

Narratives in televised political ads: Toward alternative discourses and critical voters

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Abstract

Televised political ads are powerful instruments of campaign communication because they are dominant and ubiquitous repositories of narratives by candidates and their strategists. Using Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm and Robert Rowland's narrative approach, this study looks into the use of narratives in 127 political TV ads in the 2016 and 2019 national elections. The discussion is divided into two major sections. First, the study uncovers dominant, emerging, and missing narratives in the TV ads and reflects on what these narratives reveal about Philippine political culture. Second, through a critique of these existing narratives, this study raises the challenge of reimagining and creating ads that foster critical public discourse. To this end, the paper recommends alternative topics, subjects, and strategies to improve TV ads in the future while recognizing the medium's constraints such as length and costs.

Keywords: narrative analysis, narratives, political campaigns, rhetoric, TV ads

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Despite the exorbitant costs of running them, televised political advertisements—referred to as TV ads in this paper—are very common instruments of political campaign communication in the Philippines. Candidates who run for national office spend massive resources to buy airtime from major TV networks during elections, and they employ different strategies and messaging techniques in their TV ads to win the voters' assent. In 2019, we have seen senatorial candidates who either touted the endorsement of the incumbent president Rodrigo Duterte or implicitly or explicitly called for changes in Philippine government through their TV ads (e.g., Rewl Random, 2019a, 2019b). It may also be recalled that in the presidential election of 2016, there was an infamous ad showing Duterte mouthing expletives and obscenities (e.g., Flores, 2016). The said ad used children as subjects admonishing Duterte as unworthy of emulation, further polarizing an emotionally charged political landscape populated by warring camps of voters, pejoratively labelled as “*Dutertards*” and “*dilawan/ Yellowtards*.”

Indeed, TV ads are powerful, not only for the way they stir controversy but also because of how they construct stories and fictions about national politics, voters, and political actors. Even as TV ads do not always guarantee electoral victory, they are dominant and ubiquitous symbolic resources for political actors and voters alike. As such, this study answers the following research questions: What are the dominant, emerging, and missing narratives in political TV ads of 2016 and 2019 and what do these narratives reveal about Philippine political culture? How are these existing narratives rhetorically constructed and used? And, within the limitations of the medium, what other subjects or topics must political TV ads in the Philippines accommodate in an effort to foster critical public discourse? The target audience of this study consists of those interested in political campaign materials such as voters, scholars or academics, and political actors such as consultants and strategists and even their would-be clients or the candidates in elections.

The study argues that while practices in political television advertising will always maximize utility (i.e., increase a candidate's projected vote margins by showing only one-sided versions of reality), there is still a space to critique and improve TV ads for the kinds of narratives they advance. Thus, the twofold objective of this study is: (1) to critique what TV ads both spotlight and deemphasize and (2) to provide suggestions for the ways that the potential of TV ads can be harnessed to serve the interests of an informed citizenry. These objectives are premised on the idea that while TV ads only last for 30, 60, or 90 seconds (and are very costly), they can include more voices, subjects, and issues that have been excluded in political

campaigns of the past. In the analysis, this paper provides guidelines for what the alternative topics might be, as well as the strategies for improving the narratives in TV ads while recognizing the limitations of the medium.

The study of narratives in political TV ads is important for three reasons. First, according to Bruce Gronbeck (1999), a narrative is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. Narratives involve storytelling by the candidates and participation by the audience. On the part of the candidates, narratives are used to construct who the leaders are, should be, and how they should govern. For the audience, they can participate in narrative construction by identifying with certain messages and stories from candidates. Second, as symbolic resources, TV ads do not merely persuade citizens to vote but also provide the electorate with arguments in favor of or against candidates (Hahn, 2003). Narratives in TV ads thus have the potential to engender conversations among voters. By understanding these narratives, this study wishes to extend the conversation about the kinds of talk in our political culture out of the belief that messages and issues in campaigns and elections are open to change and innovation.

Finally, the dominant political narratives in the Philippines are recurrent. They are revived or recycled during each election season which makes them predictable through time. If narratives have been formulaic through the regurgitation of their elements across different election cycles, then messages in TV ads should be examined for guidance on what narratives are emerging, might emerge, and should emerge in the future. By uncovering narratives in TV ads of the 2016 and 2019 national elections, one can better understand how mediated narratives contribute to shaping political realities in Philippine democracy.

Literature Review

TV Ads and Narratives

A political TV ad is “any message primarily under the control of a source used to promote political candidates, parties, policy issues, and/or ideas through mass channels” (Sanders, 2009, p. 177). TV ads, controlled by the candidates and their parties (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2012), are also infused with various strategies for persuasion. As visual media broadcast to a wide array of audiences, TV ads made it imperative for candidates to communicate to the voters in less formal and more personal ways (Newman, 1999). One way of communicating with the voters is through the use of narratives.

Chris Barker (2012) notes that “the concept of narrative refers to the form, pattern or structure by which stories are constructed and told” (p. 506). According to Evan Cornog (2004), the word “story” can “refer to the course of a person’s entire life or a single moment in that life, to factual narratives

and fictitious ones, and can even suggest a lie” (p. 2). Therefore, a narrative may be “lengthy and complex or quick and crude” and may emanate from a politician, his/her opponents, and even a news story (Teehanke, 2016, p. 75). Narratives are constructed in TV ads because the “control over content allows a candidate to articulate the story lines of that candidacy” (Smith & Johnston, 1991, p. 118). In other words, a narrative is central to a candidate’s political messaging as it describes problems that a candidate seeks to solve and solutions that the candidate promises to implement (Perloff, 2014).

As a story, a narrative includes characters such as heroes, villains, and metaphors in politics (Westen, 2007). In TV ads, narratives are used to highlight the qualities, values, and beliefs that candidates peddle to the electorate in the campaign. Hence, a narrative is a formulated and consistent story that uses dramatic devices in style and content (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Finally, narratives offer a plot, an account of events in a specific time through which audiences can identify with the candidate (Borchers & Hundley, 2018). Narratives may inspire identification from voters especially when politicians break their supposed superiority, establish rapport with the public, and commit to acts that signal being down-to-earth (Borchers & Hundley, 2018). Identification makes the voters feel included when candidates emphasize their similarities, as opposed to differences, with the electorate.

Approaches to the Study of TV Ads

Political TV ads have been the subject of various studies regarding their types (Devlin, 1995), functions (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1997), and production techniques (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Kaid et al., 1993). TV ads have also been analyzed using the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, 1999; Benoit & Airne, 2005). This perspective emphasizes the topics (image vs. issues) and the strategies (acclaiming, attacking, and defending) used in the ads. The functional theory has also been applied to contexts outside the United States (Benoit & Sheafer, 2006; Benoit et al., 2007; Isotalus, 2011; Isotalus & Aarnio, 2006; Lee & Benoit, 2005).

Aside from the functional theory, political TV ads have been studied using the video-style approach (Kaid et al., 1993; Kaid & Johnston, 1991). Like the functional theory, the video-style approach looks into topics and strategies but includes nonverbal elements (facial expressions, body movements, and physical appearance) and production techniques (setting, location, and physical arrangement). While the functional theory and video-style approach are valuable for parsing the elements of TV ads, they do not go beyond determining the dominant themes of issues versus image; strategies

of acclaiming, attacking, and defending; and the production techniques in the ads. These approaches do not uncover narratives or reveal the bigger picture or messages that the various elements in TV ads construct.

Meanwhile, there are a few studies that analyzed components of narratives in TV ads such as characters, setting, and qualities of candidates (Benoit & McHale 2003; Griffin & Kagan, 1996; Page & Duffy, 2009; Smith & Johnston, 1991; Sullivan, 1998). William Benoit and John McHale (2003) examined personal qualities of presidential candidates through their TV ads. Related to character and image-making of candidates, David Sullivan (1998) employed semiotics to understand the dimensions of a female candidate's image such as competency, toughness, and leadership. Another component of narrative—the setting translated to imagery in the ads—has been the focus of Michael Griffin and Simon Kagan (1996) in their comparison of cultural imagery and visualization in political TV ads in the United States and Israel. Meanwhile, Janis Page and Margaret Duffy (2009) investigated competing visions of morality in campaign ads using fantasy theme analysis.

Finally, Kenneth Burke's sociological criticism and representative anecdote have been used to study narratives in presidential commercials (Smith & Johnston, 1991). Larry Smith and Anne Johnston (1991) posit that political TV ads contain narratives as "each spot was a carefully crafted story offered through a strategically selected structure" (p. 116). Among Burke's (1961) positive, negative, and transitional narratives, the epic and elegy are also the most common structures in political advertising in the United States (Smith & Johnston, 1991). This study is a valuable contribution to the narrative approach as it looked at how literary genres applied to political ads. The present inquiry will likewise analyze TV ads from the perspective of narrative.

Theoretical Framework

There are two dramaturgical approaches to the study of narrative: symbolic convergence where "individuals in rhetorical transactions create subjective worlds of common expectations and meanings" (Bormann, 1972, p. 400) and the narrative paradigm where humans who are "essentially storytellers" participate in narrative construction (Fisher, 1987, p. 64). Ernest Bormann's (1972) symbolic convergence theory proposes the idea of a rhetorical vision or "a common way of seeing the world based on the process of sharing fantasies" (p. 400). A shared "fantasy" is a function of how individuals, as a collective, identify with messages from other communicators. Narratives are then used for identification, a two-way process where politicians establish similarities with the audience, and where the voters, individually

and collectively, may view themselves as part of (or excluded from) the narratives.

To interpret Bormann's (1972) model, a political ad becomes effective when it fosters a "shared fantasy" and when a majority of the audience identifies with political messages and act based on the intended effects of the TV ad producers (e.g., for a person to be aware of candidate X and consequently vote for the said candidate). While Bormann's approach is useful in analyzing how audiences may interact to construct common visions and make sense of textual meanings, this study does not deal with processes of reception of TV ads by audiences.

The objective of the present study is to analyze the content of the TV ads. To this end, Walter Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm is more appropriate in interpreting narratives. The said paradigm stresses the importance of narratives and stories in our lived experiences. Hence, Fisher (1987) proposes evaluating narratives according to standards of probability (consistency of story) and fidelity (how the components of a story resonate with the audience). Along with Robert Rowland's (2009) narrative perspective as the method of analysis, this study uses Fisher's narrative paradigm to look at dominant, emerging, and missing narratives in TV ads.

Methodology

This rhetorical study uses narrative analysis to surface dominant and emerging narratives in the political TV ads of senatorial, vice-presidential, and presidential candidates in the 2016 and 2019 Philippine elections. Narrative analysis is a systematic perspective of looking at the forms, functions, and evaluation of narratives (Rowland, 2009). The form of the narrative includes identifying individual elements that make up a story; the functions have to do with the narrative's way of connecting characters or subjects to viewers or the audience; and the evaluation involves how the narratives are constructed through a combination of elements. In this perspective, narratives are uncovered after their forms and functions are scrutinized.

Units of Analysis

TV ads from the 2016 and 2019 national elections in the Philippines were chosen as the texts for analysis. Political TV ads are the most common campaign device in elections (Hahn, 2003). Moreover, TV ads "can influence the agenda, prime issues, and persuasively frame problems or candidate attributes" (Perloff, 2014, p. 362). Hence, TV ads have subjects and characters, represent issues and problems, and emphasize solutions through the candidate's promises and personal qualities.

Sampling

A total of 127 political TV from the 2016 and 2019 elections were coded and analyzed in this study. Out of the 127 ads, 75 ads were coded for the senatorial race (50 ads in 2016 and 25 ads in 2019), 27 ads were coded from the 2016 vice-presidential race, and 25 ads were coded for the presidential election also held in 2016. TV ads across the presidential, vice-presidential, and senatorial elections were chosen for rigor of analysis. Through purposive, nonprobability sampling, I specifically chose ads from a mix of winning and losing candidates and those affiliated with the administration and the opposition. All the coded ads are available on YouTube. They have a standard length of 15, 30, 60, or 90 seconds, were not edited to alter the core message, and have a note indicating that they are paid ads.

Coding and Analysis

Each advertisement was viewed at least three times and transcribed in line with its verbal (dialogue/script), textual (words used or flashed on screen), and visual cues (nonverbal components including setting and symbols). In line with Rowland's (2009) narrative perspective, the dominant elements (characters/subjects, setting, plot) of the ads were first uncovered. Given these elements, themes became apparent: three dominant narratives, four emerging narratives, and an observation of missing narratives. These themes were then interpreted following Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm by looking at whether and how narratives achieve probability (coherence/consistency) and fidelity (resonance). Finally, the narratives in the ads were not differentiated based on the TV ads of presidential, vice-presidential, and senatorial candidates. Rather, what are common among the ads across these positions were the themes that were described and interpreted in the analysis.

Results and Discussion

This section is structured into two major parts. The first part deals with (1) how narratives in the ads are crafted or used, (2) the three dominant narratives in the TV ads and what these narratives reveal about Philippine political culture, and (3) the four emerging narratives and a paragraph on missing narratives. The second part will talk about (4) how the narratives observe coherence and resonance and (5) the constraints in, opportunities for, and impact of improving TV ads.

Crafting and Using Narratives

Before proceeding to the existing narratives in the TV ads, there is a need to discuss the elements used to craft narratives. Table 1 shows the common characters/subjects, the setting, the problems or issues, and the

personal qualities of the candidates emphasized in the TV ads.

Table 1. Elements of narratives in the TV ads

Characters (voters)	Setting	Problems/issues	Resolution (candidate qualities)
Family members (fathers, mothers, siblings, and children)	Homes/houses	Poverty, food security, lower water and electric bills, better transportation	Caring, kind, empathetic, God-fearing
Working class (teachers, security guards, drivers, nurses, call center agents, overseas Filipino workers, farmers, vendors)	Workplace, offices, farmlands, marketplace, and transit systems	Employment/livelihood, tax, income and benefits, irrigation and fertilizer for farmers	Service/action-oriented, honest, trustworthy
Youth (students, scholars)	Schools	Scholarships, tuition, and fees	Smart/intelligent, principled, responsible
Vulnerable sectors (senior citizens, women, children)	Hospitals and care centers	Healthcare, food, safety, security, feeding program for children	Tough, bold, courageous

Common characters across the ads include members of a Filipino family such as subjects identified as mothers, fathers, and children. Even candidates presented as possessing positive qualities in their ads highlight their identities as sons or daughters of incumbent or past leaders of the country. Meanwhile, three other sets of characters are depicted in the TV ads—the Filipino workforce, the youth, and the vulnerable sectors. It must be noted that these identities intersect with being a member of the family and they are by no means mutually exclusive. However, in each TV spot, a single identity is emphasized (e.g., a student, mother, or belonging to the workforce) to nuance the kinds of issues presented in the ads.

Meanwhile, the Filipino workforce (e.g., teachers, overseas Filipino workers, farmers, and vendors) are often seen in their workplaces, offices, shops, industries, marketplaces, and farmlands where they mention issues of wage, taxation, inflation, and irrigation. Thus, the identity of characters in the ads are determined through the prominent setting in which they appear and the issues they (or the candidates) refer to. The workforce is featured in TV ads of candidates promising better wages, lower taxes, irrigation for farmers, and protection for overseas Filipino workers. The youth is also often depicted as students present in various educational settings. Finally,

the vulnerable sectors consisting of the elderly, women, and children can be found at home, in hospitals, and care-providing facilities. While the characters, setting, issues, and qualities listed in Table 1 are by no means exhaustive and mutually exclusive (i.e., the youth is not always represented in schools/educational settings), these elements show what common political narratives in the Philippines are made of.

In the ads, the character or image that candidates project is also magnified and presented as the solution to problems identified. Addressing the needs of the Filipino families engender an ethics of care (kindness, empathy, orientation to serve others) where the candidate acts as the “provider.” This is consistent with the finding of Anne Johnston and Lynda Kaid (2002) that image ads emphasize positive qualities of candidates through popular appeals to source credibility such as trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Meanwhile, catering to the vulnerable sectors of the elderly, women, and children allows candidates to peddle attributes of toughness, boldness, and swift action, often capitalizing on grim settings that depict danger and vulnerability. The themes in the ads or the implied or explicit message of the narrative (Rowland, 2009) thus correspond to the personal qualities or character emphasized by the candidates.

Finally, the plot of the ads or the “action of the story” (Rowland, 2009, p. 120) is often constituted by the issues or policy statements that the candidates articulate for the voters. The common three-part structure of narratives in the TV ads thus include: (1) showing subjects (often plain folks) working and going about their day-to-day lives (person-in-the-street setting); (2) identifying problems that subjects in the ads such as plain folks face (through voice-over or their own testimonials), usually through themes of poverty; and (3) showing the candidates as the solution to the problems by identifying their strengths, personal qualities, attributes, and characteristics. This common structure of TV ads manifests in dominant, emerging, and missing narratives.

Dominant Narratives

Instead of merely identifying the narratives, this section will also interpret how the narratives connect to Philippine political culture. Through themes uncovered in the analysis, the three dominant narratives in the ads are the narrative of *pamilyang Pilipino* (Filipino family), *pagmamalasakit* (caring for others), and *kabutihang loob* (purity of self).

Pamilyang Pilipino (Filipino family). This narrative does not suggest that there is a singular, monolithic view of the Filipino family in all the ads. Rather, the ads, when taken collectively, build a general framework of how candidates address the electorate and how the electorate relates

to its leaders: as family. The candidates constantly use the word “pamilya” (family) when referring to the electorate whom they promise to help (e.g., chinnypanda, 2019a; Escudero, 2016). The terms “manong” (older brother), “manang” (older sister), “tatay” (father), and “nanay” (mother) are also used by candidates to refer to themselves and to suggest that these are their roles and positions in the Filipino family (e.g., Enrile, 2019; Escudero, 2016; Marcos 2019a).

The narrative of the Filipino family is reinforced when one looks at two other aspects: the subjects of the TV ads and how the candidates frame the narrative. Most of the characters in the ads are plain folks in their roles as parents working for their children and children helping their families. The candidates themselves are also characters in their own narratives. The ads show a connection between candidates and their family members to remind the voters that one is a son, daughter, or sibling of an incumbent or previously elected official (e.g., Marcos, 2019a; Pimentel, 2019). The narrative of the Filipino family becomes a symbolic resource that allows candidates to take on a script based on their parent’s or family’s legacy. This narrative also highlights one political reality in the Philippines: the dominance of political dynasties or elite families who have held successive elective posts, often intergenerationally.

Even as the candidates themselves do not acknowledge that they belong to political dynasties, their TV ads include testimonials from the members of their families who have held national elective posts (e.g., Pimentel, 2019). The family name or political pedigree then becomes the license for candidates to argue for continuity and to forge an unbroken trust between the voter and the candidate’s family. This accomplishes two things—transfer by association (a family member in politics lending credibility to a candidate) based on narrative consistency between a politician’s messaging and his/her family’s legacy; and, tapping into the notion that an individual is a reflection of his/her family. In other words, if a family name is trusted, candidates implicitly argue that they also possess the qualities that voters have come to associate with the family name (narrative fidelity or resonance).

Meanwhile, Duterte’s endorsement of senatorial candidates in 2019 seemed to stand in for paternal blessing on senatorial and vice-presidential candidates who sought his support (e.g., Rewl Random, 2019a, 2019b). Other candidates used the endorsement of their celebrity parents, wife, and family members who are incumbents and have served in politics in the past (e.g., Marcos, 2019a; Pangilinan, 2016; Pimentel, 2019). Dave Centeno (2015) argues that celebrities have “sociopolitical significance to individuals’ preferences and decision-making processes during elections” (p. 209). The president is one kind of celebrity that represents cultural

capital and symbolic power. As seen in the 2019 midterm elections, most administration-backed candidates won (Buan, 2019), thanks in no small part to Duterte's endorsement as the "father of the nation" ("Tatay Digong" according to social media supporters). As most Asian countries tend to be collectivist (Kotlaja, 2020), candidates also choose to highlight relational aspects and qualities in their TV ads. Hence, candidates use the narrative of the Filipino family to build a relationship with the voters, a narrative that is also mediated through pagmamalasakit and kabutihang loob.

Pagmamalasakit (caring for others). Part of what gives the narrative of the Filipino family its appeal is its ethics of care, a pledge by leaders to always put the interest of the electorate at heart. The electorate is also mostly represented by the poor as dominant subjects of ads. Pagmamalasakit derives its ethos from the narrative of pamilyang Pilipino because the family is the foundation of an individual's support system. Common candidate qualities emphasized in this narrative are empathy and sympathy or when candidates express identification with their audiences by claiming that they, too, came from poverty (narrative fidelity/resonance) and that the candidate's family background puts him/her in a better position to serve the masses (e.g., Madrona, 2016; Lesaca, 2020).

The narrative of caring for others also places the politician in the position of a parent or guardian who looks after their kin, children, and supporters. For instance, Duterte's emphasis on toughness or boldness in his presidential TV ads in 2016 may have cast him as an ironhanded leader (e.g., Gabac, 2020). However, his slogan of "malasakit" (concern) also showed that he cares for women, children, and lowly workers (e.g., Pinoy News Online Portal, 2016). In advancing an ethics of care, candidates use issues such as laws they helped legislate or bills they sponsored and wrote for the public welfare such as lowering personal income tax for workers (e.g., Pimentel, 2019), providing irrigation for farmers (e.g., Pangilinan, 2016; Pimentel, 2019), free tuition (e.g., Alagang Angara, 2019a; Pimentel, 2019), and provisions for healthcare of those in need (e.g., Alagang Angara, 2019b, 2019c). Overall, candidates emphasize pagmamalasakit (concern for others) through provision of goods and the supposed qualities of a caring and concerned leader.

While the narrative of pamilyang Pilipino inadvertently reminds us of political dynasties in the country, pagmamalasakit shows another underside in Philippine political culture: patronage-driven politics (Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 2003). In this kind of politics, voters who are treated as clients know that what ties them to their politicians are material incentives and goods such as dole-out, bribes, and connections (Quimpo, 2007). Emphasizing issues and actions on the part of the candidate is therefore

necessary to broker trust between the citizens and candidates. Trust is important especially when the implied relationship between the voter and candidate—one of family—is not natural but representational. Hence, aside from providing goods or personal privileges to earn the voters' trust, candidates also use the narrative of kabutihang loob.

Kabutihang loob (purity of self). Unlike the narratives of the pamilyang Pilipino and pagmamalasakit, the narrative of purity of self is oriented inward. Candidate qualities magnified in this narrative are honesty, integrity, selflessness, moral sacrifice, and being principled, good-natured, or God-fearing. Various ads have presented versions of kabutihang loob such as candidates claiming to be incorruptible and principled (e.g., Pangilinan, 2016) and candidates offering change through slogans like gobyernong may puso (e.g., Team Grace Poe 2016, 2016). The narrative of purity of self is also more common among candidates running on reformist platforms (Thompson, 2010) or candidates who vow to govern honestly and with integrity (e.g., Pangilinan, 2016).

While the narrative of pagmamalasakit brokers trust between the voter and the candidate, the narrative of kabutihang loob serves as a check on the authenticity of the candidate. In this sense, kabutihang loob is also about one's will or how one intends to relate to others (Reyes, 2015). The narrative of purity of self, however, is also directed outward as one's "authenticity" is often validated through stories by other people. Testimonial by plain folks is therefore another strategy in TV ads as subjects narrate how candidates have helped them through crises such as typhoons (e.g., Patricio, 2016; Pinoy News Online Portal, 2016). The narrative of purity of self is often affirmed and supported by stories from other people and this is a way in which narrative fidelity or resonance is maintained.

The three dominant narratives—pamilyang Pilipino, pagmamalasakit, and kabutihang loob—are also consistent with concepts of "loob" ("relational will") and "kapwa" ("together with the person") in Filipino virtue ethics which "serve as pillars that support a special collection of virtues dedicated to strengthening and preserving human relationships" (Reyes, 2015, p. 148). The narrative of kabutihang loob banks on the concept of "loob" or inner character of the candidate while the narratives of pamilyang Pilipino and pagmamalasakit animate the "kapwa" or consideration for people other than one's self. These dominant narratives emphasize the relational aspect of Philippine politics which is personalistic in nature and where candidates serve as patrons to the voters/clients (Quimpo, 2010). They also operate against the backdrop of faith and religion in a Catholic country such as the Philippines (Perron, 2009) where the narratives can be interpreted as mirroring values of Christianity.

Emerging and Missing Narratives

Aside from the three dominant narratives outlined above, there are also emerging and missing narratives in the TV ads. The emerging narratives include *pagtangkilik sa lokalidad* (narrative of the local), *pag-atake sa kalaban* (negative ads), *paggamit ng lohika* (use of reason), and *nasyonalismo* (narrative of the nation). These emerging narratives are not as common as the dominant narratives and were observed in fewer ads. They may also become more dominant in the future. The “missing” narratives, on the other hand, are excluded subjects or topics that can be taken on in campaigns in the future.

Pagtangkilik sa lokalidad (narrative of the local). This emerging narrative emphasizes a candidate’s membership to a sociolinguistic group (e.g., Marcos, 2019a, 2019b) or a candidate’s local roots (e.g., Gabunada, 2016b; Rewl Random, 2019a, 2019b). Capitalizing on one’s locality became apparent in 2016 as it marked the first time that the winners of both the presidential and vice-presidential races came straight from their respective stints in local government (Teehankee & Thompson, 2016). Moreover, politics in the Philippines is regionalist, owing to the ethnolinguistic cleavages in the country (Perron, 2009). Some candidates then tap into their identities as belonging to certain groups especially if these groups comprise a large voting constituency (e.g., Lesaca, 2020; Madrona, 2016; Marcos, 2019b).

A candidate’s birthplace, residence, or place of origin can also assure him/her of widespread support in that area or region as a matter of in-group loyalty to one’s stronghold or bailiwick. Finally, some candidates promise to implement what they did in their respective regions for the benefit of the nation (e.g., Lesaca, 2020; Madrona, 2016; Marcos, 2019b). The term “bayan” or town also connotes proximity between the leader and the voters as it is in a town where everyone knows their neighbors and leaders are within reach. This is why Duterte was known by locals as the motorcycle-riding mayor, roaming the streets of Davao at night (e.g., Mugstoria, 2015).

Pag-atake sa kalaban (use of the negative ad). A negative ad follows a structure and convention different from ads with a positive focus (Smith & Johnston, 1991). A controversial negative ad (offense) from vice-presidential candidate Antonio Trillanes came out in 2016 that used children as subjects to attack Duterte (e.g., Flores, 2016). The ad’s goal is to incite fear or concern about Duterte’s crude language and authoritarian tendencies. The ad also aimed to establish resonance by appealing to the need to shield children or the young members of the Filipino family from the corrupting influence of leaders who are not worth emulating.

Negative ads are not common in the Philippines because of the behavioral norm in Philippine political culture known as *pakikisama* (fellowship). David Timberman (1991) posits that *pakikisama* “can make it socially unacceptable to be straight-forward or to make controversial statements or decisions” (p. 19). Perron (2009) affirms that in the Philippines’ high-context culture, harmony and politeness are valued over being confrontational. Meanwhile, in the US, negative or attack ads are more common (Perron, 2009). Whether negative or attack ads will be used more frequently in future political campaigns in the Philippines remains to be seen.

Paggamit ng lohika (use of reason). A third emerging narrative is the use of reason. An example is a 2019 senatorial ad by Chel Diokno, lawyer and academic, who proposed to fix the justice system through cause-and-effect reasoning (e.g., Diokno, 2019). Other ads which used logical appeals despite the constraints of time include Miriam Defensor-Santiago’s TV spots explaining her position on lowering income tax and how to generate jobs to lessen the number of Filipinos going abroad (e.g., chinnypanda, 2019b). A few ads also proposed to kill poverty (and not the poor, an implicit reference to Duterte’s “war on drugs”) as they framed crime as consequence of poverty (e.g., Escudero, 2016). Finally, an ad urged voters to research and be informed about candidates (e.g., Marcos, 2016). These ads, while hopefully paving the way for deliberative discussion, are the exception rather than the rule. It remains to be seen whether a narrative emphasizing logical appeals will eventually take root and be sustained in campaigns.

Nasyonalismo (narrative of the nation). A final emerging narrative is that of nationalism where the nation is placed at the center of the story. An ad that represents this narrative shows Duterte proclaiming, “I am a Filipino and I love my country” and kissing the Philippine flag (e.g., Gabunada, 2016c). Another one of Duterte’s ads used a popular patriotic song in the country (“Pilipinas Kong Mahal”) as background music instead of using the usual campaign jingle or song and dance performance common in ads with a populist flavor (e.g., Gabunada, 2016a). The lyrics of the song and the images used in the ad conjure feelings related to the plight of overseas Filipino workers, the government response to airport security issues at the time, and the need for an ironhanded leader to protect the interest of the nation. Like the other narratives, the use of the nationalist narrative also depends on the general campaign platform and imaging of the candidate.

Missing narratives. The existence of dominant narratives in the ads suggests that some narratives will be subordinated or “missing.” For instance, the theme of peace and order focused on drugs, crime, and poverty. However, issues of domestic and international terrorism which continue to hound the country and the endless violence in the Philippine

south are missing narratives. Issues concerning climate change, global warming, renewable energy, and the environment were also uncommon. Moreover, ads about disaster-preparedness and risk management efforts are almost invisible even as typhoons, landslides, and volcanic eruptions have wreaked havoc in the country in the past. Finally, while TV ads tried to be as inclusive of diverse and key constituencies, no characters, stories, and voices have forcefully come out of the margins or the LGBTQ+ community, PWDs (persons with disabilities), and indigenous groups. I will return to these missing narratives in my recommendations for improving political messaging in TV ads which is the final subsection of the discussion. In what follows, I will look at how the narratives in the TV ads achieve or fail to achieve narrative probability and fidelity.

Narrative Probability and Fidelity

As one might observe from the list of narratives in the previous section, political TV ads follow conventions as a campaign message genre, and they are expected to show favorable qualities of a candidate. This affects the narrative probability (coherence) and narrative fidelity (resonance) or how the stories resonate with one's experience (Fisher, 1987). Stories in the ads are coherent, understandable, and resonant insofar as the narratives are social constructions that do not necessarily correspond to reality but only highlight positive aspects of a chosen reality. For instance, ads that show that candidates who are “*nakikiisa sa mahihirap*” (allies of the poor) may have some basis in fact. However, it is also true that the same candidates may have vetoed bills or have done nothing substantial about the plight of the poor when they were elected to office. Narratives in TV ads can and are often used for spin.

The narrative coherence of TV ads emphasizing themes of poverty is also belied by the fact that despite numerous promises by politicians that they will lift Filipino families out of poverty (e.g., *chinnypanda*, 2019a; *Rewl Random*, 2019a, 2019b), income inequality and poverty in the country persist (Oxford Business Group, n.d.). Meanwhile, the narratives of *pagmamalasakit*, *kabutihang loob*, and *pakikisama* can also be abused through overwhelming use of the poor as subjects (e.g., children, families, and the elderly). Most ads by populist candidates emphasize themes of class and status, and one cannot help but notice that TV ads in the Philippines are full of narratives of victimhood and self-sacrifice by the candidates, destitution of Filipinos, and worsening living conditions in the country. As the theme of poverty constructs an image of underdevelopment in the

Philippines, this also strains narrative coherence on the part of politicians because they promise change or progress regularly, yet for the longest time these promises have remained unfulfilled and have become empty.

To see whether a narrative has probability and fidelity, one must therefore look at the entire story arc or how a particular narrative played out in a candidate's political career and legislative record. With social media today, there are other platforms where a voter can scrutinize a candidate's narrative: official Facebook pages of candidates and those that were created by their supporters; their use of microcelebrities on Twitter, Instagram, and vloggers on YouTube; and the different memes about the candidates. All of these sources in the information ecosystem supplement the narratives of the politicians in mainstream and traditional media. In other words, narratives must not be understood in a vacuum as they are constructed by candidates using different platforms.

Granting that narrative coherence and resonance are achieved in the TV ads of the candidates, another caveat is the fact that the dirty work of politics—attacks against opponents, mudslinging, and *ad hominem*—often happens “underground” or through the use of paid hacks or trolls, as shown in the 2016 presidential elections (Ong & Cabañes, 2018) and 2019 midterm elections (Ong et al., 2019). If a voter wants a more holistic picture of a candidacy where both the good and the bad aspects of a politician's campaign are given attention, then narratives in TV ads must be weighed against news items, media reports and coverage of politicians, and campaigns using digital technology. Given the considerations for narrative probability (coherence) and fidelity (resonance), what can be done to improve the content of TV ads?

Improving TV Ad Content and Narrative

An aspect that can affect narrative coherence and resonance are the limitations of TV ads such as the length (usually 30, 60, or 90 seconds) and the exorbitant costs of airing them. TV ads must be able to communicate narratives quickly, so it is important that they remain simple but resonant. As TV ads are expensive (Diaz, 2019), they should also be worth the investment. They should stick in the minds of voters and provide recall for the candidates. Finally, it must be noted that a single candidate's TV ads may also lack a sequence or a logical order to be followed. A TV ad is usually a standalone in the sense that it does not depend on other ads for continuity in narrative. While TV ads from a single candidate should have a consistent theme or narrative (e.g., Lesaca 2020; Madrona, 2016), a TV ad should be able to effectively tell a story and be remembered on its own.

Given all of these considerations, four suggestions for improving TV ads are provided here: (1) engaging alternative discourses, (2) including concrete solutions, (3) understanding the impact of the recommendations including strengthening research, and (4) helping voters become informed and critical. This paper does not argue that TV ads should function like news reports, editorials, or debates that ideally provide in-depth discussion of issues. Rather, this paper posits that even with the limitations, TV ads can still be both catchy and informative, effective and inclusive, and simple yet eye-opening. I will explain my suggestions below.

Alternative discourses. “Alternative” here means capitalizing on novel problems, progressive issues, and more diverse subjects of representation to avoid the abuse of themes of poverty, the Filipino family, and purity of self which have become trite in political campaign communication. The presence of dominant narratives in the ads entails that some narratives will be excluded. Issue priorities in existing narratives cast a wide net by appealing to the least common denominator or key voting constituencies. Only the popular “causes” find allies among politicians such as healthcare, employment, and education for all, especially the poor.

While the ads also cater to the interests of the vulnerable sectors like women, children, and the elderly, the narratives of gender and ethnic minorities are deemphasized, if discussed at all. For instance, since majority of the ads focused on images of the *pamilyang Pilipino*, addressing the needs and demands of “alternative” families like same-sex partners and single-parent households do not get attention from the candidates and their strategists. A more liberal and progressive agenda such as long-term legislation for divorce and same-sex marriage (even reproductive health issues) are also not part of any politician’s agenda because these are controversial and polarizing issues in a predominantly Catholic country.

Other issues and concerns that can be championed are those faced by ethnic minorities and indigenous groups such as their rights to ancestral domain, opposition to mining and destruction of environment, and the preservation of culture in the face of growing tourism. With novel subjects and topics, the inclusion of narratives from previously excluded groups such as the LGBTQ+ community and indigenous groups has the potential of achieving narrative resonance as more people can be encouraged to recognize equality for all. Amplifying the voices of these marginalized groups can become a progressive move by affirming that they deserve to be listened to and represented as members of the political community.

Aside from the above, TV ads can also take on fewer common issues. While generating jobs has always been a major campaign promise, employment quota and opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWDs),

the elderly, the underemployed, and retrenched domestic and overseas Filipino workers can be explored further. Fighting the practice of “endo” (end of contract employees) that threatens the right to security of tenure, a perpetual concern of Filipino workers and laborers, can also be made a salient issue by a candidate who cares enough to propose a specific solution (Duterte promised to abolish “endo” only to veto an “anti-endo” bill later). In education, scholarships and increasing salaries are popular causes. However, mental health issues of students and adults alike are usually sidelined. Related to health and well-being, preparedness for risk and disasters in general (including health and environmental issues) can also be prioritized.

Finally, in light of recent events, political actors can present new issues and solutions, revive existing narratives, and frame them differently in the future. For instance, in a post-pandemic world, how will politicians help mitigate and prepare for a health crisis as well as its impact and consequences? In relation to political events since the presidential election of 2016, candidates and political consultants can also capitalize on issues of rehabilitation in response to Duterte’s “war on drugs”; take on Duterte’s truncated promises of pushing for federalism and foreign policy such as enforcing the arbitration ruling in the country’s territorial row with China; push for reform in the Philippine political party system; and address issues related to technology, not only in terms of access but also how to protect voters and consumers from trolls, online aggression, “fake news,” and disinformation.

Concrete solutions. Aside from including marginalized voices and engaging alternative issues, candidates and their consultants must examine whether their political agenda and campaign messaging offer something innovative or simply draw on traditional tropes and topics in Philippine politics. Concrete solutions mean innovating and providing voters with realistic plans to address problems. The solution should not be simplistic and abstract statements such as “political will” or “candidate X is the solution” but actually rooted in policy, research, and actual legislative record or agenda of a candidate. Such an approach to messages has the advantage of focusing not on problems (e.g., poverty, illegal drugs, etc.) but actual solutions. Ads every election season show problems of poverty and inequality and audiences already know the problems hounding the country. The next step is then to think of concrete ways to address the issues. If done collectively or by a majority of candidates, proposing concrete solutions will be a refreshing approach to campaigning and a novel way of communicating with the voters.

Ronald Holmes (2016) argued that Duterte won the election in part due to the “clarity of his campaign message—focused on curbing a single problem (criminality, in general, and the illegal drug trade, in particular) that he elevated as the most serious concern” (p. 15). This paper, however, proposes that aside from naming a problem, an equally important thing to do is to propose a concrete and specific solution. It should answer “how” a problem will be addressed and not just “who” will solve it. As we have witnessed, Duterte’s lack of a concrete solution to the drug problem during the campaign made voters dependent on a promise of change (eradicating crime in three to six months) with harmful consequences (the “war on drugs”).

Asking candidates to provide solutions is not about compelling them to extensively debate or explain their positions on issues in TV ads that last for only 30 to 90 seconds (this is both impossible and impractical). Rather, the suggestions in this paper wishes to challenge candidates and their strategists to focus on solutions instead of remaining problem- and personality-oriented in their campaign communication. This way, the burden is on the candidates to exercise due diligence in crafting their messages. By focusing on concrete solutions within the time restrictions of TV ads, strategists and candidates will be tested for their creativity, ingenuity, and innovation and they will be compelled to think of ways to effectively communicate their messages.

If the limitation of time compels candidates to highlight only their most important attributes in their TV ads, they can continue to do so even if they are presenting solutions. Concrete solutions do not require lengthy explanations in 30 to 90 second ads. The explanations can be provided in other fora such as debates, political interviews, official campaign platforms on social media, and even in their campaign rallies. What matters is for the TV ads to frame issues because they can set the agenda and garner news coverage. It is no longer enough to say that candidates are for generating jobs and providing access to healthcare. They should articulate how they will deliver on their promises concretely (i.e., naming a law they will propose or mentioning a state instrument or resource they will tap into). Details of these solutions and lengthy explanations can be provided in other fora and platforms.

Impact of the recommendations. Candidates presenting alternative agenda and concrete solutions can gain a competitive advantage in elections where traditional politicians promise the same things. By taking on novel issues and proposing solutions, a candidate will have a unique selling point to stand out from many candidates in the country’s multi-party system. Since the positions of different candidates on issues such

as poverty, unemployment, and access to healthcare are very similar, focusing on solutions will challenge politicians to think of the most realistic and innovative programs and policies to address some of the country's intractable problems. This is a "narrative burden" reserved for candidates who wish to earn the public's trust—a burden that will show early on in the campaign who among the candidates have a well-crafted vision and doable plan for the country.

TV ads with concrete solutions will also allow voters to compare different candidates' stances on a range of issues. In a study by the Institute of Philippine Culture (2005), it was concluded that poor Filipino voters exercise agency in their electoral choices. It is then wrong to assume that the poor (and voters in general) are "bobotantes" (idiot voters) when candidates deemed unfit for office are elected. Voters can be discerning when they are treated with respect and their agency is recognized. They are capable of understanding issues and comparing candidates if politicians and their consultants also do their part in making issues accessible to the public. The naysayers will say that the proposal in this paper will not be effective. Effectiveness is not a concern of this study. What this study argues is that TV ads can be both informative and persuasive, entertaining and beneficial, so it is not right to be consigned to the belief that TV ads should only be catchy and memorable.

Finally, alternative discourses and concrete solutions will help move the public discourse from the realm of image and spectacle to the domain of policies and platforms. Hahn (2003) argues that ads are emotional campaign devices. This paper does not suggest that politicians eschew *pathos* and *ethos* altogether (appeals to emotions and credibility) and just focus on *logos* (reason or arguments). Rather, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* should be balanced. To reiterate, TV ads can both be smart and funny, simple yet credible, and there is no need to choose either one or the other. What this study opposes are ads that only appeal to emotions, heavily use images of poverty, or overemphasize a candidate's positive qualities at the expense of concrete solutions. The public office should be a competition of the best ideas for governance, not the most dramatic fictions by politicians. If they choose to, candidates and their strategists can appeal not only to voters' values and expectations but also their interests and rationality. The suggestions in this study can also benefit from and serve the interests of public opinion research as a resource.

Strengthening research. Public opinion research can do two things: inform the creation of a communication plan and provide possible policy recommendations. While focus groups and surveys or polls are conducted by campaign teams to know whether a candidate's image or messaging is

effective, this study proposes pro-active research especially for candidates with resources. By “pro-active,” it is meant that studies can be conducted not only for measuring the success of certain campaign efforts but to get a sense of what kind of solutions voters are most likely to endorse or expect from the candidates. Research is an instrument that can be used to meet the objectives of a campaign if candidates are really concerned about proposing novel approaches to old problems, concrete solutions, and an alternative agenda.

Research will also benefit candidates if they want to test their ideas on likely voters before running their political messages. It will allow candidates to be data-driven in their approach to campaign communication instead of simply relying on received wisdom or the formula of what is perceived to work in campaigns. Candidate narratives can also be informed by the various views, opinions, and perspectives of the voters as research provides a space for the voters to impact and influence campaign messages. Through research, it is hoped that motherhood statements (e.g., “I will take care of you”) will be avoided in favor of nuanced and evidence-based arguments. This is a positive direction towards holding candidates and their consultants accountable to their messages.

Creating informed and critical voters. To be critical, a voter must interrogate the link between a narrative and reality. Narratives can combine, add, and revise any number of elements—characters, settings, issues, and qualities of candidates—to achieve the candidate’s desired image. In this regard, voters must demand accountability from politicians who made promises in their ads but later on abandoned the said promises. This can be done by voting out politicians when the promises in their TV ads are not fulfilled or by being critical of the politician’s campaign materials in the future. By considering the TV ad as the “contract” between the candidate and the voter, the voter can hold the politician accountable later on.

Political consultants and candidates can help the voters become more critical by presenting alternative discourses, concrete solutions, and amplifying previously excluded voices. The idea that strategists are just “giving what the people want” must be reconsidered because political consultants can choose to elevate the quality of public discourse while serving the interests of their clients. The two objectives are not mutually exclusive. The following challenge can then be raised for candidates and their consultants or strategists: abandon class-based concepts that overuse themes of poverty. It is time to craft narratives that respect both a candidate’s strengths and the voter’s agency. Bong Revilla’s “Budots” ad in 2019 (e.g., Peter, 2019) may have been effective but this is a kind of ad that reinforces a political culture where voters are only presented with charisma, popularity, and winnability

(manifested in lively song and dance or catchy jingles in TV ads).

What we need more of are ads that respect voters and recognize their capacity to understand issues that affect them. Chel Diokno's 2019 senatorial ad about the problems of the justice system and how it can be strengthened is an example of an ad that explained in a minute or so the complex issue of crime and corruption (e.g., Diokno, 2019). The ad shows that it is not impossible to explain a complex issue in a simple manner, all within a matter of 60 seconds. Reimagining ads as spaces for information and education will certainly challenge consultants and candidates to find ways for an ad to explain complex problems within the constraints of the medium. This is a good thing because the ads will be expected to contribute to an informed citizenry. While those opposed to this idea will argue that political TV ads are not designed to educate, this view does not negate the fact that the narratives in political TV ads are always open to innovation, challenge, and change.

Another criticism might be the notion that there are more appropriate venues for educating the public about candidate's issue positions. The 2016 and 2019 national elections included televised debates organized by the government and media organizations. While it is true that televised political debates have the potential to encourage policy discussions among candidates, the same debates can also be hijacked by the candidates' rhetorical and argumentative misgivings (Tatcho, 2018, 2020). As such, it is not true that only news, political commentary, debates, and the academe should be expected to help inform and educate the public. TV ads (and mass media in general) can be an agent of political exposure and information. These are influential platforms in democracy.

It is high time that candidates and their consultants eschew overreliance on simplistic solutions or mere image-making. TV ads should be informative and beneficial, not only for the politician but even more for the voters. Certainly, the political imperative to use TV ads for enhancing a candidate's winnability may constrain innovation. Going against the "formula" for an effective political TV ad may defy political logic (to win) and involves risk-taking. To reiterate, the point of this study is not that informative, rational, and logical TV ads are effective. Rather, improving discourse in TV ads through more concrete solutions, diverse subjects, and progressive issues is always an option for candidates running for public office. TV ads of the past may be formulaic but as a source of political exposure and information, TV ads can also contribute to critical public discourse.

In an online article for the *Inquirer*, Asia News Network (2019) noted that "more than half of the population of Southeast Asia is under the age of 30" (para. 3) and that "progressivism, issues-based rhetoric appeals more

to this new demographic than traditional voting lines, age-old political fiefdoms or conservative issues” (para. 4). Thus, in the digital world of “wokeness” and millennials, it is never too late to improve the quality of narratives in political TV ads. The emerging narrative of *paggamit ng lohika* (use of reason) shows promise in the direction of issue-based campaigning. TV ads can both inform and entertain and there are practical steps that can be taken if they are to appeal to reason, progressivism, and veer away from trite and conservative rhetoric. Public opinion research is also always available for candidates and political consultants who want to test and know the viability of their political messages and campaign ideas.

Conclusion

This study uncovered dominant, emerging, and missing narratives in political TV ads and what these narratives reveal about aspects of Philippine political culture. While the TV ads have narrative probability and fidelity because their forms and functions are made coherent and resonant by political strategists, the ads must still be checked against a story arc that spans the political career of a candidate. TV ads must not be assessed in isolation but considered in light of other sources in today’s rich information ecosystem. As TV ads can also be picked up by news outlets and netizens who create memes, ads have an agenda-setting function that can be harnessed to improve the quality of public discourse. Hence, political actors can control, frame, and challenge existing narratives in favor of progressive issues, marginalized voices, alternative discourses, and more concrete solutions uncovered through public opinion research.

As this study has implications for researchers and scholars interested in campaign materials, three recommendations for points of investigation are in order. First, studies of political TV ads in the Philippines can look into qualities emphasized by the candidates from a moral foundations vocabulary (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) or the relationship-oriented Filipino virtue ethics (Reyes, 2015). Quantitative measures can be employed to allow the audience to express identification with virtues that candidates articulate in their ads. Second, political TV ads in the Philippines can be understood better by covering a more significant time period of Philippine campaigns going further back or prior to 2016. This will provide insights on how narratives are revived, recycled, and even aborted. Finally, from a rhetorical perspective, studies can be conducted to see how a candidate’s narrative answers to the call of the times and responds to the clamor of the specific political moment (Martin, 2014). Winning elections is not a mere function of advertising but a matter of how a candidacy is situated within past and current discourses of political regimes (Thompson, 2014).

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