

Vlogging the Vice Presidency: Sara Duterte's TikTok Content as Politainment

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ABSTRACT

TikTok, an online video-sharing platform, has taken the Philippines by storm since the pandemic, emerging as one of the most downloaded social media applications in the country (Kemp, 2021). Filipino fascination with TikTok has become almost an extension of public life, drastically affecting political participation. Filipino politicians, including Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio, who have long taken advantage of social media as campaign and public relations tools, have begun to create their own TikTok accounts to bolster their clout and reputation. As a Duterte, Sara's likeness to her tough-talking father has benefitted her career in government, yet she has also shown on many occasions that she is her own person and not merely a carbon copy of the Duterte patriarch. With the aim of scrutinizing the image that Sara portrays for herself on TikTok, this study enacted a content analysis of the 33 videos posted on her account from its creation on December 15, 2023 to June 7, 2024. Under the lens of politainment, particularly entertaining politics, it was revealed that Sara's image in the platform strays from the tough-talking, informal demeanor of her father, exhibiting instead two complementary personalities: a relatable persona and an efficient official. By analyzing the enactment of politainment on an up-and-coming platform like TikTok, this study's results provide novel knowledge about how politicians can style themselves and maintain their relevance post-elections using the affordances of new media technologies. In a country where the celebrification of politics has naturally extended to social networking sites, it also provides further directions for research about how influencer-like techniques that bank on relatability and intimacy may be co-opted by politicians to keep the public engaged in their lives.

Keywords: *Sara Duterte, TikTok, politainment, social media, celebrification*

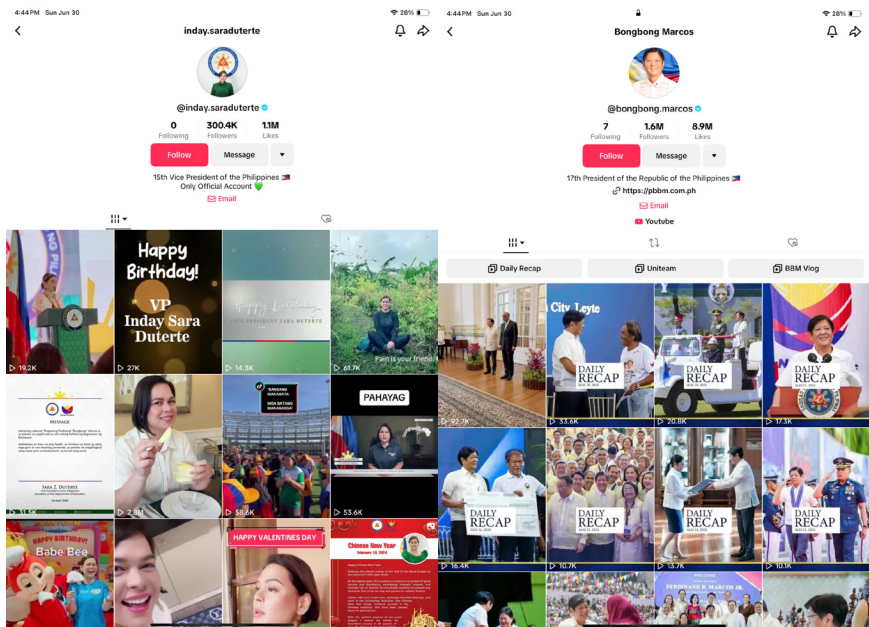
Introduction

As a campaign tool, TikTok has proven to be an effective avenue for political content to thrive in the Philippines due to its focus on short-form content and interactive features (Mendoza, 2022; Lanuza et al., 2021). The platform’s algorithm drives engagement by recording likes, comments, and other forms of behavior to show its users videos they may find interesting in the For You Page (FYP)— an area in the app akin to one’s feed on other social media platforms.

Because TikTok is rigged to keep users scrolling indefinitely, different politicians have taken to TikTok to enact their political campaigns (Ampon & Salathong, 2023; Abdullah, 2023; Cervi et al., 2021). However, even after the ballots are cast and the winners proclaimed, TikTok and other social networking platforms continue to be used by politicians to keep their constituents hooked on their live broadcasts and time in office. Bongbong Marcos, for instance, even after clinching the presidential seat, has not ceased posting content on his YouTube and TikTok accounts (Bongbong Marcos, n.d.; bongbong.marcos, n.d.). No different is his running mate Vice President Sara Duterte who, on December 2023, also established a TikTok account and has since been posting content (inday.saraduterte, n.d.).

Figure 1

Screengrabs of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos and Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio’s respective accounts on TikTok (Marcos, n.d.; Duterte, n.d.)



However, intertwining politics and social media is not a novel concept in the Philippines. Repeatedly dubbed as the citizens of the “social media capital” of the world (Mateo, 2018; Nieva et al., 2022; Pasion, 2024), Filipinos have found creative ways to access technology and the internet despite the nation’s third-world status (Curato and Combinido, 2021). This is due in part to the cheapening cost of modern smartphones (Soriano et al., 2018), as well as to creative solutions such as *pisonet* machines which offer even the poorest communities access to the web for as low as a single peso (Curato & Combinido, 2021).

This digital inclination has subsequently transformed not just the way Filipinos go about their day-to-day lives, but also how they take part in politics. The 2016 national elections in the country were even dubbed the first “social media election,” with both grassroots and fabricated campaigns on Facebook playing significant roles in the rise of then-Davao Mayor Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency (Sinpeng et al., 2020). This trend would persist until 2022, with TikTok playing a more prominent role in the spread of disinformation, favoring now-president Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. (Mendoza, 2022).

Much effort has been made to study how social media impacted and continues to impact electoral campaigns in the Philippines. While some studies have investigated the process of how false information and political propaganda spread (Gaw et al., 2023; Arugay & Baquisal, 2022; Ong and Cabañes, 2018;) as well as the narratives peddled by politicians in influence operation campaigns (Andrada et al., 2023; Ampon & Salathong, 2023; Ong et al., 2022), the protracted involvement of social media as image-building tools post-elections warrants further research, especially considering the need for a ruler to maintain their relationship with their constituency after assuming office.

In response to this research gap, this study analyzed all 33 videos posted on Vice President Sara Duterte’s official TikTok account from its establishment in December 2023 to June 7, 2024. Through the lens of politainment (Nieland, 2008), particularly the concept of entertaining politics (Riegert & Collins, 2016), this study’s results aim to add novel knowledge to the evolving ways Filipino politicians communicate with their constituents and maintain their image through the affordances of emerging social media platforms like TikTok.

Such an undertaking is especially relevant in the Philippines where politicians are continually celebritized (Centeno 2010). As the nation also fully embraces digital media as a method of political participation, research that aims to scrutinize the content politicians peddle on these platforms allows for a more robust understanding of how these tools may be used to forward political agendas.

Sara Duterte: A Dynastic Wildcard

Sara Duterte-Carpio catapulted her way into national politics in the 2022 national elections. Riding under the banner of Uniteam (a portmanteau of the words “unity” and “team”) with Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., the tandem was able to secure the highest political posts in the land by an overwhelming

number of votes (Cabato & Westfall, 2022). Like her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte, Sara's ascension to national office followed her mayoral stint in Davao city where the Duterte dynasty has been ruling for over two decades and counting (BBC News, 2022; Office of the Vice President, n.d.).

The prevalence of political dynasties in the Philippines, national or provincial, cannot be understated. The Duterte family of Davao is a prime example of this phenomenon, where electoral offices are transformed into "a private legacy" for children to inherit (McCoy, 1994). As a Duterte, Sara has drawn many benefits from this dynastic nature of politics in the nation, especially from the so-called Duterte Diehard Supporters (DDS) who even encouraged her to run for president long before the 2022 national elections (Nieva et al., 2022; Lema & Lema, 2021).

Further reinforcing Sara's image as a Duterte are the parallels that can be drawn between her and her father (Benar News staff, 2022; Barker, 2021). Duterte's jump from city mayor to president is a first in the Philippines (Heydarian, 2018), making Sara Duterte's victorious bid for the vice presidency the only other occurrence of a politician assuming national office immediately after their tenure as mayor. Duterte's hypermasculine, tough-talking demeanor, which exemplifies the typical, albeit crass Filipino man (De Chavez & Pacheco, 2020; Arguelles, 2019), is also mirrored in Sara's display of masculinity, as she often posts photos of herself posing with motorcycles, sporting a buzzcut, and adorned in military apparel (Nieva et al., 2022).

A wildcard in her own right, however, Sara is also not above holding her own against her father. On several occasions, she has blatantly disagreed with former president Duterte (Ranada, 2018), the latest and most controversial of which was her decision to run as vice president in 2022. Baquisal and Arugay (2023, p. 238) characterize Sara's move here as "a wrench thrown" in Rodrigo Duterte's plans to continue involving himself in national politics even after the expiration of his term. Sara's behavior in this respect shows a slight break from the traditional dynamics seen in political dynasties where family members cooperate smoothly to take turns holding office (Tadem & Tadem, 2016), revealing instead that Sara, according to political researcher Andrea Wong (2021), has "a mind of her own independent of her father."

TikTok Use in the Philippines

TikTok use in the Philippines has skyrocketed in recent years, with the app emerging as the most downloaded by Filipinos in 2020 (Kemp, 2021). Interest in TikTok was exacerbated by prolonged quarantines during the pandemic, where citizens stuck in their homes tried using the app as a pastime (Escober, 2020). But even post-pandemic, there seems to be no indication that TikTok use will go down anytime soon. Dubbed as living in a "TikTok-crazed" country, Filipinos have continued to use the app to create a myriad of content, from wacky dance challenges to personal stories to serious explainer videos (Baclig, 2023; Lema & Escudero, 2022). The Philippine government has even partnered with the app to aid micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in product promotion

(Presidential Communications Office, 2023; Department of Trade and Industry, 2024).

Filipinos are so enamored with the app because of its unique facilitation of user engagement. Unlike Facebook or YouTube, where a user can pick which content to engage with first, TikTok supplies “endless videos” to its audience when the app is opened via its FYP (Lanuza et al., 2021). Its algorithm, much like other social media platforms, analyzes user behavior, in turn feeding its audience content that panders to their personal interests (Rappler Research Team, 2022). This allows one’s FYP to become highly personalized and addicting to scroll through for prolonged periods (Abidin et al., 2023; Rappler Research Team, 2022).

The one-of-a-kind features and affordances of TikTok have also allowed a new breed of influencers to thrive in the app. These personalities often have large followings and can sway and affect users and entire online communities with their content (Haenlein et al., 2020). However, the terms of internet celebrity are vastly different between TikTok and other social media.

In Instagram, for example, inciting feelings of fandom and aspiration over one’s looks and lifestyle is often enough to gain a following (Abidin, 2020). This trope is flipped completely in TikTok, where users often look for relatable content (Abidin, 2020). This would partly explain why content creators like Sassa Gurl and Pipay, through their portrayal of the *baklang kanal* [lit. gays from the ditch], can thrive in the app (Cabbuag & Benitez, 2021). Minorities, particularly members of the LGBTQIA+ community, are also particularly fond of using the platform’s affordances which include filters, text, duets, and other interactive features which enable them to produce queer content and even create for themselves an inclusive queer space (Alcazaren & Labor, 2023).

TikTok and Political Communication

TikTok may have hit the societal mainstream fairly recently compared to Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms, but it has been used globally as a political tool. Though all users of TikTok have access to its affordances and technically share equal opportunity to ride trends, politicians and political entities worldwide have found that taking advantage of the platform’s algorithmic features can help them amass further fame and repute (Sapag et al. 2023).

As users, politicians can jump on the bandwagon of “duets” and “challenges” (Kennedy 2020) prominent in the app. TikTok also takes multimodality a step further as it does not only allow music to be added to content, but enables users to toy with other features such as filters, voice alterations, split screens, and lip-syncing (Zeng and Abidin 2021), the uses of which can theoretically increase a user’s chances to become trending. Moir (2023) found that incorporating viral memes, trending audio, and popular dances can propel a politician to instant stardom on the app, with such findings also confirming that as far as the TikTok audience is concerned, more favor is given to politicians who display an

influencer-like personality and whose content is geared toward entertainment and spectacle (Cervi & Marin-Lladó, 2021).

Related to the enactment of this influencer persona, politicians have the option to deliberately portray a humanized, down-to-earth version of themselves like content creators do, thereby projecting and facilitating closeness with viewers. Such a style tends to push more severe issues related to policy and governance to the sidelines, bringing instead “light-hearted content, such as anecdotes, personal stories, and emotional slogans, at the center of the political agenda” (Salazar, 2023). Salazar (2023) further suggests that such performances may be more effective than simply layering political content with a filter or background audio since it is not only TikTok’s affordances that are used to drive engagement, but tried-and-tested methods from show business:

Instead, what attracts attention is seeing the same person who yesterday presided over Congress now spending Sunday afternoon with his/her children playing in the park or cooking a barbecue with friends. And by adding catchy music, there’s a far better chance of succeeding. (Salazar, 2023)

Apart from going viral, politician/influencers can also mobilize their digital crowd of fans as they release content. In the Philippine context, Mendoza (2022) has even posited that fans themselves may do a lot of the grunt work in producing propaganda for their electoral bets. During the 2022 national elections, the TikTok fan pages of now-President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. disseminated viral content that 1) romanticized the dictatorial regime of his father, 2) celebrated the storybook romance of his father and mother, and 3) branded his son Sandro as an eligible and desirable bachelor, all of which served to “cast doubts on the atrocities of the Marcos family” (Mendoza 2022, p. 393).

Philippine Political Culture in the Age of Social Media

Curato and Combinido (2021) point out that the lack of political parties in the country has paved the way for personality politics to thrive and ultimately dominate its political landscape. Parties in the country, which have been characterized as “nebulous entities,” are malleable depending on the agenda of those running it, with politicians being able to flit from one party to the next whenever convenient for their careers and interests (Quimpo 2007, p. 277). This absence of robust parties has enabled and continues to exacerbate the melding between governance and celebrification in the country. As Curato and Combinido (2021) further explain:

It is common practice for broadcast media and in some cases film producers to bankroll biopics that portray the heroic lives of politicians. Campaign paraphernalia often come in the form of comic books that create a larger-than-life mythology of candidates. Celebrity endorsements have been powerful

political tools, especially in drawing crowds for campaign rallies. Political culture in the Philippines, in other words, has long blurred the boundaries between politics and showbiz. (Curato & Combinido, 2021)

This “blurring” is especially evident in the case of movie stars like Joseph Estrada and Fernando Poe Jr. vying for national posts and gaining massive support (Curato, 2017; Thompson, 2010). Celebrities publicly declaring partisanship towards politicians have also become a ubiquitous phenomenon, whether that is using their stardom and clout to draw in massive crowds at campaign rallies (ABS-CBN News, 2021; Esguerra, 2022) or capitalizing on the platforms they have, like talk shows to endorse politicians of their choosing (Centeno, 2010). This “celebrityhood,” where politicians can gain electoral advantage over others because of their status as former celebrities (Curato, 2017; Thompson, 2010), and/or where celebrities can affect political outcomes by endorsing candidates or being linked to them risks the continuous dilution of the importance of politics in the country (Centeno, 2010).

Social media, as entertainment tools, now serve as an extension of this kind of political culture. Curato (2017) posits that in the time of Duterte, politics has become stylized to play out like a drama— one that Duterte was able to execute well, from the “soap opera” beginnings of his candidacy on social media to the successful enactment of his presidential campaign. Another noteworthy use of social media to “perform” politics came in the form of the Marcoses’ use of social media in 2022, successfully rebranding their images “from being perpetrators of corrupt dictatorship to glamorous and misunderstood public figures” (Ong, 2022). Ferdinand Marcos Jr. used various platforms, particularly his YouTube channel, in an influencer-like fashion to portray himself as a loving family man. In contrast, his sister, Imee, used the same platform to indirectly insult her brother’s biggest contender, Leni Robredo, by acting like a sharp-tongued auntie (Ong, 2022).

Politainment

Nieland (2008) defines politainment as the merging of politics and entertainment. Here, entertainment culture becomes enmeshed with various political actors and processes, producing a novel type of political communication, often characterized by the need to “perform” politics as a spectacle (Riegert & Collins, 2016; Edelman, 1988). Politainment entails a two-fold process between politics and the media, the first one being political entertainment, which is concerned with how the media and entertainment industry features politics as content (Nieland 2008). The other is entertaining politics, which centers around how politicians capitalize on their quasi-celebrity status to promote and enhance their political clout and image when they appear in various media (Nieland, 2008; Riegert & Collins, 2016). This two-way process benefits both parties, but also has the potential to distort the truth as Nieland (2008) explains:

Politainment offers political actors effective means for reaching the public and pursuing political goals and, in exchange, provides the entertainment industry with celebrity figures and exciting stories. As a result, politics appears entertaining while public affairs enter popular media, so that the distinction between fact and fiction erodes. (Nieland, 2008)

It is the concept of entertaining politics that this study is more concerned with, as theatric and spectacular political performances using the affordances of new technologies and social media have become commonplace in the Philippines, especially during the last two national election cycles (Curato, 2017; Ong, 2022).

Developed in the early 21st century, frequent uses of politainment in research in the past years initially included the appearances of politicians in television news programs and talk shows (Riegert and Collins, 2016). Recently, however, the study of politainment has migrated to social media platforms as well. Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2023), for example, studied news content on Twitter which qualified as politainment due to their spectacularization of political information in the run-up to the Spanish general elections. They found that effective politainment included audio-visual documents, adhered to a “soft news” style of reportage, and included mentions of specific users (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023). Di Nubila et al. (2023), on the other hand, studied former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s YouTube content through the lens of politainment, concluding that Bolsonaro’s rhetoric on the platform was “based on manipulation of public opinion and government propaganda.” Finally, Cervi et al. (2023) suggested that TikTok may be the latest form of politainment in their case study of its use among politicians and their enactment of their political campaigns, eventually concluding that Peruvian candidates “use TikTok almost exclusively for politainment.”

Methodology

Sara Duterte was selected as the research subject because of the paradoxical way she enacts her image in politics. Much as she is likened by many to the Duterte patriarch and does occasionally mirrors her father’s tough demeanor (Barker, 2021; Nieva et al., 2022), she has not displayed the same behavior he had when she finally held office. This poses a question of what unique image Sara Duterte crafts for herself, and, more importantly, how she crafts it in a platform where authenticity and relatability are considered requisites to influence others successfully (Abidin 2020).

A qualitative research design was adopted to fulfill this research’s goal. Grounded in politainment, a content analysis of all 33 videos in Sara Duterte’s account from the time the account was established on December 15, 2023 until June 7, 2024 was employed. Content analysis is a fitting methodological approach

to this study as it mainly deals with recorded texts of human communication (Babbie, 2009), including TikTok videos.

A coding sheet was also used to account for 1) the date a video in Duterte's account was posted, 2) the content of the video, 3) the video's accompanying caption, and 4) characteristics of politainment that the video exhibited based on the definition of entertaining politics. From the trends and patterns yielded by the textual analysis, the results were arranged into specific themes.

Results and Discussion

Sara Duterte's TikTok profile has garnered over 300,000 followers and over a million likes since its establishment in December 2023 (inday.saraduterte, n.d.). Her account also boasts a blue checkmark, a sign that it is functioning in an official capacity. Her TikTok feed is a mix of different videos, but most of her content is relatively short, averaging less than a minute, as is the norm on the platform.

Riegert and Collins (2016) emphasize the crucial role of celebrityhood in politainment, concluding that such is especially prevalent in liberal democracies where aspiring politicians have long used celebrity techniques to enliven their political careers. Sara Duterte's TikTok content falls squarely in line with this definition, as she uses the platform's numerous features to deploy a unique and charismatic version of herself. TikTok, thus, is an image-building tool for Sara Duterte.

Sara Duterte and the Political "Styling of the Self" on TikTok

Image-building is crucial at any point in a politician's career. With the advent of social media and the continuous diversification of the public into various subgroups, politicians "style" themselves accordingly to keep themselves relevant, secure voter attention, and project distinct personas that will appeal to particular groups (Corner & Pels, 2003). The charm and charisma of politicians have long been studied under politainment, but the focus has mainly been on their ability to secure media attention by being telegenic (Nieland, 2008).

However, the emergence of social networking platforms has provided politicians an additional platform to "style" themselves, without the burden of mass media's traditional rules. Though there are occasional departures, this "styling" largely manifests itself into two broad themes in Sara's TikTok content: as an authentic person and as an effective official.

Sara Duterte as an authentic person. Almost a quarter of the videos are dedicated to showing snippets of Sara Duterte's personal and private life. The persona displayed in these videos is very far from the tough-talking, rambling Rodrigo Duterte. Instead, Sara is often always smiling or laughing as she is being recorded or as she records herself.

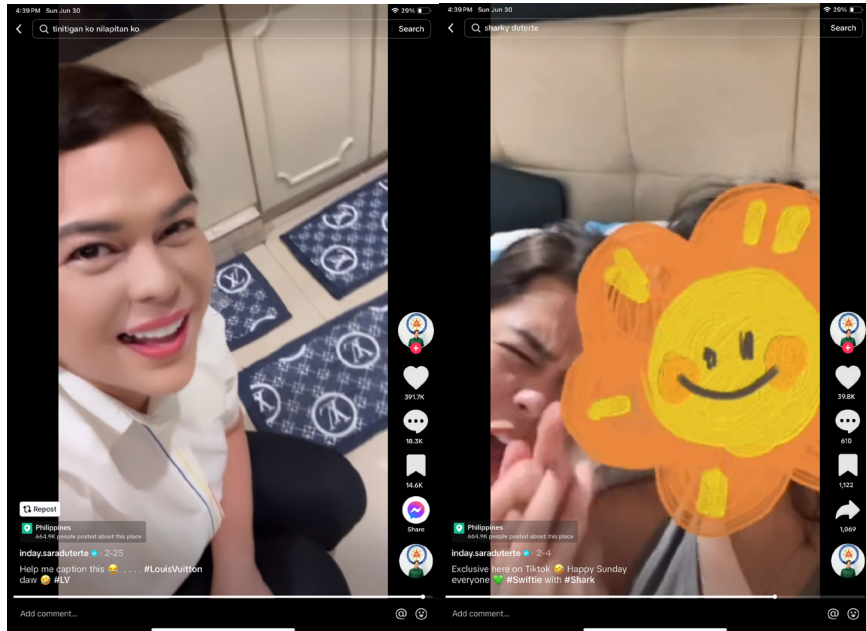
In one video captioned "Help me caption this 😊 . . . #LouisVuitton daw 🧡 #LV," [Help me caption this, it is allegedly Louis Vuitton] Sara says she wants

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her viewers to see her kitchen, poking fun at a rug bearing the logo of the luxury brand Louis Vuitton, then revealing at the end that they have three of the same rugs. We see another glimpse of Sara's home life in another video where she is lying down with her daughter Sharkie and singing to Taylor Swift's "Betty." Sara jokes in the caption that their cover of the song is "Exclusive here on TikTok 🇵🇭."

Figure 2

Videos of Sara Duterte showing aspects of her home life (Duterte, 2024f; Duterte, 2024e)



In another, she shows herself eating mango slices and dipping them in *bagoong*, a fermented seafood paste. She jokes at the end that another word for *mangga* [mango] is *manggagamit* [someone who takes advantage of others] (Duterte, 2024i). In another food-related video, Sara reveals that her date for the weekend is Jollibee. Set to a quirky version of Thù's "Girls Like Me Don't Cry," the video features dancing characters of the fast food chain and Sara and Jollibee posing together with the text "Babe Bee" above them. Known for its Chickenjoy, Jollibee is practically a cultural icon and a personal favorite food item among Filipinos (Matejowsky, 2017), and Sara Duterte in this clip seems to be no exception. Her caption reads: "Extra rice pls 😂 #Jollibee #FilipinoFood is the best ❤️" (Duterte, 2024g).

Accompanied by short, impactful captions and honest, almost impromptu content, many videos in Sara's TikTok account seem to make the case that Sara is an average and relatable Filipino woman, in line with the requisite of authenticity and modesty that is appreciated on TikTok (Haenlin et al., 2020).

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Other videos, however, pull focus away from Sara Duterte and shine a spotlight on her constituents. Two separate videos of government personnel and ordinary citizens greeting Sara happy birthday and wishing her well are examples. Others show Sara Duterte actively engaging with her citizenry. In one video, she interacts with kids in a contest, bidding them good luck and shaking hands. The caption reads:

Ito ang mga sandaling hindi mababayaran nang kahit ano, ang makita ko ang mga ngiti, ang dedikasyon, ang sipag at ang ligaya ng mga batang Pilipino.. 🙏 Patuloy nating mahalín ang Pilipinas 🇵🇭 #BansangMakabataBatangMakabansa #Pilipinas (Duterte, 2024h)

[These are the priceless moments to see the smiles, dedication, effort, and happiness of the Filipino children... Let us continue to love the Philippines]

In another, she is featured with two members of a security team and two drag queens performing a comedically sexual dance during a Christmas party in Davao City. Such videos hint at a certain level of populism, where Sara is depicted as close to her people. In relation to this, Sara also takes advantage of special occasions to bolster her TikTok persona, using Christmas and New Year's Day to produce her holiday-themed content. During the lead-up to Christmas in 2023, Sara produced four consecutive videos celebrating the holidays, some packaged as a message to her constituents, while others as personal, on-the-spot videos. One such instance was posted on December 25, where Sara sings the chorus of Wham!'s hit song "Last Christmas." She sports a plain blue dress with Christmas decorations adorning her background. To poke fun at her singing, the caption reads "Pwede na ba tong pang trending? 😊 Merry Christmas everyone 🇵🇭 #Christmas" [Is this enough to become trending? Merry Christmas everyone] (Duterte, 2023b).

On January 1, 2024, Sara capitalizes on the new year fever to give thanks to 2023. Set to Katy Perry's "Firework," the video is a compilation of photos and clips of her exploring and hiking in different places in the Philippines. Whereas the video started with a block of text thanking 2023, the caption rounds out the entire post by wishing the audience "a progressive and peaceful #2024" (Duterte, 2024a). Notably, videos that fall under this theme are also often those that garner the most attention and likes, reinforcing the claim that TikTok users do not necessarily wish to aspire to be the personas they follow on the platform, but to feel a sense of intimacy and relatability with them (Abidin 2020; Shtern et al. 2019).

Sara Duterte as an effective public official. Most of the other videos are public statements and messages in Sara's official capacity as vice president and education secretary. The longest video of the bunch under this theme is a nine-minute clip that plays almost like a short film.

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Figure 3

A video of Sara Duterte performing a sexually suggestive dance during a Christmas party celebration in Davao (Duterte, 2023c)

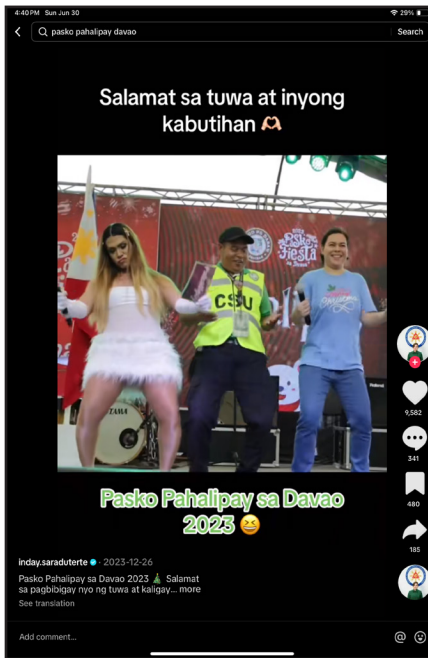


Figure 4

The longest video in Sara's TikTok profile flashes statistics of her accomplishments as education undersecretary (Duterte, 2023a)



Posted on December 20, 2023, the clip outlines Sara Duterte's successes as head of the Department of Education. This includes, among others, statistics about how many classrooms have been fixed, initiatives to install Wi-Fi in certain schools, and additional insurance benefits for teachers. Though it does not bank on the usual short-form video style of TikTok and seems more suited to traditional media such as television, the video nonetheless employs sentiment and a message of hope that Sara will not stop delivering education that is *matatag* (firm), a reference to the new Matatag Curriculum DepEd has enacted since Sara manned its helm. Another video in relation to her work in the education sector is captioned "Catch Up Fridays 📖 starting tomorrow Jan. 12, 2024 #PatuloyNatingMahalinAngPilipinas #CatchUpFridays," where a clip of Sara giving a speech is shown (Duterte, 2024b). In the speech, she declares the implementation of Catch Up Fridays as a response to the growing learning poverty problem in the Philippines (Duterte, 2024b).

Other videos under this theme are not as stylized, delivered instead in a more serious manner. A bulk of her posts are not even video material, with many of her official statements simply being unmoving photos rehashed from her other social media accounts.

In terms of content proper, however, Sara Duterte consistently uses language as a form of identity politics (Sinha, 2022). Some of her videos are delivered completely in Visayan, and in many of her official statements, the Islam greetings *Assalamualaikum* (peace be with you) at the beginning of the video and *Shukran* (thank you) towards the end are present. These are clear references to her roots in Mindanao, an area in the Philippines notable for housing a supermajority of the country's Islamic residents (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017). Apart from giving a straightforward and comprehensive message addressing whatever issue was at hand, Sara also often ends with the line "*uunahin ko ang Pilipinas*" (I will put the Philippines first). The use of this line is especially evident when she addresses issues that are contentious or that often show her at odds with other prominent political figures like her father.

In a statement video posted in January 31, for example, Sara asserts that she is against the "*pera kapalit ang pirma sa people's initiative*," [lit. money in exchange for signatures people's initiative] referring to the apparent signature-buying being done to railroad reform in the Philippine Constitution via people's initiative. Towards the end, she contrasts herself with the beliefs of her family members, saying:

May respeto ako sa mga pananaw at opinyon ni dating Pangulong Rodrigo Duterte pati na ng aking mga kapatid. Ngunit, katulad ng posisyon ko sa maraming mga isyu, hindi kailangan na sumasang-ayon ako sa lahat ng mga ito. Pinalaki ako ng aking mga magulang na may pagpapahalaga sa malayang pag-iisip at pagpapasya. (Duterte, 2024d).

[I respect the views and opinions of former President Rodrigo Duterte and my siblings, but like my position on many issues, we do not always have to agree on everything. My parents raised me to give importance to freedom of thinking and choice.]

In another video, Sara addresses accusations thrown at her by Arturo Lascañas, an ex-cop who worked for the Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group allegedly formed by Rodrigo Duterte to kill criminals and political opponents. Lascañas had alleged that Sara and her father had greenlit the killing of 10,000 people and that Sara even masterminded the concept of *Oplan Tokhang*, the house-to-house strategy of the Duterte administration to curb drugs which ended up drawing the ire of rights groups for human rights violations (Bouckaert, 2017; Cariaso, 2024; Lamb, 2017; Ratcliffe & Bayani, 2022).

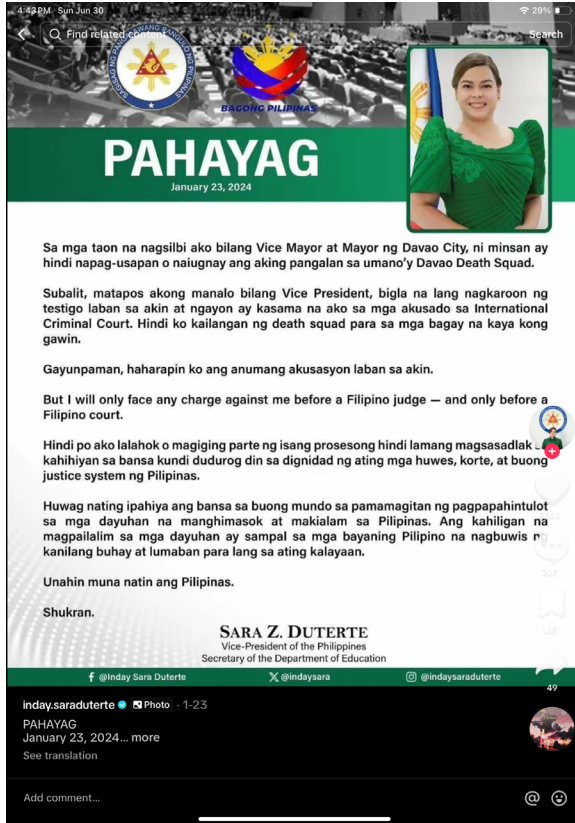
In response to this, Sara posted an image of her written statement on her TikTok page. All seems to be recycled from the statement posted in her Facebook account, save for the music that she chose to accompany the post with, Ver Como e Hit Mano's "Truth," a somber and serious-sounding piece (Duterte, 2024c). The post also ends with the trademark tagline of putting the Philippines first, only this time Sara says "*uunahin muna natin ang Pilipinas*" (we will put the Philippine first), seemingly stoking a sense of nationhood and attempting to enjoin the

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Filipinos reading the message to support her in her non-cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Figure 5

An example of an official statement that is not in video format in Sara's TikTok account (Duterte, 2024c).



Sara Duterte's TikTok as new politainment medium

Politainment was conceived partly to make sense of political actors who can use media access and practices to lend themselves clout. In decades past, specific instances of this encompassed election sorties arranged to be concert-like in appearance and the growing presence of politicians in talk shows, among others (Nieland, 2008). Social media has completely upended this arrangement, as politicians can now ride the trends of the time and keep up with fast-changing developments in popular culture, continually securing celebrity status (Riegert & Collins, 2016). Sara Duterte's TikTok videos, particularly those that brand her as an authentic person— a Jollibee-loving Filipina, a concerned mother, and a simple Davaoëña— are clear examples of a politician willing and able to perform authenticity on TikTok.

This performance fits the app well because Sara blurs “the dividing line between the studio and the audience at home” (Riegert & Collins, 2016, 8). Classical and traditional politainment typically involves arranging studios informally and employing various props to give a televised program a more homelike feel, making the audience feel like a politician exists in a setting as comfortable as home as well. This imaging technique is a snug fit for the app in light of the premium given to relatable performances and the showcasing of an authentic self (Abidin, 2020). Sara Duterte does not need to appear in a studio and act as if she were an average person, for she can record videos in her living room, in her kitchen, with her family members, or with her constituents and still achieve the same effect.

Then Sara Duterte projects another image on the platform: that of a professional working woman in government whose achievements are noteworthy and remarkable and who remains unfazed by the controversy. Sara’s political styling of herself by projecting these personalities, though seemingly contradictory, reinforces her image as someone who is both relatable and professional and who can bring together the best of both worlds in terms of her being a private person and a public servant. This observation also falls squarely within performative authenticity (Shtern et al., 2019), which is typical of influencers.

Despite Sara Duterte’s videos being peddled deliberately on TikTok to promote her as the busy head of the education department, for example, the style of the videos— from the unscripted way she seems to act to the playful and sentiment-driven captions— repackage her content in a manner that appears genuine and unscripted. Notable also is Sara’s use of identity politics, harking back to her Mindanaoan roots with her constant use of Islam greetings in certain statements. Her portrayal of herself in TikTok also takes a 180-degree turn away from that of her father’s crass demeanor, mirroring instead a more prim and proper image typical of Filipino politicians (Arguelles, 2019).

However, despite Sara’s technological savvy, some posts do not take advantage of the platform’s video-centric affordances. Though delivered audio-visually, her video statements are more suited to traditional media such as television, as evidenced by the orientation of some of the materials, which are not in a vertical format. A similar case exists for the press releases and photos of statements rehashed from her other social media accounts. These materials have a relatively lower number of likes and interactions than Sara’s other posts, indicating that content that does not adhere to the platform’s features and size configurations is less likely to be viewed and liked by her followers.

As much expertise as Sara and her team have with TikTok, they remain unable to take advantage of all the platform’s affordances fully; so while TikTok, on the one hand, functions as a new and emerging face of politainment for Sara Duterte, it remains, on the other, a challenge for her to fully and capitalize on the app’s various features and logics.

Conclusion:

TikTok and the changing norms of political image-building

Politainment, particularly entertaining politics, centers around the ability of a politician to effectively use their prominence and personality to “perform” politics using media channels (Riegert and Collins, 2016). From the qualitative content analysis performed on Sara’s TikTok account, she is generally able to fit this description as her posts, using the video-centric approach and interactive features of TikTok, enable her to brand herself as 1) an authentic person and 2) as an effective public servant. Important to note also is Duterte’s veer away from her father’s image in this platform. The picture of a rambling, oft-disrespectful Duterte (De Chavez & Pacheco, 2020) is nowhere to be found in Sara, as she has carefully curated her TikTok account to be a space where she is simultaneously relatable yet professional— a public official who knows the balance between work and play.

At least in Sara’s case, politicians continue to rely on their celebrity status and social media accounts to keep themselves relevant in the public sphere. Whether many Filipino politicians use TikTok to showcase various aspects of their daily lives or as PR tools to broadcast their achievements, as Sara Duterte does, should be the subject of further study. What is clear at this point, however, is that the performance of the mundane and the everyday are potent drivers of engagement on the app (Salazar, 2023). Performative authenticity, a technique among influencers where they stoop to the level of their viewers by capitalizing on relatable and familiar topics (Shtern et al., 2019), can also be used by politicians like Sara Duterte to lend themselves political clout.

Adept as she is at using TikTok; however, Sara has yet to maximize the platform’s full potential, as a significant number of her videos feature only one photo, which has been posted on her other social media pages, or recycled videos that have been uploaded in other platforms. Notwithstanding this, however, Sara has managed to amass over 300,000 followers and over 1.1 million likes (Duterte, n.d.), a clear indication that her page houses considerable potential to grow its following and influence on the platform— and these numbers may increase should Sara learn to take advantage of TikTok’s features fully.

The astronomical rate at which her account has flourished since it was established also shows that Filipino politicians still hold potent sway in social media (Pertierra, 2014). Suppose the results of this study and the trend set by the Marcoses in 2022 for their political rebrand are any indications. In that case, social media and politainment may well be an effective combo not just for politicians to continuously keep in touch with their constituents before, during, and after electoral campaign periods, but to reinvent themselves and their image, as Sara has attempted to do in line with this study’s findings.

The results of this research find further relevance in fact that TikTok shows no indication of decline anytime soon (Alcazaren & Labor, 2023; Lanuza et al.,

2021). In a country whose citizens are as glued to their screens as the Philippines and whose citizens' media and information illiteracy has allowed for the societal proliferation of disinformation and historical distortion (Mendoza, 2022; Ong & Cabañes, 2018), TikTok's potential to be used— even weaponized— by politicians to promote their political agenda undoubtedly warrants further study as well.

Future research that will build on the results of this one may want to direct their attention to other politicians who are turning to social media to promote themselves and their image, to provide a more complete picture of what techniques other than the use of relatability can hold viewer attention and drive engagement. Other studies may also shift their focus toward the users themselves, and how they can affect and interact with politicians and their politainment. This may be especially relevant in TikTok, where users are able to not just comment or like, but literally “stitch” a video with their own response, theoretically democratizing online political participation (TikTok, n.d.; Pertierra, 2014).

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