic are harder to analyze for social media that do not have an explicit action to denote like or dislike (e.g., Twitter).¹⁰⁷ Studies on identifying influencers, on the other hand, look at network structures by utilizing degree centrality, average clustering coefficient, density values, and number of nodes, to identify the most influential accounts.¹⁰⁸ Content indicators like ‘professional graphics’ posted are also considered.¹⁰⁹

Feature-based detection in bot detection involves using machine learning to look for the optimal features that describe an inauthentic account. These features range from the account’s user information, its network, its behavioral posting, content, and sentiment. Top features are then ranked as most indicative of an account’s authenticity.¹¹⁰ Similarly, feature detection is used to identify influencers but it is usually coupled with network analysis to completely assess impact scores.¹¹¹ For troll detection, feature-based detection using machine learning is typically used for sentiment analysis and text-based analysis to identify writing patterns of trolls and assess its top features based on semantics, lexicon, sentiment, emotion, and intensity of language, although some studies also include account metadata and behavioral patterns.¹¹² One study also used feature-based detection machine learning to create a holistic automated detection system that incorporates features from six categories: sentiment, time and frequency of actions, text content and style, user

107 Kumar, Spezzano, and Subrahmanian, “Accurately detecting trolls”

108 Alassad, Hussain, and Agarwal, “Finding Fake News Key”; Flaminio et al., “Shifting Polarization and Twitter”; Guarino et al., “Beyond Fact-Checking: Network”

109 Dilley, Welna, and Foster, “QAnon Propaganda on Twitter”

110 Davis et al., “BotOrNot”; Onur Varol et al., “Online Human-Bot Interactions”

111 Smith et al., “Automatic Detection of Influential”

112 Al-Adhaileh, Aldhyani, and Alghamdi, “Online Troll Reviewer”; Seah et al., “Troll Detection by Domain”; Mihaylov and Nakov, “Hunting for troll comments”; Cambria et al., “Do not feel the trolls.”; Im et al., “Still out there.”

behavior, community interactions, and promotion of external content, which identified the top features that mark a troll in each category.¹¹³

While bot detection and influencer identification are useful methods, the focus remains on the account itself. **Their inauthenticity and influence are looked at singularly, lacking in capturing the greater context of disinformation it exists in—strategic information operations and campaigns.**¹¹⁴ These studies do not explore intent and the detection of inauthentic coordinated behavior present in influence operations. To fill this gap, more methods of detecting inauthentic coordinated behaviors are being explored, mostly focusing on network features and experimentation on time thresholds to detect near-simultaneous sharing.¹¹⁵ In our research, a combination of methods from bot detection, influencer identification, and coordinated behavior is used to help uncover covert influence operations in the Philippines during the country's 2022 elections.

Methodology: Multi-dimensional computational approach

For this research, we take a multi-dimensional approach to identifying influencers performing covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine Elections (see Figure 4). First, we expand our definition of influencers to include all accounts that meet a particular follower threshold and are engaged in various forms of political talk on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok, excluding institutional, mainstream, and community accounts. Secondly, we evaluate these influencers based on three dimensions of 18 indicators to encompass a wide array of known manipulative strategies and capture their amalgamations. Thirdly, we assign a weighted score

113 Paolo Fornacciari et al., "Holistic System for Troll."

114 Vargas, Emami, and Traynor, "Detection of Disinformation Campaign."

115 Vargas, Emami, and Traynor, "Detection of Disinformation Campaign"; Giglietto et al., "It Takes a Village"; Gruzd, Mai, and Soares, "How Coordinated Link Sharing."

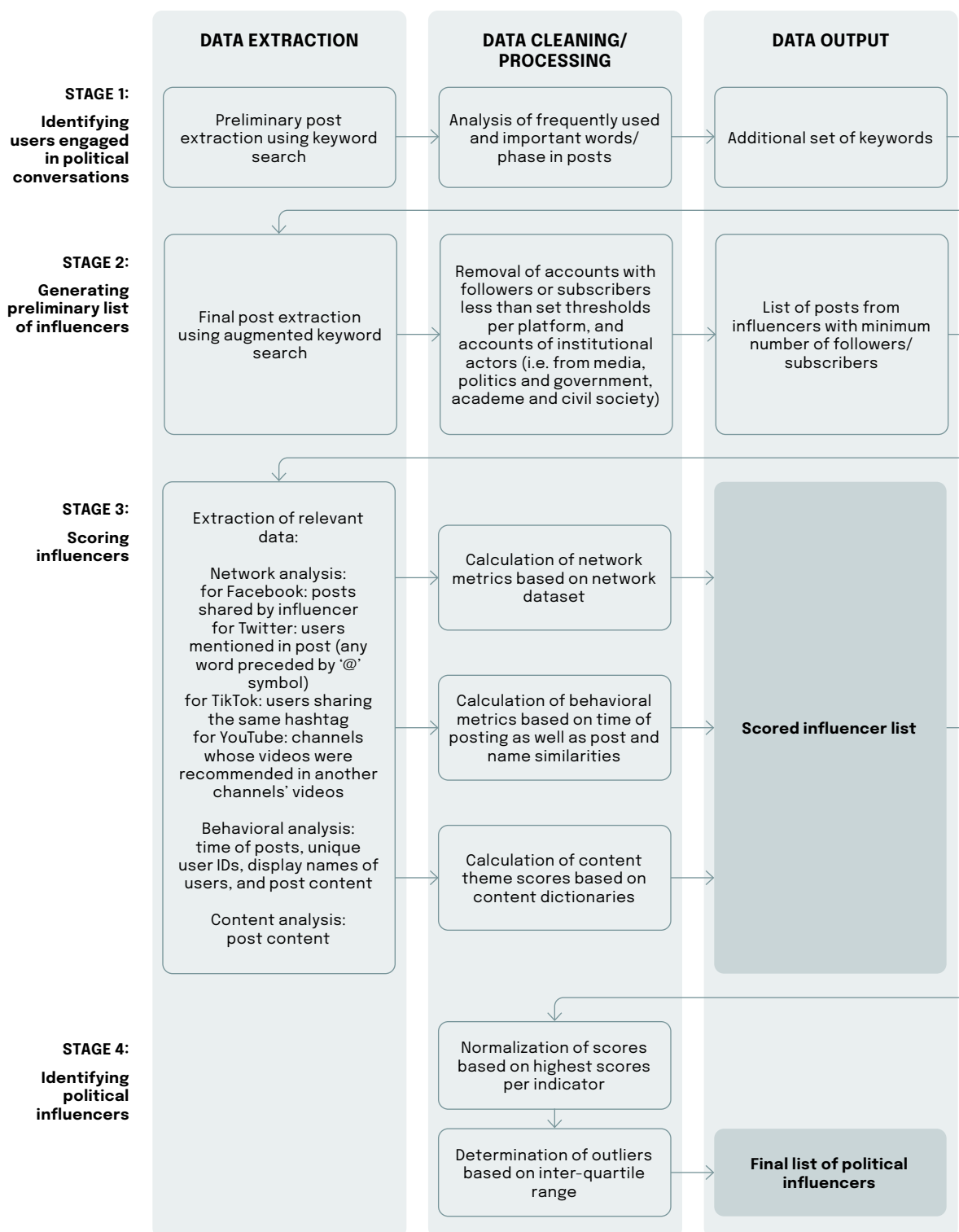


Figure 4. Multi-dimensional approach in covert influence operations detection

for each influencer based on these dimensions and indicators and determine influencers who are deemed to exhibit suspiciously deviant political activities from the rest. **This process produced a list of influencers who are argued to be participants of covert influence operations and presumed to be commissioned political influencers.**

This list of presumed commissioned political influencers will be presented in this chapter in its generalized form following our ethical consideration of non-disclosure to prevent harming the specific individuals operating these accounts and their assumed livelihood from these activities. It comes in the form of summarized statistics that characterize the distribution of influencers for each dimension and each platform, and the estimated number of influencers rated to engage in covert influence operations for particular candidates. We also reify these influencers into a typology that defines their corresponding repertoire of manipulative strategies based on emergent covariance among the indicators. These influencer types are also illustrated in narrativized forms augmented by additional qualitative analysis of the influencers' actual profiles, posts, and engagement with their followers.

Our methodology of multi-dimensional assessment is the first step to designing a systematic approach to identifying actors in covert influence activities beyond single indicators and multiple but narrowly defined indicators used in research. It is intended to be an inclusive framework to acknowledge the 'grayness' of manipulation strategies as propaganda and disinformation campaigns evolve from their precursors in 2016 and embed in everyday politics in digital public spheres. In particular, we are contributing to our understanding of political influencing as a complex phenomenon defined by a range of composite strategies to perform particular roles in deceptive political communication. In other words, our methodology is both responsive to the increasing complications of political influence campaigns and generative of analytical perspectives to make sense of these complications.

Apart from the approach of being able to encompass a wide range of covert political influencers, its multi-dimensionality is also meant to empirically rule out volunteer and platform-incentivized influencers. Unlike commissioned influencers who are embedded in the influence operations, these non-commissioned influencers are likely operating independently, as discussed in Chapter 2. They may be coordinating with the campaign team, but not to the same extent or consistency with those employed as operatives (see Goodwin et al., 2023 for specific cases of influencer coordination). Since we use multiple indicators of different dimensions, non-commissioned influencers may satisfy some of the indicators but are not substantially anomalous to make it to the final list. Accounts also considered as trolls or bots are also generally excluded in our analysis given that they are often below the following thresholds we applied for influencers.¹¹⁶

Dimensions and indicators of covert influence work

To provide a more nuanced understanding of political influencers and their covert ways of shaping online discourses, we scoped the literature on disinformation, online propaganda, and social media influencers. We reviewed related studies and examined different indicators that scholars have investigated to study the use of digital platforms in influencing online discourses. These indicators were primarily examined from a computational approach, or the use of analytical models written and evaluated through software to process large volumes of digital metadata and textual data to reveal patterns of relationships and behaviors. We applied them in our research to understand the scale of influence work that took place during the 2022 Philippine Elections. **From our review, we were able to identify the indicators of manipulation that can be measured given our datasets and platforms to investigate the ways in which influencers operated during the elections.** We integrate these indicators in our research into a multi-dimensional approach that considers the emerging ways of influencing in networked media environments and reveals a robust set of actors engaged in various ways of influencing.

116 Clare Llewellyn et al., "For Whom the Bell?"; Linvill and Warren, "Engaging with others"

Network Indicators. Much of the literature on covert influencing characterizes actors based on their strategic location in digital networks. Network research has revealed that political influencers are able to diffuse agendas at a faster rate due to the connections they have online. Each account represents a node and their nodal characteristics, such as degree, betweenness, and eigenvector centralities, have been examined as measures to reveal political influencers. They were likewise used to examine the structural conditions within digital networks that enable these influencers to engage in political manipulation. Table 2 summarizes the network indicators we used in this research.

TABLE 2.
Summary of network indicators

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
Centrality (degree, eigenvector, betweenness centrality)	The location of a user in a network based on the number of direct connections to other users (degree centrality), number of connections weighted by the number of their respective connections (eigenvector centrality), and number of times a user lay on a path between two nodes in the network (betweenness centrality).	Alieva et al., 2022; Borgatti & Brass, 2019; Keller et al., 2020; Miller & Culliver, 2020; Soares & Recuero, 2021
Edgweight	Amount of ties or connections between two nodes in a network, measuring the strength of connection or relationship. Abnormally high average edgeweights are considered indicative of suspicious linking behavior among influencers, as they provide evidence of coordination.	Innes et al., 2021; Soares & Recuero, 2021

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
Co-tweet and co-share network	The number of connections to users within a network identified to be tweeting or sharing the same content, signaling coordination work.	Alieva et al., 2022; Keller et al., 2019
Connectedness to disinformation actors	The number of connections to known websites and pages sharing disinformation.	Starbird et al., 2019; Golovchenko, 2020

Relying solely on network metrics may not be sufficient, since doing so assumes a purely structural approach that ignores how centrality is a function of the agency of individual nodes in forging meaningful, strategic relations. To illustrate, some users actively reach out to other actors, thereby increasing their out-degree centrality. Others actively produce content that regularly go viral online, thereby generating interactions from other nodes, some of which could be holding traditional societal influence (e.g., news media). This increases both their in-degree centrality, as well as their eigenvector centrality. Through active efforts in strategically linking with actors online, pages, accounts, and channels in social media, influencers are able to exert influence on the whole network.

Behavior Indicators. Observational studies online have revealed that disinformation actors perform certain patterns of behavior that provide evidence of attempts to manipulate discourse—engaging in coordinated action online, masking their identities online, and sharing from known disinformation actors. While some of them have clear network traces (e.g., coordinated action and sharing from disinformation actors), other behaviors have to be examined using techniques other than social network analysis. Table 3 summarizes the behavioral indicators used in the research.

TABLE 3.

Summary of behavioral indicators

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
Having same-name accounts	These are accounts that possess a name similar to professional news sources, despite having no affiliation with these platforms, to make themselves appear credible or legitimate sources. In this study, having same-name accounts was a dichotomous variable—users who have at least 90% name similarity to any legitimate source were categorized as having a same-name account.	Nimmo & Torrey, 2022; Linvill & Warren, 2020b
Distributed amplification	Also known as link coordination, this refers to the practice of sharing the same link with other users simultaneously (within N number of seconds after being posted by a source), in order to manipulate trends.	Giglietto et al., 2020
Post recurrence	The practice of sharing the same content within the same period, without directly linking the original source of the content, as in distributed amplification. We measured post recurrence by sampling days with high post volumes and clustering posts based on similarities, and getting the number of users simultaneously sharing similar content.	Kin Wai, et al., 2021

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
Sharing from known fake news sources	The number of times an actor shared content from known fake news sources; here, we count frequency of sharing fake news rather than number of fake news sources to whom an actor is connected.	Nimmo & Torrey, 2022; Haenschen et al., 2023
Pseudonymity	These are actors who possess online personas that appear non-political or disengaged in political conversations but slip in political content and engage in the electoral discourse on their pages.	Ong & Cabbuag, 2022; Bunquin et al., 2022
Sockpuppetry	The practice of having an account across multiple platforms, based on having matching usernames among different platforms.	Ng et al., 2021
Commenter behavior	The practice on YouTube of having the same set of commenters comment on one's video, in an attempt to manipulate online discourse, through boosting viewership.	Hussain et al., 2018

Content indicators. Aside from the patterns of linkages that make actors influential and the behaviors they make as they interact with others online, it is also important to examine the actual messages disseminated by actors online as they push for their political agendas or undermine those of other users. Such content also provides the context as to why others engage with them, why they engage with others, and how these actions translate to network consequences. To illustrate, affect-driven messaging, such as threatening, hateful, and antagonistic content tends to be used by actors online, as they trigger intense reactions from others and get shared more rapidly and widely in a network. Table 4 summarizes the

content themes manipulative actors used in previous studies to shape political conversations and accelerate the spread of political ideas online. We developed dictionaries to surface the presence of content themes in the texts made by influencers in our data.

TABLE 4.

Summary of content indicators

INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
Partisanship	A user’s overt association with partisan identities, personalities, and ideas	Duffy et al., 2022; Shu et al., 2021; Innes et al, 2021
Antagonism and delegitimization	Content that undermines the credibility and discredits the work of the media, academics, civil society, and other actors	Nazar & Pieters, 2021; Sobieraj, 2019
Misogyny and prejudice	Attacking individuals and organizations on the basis of their identity (e.g., being a woman). We expanded this indicator to include other identities that serve as a basis for hateful remarks (e.g., ideology, race, age, and disability)	Jones, 2021; Sobieraj, 2019
Conspiracy and manipulation	Posts that promote content deemed as deceptive, misleading, and conspiratorial	Alieva et al., 2022; Soares & Recuero, 2021
Self-ascription	This refers to posts that ascribe users as an “independent” or “alternative” source of news and political opinions	Starbird et al., 2019

By considering these indicators based on the three dimensions of influence work—the communicative structures (network), the communicative engagements (behavior), and communication messages (content), we were able to locate actors that aim to manipulate online discourses, and those who do so in a covert manner.

Data collection and analysis

We collected online data using scraping tools specifically designed to extract public posts from social media platforms recognized as influential during the 2022 Philippine Elections. These included Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube given the pervasiveness of political talk within the platforms. Not only were these platforms extensively used for political campaigning, but they were also subjects of significant research as sites of political influence, including covert operations. While Instagram was analyzed in the digital ethnography as a platform that the candidates used for campaigning, the platform was not widely used for political discourse. Consequently, the indicators we identified were largely applicable to these four platforms, based on the existing literature.

Data collection

Our primary focus was on identifying influencers who actively participated in discussions related to the 2022 Philippine Elections. Hence, it was crucial to identify posts specific to the elections and the users who published them. To achieve this, we generated a comprehensive list of keywords that could capture a wide range of election-related posts made up of official names, aliases, campaign names, taglines, hashtags, and general election terms. These initial keywords served as a foundation for gathering relevant posts. Subsequently, we performed an analysis of the word embeddings of the collected posts to uncover additional keywords that were frequently used within the discourse, thus generating an augmented keyword set.

The augmented set of keywords derived from this process was then utilized for the final data collection, ensuring a more comprehensive extraction of election-related posts and identification of influencers within the discussion. We collected posts

published from October 10, 2021, or the deadline for filing for candidacy, to May 9, 2022, the actual election date, using various tools (see Table 1 in Appendix 3).

Data processing and analysis

a. Influencer identification

Recognizing the emerging ways of influencing in digital media, we took a liberal approach in our definition of influencers by identifying them based only on two parameters: *number of followers* and *affiliation*. We considered users as influencers (1) when they have at least 1,000 YouTube subscribers or 10,000 Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok followers, which is based on each platform's minimum follower count for monetization, and (2) when they are not affiliated with professional organizations (e.g., professional media organizations such as ABS-CBN or GMA 7), institutions (e.g., government offices, non-government organizations) or verified public accounts that represent elected or appointed government officials or political candidates based on information publicly declared in their user profiles. We also excluded “community” accounts or self-identified partisan support pages on Facebook as these are considered community-initiated.

Operationally, this meant removing accounts with less than 1,000 YouTube subscribers and less than 10,000 followers on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Following this, we removed accounts that were identified as institutional actors based on a list of actors generated via a page classifier based on a Stochastic Gradient Descent model with a 92% accuracy score¹¹⁷ developed by the Digital Public Pulse project (Philippine Media Monitoring Laboratory, 2022), a media monitoring project that examined discourses during the 2022 Philippine Elections.

117 For full classifier details, see Appendix 2

b. Processing for network, behavioral, and content analysis

The four platforms differed in terms of the way networks are constituted. **For network analysis, we provide a definition of the nodes and the links we considered as bases for network formation, as well as the data points we used to extract them.** This is summarized in Appendix 3, Table 2.

For the behavioral analysis, we looked at behavioral patterns indicative of political manipulation among influencers based on time of posting, frequency of posting, and linkage to certain users on the platform. The indicators and their corresponding data points are summarized in Appendix 3, Table 3.

For the content analysis, we extracted all available textual data of posts/videos made by user accounts and scored each post based on the presence of keywords in the content dictionaries we developed. The content dictionaries were populated through (1) running top keywords that fell under our content themes through a word2vec model to identify related keywords in the corpus; (2) scraping keywords from the comment sections of top commented posts of elected senators, progressive groups, media organizations, and Filipino public figures known for their political participation; (3) scraping keywords from posts identified in Internews' TootBa.info database, which is comprised of fact-checked articles from its Philippine Fact-Checker Incubator project, and Rappler's fact-checked database, which list the media organization's collection of fact-checked articles; (4) sourcing keywords from [Hatebase.org](https://hatebase.org/), a pre-existing database on indicators of hate speech; and (5) constructing local variations of the words collected through these processes. We then aggregated the mean score per user on each content theme to generate individual metrics. These are summarized in Appendix 3, Table 4.

c. Scoring

Each metric used in the study was normalized on a scale from 0 to 1. Subsequently, we calculated the mean score within each dimension and obtained the overall political manipulation score for each influencer by summing the scores. **Accounts that fell outside the interquartile range, representing the upper limit on each platform, were identified as engaging in suspicious behavior.** It is important to emphasize that our set of indicators provides us with multiple criteria to assess whether an influencer is involved in politically manipulative behaviors online. Each user account undergoes a comprehensive evaluation based on multiple equally weighted criteria divided into three score dimensions. Thus, scoring high in a single criterion does not automatically classify an account as engaging in suspicious activity. **By focusing on the outlier accounts that outperformed others, we have increased our confidence in identifying influencers who demonstrated high scores and exhibited multiple indicators identified in our study.**

While our criteria allowed us to generate a summary score for identifying influencers involved in political manipulation, we also acknowledge that users may score high in certain aspects while scoring low in others, thus adding nuance to their online engagement. To leverage this aspect, we utilized K-means clustering to group users together. **By clustering users who were identified as engaging in politically manipulative activity, we were able to categorize them based on the various combinations of indicators in which they scored high** (see section on *typology of political influencers* later in this chapter). This analysis provided valuable insights into their repertoire of online political manipulation strategies.

Ethical considerations

Data collected in this phase were all publicly available posts meant for public consumption. Data were anonymized by removing irrelevant metadata from the dataset, and findings are reported in aggregates. We will also not single out specific cases, and findings based on the content of posts are paraphrased to make it

impossible to trace back posts to specific users. **We recognize that behind these pages or user accounts are individuals employed to handle influence operations and identifying these accounts might put their livelihoods in jeopardy.** Thus, we uphold the principles of respect for persons, as well as anonymity, ensuring that no personally identifiable information was included in our analysis and report.

Limitations

Our examination of covert influence operations in social media draws from a comprehensive set of indicators that can be extracted, examined, and measured using computational techniques. These are by no means complete, as influence work is constantly evolving. We are also limited by what we can collect as allowed and/or provided by the platform APIs and available tools. In our case, our analysis is drawn largely from text-based data as platforms have yet to either develop that technology to capture multi-modal data or share this technology publicly. This is most salient for YouTube and TikTok where we relied heavily on textual features (e.g., titles, descriptions, hashtags, etc.) to infer video content. Moreover, the technical limitations of digital media mean that our indicators are, at best, proxy measures of our phenomenon of interest. Thus, our findings offer more indicative rather than conclusive insights on the scale and types of influence operations during the 2022 Philippine Elections.

Our measurement also assumes equal weights among the indicators of influence operations, treating each variable as equal in terms of their importance in detecting political influencing. We have decided to opt for this approach given the lack of existing models that can provide guidance on the weights of various factors, especially when considering network, behavioral, and content factors as part of one measurement model. **Our measurement thus provides an exploratory look on the factors that contribute to covert political influencing and begets a confirmatory step to identify factor loadings.**

Influencers and their patterns of covert political campaigning

Network characteristics of political influencers

In this section, we provide an overview of the scores within the network dimension. It is crucial to acknowledge that the concept of networks varies across platforms to contextualize these scores. Specifically, for Facebook and Twitter, networks are formed through interactions such as sharing on Facebook and replying/retweeting/mentioning on Twitter. In the case of TikTok, networks are established based on the use of the same hashtags in posted videos. On YouTube, networks are formed when a video from one channel is recommended in a video from another channel.

Centrality. TikTok influencers exhibited the highest degree of connectivity within the platform ($M = 1084.47$, $SD = 764.87$) compared to influencers on other platforms. The constitution of the network could account for the larger degree sizes observed.

On platforms where interactions formed the basis for connections, we used out-degree centrality given the directionality of the relationships. Facebook influencers tended to reach out to others more frequently ($M = 47.47$, $SD = 68.44$) compared to Twitter influencers ($M = 36.29$, $SD = 48.94$).

Other metrics of centrality were examined to understand the network characteristics of influencers and their ability to exert influence on other users. In terms of eigenvector centrality, TikTok ($M = 0.22$, $SD = 0.26$) still had the highest median eigenvector scores. Twitter influencers ($M = 0.03$, $SD = 0.05$) and Facebook influencers ($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.03$) ranked lower in terms of eigenvector centrality, suggesting that only a select few user accounts were connected to other highly connected users.

Regarding betweenness centrality, YouTube influencers ($M = 101,709.48$, $SD = 168,368.41$) and Twitter influencers ($M = 23,853.97$, $SD = 50,981.00$) had the highest average betweenness scores, followed by TikTok influencers ($M = 5,803.00$, $SD =$

6,744.89) and Facebook influencers (M = 29.58, SD = 280,334.52). The high average betweenness scores on YouTube and Twitter indicate that these networks were structured in a way that facilitated better diffusion of messages to larger audiences.

Edgework. Our network indicators also covered edgework as a way to measure the strength of the relationship between two nodes. Our analysis showed that Facebook influencers had the highest average edgework scores (M = 89.17, SD = 507.34). Since edgework is contingent on the frequency of interaction between two accounts, these results are indicative that Facebook influencers exert influence through coordination work (i.e., sharing content from the same sets of accounts) in the platform.

Co-tweet and co-share network. We used degree centrality to measure the extent of connection with actors with whom a user is sharing or retweeting the same content. We found that Twitter influencers had a larger average co-tweet/co-share network size (M = 15.43, SD = 24.21) compared to Facebook (M = 2.03, SD = 3.96)

Connectedness to disinformation actors. We found that Facebook influencers have made ties at 30 times on the average to pages known to be sharing disinformation content compared to Twitter.

To summarize, **Facebook influencers appear to exert influence in social media by frequently sharing content from other pages in the network and reaching other communities in the platform**, indicated by their high out-degree scores, high edgework scores, and high betweenness centralities. **Some of the content they share are known to be disinformation actors, as indicated by the relatively high connectedness to disinformation actors score by Facebook influencers.**

Meanwhile, **Twitter influencers exert influence by interacting with many other users online**, as shown by their high out-degree scores. **They are also able to reach multiple communities by diffusing messages through the sharing features available in the platform**, based on their high betweenness centrality.

The high degree centrality on TikTok indicates that the hashtags they utilize are those engaged by many others, enabling TikTok users to connect with other users

in the network and diffuse their content to many other communities, as shown by their high average betweenness centrality.

Finally, **YouTube influencers connect with many others in a network by creating content about trending topics that enable them to get multiple recommendations**. Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviations of network indicators per platform.

TABLE 5.
Mean and standard deviations of network indicators per platform

Network Indicator	Facebook (N=207)		Twitter (N=127)		TikTok (N=658)		YouTube (N=584)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Degree	NA	NA	NA	NA	1084.47	764.97	402.08	392.02
Outdegree	47.48	68.44	36.29	48.94	NA	NA	NA	NA
Edgweight	89.17	507.34	4.28	10.00	2.76	0.84	70.46	530.61
Eigenvector	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.22	0.26	0.12	0.13
Betweenness	93191.16	280334.52	23853.97	50981.00	5803.00	6744.89	101709.48	168368.41
Co-tweet/co-share network	2.03	3.96	15.43	24.21	NA	NA	NA	NA
Correctedness to disinformation actors	30.08	123.67	0.23	0.65	NA	NA	NA	NA

Behavioral characteristics of political influencers

- **Having same name accounts.** Across the four platforms studied, almost all influencers did not possess a name similar to any credible source. The largest proportion of those who had same-name accounts could be found on Facebook, where one out of 10 influencers (13.23%) appeared to be named after legitimate information sources (13.23%).
- **Distributed amplification.** Distributed amplification was more prevalent on Facebook (M = 119.54, SD = 346.81) than on Twitter (M = 28.98, SD = 58.53), despite the number of amplification features on Twitter (e.g., retweet and quote tweet). In fact, retweets are easier to perform than Facebook shares, as it only takes a single press of a button to retweet as opposed to sharing, which needs at least two steps to be executed.
- **Post recurrence.** The prevalence of recurring similar posts was highest among Facebook influencers, who shared an average of 25 recurring posts on the platform (M = 25.24, SD = 23.81).
- **Sharing from fake news sources.** The majority of users on the platforms were not associated with known fake news sources. However, among those who shared fake news sources, it was observed that Facebook influencers had the highest average associations with fake news sources (M = 86.19, SD = 328.22).
- **Pseudonymity and sockpuppetry.** It is worth noting that none of the influencers in the final list seemed to have utilized pseudonymity as a strategy for influencing, and there was minimal evidence of sockpuppetry.
- **Commenter behavior.** To clarify, this particular indicator assesses the number of videos in the dataset which had the same set of commenters. It is specific to YouTube and not applicable to other platforms. The average score for this indicator was 0.07 (M = 0.07, SD = 0.37).

Overall, **political manipulation was most evident among Facebook influencers, based on their high distributed amplification scores, high post recurrence scores, and multiple instances of sharing from fake news sources.** Table 6 shows the mean and standard deviations of behavioral indicators per platform.

TABLE 6.

Mean and standard deviations of behavioral indicators per platform

Behavioral Indicator	Facebook (N=207)		Twitter (N=127)		TikTok (N=658)		YouTube (N=584)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Same name accounts	0 (86.76%)	NA	0 (100%)	NA	0 (99.54%)	NA	0 (97.23%)	NA
Distributed amplification	119.54	346.81	28.98	58.53	NA	NA	NA	NA
Post recurrence	25.24	21.81	-	-	2.16	2.17	3.00	3.77
Sharing from known fake sources	86.19	328.22	0.39	1.16	0.26	2.19	0.08	0.27
Pseudonymity			NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sockpuppetry	0.17	0.47	0.25	0.53	0.04	0.18	0.05	0.22
Commenter behavior	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.07	0.37

Content characteristics of political influencers

- **Partisanship.** Partisanship was the most prevalent type of content theme among the five themes examined in this research. This was to be expected given the set of keywords used to set the data, which partly comprised the dictionary used to analyze partisanship. We found that TikTok influencers were the most partisan in their content (M = 5.61, SD = 3.35), followed by Facebook influencers (M = 2.78, SD = 1.29).

- **Antagonism and delegitimization.** Antagonism and delegitimization were equally prevalent on posts by Facebook and Twitter influencers (M = 0.31, SD = 0.71), (M = 0.31, SD = 0.60), followed by YouTube (M = 0.15, SD = 0.40) with TikTok coming last (M = 0.10, SD = 0.31).
- **Misogyny and prejudice.** Most platforms scored low in misogyny and prejudice, with Twitter scoring the highest (M = 0.08, SD = 0.21) and TikTok scoring the lowest (M = 0.01, SD = 0.06).
- **Conspiracy and manipulation.** Conspiracy and manipulation was also not evident as a content theme. In this parameter, TikTok influencers scored slightly higher (M = 0.02, SD = 0.14) than influencers from other platforms, which had a mean score of 0.01.
- **Self-ascription.** Self-ascription, which measures accounts identifying as an “independent” or “alternative” source of the news and political opinion, was most evident on YouTube (M = 0.18, SD = 0.48), followed by Facebook (M = 0.15, SD = 0.91).

To summarize, we find that **partisanship characterizes the content of political posts made during the election season by online influencers. Antagonism and delegitimization was most evident on Facebook and Twitter, misogyny and prejudice was highest on Twitter, conspiracy and manipulation was slightly more evident on TikTok than on other platforms, and self-ascription was most evident on Facebook and YouTube.** Table 7 shows the mean and standard deviations of content indicators per platform.

TABLE 7.

Mean and standard deviations of content indicators per platform

Behavioral Indicator	Facebook (N=207)		Twitter (N=127)		TikTok (N=658)		YouTube (N=584)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Partisanship	2.78	1.29	0.57	0.55	5.61	3.35	0.95	1.26
Antagonism and delegitimization	0.31	0.71	0.31	0.60	0.10	0.31	0.15	0.40
Misogyny and prejudice	0.03	0.15	0.08	0.21	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.13
Conspiracy and manipulation	0.01	0.07	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.14	0.01	0.08
Self-ascription	0.15	0.91	0.10	0.26	0.02	0.10	0.18	0.48

Network, behavioral, and content scores per platform

After normalizing the scores per indicator from 0 to 1, we calculated the relevant network, behavioral, and content scores of influencers per platform and created an overall measure of covert political influencing performed by actors per platform (see Table 8).

On **Facebook, behavioral characteristics served as the most evident form of covert influence performed by users, which scored higher compared to the network and content indicators.** Behavioral scores on Facebook were also significantly higher compared to the other platforms.

Normalizing the scores also revealed little evidence of manipulation from Twitter users. As shown in Table 8, Twitter influencers scored an average of 0.8 in the combined network measure, 0.04 in the behavioral measure, and 0.07 in the content measure.

On TikTok, evidence of influencers’ manipulation appears to emanate from their network characteristics (M = 0.27) rather than their behaviors in the platform (M = 0.04) or the content they post (M = 0.07). It must be noted, however, that the content dimension measured here was based largely on the hashtags and minimal captions they included in their posts—actual content is still a blind spot when doing TikTok research given the limitations in the kinds of data that can be processed using a computational approach.

Finally, the network characteristics also appeared most evident on YouTube (M = 0.09). However, much like influencer scores on Twitter, the normalized scores show little evidence of manipulation in the platform. Similar to TikTok, it must be noted that the content measured on YouTube was limited to the textual data collected in the platform—actual video content still needs to be examined for a more robust examination of the messages employed by influencers.

TABLE 8.

Mean standardized network, behavioral, and content scores of influencers per platform

DIMENSION	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	TIKTOK	YOUTUBE
Network	0.05	0.08	0.27	0.09
Behavioral	0.26	0.04	0.04	0.06
Content	0.01	0.07	0.07	0.03

From the scored list of influencers, we determined users engaged in covert influence operations by identifying those who performed exceptionally compared to other accounts in the list. This determination was done by identifying accounts that scored above the upper limit for outliers, which was calculated using interquartile range. For Twitter and YouTube, where all influencers were included in the network by default, we first eliminated lower-bound outliers before calculating the threshold. Any influencer scoring above the threshold was included in our final list of

influencers. We also removed influencers with fewer than four posts and/or videos to generate a more conservative estimate. For Facebook specifically, we removed community pages with overt partisan support.

Table 9 shows the final breakdown of influencers with significant evidence of participating in covert influence operations. **We identified a total of 1,425 covert political influencers, with the majority of them on YouTube (584) and TikTok (544), followed by Facebook (207) and Twitter (89).**

TABLE 9.

Max scores, score thresholds, and number of complicit influencers with significant evidence of cover influence operations per platform

PLATFORM	MAX VALUE	THRESHOLD	COMPLICIT INFLUENCERS BASED ON MULTIPLE EVIDENCE
Facebook	0.66	0.25	207
Twitter	0.75	0.10	89
YouTube	1.19	0.07	584
TikTok	0.79	0.28	544
TOTAL			1,425

Typology of political influencers and their repertoire of manipulation

The covert political influencers we identified in our research are by no means homogenous. They represent a spectrum of influencers who have their repertoire of manipulative strategies to perform a specific role in the campaign. Unlike trolls and bots that are designed for singular goals like astroturfing or charading as members of the public or amplifying manipulative messages in the network, influencers have the bandwidth to perform more complex and nuanced strategies.

Through clustering techniques based on influencers’ different combinations and varying degrees of use of manipulation tactics, we were able to formulate seven types of covert political influencers. Figure 5 characterizes the set of strategies and the extent to which covert political influencers used it relative to other strategies. We augmented our quantitative analysis with a qualitative reading of their profiles, posts, and community engagement. We likewise provided illustrative representations of the influencers identified in our research, whose details are kept confidential for ethical purposes.

1. ‘Amateur’ commentators and curators

‘Amateur’ commentators and curators are influencers performing political commentary and do-it-yourself (DIY) knowledge curation with subtle partisan leaning. They have a large following and are strategically situated in key communities, bridging people with different interests and backgrounds. They post election-related content regularly and are often the source of political messages amplified by other actors in the network. **Their individual content is packaged as genuine political opinion and fair criticism, but taken as a whole, they express strong partisan bias and hostility against actors opposing their candidate of choice.** These influencers provide the layman’s interpretation of complex political issues and translate serious politics into light entertainment.

These influencers’ ordinariness is augmented by their ‘research’ skills to uncover “the real deal” in politics purportedly not reported objectively or

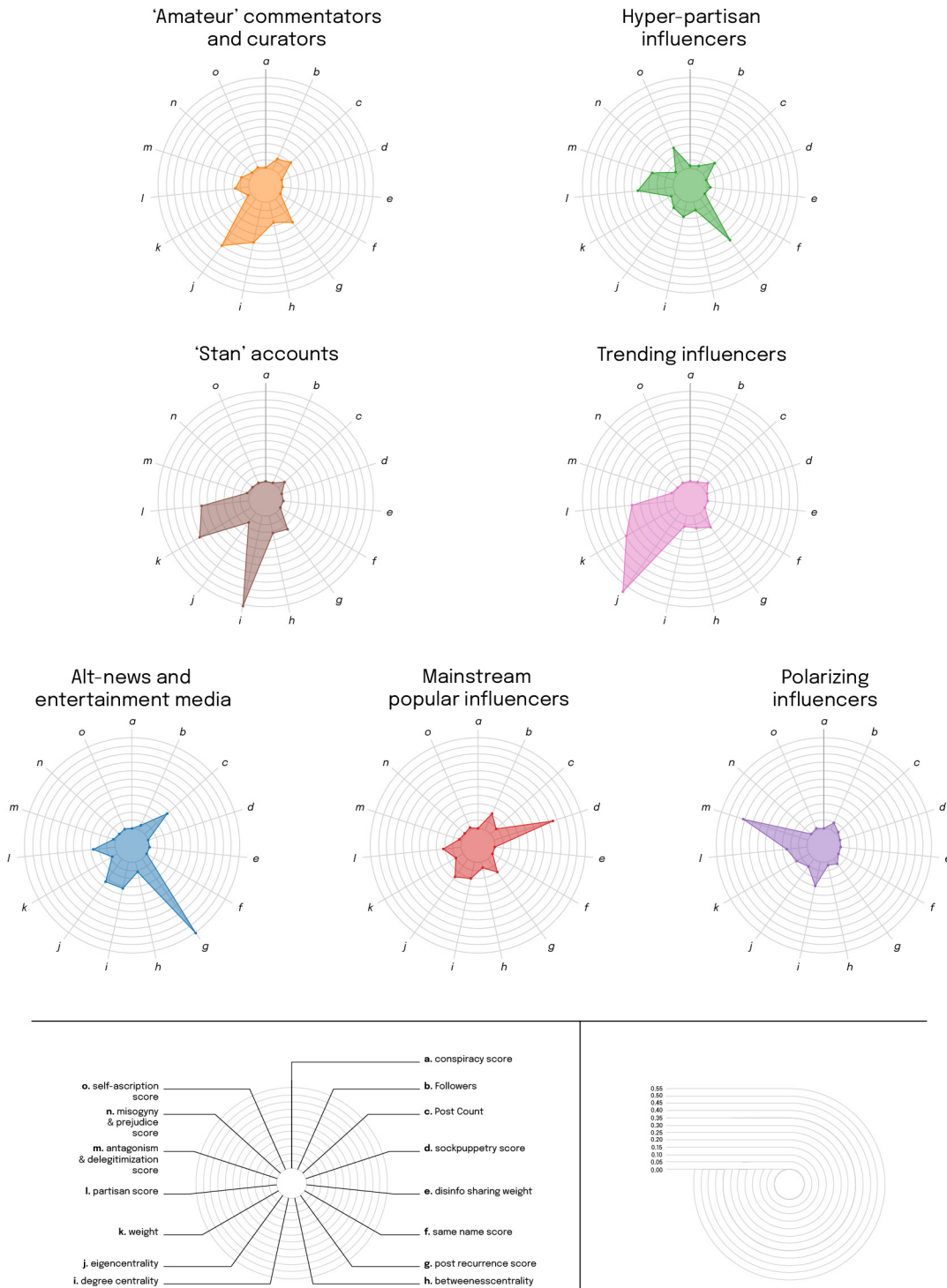


Figure 5. Covert political influencer types based on K-means clustering

completely by mainstream media. They often drop jargon and proceed to explain what these terms mean in ways that would support their political spin. They oscillate between detailing the ‘facts’ of the case and giving their ‘hot takes’ on the issue by selectively choosing evidence and sometimes making conspiratorial claims. ‘Amateur’ commentators and curators rose to prominence because of their live *kwentuhan* (casual chatting) format, treating followers and viewers like neighbors and friends. **They act as brokers for politicians by making voters feel that they know the politicians intimately, despite never meeting or interacting with the candidates in person.**

2. Hyper-partisan influencers

Hyper-partisan influencers and accounts are those that explicitly advance the propaganda of particular candidates and politicians in the guise of ‘community’ support and political participation. **They distribute the political message of the day, assumed to be the unofficial party line, not only within their staunch partisan communities but also to other influencers.** Their social media activities are unapologetically partisan, but they ascribe themselves to be “truthful” (*tapat*) and service-oriented for the “common good” (*para sa lahat*). However, they engage in overly antagonistic speech against competing candidates, as well as consistently allege conspiracies about the media, progressive groups, and other so-called enemies of the state.

They bring the campaign on-ground to their online followers through hundreds of first-hand accounts, photos, and videos and make it look like the “majority” supports their candidate and that they are headed to a “landslide” victory. **When their candidate is criticized, they transform into a formidable PR machine ready to defend and justify their vouched candidates’ actions and claims.** While they already appear to be preaching to the choir, they welcome those who ‘flipped’ and joined their chorus as evidence of their campaign’s resonance. **They offer their followers a sense of belonging anchored on their support of their candidate, as well as a feeling of self-righteousness for being on the right side of history.**

3. 'Stan' accounts

'Stan' accounts are influencers who present themselves as 'stan' or fan accounts of politicians to both glorify their public persona and humanize their presumed personal selves on TikTok. Similar to the cultural practices of other fandoms, these accounts flood the platform with content about their political heroes regularly and ensure its visibility in the platform by coordinating the sets of hashtags to use. They are highly partisan but not necessarily about the platforms and policies of the candidates, but of their persona as public figures and as individual persons. They often attach the candidates' names and respective cultural references to their profiles to signal that their accounts are dedicated to content about their revered politician. **'Stan' accounts elevate the politicians as people larger than life while also creating impressions of them being one with the common people.**

They create TikTok video montages of the candidates' public life in their performance of their official duties and speeches in campaign rallies and their private moments of family life and personal interactions with supporters. They feature intimate scenes of candidates making jokes and bonding moments with their children to make them relatable. **'Stan' accounts strategically position their candidate of choice beyond the crude realities of politics but also within the cultural imaginaries of everyday life.** They are effective political brokers by cultivating feelings of adoration for and closeness with the politicians among their audiences without the candidates directly interacting with them.

4. Trending influencers

Trending influencers transform political content into stylized 'trending' content that aligns with their digital persona and the cultural vernacular of the platform. Mostly on TikTok, these influencers have achieved clout by developing their own content style and carving out a niche within popular topics on the platform. **In the context of the election, they strategically use political hashtags to link themselves to other creators to help appear as recommendations on TikTok's**

for you page.¹¹⁸ They are generally overt in their partisanship in their textual captions but can be more subtle in their audio-visual presentation in the videos. As their name implies, these influencers are adept at producing political content intended to ‘trend’ and exponentially reach wide and diverse audiences.

Their content features videos of the candidates in their campaign trail and reels showcasing their projects and achievements superimposed with TikTok song and dance trends. Trending influencers creatively weave separate worlds together by, for example, juxtaposing the qualities of K-drama idols and political personalities and transposing users’ affinities from pop stars to politicians. Unlike the polarized discourse by other influencers, they lean heavily on positive campaigning to elicit feelings of hopefulness and upliftment from their audiences, attached to the prospect of their preferred candidate winning for office. **Trendy TikTok political posts are the equivalent of TV political jingles on steroids, not only creating recall but also cultural purchase, especially among younger voter segments.**

5. Alt-news and entertainment media

Alt-news and entertainment media are accounts that identify as alternative sources of news and entertainment to package partisan agenda as newsworthy and with entertainment value. They name their accounts after words similar to or associated with traditional news media (e.g., ‘Daily’, ‘Dateline’, ‘Fact’, ‘Headline’, ‘News’, ‘Updates’, ‘Herald’), despite not engaging in journalistic practice. They produce large volumes of content regularly and this makes them highly visible and connected in the network. Facebook influencers in this category generally have indirect and calculated expressions of partisanship, while those on YouTube are explicit with their political position and biases. **Alt-news and entertainment media function to legitimize hyper-partisan messages, conspiratorial claims, and unfounded attacks against competition that the mainstream media would not otherwise report.**

¹¹⁸ TikTok’s equivalent of a personalized news feed, only that the content served to the user are not necessarily from the accounts they follow but from accounts that create content on similar topics

Their content is familiar to audiences given their mimicry of news and entertainment formats, from conventional news headlines to tabloid-type reporting and soft entertainment news. However, their no-holds-barred angle to their stories translates to uncritically glorifying their preferred candidates and excessively antagonizing their opponents. Their cultural purchase is in their ability to make politics exciting and intriguing, manufacturing controversies and framing democratic procedures like a horse race. **With the look of credibility but with the delivery of unrestricted honesty and hostility, they reinvigorate the political interest of an otherwise apathetic and jaded audience.**

6. Mainstream popular influencers

Mainstream popular influencers are those who integrate politics in their established brands popular across platforms by supporting their candidate of choice, akin to celebrity endorsements. They have high numbers of followers across multiple platforms and are considered elite influencers. This helps them break through traditional media and become household names. Their partisan content on social media is their way of staying ‘relevant’ at a time when election topics dominate the Philippine public sphere. **Mainstream popular influencers have large communities and their extended reach makes candidates appear to have the ‘majority’ support.**

Their political content is very much aligned with their ‘brand’ playbook, such as a queer influencer talking about their stance on same-sex marriage or an entrepreneur-turned-influencer promoting candidates who promise to support small businesses. As such, their subsequent posts campaigning for candidates look authentic, and more so, persuasive to their swaths of followers. **They appear like advocates for politicians who purportedly genuinely support their candidates of choice, and not endorsers who are assumed to be paid to campaign for the candidates.**

7. Polarizing influencers

Polarizing influencers are influencers who mobilize aggressive support for their preferred candidates and excessive antagonism against opposing candidates and personalities. **Their content is characterized by their hyper-partisan messaging resonant to ‘solid supporters’ and hostile and pejorative remarks, not only against opposing candidates (i.e., *pinklawan*, apologists) but also against people who identify with particular politics (i.e., self-righteous elites, morally corrupt politics).** They produce high volumes of content and distribute them in an orchestrated manner, such that the same accounts consistently amplify the same messages. Similar to the disinformation strategies of trolls, they also create a complementary following-follower network that helps them galvanize active partisan communities.

Influencers of this type differ in their strategies and the spaces they occupy depending on the political camp they support. Pro-Marcos influencers are mostly on TikTok and are prolific producers of user-generated content and customized memes, while pro-Robredo influencers mostly amplify existing content on Twitter. The agenda of the former consists of cementing the imaginaries of a Marcos-Duterte government by romanticizing the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte and reiterating their political alliance, while the latter involves building the case of Robredo’s presidency based on her merits and achievements.

Both camps attack each other, often using conspiracy and mockery to disparage Robredo and her allies about her malicious political dealings with the elite, and doing fact-checks and casting moral judgments to condemn Marcos and his supporters for overlooking his deception and pretense, and his families’ atrocities and corruption. They also differ in their content formats, with pro-Marcos influencers editing multimedia content from news clips, mobile videos, and campaign music, while pro-Robredo influencers are primarily text-based, with some accompanying images in re-tweets and quote tweets. **These accounts cultivate the most fervent supporters for both camps but also encourage extreme antipathy for anyone outside of their political community.**

Chapter summary

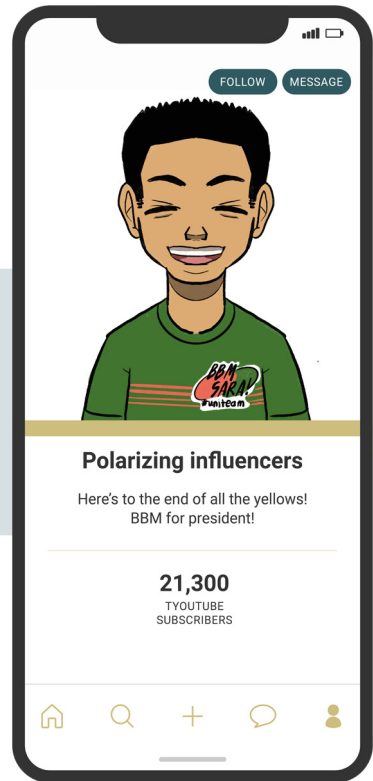
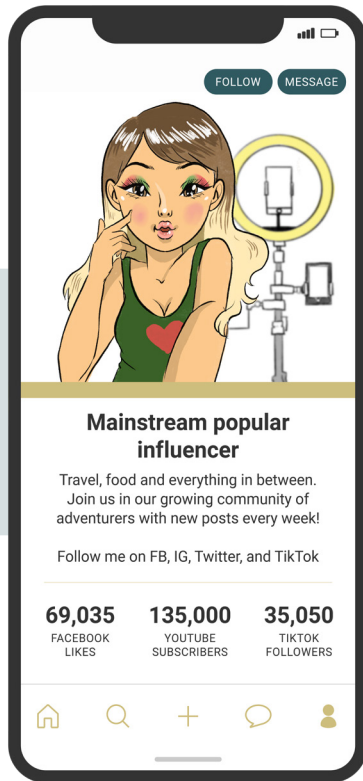
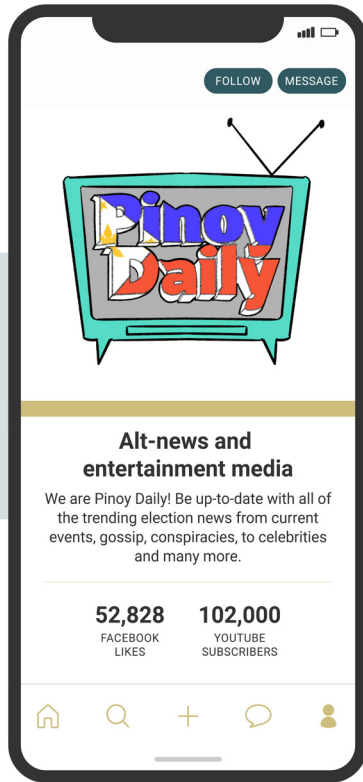
Influencers are ‘gray’ political actors that do not fit squarely into the normative features of disinformation and propaganda. This makes it difficult to detect their participation in political influence operations, and more so, define their strategies and tactics to harness support, sow distrust, and mobilize users to achieve the political agenda of their clients. **In response to this research context, we developed a multi-dimensional approach to identify covert political influencers based on their network, behavioral, and content characteristics using 18 indicators.** They are designed to identify presumed commissioned political influencers based on evidence of their participation in covert influence operations, which informs our economic modeling in the next chapter.

We identified 1,425 influencers across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok (not distinguishing multiple accounts from the same influencers) that exhibit evident patterns of manipulative activities. Our analysis showed the distinct textures of manipulation in each platform, such as Facebook influencers primarily engaging in coordinated behavior to amplify politically biased content and TikTok influencers leveraging their network connections to expand the visibility of their partisan content through algorithmic recommendations. Our analysis identifies seven types of influencers—(1) ‘amateur’ commentators and curators, (2) hyper-partisan influencers, (3) stan accounts, (4) trending influencers, (5) alt-news and entertainment media, (6) mainstream popular influencers, and (7) polarizing influencers—who engage in distinct but complementary repertoire of manipulative strategies to promote the political interests of their respective political clients.

ILLUSTRATION 1.

Covert political Influencer types exemplified as social media profiles







CHAPTER 4

Economics of covert influence operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections

This chapter aims to estimate the economic cost of commissioning political influencers in covert influence operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections. It presents an estimation framework that informs our calculations based on economic modeling principles and data limitations. We discuss the assumptions of our estimates based on the data generated by the first two phases of the research, as well as the limitations of our estimates. Based on our methodology, we present two models of estimated costs of political spending on influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections.

Key findings

- The estimated political spending on the presumed commissioned political influencers for the top national posts in the 2022 Philippine Elections is PhP 600 million to 1.5 billion (USD 10.9 million to 27 million), following the retainer model and pay-per-post model of pricing, respectively.
- Based on the retainer model, Facebook influencers were projected to have the highest amount spent at PhP 311.4 million (USD 5.7 million), followed by YouTube at PhP 213.5 million (USD 3.9 million).
- There are other factors that may have contributed to pricing but were not included in the estimation due to data limitations, such as political ideology, reputational risk, discounted packages, and influencer performance and negotiation skills. Platform monetization was also outside of the scope of the models but is acknowledged to be a key economic variable for commissioned and non-commissioned influencers alike.

Estimating political spending

Our estimation framework primarily considers the cost of commissioned or paid influencer work for covert political campaigning based on the multi-dimensional evidence of participation in covert influence operations that identified complicit political influencers (see Chapter 3). For commissioned work, the cost estimate reflects the resources paid by the political campaign or its contributors to influencers through intermediaries, as discussed in the earlier chapters.

Provided that any approximation has a reasonable level of uncertainty, our estimation also accounts for the small number of influencers that may not have been compensated but exhibit characteristics of organized political manipulation

(i.e., reproducing the performance of covert political influencers and other participating actors to ‘ride the trend’ and monetize the attention) that were included in the Phase 2 analysis. For this unpaid work, the cost estimate captures the value of the influencers’ labor, which can be interpreted as the opportunity cost to do other paid work. In other words, it represents the resources they would have received had they been compensated by clients. While there may be limitations in precisely quantifying the value of unpaid work, the characteristics of these influencers are comparable to the ones performed by commissioned influencers, and thus might have contributed to the outcomes of covert influence operations. This accounting provides us with a comprehensive assessment of the overall cost of covert influence operations during the 2022 Philippine Elections.

Our estimation of the cost of covert influence operations follows a model similar to usual valuation exercises, employing the formula: Cost = Quantity x Price. The quantity measures used in this model are derived from Phase 2 of our study, specifically the number of complicit political influencers and the number of posts presumed to be part of covert political campaigning (see Chapter 3). Our cost estimates cover influencer activities from October 2021 to May 2022, which includes months before the official campaign period. Influence operations are already expected to be at play as soon as the candidate officially files for candidacy, if not months and years earlier given contemporary practices of permanent campaigning.¹¹⁹

To determine the price measures, we obtained proprietary data on influencer rates from a PR firm. This data included historical cost information for over 300 influencers engaged by commercial brands. We use industry data as proxy to political influencer rates, given the lack of standard rates in the field as discussed in Chapter 2. By analyzing this dataset, we estimated the price per post as a polynomial function of the number of followers. Estimating a polynomial function allows us to capture how follower count affects per-post pricing in a non-linear way.

119 Larsson, “Online, all the time?”

We have estimated the cost per post for each platform where data is available. Considering data limitations and aiming to be conservative in our estimates, we selected the TikTok rates, which had the least cost estimates, as our base price. This base price is then applied uniformly to all types of posts in all platforms in our estimation exercise given limitations on differentiated platform pricing. While we acknowledge that different types of posts (e.g., static vs. dynamic) have different pricing, our data does not allow us to estimate differential pricing for each type. We are only able to determine media type in the Phase 2 of the research, but not the differences in their value or rates. **By employing this approach, we acknowledge that influencer rates can vary across different platforms and sectors, and our conservative estimate serves as a reasonable approximation for the overall cost of covert influence operations.**

Methodology: Economic assumption building

In our first costing exercise, the baseline assumption is that influencers involved in covert influence operations are compensated on a pay-per-post basis. This assumption allows for a more detailed estimation of costs, aligning with the prevalent industry practice where influencers are typically paid for each post they create. However, we are aware that influencers may not always be compensated in this manner given more sophisticated and cumulative arrangements, or may not receive payment at all, as discussed in Chapter 2.

In cases where influencers are paid but not based on a per-post pricing structure (e.g., retainer or fixed fee pricing), our pay-per-post cost estimate can serve as an approximation of their potential fixed fees. This assumption serves as a reasonable starting point, as it can be argued that contracts with fixed fee payments are typically determined based on an implicit understanding of the anticipated level of activity the influencer will undertake. While the exact payment structure may differ, the estimated pay-per-post cost can provide a reference point for estimating their potential fixed fees. By considering the average pay-per-post cost, we can infer a comparable value that aligns with the influencer's expected level of engagement and contribution to the covert influence operations.

Conversely, non-commissioned influencers still incur opportunity costs in terms of their time and platform usage. The estimated pay-per-post cost assigned to these influencers can be interpreted as the value of their independent efforts. Given the challenge of distinguishing between paid and unpaid work, applying the pay-per-post pricing model to all influencers ensures that a value is assigned to both paid and unpaid contributions. This approach enables us to account for the potential economic impact of unpaid work within the estimation of covert influence operation costs.

In our second costing exercise, we consider that some influencers are paid on a retainer or fixed fee basis which is one of the findings in the Phase 1 of our study (see Chapter 2). We assume that influencer accounts in the top quartile, those with the highest total pay-per-post costs, receive a fixed fee regardless of the number of posts they make provided their distinct arrangements with their clients. This retainer pricing model ensures a more stable compensation structure for highly influential accounts, acknowledging their added value beyond transactional relationships and the specific role they play in the larger covert influence operations.

The fixed fee assigned to influencer accounts in the top quartile corresponds to the 75th percentile total pay-per-post cost. This means that all influencer accounts within the top quartile receive the same fixed fee, irrespective of the actual number of posts they create. Our findings discussed in Chapter 2 show that some influencers with large follower counts are offered fixed fee contracts. We consider the 75th percentile as a good starting point in simulating the effects of how retainer pricing could affect our pure pay-per-post model. This approach provides a more conservative estimate of the costs relative to a pure pay-per-post model.

Pay-per-post and retainer models estimation

Our pay-per-post costing exercise reveals an estimated total cost of approximately PhP 1.5 billion (USD 27 million) as shown in Table 10. In order to make sense of what drove our estimates for each platform, recall that our pricing model is $\text{Cost} = \text{Quantity} \times \text{Price}$ (followers). The quantity measure is driven by the number of posts while the price measure is driven by the number of followers per influencer.

Facebook had the largest cost at more than PhP 900 million (USD 16 million) which is driven by the large number of posts per account (average of 252) and large number of followers (205 thousand per account). YouTube follows with the second largest cost at PhP 460 million (USD 8 million). This is clearly driven by the large following on YouTube (171 million total followers, 293 thousand followers per account). TikTok and Twitter follow with total estimated costs of PhP 94 million (USD 1.7 million) and PhP 42 million (USD 764,000), respectively. It must be noted here that the disproportionate number of posts on Facebook may have been influenced by the low barrier to content creation in the platform (i.e., text as minimum, straightforward uploading of multimedia content, low involvement interactions through reacts). Because the pay-per-post model assumes that each post has an economic value attached to it, the high volume of content produced by presumed commissioned influencers on Facebook also drove the pricing higher.

TABLE 10.

Cost estimate with pay-per-post pricing

	SUM OF FOLLOWERS (ALL ACCOUNTS)	AVERAGE NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS (PER ACCOUNT)	AVERAGE NUMBER OF POSTS	AVERAGE COST PER POST (IN PhP)	TOTAL COST (IN MILLION PHILIPPINE PESOS)
Facebook	42,541,172	205,513	252	14,752	939.4
Twitter	3,097,525	34,804	57	10,328	42.2
YouTube	171,112,160	293,000	51	16,337	460.6
TikTok	92,256,400	140,421	15	12,412	94.3

Incorporating some retainer pricing, we estimate a total cost of approximately PhP 600 million (USD 10.9 million). Table 11 provides a comparison between the total costs estimated using pay-per-post pricing alone and the inclusion of retainer pricing for the top quartile influencers. The percentage change in costs highlights the significant impact these influencers have on the overall expenses for each platform.

The data reveals a substantial reduction in costs when retainer pricing is factored in. For instance, in the case of Facebook, the total cost decreases from PhP 939.4 million (USD 17 million) under pay-per-post pricing alone to PhP 311.4 million (USD 5.7 million) with the inclusion of retainer pricing, resulting in a 67% decrease. Similar patterns are observed for Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok, with percentage decreases of 39%, 54%, and 50% respectively. The significant decrease in the estimates indicates that the cost attributed to the top quartile influencers under the pay-per-post pricing accounts for over 50% of the total cost per platform.

TABLE 11.

Cost estimate with pay-per-post pricing and retainer pricing

	TOTAL COST WITH ONLY PAY-PER-POST (IN MILLION PHILIPPINE PESOS)	TOTAL COST WITH RETAINER PRICING (IN MILLION PHILIPPINE PESOS)	% CHANGE
Facebook	939.4	311.4	-67%
Twitter	42.2	25.7	-39%
YouTube	460.6	213.5	-54%
TikTok	94.3	47.49	-50%

It is important to note that the assumptions made regarding retainer pricing were not based on concrete quantitative data, as we lacked sufficient information to systematically incorporate this pricing feature into our estimates despite the retainer model being the pricing model subscribed to by prominent political influencers (see Chapter 2). Therefore, the conservative estimate of PhP 600 million (USD 10.9 million) should not be interpreted as definitive figures, but rather as a result of a what-if (scenario) analysis. From our interviews, we gathered insights suggesting that retainer pricing could potentially apply to more prominent influencers. However, given the limited information available, we approach this as a what-if analysis. By applying retainer pricing to the top quartile of influencers, we derive an estimate of PhP 600 million (USD 10.9 million). It is worth noting that further scenario analyses can be conducted by adjusting the retainer pricing cutoff, which would consequently impact the total estimated cost. Through exploring different scenarios, we can gain a better understanding of the potential cost variations associated with different pricing models in covert influence operations.

Other analyses: Distribution and spending per candidate

To further understand the data underlying the estimation results, we examined the number of followers along several key metrics, namely, number of posts, cost per post, and total cost per account (see Figures 6.1, 6.2, 6.3).¹²⁰ Figure 6.1 reveals a similar distribution among the four platforms, with the majority of data points clustering in the southwest region, indicating that **a majority of the influencers have a low number of followers and posts**. However, both the number of followers and posts exhibit outliers, suggesting the presence of influential accounts with a larger reach and posting frequency.

Moving to Figure 6.2, the estimated cost per post demonstrates a distribution consistent with our chosen estimation method. It is important to note that we estimate the cost per post using a nonlinear function based on the number of followers. **This approach enables us to capture the nuanced relationship between the influencer’s reach and the pricing structure.**

¹²⁰ Some outlier values were removed in the figures for clarity.

Lastly, Figure 6.3 showcases the estimated total cost per account after incorporating retainer pricing. **The plot highlights that, with our retainer pricing assumption, the estimated cost per influencer is capped at the 75th percentile total cost.** The plot for Facebook exhibits a more dispersed distribution compared to the other platforms, suggesting that the size and posting behavior of Facebook influencers are more diverse. In contrast, the plot for YouTube displays a more compact distribution, implying that YouTube influencers tend to have more similar sizes and posting behaviors.

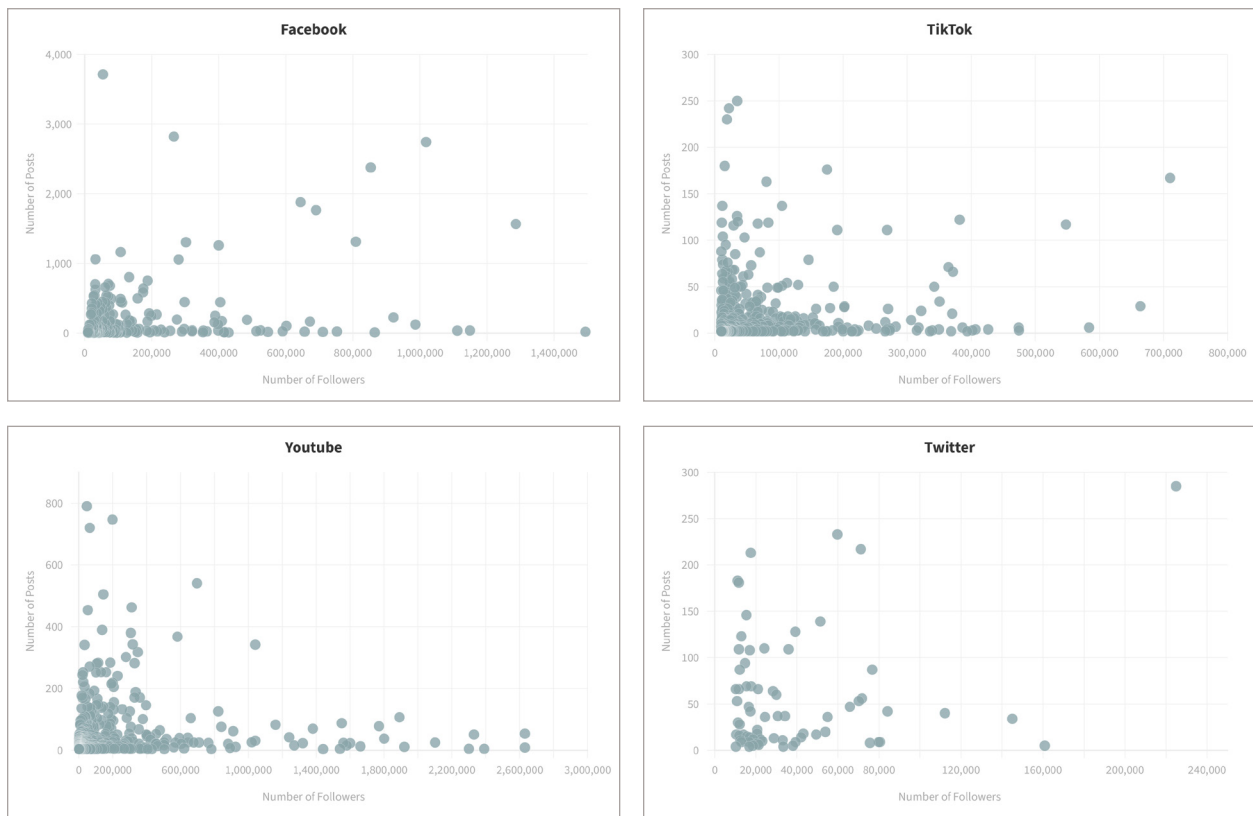


Figure 6.1. Distribution plot for influencer follower count and post count

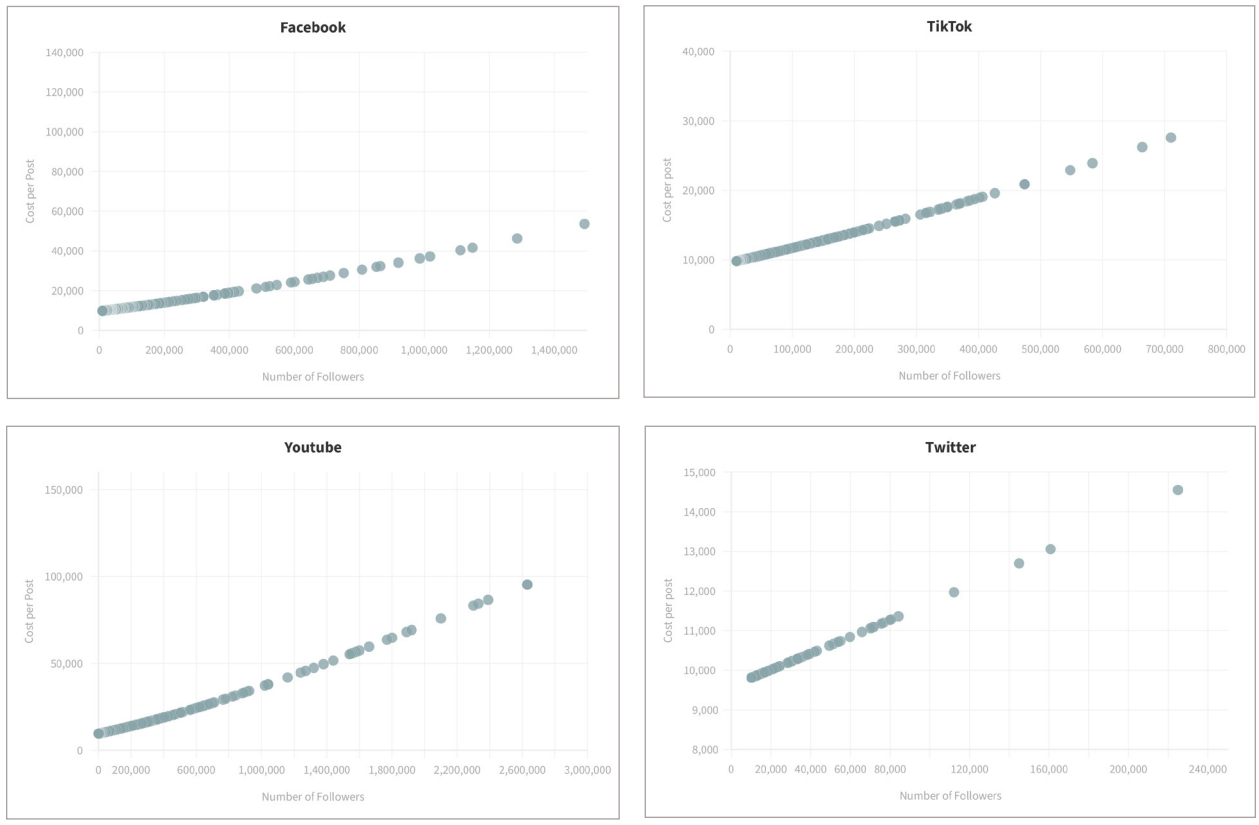


Figure 6.2. Distribution plot for estimated cost per post

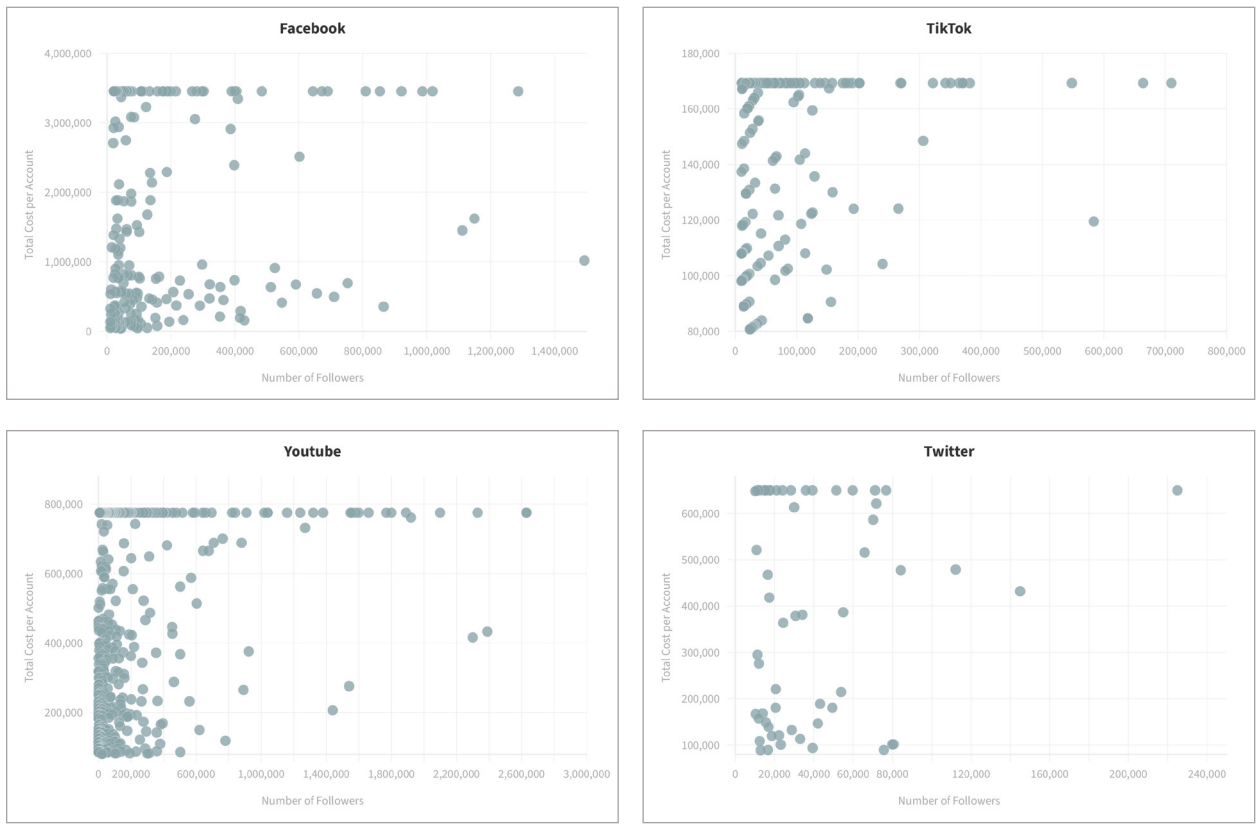


Figure 6.3. Distribution plot for total cost per account given the retainer model

Table 12 shows our attempt at assigning the estimated costs to the influencer's supported presidential candidate. Analysis from Phase 2 includes information about the influencers' plausible political allegiance, based on two data points: frequently mentioned candidate (derived through automated text analysis) and actual candidate supported (derived through manually and qualitatively verifying expression of support for particular candidates from their social media profile). The data on the influencers' frequently mentioned candidate was not used in this analysis because it is possible that one frequently mentions one candidate (e.g., to malign the candidate) but actually supports another candidate. Instead, we use the information on the actual candidate supported for each influencer account as a basis for our estimates on candidate spending on influencers.

It is assumed from this data that Marcos Jr. spent the largest amount on covert political influencers for his campaign at PhP 351 million (USD 6.3 million), followed by Robredo at PhP 135 million (USD 2.4 million), Moreno at PhP 42 million (USD 755,042), and Pacquiao with only PhP 1 million (USD 17,977). Some of the influencers in our data, particularly on YouTube, did not explicitly identify their preferred candidate in their content, and thus the projected spending on them cannot be attached to a candidate. However, findings from Chapter 2 indicate that some influencers are commissioned to do neutral content so we would not dismiss the evidence of their participation in covert influence operations.

Note that these crude estimates are not to be taken in absolute terms given that we do not have the data to confirm the relationship between overt political support and commissioned influence work from Phase 1 of our research.

TABLE 12.

Estimated cost per platform per candidate

PLATFORM	PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SUPPORTED (IN MILLION PHILIPPINE PESOS)					TOTAL COST
	BBM	LENI	ISKO	MANNY	OTHERS	
Facebook	192	88	21	1	9	311
YouTube	123	17	19		53	214
TikTok	29	11	1		6	47
Twitter	7	18	0		1	26
Total Cost	351	135	42	1	69	598

Note: “Others” refer to influencers who do not clearly support a specific presidential candidate or only support a vice-presidential candidate.

Limitations of our estimation framework

We recognize the limitations inherent in our assumptions, methodologies, and results in our estimation given the nature of influence operations as shadow economy (see Box text 5). These should be taken into account when interpreting our cost estimates. In this section, we will discuss these limitations, encompassing both the measures of quantity and price.

One limitation of our analysis is the challenge of quantifying the extent of non-commissioned work and volunteer efforts within covert influence operations.

While our Phase 2 indicators provide insights into behaviors that are likely organized and paid, it is still possible for some of the identified complicit influencers to be independent contributors. In our attempt to estimate the value of their work, we employed a pay-per-post cost approximation. However, this approach certainly

does not capture other underlying factors that affect the influencers' motivations and contributions. Factors such as political ideology and platform monetization incentives can significantly influence the level of unpaid work, but we were unable to comprehensively account for these aspects in our analysis.

When considering the pricing aspects of our estimation model, several limitations come to light. First, one of the limitations in our analysis is that commercial influencer rates may not necessarily serve as an ideal benchmark for determining political influencer rates. Commercial influencers often operate in a different landscape, where their endorsements and collaborations with brands drive their market value. In contrast, political influencers possess unique qualities such as social capital and notoriety, as discussed in Chapter 2, and perform specific strategies like amplifying partisan messages or attacking political opponents, as discussed in Chapter 3. Therefore, the rates and pricing structures for commercial influencers may not be directly applicable or reflective of the value and impact of political influencers' involvement in covert influence operations. While we have a logical and empirical basis on commercial influencer rates in our estimates, it is important to be cautious and transparent with one's assumptions when extrapolating commercial influencer rates to estimate the costs associated with political influencer engagement.

Second, our model does not incorporate the potential impact of reputational risk on influencer rates. Influencers associated with controversial topics or higher risk profiles may demand higher compensation to mitigate potential reputational damage. The lack of specific data on reputational risk prevents us from accurately incorporating this factor into our cost estimation.

Third, our assumption also assumes a uniform level of involvement and impact among influencers involved in covert influence operations. However, influencers may play different roles in political campaigns, as identified in Chapters 2 and 3. These varying roles can significantly influence the value and pricing of their services, but we were unable to differentiate and account for these differences in our analysis.

Fourth, our estimation model assumes a straightforward pay-per-post pricing structure, which may not capture potential discounts or variations in pricing based on the length of engagement with influencers. Long-term partnerships or bulk contracts may result in negotiated discounts or customized pricing arrangements that our analysis does not fully capture.

Fifth, our estimation model primarily considers the number of followers as the determinant of influencer rates, overlooking other factors such as production costs and additional factors driving influencer rates. Factors like popularity, reach, engagement metrics, and negotiation skills can affect influencer rates but were not comprehensively incorporated due to data limitations.

It is crucial to recognize these limitations within our study. While our assumptions and methodologies provide valuable insights into the economic costs of commissioning covert influence operations, further research and data collection are necessary to refine our analysis and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the economic dynamics involved. **These limitations should be considered when interpreting our estimation results and drawing conclusions regarding the scale of covert influence operations during the 2022 Philippine General Elections, and later, in applying the same framework in future estimates, such as the upcoming 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections.**

BOX TEXT 5.

Estimating shadow economies

Shadow economies have garnered attention from scholars, policymakers, and researchers seeking to understand their value and impact. Defining and measuring the shadow economy is difficult not only due to its hidden nature but also because it includes diverse activities. **The market for covert influence operations can be considered part of the shadow economy.** One commonly used definition characterizes the shadow economy as “all market-based legal production of goods and services that are deliberately concealed from public authorities for various reasons”.¹²¹ However, this definition is narrow and limited because illegal activities can also be classified as part of shadow economies.

The shadow economy can be categorized into four types.¹²² First, the *illegal economy* involves activities explicitly prohibited by law, such as drug trafficking and counterfeiting, which generate substantial profits while evading legal sanctions. Second, the unreported economy comprises legitimate activities intentionally unreported to avoid taxes and regulatory obligations, resulting in significant revenue losses for governments. Third, the *unrecorded economy* includes legal activities unaccounted for in official statistics, such as subsistence farming and unpaid household work, posing challenges for policymakers. Lastly, the *informal economy* encompasses both legal and illegal activities outside formal employment arrangements, requiring a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of that specific market.

121 Schneider and Buehnm, “Shadow Economy: Estimation Methods.”

122 Freige, “Defining and estimating underground.”

Estimating the size and impact of the shadow economy can be methodologically complex.¹²³ Direct estimation methods involve data collection through surveys, tax audits, and law enforcement agencies to quantify specific shadow economic activities. Indirect estimation methods use macroeconomic models and statistical techniques to infer the hidden economy's size and impact, considering factors like discrepancies between reported and actual economic indicators.

Studying specific instances of illicit markets necessitates the application of creative techniques for measurement and estimation. For example, in the case of studies on the cannabis trade in France and New Zealand, indirect estimation methods have been utilized, using data from consumption surveys, law enforcement data, and statistical modeling.¹²⁴ On the other hand, one study of Italy's illicit cigarettes market was estimated by using data from legal sales, consumer surveys, and empty packs surveys.¹²⁵ In this research, we have used a combination of indirect qualitative evidence in our fieldwork, digital proxy measures for covert political influencer detection, and parallel market data in marketing and PR in our estimation of political spending. **These may not be perfect tools for estimation, but they provide us with a sound and rigorous baseline in estimating the shadow economy of influence operations.**

123 Schneider, *Shadow Economy and Shadow Labor*.

124 Wilkins, Reilly, Pledger and Casswell, "Estimating the dollar value"; Legleye, Lakhdar, Spilka, "Two ways of estimating."

125 Calderoni. "A new method."

Chapter summary

In this chapter, we present an estimation of the economic cost of commissioning political influencers in covert influence operations during the 2022 Philippine Elections. We propose an estimation framework based on a simple quantity-price model. **Our findings reveal that the estimated political spending on presumed commissioned political influencers ranges from PhP 600 million to 1.5 billion (USD 10.9 million to 27 million), depending on the pricing models of retainer or pay-per-post.** Among the platforms, Facebook influencers exhibit the highest estimated spending at PhP 311.4 million (USD 5.7 million), followed by YouTube at PhP 213.5 million (USD 3.9 million). Additionally, we provide the estimated cost per platform per candidate, offering insights into the platform-specific expenses. We acknowledge that factors such as political ideology and influencer performance may have influenced pricing but were not included in the analysis due to data limitations. We also acknowledge certain limitations of our analysis, including the challenge of quantifying non-commissioned work and the use of commercial influencer rates as a benchmark for political influencer rates.



CHAPTER 5

Recalibrating our maps and models

This chapter concludes the report by presenting the three key implications of our research into the political economy of covert influence operations. In particular, we emphasize the need to recalibrate our analytical maps of influence operations and of political campaigning specific to elections, as well as the need to recalibrate our economic model given more nuanced information about the market of organized political manipulation. We also present key recommendations directed at particular stakeholders on what might be within their scope of influence.

Beyond disinformation

Disinformation is now a normative political tool to manipulate public opinion based on false, fabricated, or misleading claims, but more insidious strategies have been at play in recent elections that do not necessarily involve outright deceptive messaging. **This report on covert influence operations of political influencers exemplifies that direction towards a more ‘soft sell’ political strategy through a thoroughly organized but exceedingly opaque scheme.**

While research has documented some of the more subtle executions of influence operations,¹²⁶ it is difficult to know the whole array of techniques they employ given this opacity. Specifically for this research, there might be political influencers who were officially commissioned by a campaign but have been outside the purview of the research as we have not yet caught up with their latest, more intricate manipulative strategies. Our results are only as good as our measures and methods, and the neglect of empirical research outside of the narrow confines of disinformation makes it plausible to have excluded other covert influence operators.

We argue that these public opinion manipulation schemes must be mapped in a spectrum, with aboveboard campaigning as operating within the acceptable electoral and political practices on one end, and black operations on the other end where disinformation and other unscrupulous acts are staple in their operating playbook. Influence operations straddle between these two poles. This makes it convenient for clients to distort or promote narratives through more ‘authentic’ actors such as influencers. As discussed in Chapter 1, political manipulation tactics might include making partisan messaging visible in their communities, integrating their branding in producing political campaign content, and charading political propaganda as political opinion. Chapter 2 also touches on influencers engaging in platform-specific strategies such as creating hyper-visible hyper-partisan news on YouTube and promoting hashtag-driven conspiratorial content on TikTok. They perform designated roles in the campaign to cultivate

126 Ong, Tapsell and Curato, "Tracking Digital Disinformation"; Bunquin et al., "Digital Public Pulse"; Ong et al., "Parallel Public Spheres."

particular voter orientations, from partisan communities to fence-sitters and the general public. These more nebulous strategies make them more difficult to monitor, study, and regulate.

We propose a recalibration of our analytical map of influence operations to be able to contend with this opacity and ambiguity.

- **Emphasize the intentional nature of influence operations**

Like disinformation, influence operations are premeditated to secure some political or economic gain. As such, it is meticulously planned and abundantly funded, not just by anyone but by people who are in power with high-stake interests and with resources to support its operations. This lens narrows our interests to a number of actors and can inform our research questions along the lines of who has the most to gain, who are in the position to perform these operations, and who are targeted by influence operations.¹²⁷ **A focus on power is one of our rationales in pursuing a political economic analysis of covert influence operations.** As Chadwick and Stanyer¹²⁸ pointed out, we should be “tracing misperceptions back to the originating interactions that led to their emergence, before tracing their spread forward again.”

- **Widen our analysis to include historical precedence of influence operations to inform its trajectories**

Prior to social media, political brokers on the ground such as local community leaders and vote brokers engage in “personalized patronage” by representing the candidates to the neighborhood to bring them closer to the voters.¹²⁹ Marketing and PR have also played a big role in political campaigning before the internet, they are arguably the original architects of propaganda in the Philippines. These precedents have parallels to more contemporary practices in influence operations, with influencers now performing networked brokerage

127 Hameleers, “Disinformation as a context-bound.”

128 Chadwick and Stanyer, “Deception as a bridging concept”, 5.

129 Aspinall et al., “Local machines and vote brokerage”, 194.

on social media¹³⁰ by mediating between the politician and audiences, and with promotional professionals running underhanded political campaigns with the same aboveboard tools and tactics.¹³¹ In the same vein, we need to take stock of the disinformation and influence operations in the elections in 2016 and 2019 to make sense of its iteration in the 2022 Philippine Elections, and in the elections to come. **These operatives' social capital accumulates through the years,¹³² and their effects are also arguably compound.**

- **Influence operations should be analyzed as a feature of the media system, and of the political system more broadly**

The structural characteristics of the media system in the Philippines are conducive to influence operations, being more profit-driven than for public service, and being entangled with politicians and subject to bureaucratic maneuver.¹³³ Further, the configurations of digital media platforms not only afford but also incentivize organized political manipulation through its loose governance structure and digital economic architecture. At the level of the political system, influence operations also thrive in the context of weak political institutions and are congruent with the pervasiveness of patron-clientelistic relations¹³⁴ in Philippine politics by ensuring mutual benefits between the politician and influence operators. **Influence operations work in confluence with these other components of the media and political systems, enabling actors to engage in illiberal political acts while magnifying their reach and impact.**

130 Soriano and Gaw, "Platforms, alternative influence."

131 Ong and Cabañes, "When disinformation studies meets."

132 Bunquin et al., "Digital Public Pulse."

133 Lanuza and Arguelles, "Media System Incentives."

134 Teehankee, "Clientelism and party politics."

Gray actors, gray campaigning

Does influence operations count as political campaigning? This research, among many others before it, has stipulated the characteristics of influence operations—organized, well-financed, and designed to complement or work with the mainstream political campaign. However, unlike formal political campaigns, **it involves ‘gray’ actors, who are not exclusively social media managers and not necessarily industrial cyber troops, engaged in ‘gray’ campaign strategies in the middle of the spectrum of political influence schemes**, as discussed above. In other words, even if we consider influence operations as political campaigning, the mechanisms to detect them are exploratory, such as this research, and the principles to govern them are not yet on solid grounds.

We argue that using old paradigms to determine if influence operations are considered political campaigns fails to account how political campaigning itself has changed given new media logics.

- **‘Early’ campaigning to permanent campaigning**

If early campaigning was a problem prior to social media, we could argue that the recent cases we have seen are engaged in much earlier ‘early’ campaigning. Marcos Jr.’s disinformation campaign on rehabilitating his father’s legacy and legitimizing his family is a long-game political ploy, documented in social media as early as 2019¹³⁵ and arguably serving as the launching pad of his 2022 electoral campaign. Like many other populist leaders, Duterte has engaged in permanent campaigning throughout his administration by keeping tight control of the narrative and mobilizing his legions of supporters through his formidable influence operations.¹³⁶ The official campaign period is still important, **but the campaign message has long been seeded and the infrastructure to promote it was built way before and fortified through the years**. A political economic perspective on influence operations makes it evident that these prolonged

135 Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence”; Ong, Tapsell and Curato, “Tracking Digital Disinformation.”

136 Feldstein, “Social Manipulation and Disinformation”; Bradshaw and Howard, “The global disinformation order”; Thompson, “Duterte’s violent populism.”

campaigns are inseparable from their ‘official’ campaigns, if not merely a part of normal politics.

- **Accounting spending on political ‘PR’ and other non-advertising campaign expenses**

Campaign regulations are still operating on the assumption that campaigns follow an advertising model, and it is evidently still a primary vehicle for mass reach, especially for new politicians. In an era of hyper-exposure to media, advertising is just the tip of the iceberg, and it is persuasion that ultimately converts people. TV ads, celebrity endorsements, and political sorties are less persuasive because they are plainly contrived, and organic-looking support from influencers, communities, and ‘real’ people is what works. Marcos Jr. prominently spent zero of his campaign budget on Facebook ads, yet he is the most popular on the platform.¹³⁷ Even if we float the argument that his popularity is what drives his campaign on Facebook, it is unlikely that his camp did not engage in covert influence operations to amplify organic support and sustain it. **These instances of non-advertising spending are neither captured nor asked of politicians in COMELEC’s SOCE, despite the shift in campaign practices.**

- **The emergence of ‘approval’ buying**

Vote buying is still a prevalent election violation. Political campaigning has also moved into what we call ‘approval’ buying. In a culture of recommendations, expressions of endorsements, show of support, and perceptions of popularity have cultural purchase. The bandwagon effect is not new, but what has changed is the performance of such approval and the value people place on their ‘authentic’ political expression. **Influence operations may be considered as the business of manufacturing that approval by commissioning influencers, mobilizing trolls, and hijacking metrics of popularity.**¹³⁸ The opacity of their employment under influence operations is arguably their distinct social capital as influencers because they appear real but are paid

137 Salazar, “Robredo leads, Marcos snubs.”

138 San Pascual, Durana and Cinco, “The emergence of political polling.”

to perform that authenticity. Contemporary political campaigning is all about accumulating expressions of approval not only in static figures in election polls but also in animated engagement on social media, which is partly artificially boosted by influence operations.

Based on these points, we need to recalibrate our conceptual framework of political campaigning during the elections and beyond it to better inform our interventions and policy directions.

Work-in-progress economic model

The estimates of political spending on commissioned influencers within covert influence operations are our best approximation of the cost of running such campaigns given the data we have. While we exercised rigor in our research process, we have been explicit about the limitations of our data in this report, given difficulties with participant recruitment in Chapter 2, use of proxy measures in covert influencer detection in Chapter 3, and reliance on commercial influencer rates in Chapter 4. The variability in the field also complicates the estimation due to the distinct dynamics in the political influencing field compared to the commercial influencer market. As already belabored in this chapter, the specificity and sophistication of covert influence work are also important aspects to consider in our economic model that we decided to preclude in this version of the report given the lack of robust quantitative data sources on them.

Our economic models are sound approximations, but they will always be works in progress as we catch up on the changing political landscape. With more information about the political conditions of covert influence work, we can make our assumptions more grounded. We can also improve our measures of covert influence work with more insights in the field about emerging strategies and techniques. With more data on the political influencer rates, we can account for the variability (i.e., retainer model) and make our models more accurate.

Because our models are works in progress, we call for your support in helping us recalibrate them through the following:

1. **Help us reach out and document the accounts of self-identified commissioned influencers** and their experiences in this line of work, considering our ethical commitment to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.
2. **Inform us of new patterns of manipulation you observe** or are exposed to online to help us develop bottom-up measures for identifying covert influence operations.
3. **Provide us with information about influencer rates** for specific platforms and content or execution to refine our estimates.

Covert influence operations will only ramp up in the next elections, and we expect the economic model to be instrumental in monitoring these campaigns in the 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections, subject to recalibration. We are open to collaboration to strengthen our maps and models.

Recommendations to stakeholders

Government. The government should expand the scope of SOCE to include a broader range of non-advertising expenses, including the commissioning of ‘gray’ actors such as influencers, vloggers, and content creators. Self-reporting of finances must be supported with documentation, which implies that these social media workers should also be required and incentivized to make their engagements with political campaigns transparent. These include employing stronger mechanisms to make them register as independent contractors and file taxes. The government could likewise engage with industry and social media companies for joint monitoring and policy efforts.

Social media platforms. Social media companies should review their ‘content creator’ programs to determine if they are providing misplaced incentives to those complicit in covert influence operations. They should create higher standards for influencers given their social stature within the platforms and their stronger

capacity to influence public opinion. Consequently, platforms should implement mechanisms to penalize those who not only promote disinformation but also monetize malicious activities. The penalties may come in the form of withdrawing malicious content creators' verified status and the demonetization of their accounts.

Media. Media institutions and journalists must expand the scope of their reporting. They must go beyond their usual coverage of addressing disinformation and help in raising awareness to the insidiousness of covert influence operations. We hope to see more media organizations support researchers in surfacing and materializing their political economic workings through investigative journalism. We urge reporters to follow and sustain leads on influence operations beyond elections as part of their political beats, focusing not only on national-level propaganda campaigns but also their counterparts in local politics, especially on anti-media influence campaigns.

Civil Society. Civil society organizations must put their efforts together to shed light on the political economic structures that sustain covert influence operations. One way is for civil society to expand its purview as watchdogs by monitoring election manipulation on social media. Another could be a focus on communities and groups where influence operation work has become a source of livelihood. Their grassroots influence can be the foundation of trust between researchers and workers to help uncover these illicit operations.

Academe. Academics are encouraged to engage in more collaborative cross-discipline work to refine frameworks and models and to design innovative methodologies to uncover the workings of covert influence operations. We suggest qualitative researchers to focus on building strategies to access the field and build trust among potential participants, and quantitative researchers to support in developing robust measures in detecting covert influence operations.

Industry. Promotions industries are gatekeepers to the opportunities for brand and corporate engagement for influencers. We recommended that the industry establish self-regulatory mechanisms for influencers to be transparent in their engagements with politicians and political campaigns by incentivizing them with good relationships

with agencies and corporate clients. Furthermore, as influencers themselves are beginning to organize, we encourage them to build ethical principles in their professional practice and engage in checks and balances among their members.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Preliminary set of words

1986 EDSA Revolution	2022 ph senatorial race	aspirant
Isambayan	2022 Philippine presidential election	2022 Philippine senatorial aspirants
2022 ph election	2022 Philippine presidential elections	2022 Philippine senatorial bet
2022 ph elections	2022 philippine election	2022 Philippine senatorial bets
2022 ph general elections	2022 philippine elections	2022 Philippine senatorial polls
2022 ph national elections	2022 Philippine general elections	2022 Philippine senatorial race
2022 ph national polls	2022 Philippine national elections	ACT-CIS
2022 ph presidentiables	2022 Philippine national polls	Akbayan Party
2022 ph presidential bet	2022 Philippine presidentiables	Aksyon Demokratiko
2022 ph presidential bets	2022 Philippine presidential bet	anak ng diktador
2022 ph presidential election	2022 Philippine presidential bets	Angat Buhay
2022 ph presidential elections	2022 Philippine presidential race	Atty. Leni
2022 ph presidential race	2022 Philippine senate elections	BabyM
2022 ph senate elections	2022 Philippine senatorial aspirant	Bagong lipunan
2022 ph senatoriables	2022 Philippine senatorial aspirants	Batas Militar
2022 ph senatorial aspirant	2022 Philippine senatorial bet	bayaran
2022 ph senatorial aspirants	2022 Philippine senatorial bets	BBM
2022 ph senatorial bet	2022 Philippine senatorial polls	BBM-Sara
2022 ph senatorial bets		Bicol vote
2022 ph senatorial polls		

Blembong	Doc Willie	hindi kami bayad
bong bong marcos	doc willie ong	Hitler diktador tuta
Bongbong magnanakaw	doc. willie ong	Hugpong ng Pagbabago
Bongbong mandarambong	Doctor Willie Ong	Inday Duterte
bongbong marcos	dolomite beach	Inday Sara
Bongbong-Sara	dr willie ong	Isko Domagoso
Certificates of candidacy	Dr. Willie Ong	Isko moreno
COMELEC	Dutertard	ISKO-DOC WILLIE
Commission on elections	duterte legacy	Isko-Ong
CPP	Duterte Youth	ka leody-bello
CPP-NPA	Dutertelegacy	Ka-Leody
crame bagong lipunan	Dutertle	kaban ng bayan
Dayaan	edsa people power	kabataan partylist
DDS	edsa revolution	kakampanget
De guzman	electoral campaign	Kakampwet
De Guzman-Bello	electoral fraud	Kakapanget
de-lawan	electoral protest	Kakapwet
Delawan	electoral race	Kampanya
di-lawan	electoral votes	kiko pangilinan
Dictator son	eleksyon	Kikoman
Dictator's son	Fake vice president	Kilusang Bagong Lipunan
Diehard Duterte Supporter	Ferdinand E. Marcos	Lacson-sotto
Digong	ferdinand marcos	Lakas-CMD
Diktador tuta	filing of candidacy	Len Len
Dilawan	Gabriela partylist	Len-len
dlawan	2022 halalan	Leni Lugaw
Doc Ong	halalan2022	Leni Lutang

leni robredo	Marcos apolo10	Pacquiao Pacman
leni sunbeim	Marcos apologist	Pacquiao-Atienza
leni-kiko	Marcos dictatorship	Pacquiao
Leni-Lugaw	Marcos family	panfilo lacson iii
Leni-Lutang	Marcos regime	panfilo lacson jr.
lenibobo	Marcos supremacy	Panfilo Ping Lacson
LeniLugaw	Marcos-Duterte	pangulo ng pilipinas
lenilutang	Marcos' golden age	paolo duterte
Lenlen	Marcos' golden years	Partial and unofficial
Lenlens	Martial law	Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan
leody de guzman	Mayor Isko	Partido Federal ng Pilipinas
Leody Deguzman	miting de avance	Partido Reforma
Leody Manggagawa	Moreno	PDP-Laban
Leodycakes	Moreno-Ong	People power revolution
Liberal Party	Mothers for Change	people's grand rally
Lito Atienza	Nacionalista Party	People's Reform Party
Lugaw	Nanay Leni	ph proclamation rally
Ma'am Leni	National Unity Party	ph vote 2022
Madumb	Nationalist People's Coalition	phvote 2022
Magnanakaw	Never again	ph voting polls 2022
Makabayan bloc	Never forget	philippine election
Mam Leni	Neveragain	philippine elections
Mama Leni	Neverforget	Philippine foreign policies
manila bay dolomite	NPA	Philippine foreign policy
manny pacman	online comelec registration	Philippine foreign trade
manny pacquiao		Philippine human rights
Manny-Lito	Otso diretso inodoro	

philippine martial law	Solid BBM
ping-tito	SWOH
pink lawan	tito sotto
Pinklangaw	Twitter President
Pinklawan	Uniteam
Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino	Unithieves
Re-electionist	Unity
Robredo	Vicente Sotto III
Robredo-pangilinan	voteph
rodrigo duterte	VP Bet
sara duterte	walden bello
Sara Duterte-Carpio	wedecide
Sarah Duterte	willie ong
smartmagic	Withdraw Isko
smartmatic	Withdraw Leni
Solid BBM	Yellow cult
Solid North	Yellow-pinks
SolidNorth	Yorme
SolidSnort	Yorme Isko
Solid Snort	yorme isko moreno

Appendix 2. Institutional actor classifier

ACTOR CATEGORY	PRECISION
Civil society	0.97
Entertainment media	1.00
Facebook page of political communities	0.90
Facebook page about other topics	0.95
Facebook page about politics and current affairs	0.89
Politicians, government officials, and government offices	0.91
Facebook profiles of unaffiliated users	0.88
Facebook profiles of unidentifiable users	0.90
News media	0.92
Other affiliation	0.92

Appendix 3. Data collection and analysis details

TABLE 1.

Tools used for data collection in each platform

PLATFORM	TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND SEARCH PARAMETERS
Facebook	CrowdTangle	A social media listening tool developed by Meta, which serves as the parent organization of Facebook
Twitter	NodeXL Pro	Excel add-on developed by the Social Media Research Foundation, which is linked to the Twitter API for academic research, enabling historical access of 10 million tweets per month. ¹³⁹
TikTok	Apify	A commercial scraper ¹⁴⁰ developed to extract TikTok videos based on keyword search; used to identify content creators to scrape videos for the project. Identified accounts were followed to train the algorithm of a new TikTok account and generate new videos.
	Zeeschuimer	A tool developed by Stijn Peeters from the Digital Methods Initiative that captures algorithmically recommended content in the for you page available on one's screen as users scroll through the platform. We used it to collect recommended content based on our initial keywords to generate more related keywords.

¹³⁹ <https://developer.twitter.com/en/products/twitter-api/academic-research>

¹⁴⁰ <https://apify.com/clockworks/tiktok-scraper>

PLATFORM	TOOL	DESCRIPTION AND SEARCH PARAMETERS
YouTube	YouTube data tools	<p>A set of tools developed by the Digital Methods Initiative by Bernhard Rieder that extracts YouTube data using the platform's API; videos were collected using the video list module. Irrelevant videos were removed through a manual inspection of the data, discarding videos from foreign channels, content unrelated to the Philippine elections, and other irrelevant videos based on video titles.</p> <p>Video IDs of the collected videos were then used as inputs to get video recommendations.</p>

TABLE 2.

Nodes, edges, and data points per platform

PLATFORM	NODES	EDGES	DATA POINTS USED
Facebook	Pages	Sharing post made by another Facebook page (<i>A's post was shared by B</i>)	Facebook page ID and URL of link shared in post
Twitter	Twitter accounts	Including another user (denoted by @ symbol) via direct mention, retweets, quote tweets, and replies (<i>A's tweet mentioned B</i>)	Twitter username and tweet content
YouTube	YouTube channels	Inclusion in the list of recommended channels by the YouTube algorithm (<i>A's video was recommended based on B's video</i>)	Seed video and recommended video

PLATFORM	NODES	EDGES	DATA POINTS USED
TikTok	TikTok accounts	Use of the same hashtag <i>(A's video used the same hashtag as B's video)</i>	TikTok username and TikTok hashtags used in post

TABLE 3.

Behavioral indicators and data points per platform

INDICATOR	PLATFORM	DATA POINTS USED	ANALYSIS
Having same-name accounts	All	Username	Based on name similarity: We identified usernames that were 90% similar with names of institutional users to identify influencers that were mimicking these pages.
Distributed amplification	Facebook, Twitter	Username, post, link, and post time and date	Based on time-elapsd and frequency of sharing: We examined users that shared a post within 60 seconds after original posting. We then counted the number of times a user performed this behavior and removed those that did it less than 5 times.
Post recurrence	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Username, post, link, and post time and date	Based on post similarity and time elapsed: We identified users who made highly similar posts within a one-week period.

INDICATOR	PLATFORM	DATA POINTS USED	ANALYSIS
Sharing from fake news sources	Facebook, Twitter	Link/URL present in tweet	Based on presence in list: We identified users sharing links from fake news actors identified by reputable fact-checking organizations (e.g., TootBa.Info, Rappler, etc.).
Sockpuppetry	All	Username	Based on name similarity: We compared usernames in all platforms and identified users that matched based on high similarity scores.
Commenter behavior	YouTube	Commenter ID, Video ID, Channel ID	Based on frequency of commenting on videos in one channel: We identified channels with commenters who frequently made comments on their videos.

TABLE 4.

Content theme development and sample words

CONTENT THEME	DICTIONARY DEVELOPMENT	SAMPLE WORDS
Partisanship	Names of politicians, political parties, political platforms, and other vernacular expression of partisanship	“BBM” “Uniteam” “Angat Buhay”
Antagonism and delegitimization	Words often used in hateful and defamatory comments on social media against common targets of political hostility (e.g., news media’s posts)	“balitanga” “biasmediabasura” “iskomunista”
Misogyny and prejudice	Terms from a pre-existing database (Hatebase.org) augmented with culturally specific keywords in scoring texts based on this content theme	“malandi” “desperada” “mga bayad kayo”
Conspiracy and manipulation	References to popular political conspiracies and manipulative narratives derived from fact-checked databases	“propesiya na itinakda” “martial law victims ay komunista” “Facebookfactcheckerpbias”
Self-ascription	Adjectives and other words used in self-descriptions that invoke alternative position from mainstream news media, or claims of servicing public interests	“Totoong balita” “boluntaryo” “para sa taong bayan”

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