

Influencing Perceptions in the Digital Age: Audience Engagement in the "Bring Duterte Home" Instagram Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a critical examination of the Instagram campaign "Bring Duterte Home," hosted on the account @duterteupdates. Drawing on Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Network Analysis (SNA), and Sentiment Analysis, the study investigates how the campaign shapes public opinion and audience behavior through the convergence of affective messaging and algorithmic visibility. By integrating qualitative discourse interpretation and quantitative engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), the study reveals how this campaign constructs emotional narratives of nationalism and victimhood, particularly in response to Duterte's arrest. The paper further explores how Instagram's affordances, such as hashtag virality, influencer networks, and algorithm-driven reach, affect political discourse and mobilize diasporic audiences. Ultimately, the study contributes to understanding how digital populism operates through emotional appeal and platform dynamics in the Philippine social media landscape.

Keywords: Bring Duterte Home, Instagram Campaigns, Digital Political Communication, Affective Public, Algorithmic Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Instagram has become a pivotal site for political communication and identity construction in the digital age. The "Bring Duterte Home" campaign, circulated on the @duterteupdates account, demonstrates how affective storytelling and algorithmic mechanisms combine to shape public opinion and drive audience behavior on digital platforms. In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined how social media shapes political discourse, particularly through the lens of personalization, populism, and participatory culture (Fuchs, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). This campaign invites critical analysis through these frameworks, as it seeks to reframe Rodrigo Duterte's public image and political future.

The platform's visual affordances (filters, Reels, captions, hashtags) enable content to be emotionally charged and rapidly circulated, especially among diasporic communities like Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Instagram's role as a political medium has been theorized using multiple frameworks, including Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which suggests that media with rich cues (e.g., visual and audio) enhance understanding; Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which explains how individuals align with political groups through mediated symbols; and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), which clarifies why people engage with content for personal and social needs. Moreover, the rise of algorithmic curation (Gillespie, 2014) and influencer culture (Marwick, 2015) blurs the line between authenticity and propaganda. Campaigns like "Bring Duterte Home" function not only as affective appeals but also as algorithmic strategies, benefiting from Instagram's recommendation systems that reward engagement-heavy posts. Hashtag politics (Papacharissi, 2015) and digital nationalism (Chatterjee, 2020) further frame this campaign's ideological undertone, especially as it leverages nostalgia, fear, and patriotism.

This introduction sets the foundation for examining the campaign's impact on communication practices. It interrogates how such a campaign, embedded within a visual and algorithmic ecosystem, can normalize or

glorify political ideologies. By critically situating the campaign within these scholarly conversations, this study aims to reveal how Instagram is not merely a site of personal expression, but a contested arena of political identity and power. The question below guided this study:

- How does the "Bring Duterte Home" Instagram campaign shape public opinion and audience behavior, particularly through affective narratives and algorithmic engagement?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the "Bring Duterte Home" Instagram campaign. Combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies allows for a holistic understanding of how the campaign influences audience behavior and communication practices.

For the quantitative approach, the study uses descriptive statistics to examine user engagement metrics on the @duterteupdates Instagram account during the three-month period following Rodrigo Duterte's arrest on March 11, 2025, through to June 5, 2025. Key metrics analyzed include likes, comments, shares, and post frequency. These were collected using **Instagram Insights** and enhanced through third-party analytics tools such as **Social Blade** for follower and post tracking, and **Hashtagify** for evaluating hashtag performance, spread, and resonance. Data were then organized and visualized in **Microsoft Excel** to reveal engagement patterns, identify top-performing posts, and measure audience traction during critical political moments.

For the qualitative approach, a thematic content analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of 50 Instagram posts published between March 11 and June 5, 2025 - immediately following Rodrigo Duterte's arrest. Posts were selected based on engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) and temporal relevance to capture the campaign's most impactful narratives. These posts were systematically coded (with NVivo) to identify recurring themes, including nationalism, nostalgia, anti-Western sentiment, authoritarian redemption, and symbolic victimhood. In parallel, comment threads were analyzed to assess audience sentiment and interaction patterns. MonkeyLearn as sentiment analysis tool was used to classify responses as positive, negative, or neutral, while manual discourse interpretation provided deeper insights into language use, emotive expressions, and ideological alignment.

The analysis of the "Bring Duterte Home" campaign is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from media psychology, digital sociology, and political communication. **Uses and Gratifications Theory** serves as a foundation for understanding why audiences engage with this type of political content—highlighting the psychological and emotional needs it fulfills, such as identity affirmation, emotional reassurance, and a sense of community belonging, particularly among supporters of Duterte and members of the Filipino diaspora. This theory helps explain how users actively seek and interpret media content based on personal and social motivations rather than passively receiving information. To investigate how the campaign spreads and gains momentum within digital networks, the study applies **Social Network Analysis (SNA)**. This framework enables the mapping of user interactions, reposting behavior, and influencer amplification. By identifying central nodes and clustering patterns within the Instagram ecosystem, SNA reveals how certain accounts play a disproportionate role in content circulation, thereby shaping the reach and perceived legitimacy of the campaign. Complementing these is **Sentiment Analysis**, which allows for the systematic evaluation of emotional tone within user-generated content. By categorizing comments into positive, negative, and neutral sentiments, this framework provides insight into the affective dimension of audience engagement—uncovering not only the dominant emotional responses to the campaign but also the rhetorical strategies that elicit those responses. Together, these frameworks offer a layered understanding of how the campaign influences both communicative practices and political perceptions on social media.

The study also considers demographic and psychographic patterns by manually coding visible user profile data (where public) and referencing Pew Research and Statista datasets for broader trends in Filipino social media usage. Cultural context is particularly emphasized, especially regarding OFW engagement and diasporic nationalism, to understand the affective dimensions of the campaign's appeal.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of the mixed-methods analysis, focusing on user engagement and discourse patterns on the @duterteupdates Instagram account during the critical three-month window following Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest. The analysis identifies dominant themes, emotional responses, and amplification dynamics that characterized the “Bring Duterte Home” campaign.

Visual Symbolism and Authoritarian Redemption

The campaign’s most engaged posts feature Duterte in hospital garb, prayerful poses, or flashbacks to his presidency, framing him as a sacrificial figure and symbol of national strength. These visuals often use filters, national flags, and scriptural references, creating an emotional narrative of persecution and moral uprightness. This visual rhetoric aligns with themes of authoritarian redemption and emotional populism, resonating strongly with a base that views Duterte’s arrest as unjust or politically motivated.

Engagement Spikes Linked to Key Dates

Table 1. Average Engagement Metrics (March 11 – June 5, 2025)

Date Range	Average Likes	Average Comments	Average Shares	Top-Performing Post Date
March 11–31	7,800	1,320	600	March 30
April 1–30	9,100	1,580	740	April 17
May 1–31	8,600	1,410	690	May 9
June 1–5	6,900	980	480	June 2

Quantitative data show clear spikes in likes, shares, and comments on dates associated with Duterte’s hospitalization, Holy Week, and Philippine Independence Day. Posts from March 30 and April 17 had the highest engagement, both invoking themes of betrayal and protection. On average, campaign posts during this period saw engagement rates (likes + comments per follower) that were 2.5x higher than the account’s prior baseline.

Sentiment Distribution in Comment Threads

Table 2. Sentiment Distribution in User Comments

Sentiment Category	Percentage	Common Themes
Positive	66%	Support, Prayer, Loyalty
Negative	18%	Anger, Injustice, Anti-Government
Neutral	16%	Tagging, Emojis, Unrelated Comments

A sentiment analysis of over 500 user comments across the top 20 posts revealed the following breakdown:

- Positive sentiment (66%): Posts expressing love, prayers, and longing (e.g., “Praying for your return,” “Still our president”).
- Negative sentiment (18%): Posts critical of political opponents or expressing despair about the arrest.
- Neutral or ambiguous (16%): Emoji-only reactions, tagged friends, or unrelated comments.

Manual discourse analysis revealed recurring rhetorical patterns, such as martyr metaphors (“crucified by the system”) and emotive appeals to “protect Tatay Digong.”

Diasporic Solidarity and Emotional Mobilization

Many of the most active commenters self-identified as OFWs (e.g., “Watching from Riyadh,” “We are with you from Italy”), suggesting the campaign’s strongest base of support came from abroad. Emotional language in these comments emphasized longing, moral conviction, and collective memory. This reinforces the role of diasporic nationalism in driving affective political engagement on digital platforms.

Amplification by Influencers and Networked Support Pages

Social Network Analysis revealed that engagement was disproportionately amplified by a small group of Duterte-aligned influencer accounts. These accounts reposted campaign visuals with identical captions, suggesting coordinated messaging. Network centrality metrics showed that just 10 accounts were responsible for over 40% of reposting activity, greatly expanding the campaign's algorithmic visibility.

These findings highlight how the “Bring Duterte Home” campaign successfully leveraged Instagram's visual culture, emotional affordances, and influencer networks to construct a populist counter-narrative. The interplay of affective imagery, diasporic sentiment, and algorithmic amplification underscores how digital platforms serve as arenas for identity consolidation, political nostalgia, and soft resistance.

Table 3. Recurring Themes in Campaign Posts

Theme	Frequency (out of 50 posts)	Example Caption/Visual
Nationalism	35	Images with PH flags, slogans like “Para sa Bayan”
Nostalgia	28	Throwback photos from Duterte's presidency
Anti-Western Sentiment	18	Posts critical of ICC or Western media
Political Redemption	32	References to Duterte as a martyr or savior
Religious Symbolism	22	Use of prayers, crosses, and biblical quotes

DISCUSSION

The “Bring Duterte Home” campaign on Instagram demonstrates how digital platforms serve as arenas for affective political communication, identity negotiation, and ideological reinforcement. The campaign's success, measured by high engagement, viral visibility, and emotionally charged commentary, can be understood through the application of key communication theories and cultural analysis.

Uses and Gratifications in a Time of Political Crisis

According to Uses and Gratifications Theory, individuals actively seek media content that meets specific psychological or social needs. In the context of Duterte's arrest, followers of @duterteupdates turn to the campaign for reassurance, emotional catharsis, and group solidarity. The comments analyzed (filled with prayers, nationalist affirmations, and expressions of betrayal) suggest that the campaign fulfills needs for emotional coping, identity reaffirmation, and political belonging. Filipino diaspora participants, particularly OFWs, appear to engage with the campaign not only for informational purposes but also for emotional proximity to national affairs. For these users, Instagram serves as a bridge between distance and national identity, enabling them to symbolically participate in political events through digital expression. This validates findings from prior research that social media gratifies diaspora populations by enabling political involvement and cultural maintenance (Tufekci, 2017).

Visual Populism and Media Richness

Instagram's capacity for high media richness (visuals, captions, videos, and ephemeral Stories) amplifies the campaign's emotional and symbolic weight. The portrayal of Duterte as a benevolent patriarch or unjustly persecuted leader leverages visual cues (e.g., religious imagery, nationalist symbols) to evoke moral emotions like empathy and righteous indignation. These cues enhance emotional salience, encouraging engagement and viral transmission. This reflects Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which suggests that richer media channels are more effective in conveying ambiguous or emotionally complex messages. Through highly curated posts, the campaign shapes perceptions not just through information, but through affective immersion, making followers feel rather than think their way through political positions.

Social Identity, Digital Tribes, and Polarization

The comments sections of high-engagement posts reveal a distinct pattern of in-group identification and out-group antagonism, consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Supporters frequently refer

to themselves as “DDS” (Diehard Duterte Supporters), establishing solidarity, while referring to political opponents (e.g., “Kakampinks”) with sarcasm or hostility. Instagram thus functions as a digital tribe-forming platform, where shared narratives and visual codes reinforce social identities. This tribalism is algorithmically encouraged: content that polarizes often performs better in terms of engagement, increasing visibility while narrowing discourse diversity. The campaign benefits from this feedback loop by creating “us vs. them” narratives, simplifying complex political debates into emotionally digestible binaries.

Affective Publics and Hashtag Nationalism

The campaign also exemplifies what Papacharissi (2015) terms affective publics, networked groups mobilized by shared emotions rather than shared ideologies. The hashtag #BringDuterteHome encapsulates not a concrete political agenda but an emotional plea, a sense of longing and injustice. Through repeated use and resharing, the hashtag becomes a symbolic anchor for dispersed publics to rally around, especially in moments of political uncertainty. This reflects a broader pattern of hashtag nationalism, where digital expressions of loyalty and memory-making play crucial roles in shaping collective consciousness. The campaign effectively transforms a legal/political event (Duterte’s arrest) into an emotionally resonant narrative of victimization and resistance.

The Role of Networked Influence

The last one is the Social Network Analysis that highlights how a small number of high-follower accounts drive the campaign’s amplification. This aligns with Marwick’s (2015) insights on networked celebrity and influencer gatekeeping, where visibility is not evenly distributed but flows through strategic hubs. These accounts not only repost content but serve as validators, reinforcing the campaign’s legitimacy and encouraging follower conformity. The centralized network structure suggests a semi-coordinated digital movement, where ideological messaging and emotional storytelling are disseminated systematically for maximum impact. This raises important questions about the authenticity and manipulation of digital political discourse, especially when such content skirts platform policies or blends organic support with orchestrated outreach.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The “Bring Duterte Home” campaign offers a compelling case study in how Instagram can be weaponized not only for political communication but also for emotional mobilization and identity construction. Following Duterte’s arrest on March 11, 2025, the campaign swiftly transformed a legal event into an emotionally charged narrative of redemption, nostalgia, and nationalist resistance. Through algorithmic amplification, strategic influencer engagement, and culturally resonant symbolism, the campaign succeeded in capturing and sustaining public attention, particularly among OFWs and pro-Duterte constituencies.

This study reveals that Instagram is not a passive container for content but an active participant in shaping political reality. It does so through a complex interplay of media richness, network effects, identity dynamics, and emotional engagement. The visual platform supports a new mode of political storytelling—one that emphasizes affect over evidence, community over critique, and narrative coherence over nuance.

These are the implications for communication practices:

- The findings underscore the urgency of interrogating how platform algorithms prioritize emotionally charged content, thereby reinforcing existing beliefs and identities. Communication practitioners must grapple with the ethical consequences of such personalization and the risks it poses to deliberative democracy.
- The campaign demonstrates how emotion—not merely policy—is becoming a central currency of political communication. Content that resonates emotionally, even when lacking factual depth, may hold more persuasive power in the digital age. Scholars and policymakers must consider how to mitigate the manipulative potential of such strategies while respecting freedom of expression.

- The strong support from the Filipino diaspora shows how social media bridges geographic divides in political participation. Future communication strategies, both governmental and grassroots, should account for the transnational nature of digital publics and their influence on homeland politics.
- This case also raises questions about Instagram's role in moderating political content that skirts disinformation or veers into emotional manipulation. As platforms continue to evolve, new regulatory frameworks and community guidelines must be designed to promote transparency, accountability, and content integrity.

From this study we can note that the “Bring Duterte Home” campaign illustrates how digital platforms are not just arenas for political contestation but are themselves **actors** in the political process. As such, they must be studied not only through metrics and media theory, but with a critical eye toward power, ideology, and the lived experience of users navigating increasingly mediated political realities.

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