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Abstract

This paper explores the limits of the frame “disinformation” when exploring the growing industry of pseudonymous influencers who occasionally campaign for politicians and seed crisis frames. Pseudonymous influencers in the form of parody accounts, meme pages, and romantic love quotes (*hugot*) accounts, and horny queer "alt" accounts have been able to evade disinformation interventions such as fact-checking because their media manipulation objectives are less focused on spreading false news and more directed toward signal boosting politically-slanted hashtags or promoting electioneering politicians. By mapping a diverse ecosystem of pseudonymous influencers in the Philippines, our paper contributes an important global South case study to understand the political economy of disinformation and the complicities of influencer industries with disinformation and “dark PR” (Edwards, 2021).

Introduction

Popular journalism about the Philippines’ disinformation crisis has often narrowly attributed “fake news” to President Rodrigo Duterte, the Marcos family, and a small but influential army of social media bloggers (Syjuco, 2017). Many online celebrities have indeed amassed thousands of followers by amplifying Duterte’s angry populist rhetoric (Curato, 2016) and rallying supporters to embrace a political identity of being part of Duterte’s army, known as the “Duterte Death Squad” (DDS) (Gutierrez, 2017). Some these journalistic reports and academic research have overstated the impact of these supporters on the political process, at times even expressing deterministic claims they were secret weapons for Duterte’s electoral victory in 2016 (e.g., Etter, 2017). Senate investigations in past years have pinned the problem of “fake news” on online influencers (Tan, 2017), and social media platforms eventually tried to minimize their reach in their News Feed (Rappler.com, 2020). While investigating mega-influencers' popularity illustrates how rabble-raising and clout-chasing political punditry can be monetized, in reality the disinformation ecosystem goes deeper than those mainstream media have branded as “purveyors of fake news”. In the Philippines’ competitive disinformation economies, other kinds of micro-influencers have also stepped in to compete for clout and profitable collaborations (see Authors 2019).

This paper focuses on the rise of “pseudonymous influencers” and situates them as important, but underreported, disinformation agents that pollute the media ecosystem. Pseudonymous influencers are those innocent-looking parody accounts, humorous meme pages, and romantic love quotes (aka. *hugot*) accounts that occasionally slip in paid content for their political clients. While they might not have the same capacities to shape political conversation as a “fake news

queen” or traditional celebrity, pseudonymous influencers play a unique role in the disinformation economy as their media manipulation strategies are not confined to the narrow frame of “disinformation” or obvious falsehoods that could be corrected by fact-checkers. Pseudonymous influencers’ media manipulations instead take advantage of regulatory loopholes in election campaigns and campaign finance laws. They use humorous language or horny thirsttrap selfies to cloak political messages and even inflammatory speech. They are also able to maintain anonymity that helps them evade both creative industry regulations and official investigations.

Engaging broader debates about the political economy of disinformation (Briant, 2021; Feldstein, 2021) and contributing a global South case study, our analysis demonstrates that fact-checking initiatives with narrow remits in defining and correcting disinformation must evolve to better respond to local features of disinformation production. What is needed in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines are creative and collaborative interventions that can engage private industries as well as promote transparency and accountability in practices of influencer marketing and political campaigning. Researchers and legal experts should collaborate and strategize for local regulatory reform in the promotional industries rather than simply lobby Facebook or Twitter for more or better content moderation of “fake news”.

Finally, our paper contributes to disinformation studies by nuancing how pseudonymous influencers in a personality-based political system test the boundaries of the frame “disinformation”. This has far-reaching consequences as these controversial, if not necessarily obviously disinformative, tactics were also used in the failed Democratic presidential campaign of Michael Bloomberg in the US (Tiffany, 2020). His campaign assembled armies of social media influencers and meme accounts and raised questions about the professional ethics of campaigning as well as the regulatory grey areas in campaign finance. Several meme pages that Bloomberg enlisted used fake quotes from Bernie Sanders, but the humorous delivery of meme accounts were not as egregiously manipulative as other scandalous tactics in the US election cycle, such as the use of conspiracy theory (Collins, 2021). We argue the media manipulation strategies of pseudonymous influencers have really flown under the radar of disinformation interventions and indeed we need a “whole of society approach” to tackle the issue (Friedberg & Donovan, 2018). The anonymous nature of these accounts is also worth critical reflection: new top-down legislation in the Philippines and other countries in the global South have pivoted toward banning, censoring, and penalizing anonymous accounts on social media with no consideration of the actual content of their pages. Human rights groups such as Article 19 have cautioned that overly punitive legislation threatens users' privacy, freedom of expression, and non-discrimination (Article 19, 2022).

Context and Methods

This article draws primarily from a collaborative project we conducted during the 2019 Philippines elections, where we monitored social media conversations and tracked disinformation narratives using digital ethnography between December 2018 and May 2019. Our project was specifically interested in the disinformation agents and media manipulation

techniques underreported in mainstream media and escaping the fact-checking interventions that dominate the Philippines' disinformation mitigation space. Together with a larger team of researchers, we observed a range of news pages on various platforms and influencer accounts on Instagram and Twitter. This paper specifically compiles our insights about the pseudonymous influencers we observed, though we also catalogued a more diverse range of mega- and micro-influencers (see Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019). The broader project made use of mixed methods of qualitative online observations, big data analysis, and interviews with digital campaign strategists to capture evolving trends in election campaigning that include official "above-ground" political advertising and marketing as well as black ops campaigning incorporating disinformation and smear campaigns.

At the same time, this paper is informed by long-term ethnographic research on disinformation economies in the Philippines that involved interviews with the range of campaign strategists, influencers, and fake account operators active in digital political campaigns in the 2016 Philippines elections (Ong & Cabanes, 2018; 2019). This original research project was informed by a production studies approach examining the work arrangements and moral justifications of workers behind digital campaigns. This earlier project uncovered the very early use of pseudonymous influencers behind the worldwide trending hashtag #NasaanAngPangulo ("Where Is the President?") smearing the reputation of then-President Benigno Aquino III and spotlighting his absence during a monumental crisis event, as we will discuss further below. As a paper that synthesizes insights from two election cycles and crisis events happening between campaign periods, we are able to present a typology of the diverse genres of pseudonymous influencers involved in the political process that should inform researchers and policymakers trying to mitigate social media manipulation at scale.

The Pseudonymous Influencer Ecosystem

Influencer is a marketing term used to refer to individuals with a large number of online followers acting as "micro-celebrities" in digital environments (Abidin, 2016). We characterize pseudonymous influencers as part of the influencer economy in the sense that they capitalize on their smaller yet equally fervent organic followers (from 50,000 to 2,000,000 followers). Like other digital influencers, pseudonymous influencers get paid for promoting different commercial brands (Ong & Cabanes, 2018). However, unlike the microcelebrity influencers who are known to capitalize on their "textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles" (Abidin, 2016, p. 3), pseudonymous influencers operate successfully without disclosing names and identities of their actual operators. As we discuss below, the same way that pseudoanonymous influence operations leverage their anonymity to appropriate marginalized identities and use inflammatory speech (Friedberg & Donovan, 2018), it is also the anonymity of pseudonymous influencer accounts help them evade industry regulations and serve different political patrons.

This section maps out a diverse ecology of pseudonymous influencers classified to different genres of social media performance and media manipulation strategies: a) Pinoy Pop Culture Accounts, 2) Parody Accounts, and 3) Horny "Alt" Accounts. The typology presented is based on the characteristics of these accounts and the usual contents they post to appeal to and sustain

their online audience. By citing examples of disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy theory seeded by these pseudonymous influencers, we demonstrate how their strategic use of local popular vernaculars and “gutter languages” is able to maneuver diverse grey areas around acceptable speech on platforms.

1. Pinoy Pop Culture Accounts

Pinoy pop culture accounts adopt pseudo personas such as a stereotypical middle-class auntie (e.g., @TitasofManila, or Aunties of Manila), a wise adviser on love and failed romances (e.g., @BobOngQuotes, @hugotquotes), and fictional television villains known for their bitchy (and occasionally misogynist and classist) one-liners (@SenyoraSantibanez). These accounts comment on Filipino society and culture at large and can reach mega-influencer status of having millions of followers because of their broad *masa* (mass or mainstream) appeal. For instance, Senyora makes fun of herself as a “flat-chested” woman and many of her posts poke fun at well-endowed celebrities and influencers, pushing the boundary of acceptable humor with Filipino gender stereotypes.

Operating mostly on Facebook and Twitter, their media manipulation includes slipping paid posts for their corporate and political clients in between their stream of inspirational or humorous posts. Organized systematically, a team of them can work together and coordinate the tweeting of hashtag according to set schedules in an effort to game the Twitter trending rankings, or more specifically, to secure the top rank in trending topics in order to catch the public’s attention.

We first observed this coordinated behavior on Twitter for #NasaanAngPangulo (trans. #WhereIsThePresident) during the Mamasapano Crisis way back in January 2015, which sought to shame President Benigno (Noynoy) Aquino for his absence in the public spotlight in the immediate aftermath of the death of 44 Special Action Force personnel from a failed military operation (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. @TheBobOngQuote originated the hashtag #NasaanAngPangulo which trended worldwide on Twitter, and picked up by local and global media outlets.

The account @TheBobOngQuote is operated anonymously. The pseudo's persona is that of a wiser old man dispensing generic inspirational quotes. The hashtag #NasaanAngPangulo trended both locally and internationally; both local and international news media outlets such as the BBC picked up the story and reported heavily on Filipino Twitter publics' anger at an "absentee President" (BBC Trending, 2015). In our analysis of social media discourse, we observed @TheBobOngQuote account worked alongside other Pinoy pop culture accounts in a coordinated fashion and helped shape broader public discussions about the country's need for a populist strongman leader instead of an elite politician. After all, Aquino represented the elite establishment, and his eventual successor Rodrigo Duterte is the angry populist strongman who promised to deliver results during a crisis (Arguelles, 2021). In our ethnographic interviews with campaign strategists (Ong & Cabanes, 2018), one PR consultant took credit for being the brains behind the #NasaanAngPangulo influence ops and revealed she "activated" her usual collaborators—a group of younger people operating multiple pseudo accounts—during the crisis. Gaming Twitter trending rankings is a service she has historically offered to corporate clients, and now being rolled out to political clients.

During our 2019 elections monitoring, we observed similar techniques of assembling pseudonymous influencers this time to promote campaign slogans for politicians. The most successful hashtag boosting was for Imee Marcos' election campaign slogan #IMEEsolusyon, which reached the Top 10 Trending hashtags on Twitter.

In many ways, pseudonymous influencers' media manipulation strategies enact Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis' (2017) concept of *attention hacking*, which they described as a media manipulation technique employed by US far-right groups that sneak extreme ideas into mainstream media coverage. Attention hackers exploit journalists' predilection to cover newsworthy controversy such as viral and trending topics on Twitter. Our case study here illustrates how innocent-looking pseudonymous influencers similarly hack media and public attention through seeding hashtags for their political clients. In this case, the local attention hackers' practice of gaming Twitter trending topics is primarily driven by corporate marketing logics rather than driven by political beliefs or position (for more on the advertising and PR disinformation work model, see Ong & Cabanes, 2019). As Lee Edwards (2021) argued, PR firms uses disinformation "by constructing their meaning in ways that protect professional interests" (p. 177) but at the same time damages the quality of political debate. This is why pseudo accounts can also be inconsistent with their political positions and loyalties – their allegiances can shift and their services can be sold to their client of the moment.

Take for example the case of Pinoy pop culture influencers formally enlisted as "endorsers" of politicians (Figure 2). Senyora Santibañez, a mega-influencer with over 4.5 million Facebook followers, endorsed reelectionist Senator Nancy Binay months before the start of the 2019 election campaign season. Prior to this engagement, this account, best known for her snarky takedowns and classist comments on the poor and the working-class, had actually bullied Binay and her family for having dark skin—a racist and classist jibe in postcolonial Philippines where fair skin color is a marker of high status. This is an example of how a politician pays out a powerful influencer to silence their racist and classist bullying, and instead direct their operations to support their political campaigns. In this regard, pseudonymous influencers can be very opportunistic in their political transactions.



Figure 2. In this post, Senyora pokes fun at her physical absence at the book launch of her co-authored joke book with Nancy Binay. Ironically, this account had once bullied Binay and this staged collaboration officially ended their feud and helped reverse the tide of incessant racist/classist bullying of Senator Binay.

2. Parody Accounts

Unlike Pinoy pop culture accounts whose political loyalties can be more discreet unless activated in an official endorsement, parody accounts tend to be obviously supportive or antagonistic toward the politicians or government offices they impersonate.

Parody accounts (such as @NoynoyingAquino, @Korinavirus, and @AltPhilMedia) employ vulgar language when criticizing elite establishment personalities and "elite" mainstream media. They attack politicians for being too elitist or lacking political will during times of crisis. Sometimes, they poke fun at specific facial features or personality traits of politicians, such as when @NoynoyingAquino used vulgar humor to call former President Benigno Aquino III mentally abnormal—riffing off an old and very offensive joke that the President looks like a mentally handicapped person.

In this example below (Figure 3), @NoynoyingAquino attacked Aquino and fellow Liberal Party ally current Vice President Leni Robredo, bullied their supporters as “abnormal” (or mentally handicapped), and praised the Duterte administration.



Failed Former President Benigno Aquino III
@NoynoyingAquino



I am proud to say that the Country is getting better in the hands of Duterte even with out a VP.

**SUMUKO NA KAYO MGA SUPPORTERS KONG
ABNORMAL. TAMA NA!**

12:14 AM · Feb 20, 2021 · Twitter for Android

31 Retweets 8 Quote Tweets 140 Likes

Figure 3. A political parody account of former President Benigno Aquino III praised the Duterte administration and attacked his supporters.

Meanwhile, anti-Duterte parody accounts—such as Malacañang Events and Catering Services, and the Superficial Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines (parodying official government offices)—use the language of satire and humor to challenge Duterte and his allied authority figures. Rhetorically, parody can be strategically used to poke fun at the excesses and shamelessness of those in power. Sometimes, a target of their parody is how Duterte claims at being a “strongman” politician while actually being cozy with the Chinese government (Shiga & Kawase, 2021).

At times, these parody accounts critical of the Duterte government slipped into racist expressions against Chinese people. For instance, the Malacañang Catering Events and Services account poked fun of Duterte and his close relationship with Xi Jinping, acknowledging how the country is an inch closer to being “a province of China”. Other accounts used explicitly racist and crass language. The political parody account Pulitikanginamo (Figure 4) regularly referred to Chinese people with the racial slur “ching chong”. On one occasion, the account misleadingly shared a photo of a Chinese toddler defecating in public though the incident did not actually occur in a Philippines mall. The page called Chinese tourists “dog eaters” and invited its followers to submit memes mocking them. This page has since been taken down by Facebook after our research team published our study that discussed the use of racist narratives as a political weapon in the 2019 election (see also: Silverman, Lytyvenko & Kang 2019).



PULITIKaNGINaMO

Apr 27 at 00:35 • 🌐

Putang inang mga Intsik Ching Chong Bababoy ng mga puking ina talaga! Ilang buwan sinara yan para ayusin at linisin bababuyin niyo lang! I-ban dapat kayong mga putang ina niyo dyan! Di lang kayo ang turista sa Mundo! Bwakinang ina niyong mga Dog Eaters! Pakyu! Pakyu! Ching Chong Layas!



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Figure 4. Trans. "Son of a Bitch, these Ching Chongs are so disgusting [profanity]! The beach was closed for months to be cleaned and you'll just make it dirty! You should be banned, you sons of bitches! You're not the only tourists in the world! You sons of bitches you dog eaters! Fuck you! Get out, Ching Chong!" Screenshot by the authors.

Like the meme pages in Abidin's study (2018), pseudonymous influencers can pivot their content during crisis events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and remain relevant and influential. As shown in examples below (Figure 5), pseudonymous influencers were similarly responsible for mixing up conspiracy theory, medical misinformation, and anti-Chinese hate speech in the Philippines when fears of the virus and its origins took hold. The country has long been victim to Beijing's territorial encroachments into contested regions of the West Philippine Sea (Ong, 2021; Tantuco, 2021).



Figure 5. A discussion between two pseudo accounts discussing the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 virus was intentionally leaked from the Wuhan Lab in China.

These conspiracy theories are clear examples of what Abidin (2018) describes as “decision-seeding discourses” that can be expressed in extreme ways by pseudonymous posters and meme pages, while politicians advanced this same narrative in their own official statements in more “moderate” and less inflammatory tones (for more on anti-Chinese racism in Southeast Asia, see Ong, 2021).

What is critical to highlight here is how pseudonymous influencers’ media manipulation strategies of using anti-China narratives for political gain could lead to everyday racism and hate, as Chinese migrant workers have been tagged on social media like in Figures 5 and 6 as carriers of the virus and agents of the Chinese government. While these accounts position these racist

expressions as pockets of resistance whereby they assert that Philippines is the primary victim of Chinese territorial aggressions and it is important that more Filipinos expose and resist political and everyday indignities, these expressions could pose significant threats to multicultural social relations in the country.

3. Horny “Alt” Porn Accounts

Unlike other platforms with stricter rules around nudity and X-rated content, Twitter has become an “amateur porn paradise” for gay men to experiment with “alter” (i.e., alter ego) personas who are sexually liberated and expressive of their innermost desires. “Alter” accounts in Philippines’ Gay Twitter might still act more discreetly than Gay Twitter in the US (Abad-Santos, 2021) as many horny Filipino gay men still hide their faces and adopt pseudonyms to post sexual content, flirt with other “alters”, and deep dive into specific sexual genres such as intergenerational or interracial sex. Some “alters” offer paid subscription services on amateur porn sites such as OnlyFans and JustForFans (Cao, 2021). With the popularity of “alters” or “alts” on the rise, some have taken advantage of their huge and passionate fan following for political persuasion.

In the pandemic moment where many have been sexually frustrated locked down at home as well as frustrated the Duterte government’s militarized pandemic response, we observed some “alt” porn accounts breaking from their homemade sex video production for political commentary (see Figure 6).

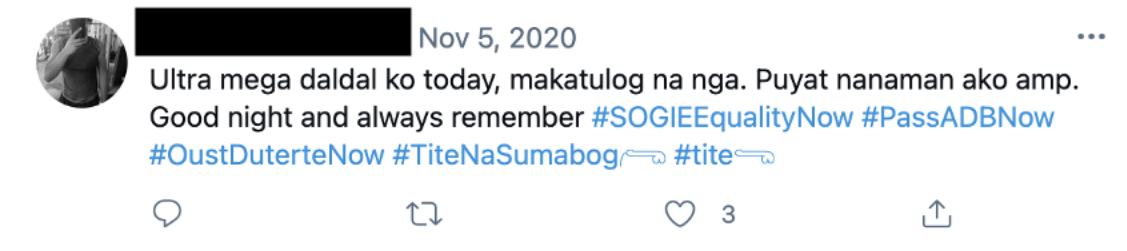


Figure 6. Alt Account 1 (pseudonym) is an ‘alt’ who shares sexually suggestive content and occasionally participates in political commentary. Here he mixes anti-government commentary #OustDuterteNow and support for LGBTQ equality with #TiteNaSumabog (#EjaculatingPenis) to appeal to a very specific demographic of “woke” horny gay men.

In Figure 7, we see a similar practice of mixing horny hashtags (#jakol or #masturbate) with a clear anti-Duterte political position. Not only does this help boost the visibility of anti-government voices in the context of a repressive regime, it also connects the alter with other gay men belonging to a minority political camp. As pro-government online trolls and state officials have silenced dissent through digital harassment as well as “redtagging” (insinuating that government critics are Communist sympathizers), maintaining pseudo identities such as alters should be seen as a strategic expression of activism to evade state-sponsored trolling and harassment. We observe alters such as one trans female account (see Figure 8) using Twitter to highlight government abuses as well as criticizing politically apathetic fellow citizens.



Figure 7. Alt Account 2 shares their thirst trap photo with hashtags #jakol (#masturbate), #alterph, #OustDuterte, and #OUSTDUTERTENOW as a form of political signaling within their specific community.

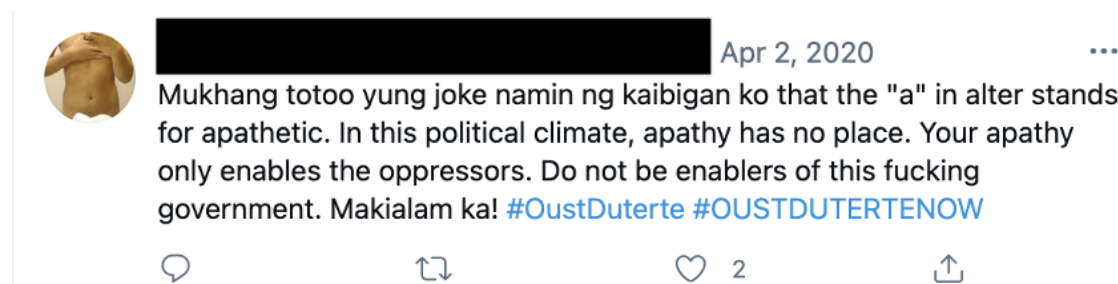


Figure 8. Alt Account 3 is a trans alter account who mixes pornographic content with political criticism.

Alter accounts are liberated in both sexual and emotional expressions. We have not gathered material evidence from research interviews that any of the "alt" accounts are formally enlisted as part of paid influence operations, though it is possible that their operators might maintain other meme pages.

However, in 2019 we had observed how non-X-rated sexy shirtless men's Instagram pages were activated to repost the official campaign materials for an old male Senator, ostensibly used to micro-target Filipino LGBTQ+ voters (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019). This is the most concrete

evidence to date that at least one politician and their political PR team has considered that sexy gay male influencers can arouse a niche voter demographic.

Understanding Local Features of Disinformation to Inform Global Disinformation Interventions

Thus far, this paper takes a broader view of disinformation shadow economies in the Philippines and spotlights the media manipulation strategies of pseudonymous influencers that appear entertaining and innocent while evading responsibility for stoking racism and seeding crisis narratives. Pseudonymous influencers are not the disinformation agents most egregiously responsible for blatantly false news or the most aggressive and inflammatory speech. However, we have shown examples how they have occasionally used humor, parody, and horniness to cloak blatantly racist, classist, sexist, or ableist speech.

At the same time, this paper exposes the limits of the frame “disinformation” when we discuss the influence operations at play and their many proximities to inauthentic coordinative behavior, racial targeting and harassment, “black” campaigning, and attention hacking. As we have shown, pseudonymous influencers can pivot during crisis events such as COVID-19 and seed “decision-making frames”. What this means is that pseudonymous influencers’ media manipulation have agility and maneuverability to survive and thrive in a sophisticated disinformation economy where platforms, journalists, and fact-checkers focus their energies catching a select few “purveyors of fake news” but overlooking those enacting subtler and savvier influence operations. This is particularly problematic as platforms’ content moderation has been notoriously slow to understand cultural nuances of local humor or niche subcultures. In our experiences when engaging with platforms, their takedown policies are best suited to deplatforming accounts that use specific words, such as racial slurs like “ching chong”, as discussed above.

Moving forward, we are particularly worried about how these accounts will continue to exploit regulatory loopholes. We observe a lot of momentum behind spotlighting platform accountability in the West, where specific discussions about Silicon Valley platforms’ responsibility to deplatform political elites have advanced significantly from previous policies (Zuckerman, 2021). However, the accountability of private industry with the diversity of disinformation-for-hire or influence-for-hire actors lacks steam. It is important that future interventions expand from fact-checking and reporting on false news on social media to include PR firms, advertising agencies, and influencer agencies’ responsibility and accountability in the disinformation debate (Briant, 2021; Edwards, 2021). At the same time, civil society groups should resist top-down legislation that caricature all pseudonymous accounts or anonymous accounts as the source of “fake news”, which some worrying legislation that aims to empower law enforcement to go after anonymous accounts (Article 19, 2022). What is needed are transparency and accountability frameworks rather than overbroad top-down legislation that expands government control and surveillance. In any case, this study has presented granular evidence to show how the thriving influencer industries in a global South context are very much complicit and creative in being enlisted as pawns and artillery for political elites’ game of thrones.

At the same, because of the anonymous nature of these same accounts, they can be easily scapegoated and targeted by dangerous legislation.

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