

Digital Satire as Political Discourse: Humor, Memes, and Resistance in Philippine Internet Culture

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Abstract

This study examines the emergence of humor and satire as a new form of political language within the digital culture of the Philippines. It aims to understand how political memes, parody videos, and satirical content function as instruments of political articulation in a society shaped by Catholic values, colonial legacies, and strong oral traditions. Employing a qualitative literature-based analysis, this research synthesizes findings from academic journals, scholarly books, and digital documents to explore the socio-political roles of digital humor. The findings reveal that digital humor serves not merely as entertainment but as a cultural strategy for negotiating power, fostering political solidarity, and expressing collective identity. It enables citizens to criticize authority and address social issues indirectly, aligning with Filipino communication norms of pakikisama (social harmony) and hiya (shame/honor). The study argues that digital humor is fundamentally ambivalent, it can act as a tool of resistance and emancipation while also reinforcing political propaganda and disinformation. This duality underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the complex interplay between digital culture, political participation, and socio-cultural characteristics in postcolonial contexts like the Philippines.

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Introduction

Social media, once regarded as a space of openness and freedom of expression, has increasingly become an arena for political discourse contestation, where humor, satire, and memes play a significant role as instruments of public communication (Penney, 2020). In this landscape, digital technology is not merely a tool but a cultural space laden with values, ideologies, and power struggles (Betancourt, 2016). The rise of political memes in the Philippines illustrates how society channels its political expressions through forms of digital humor that are clever, ironic, and sometimes provocative (Calimbo, 2016). However, such expressions are not always proportionally received, as the

public's digital literacy is not yet fully capable of interpreting the ideological messages hidden behind the humor (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). On one hand, digital humor serves as a vehicle for resistance against power, yet on the other hand, it can also become a medium for the spread of disinformation and political manipulation (Dr. Shaista Zeb et al., 2025). As the boundary between satire and propaganda becomes blurred, new concerns emerge regarding how society understands truth and political participation in the digital era (Kumar, 2025). This phenomenon underscores that the presence of technology is not always compatible with the cultural characteristics of communication within Filipino society, which has been shaped by oral traditions, social hierarchies, and strong religious values. Thus, the relationship between digital technology and Filipino society cannot be understood linearly; instead, it must be viewed as a complex interaction between modernity, humor, and political expression.

To date, studies on digital culture in the Philippines remain limited in their understanding of the role of humor and satire as part of the political practices of society (Calimbo, 2016; Lorenzana, 2021; Lorenzana & Soriano, 2021). Existing research tends to focus more on the use of social media as a tool for political mobilization or the dissemination of disinformation, without examining how humor and memes shape collective political consciousness. Many studies view digital technology as a neutral space for democracy, even though in practice it operates within a complex social and historical context. Studies by (Bail et al., 2018; Hao et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2018), for instance, emphasize political polarization and the influence of social media on public opinion, while (Benaissa Pedriza, 2021; Guo & Vargo, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) explore the dynamics of digital propaganda and hoaxes during elections. Meanwhile, research by (Lin & De Kloet, 2019; Mao, 2020; Zayani & Khalil, 2024) highlights the creative economy and digital culture without linking them to the politics of humor. These three tendencies show that the socio-cultural aspects of society in producing digital humor remain underexplored. Yet in the Philippines, humor is an important means for negotiating power and indirectly criticizing social conditions (McMahon, 2004). Therefore, there is a theoretical and empirical gap in understanding how digital humor and political memes shape the communication landscape in the Philippines. This gap indicates the need for a cultural approach that can explain how digital humor serves not only as entertainment but also as a strategy of resistance against hegemonic power structures (Kashifa Khatoon et al., 2025; Lowenstein-Barkai et al., 2025; Shazia Akbar Ghilzai, 2025).

This study seeks to fill gaps left by previous research, which has not comprehensively examined how the socio-cultural characteristics of Filipino

society influence the practice of using humor and satire in digital politics. In a society shaped by the legacy of colonialism, Catholic values, and strong oral communication traditions, humor functions as an important social medium for expressing criticism, solidarity, and resistance without direct confrontation (David & Nadal, 2013; Del Castillo et al., 2023). Humor becomes a safe yet sharp way to comment on social inequalities and the behavior of political elites (Nugraha, 2024; Prahastiwi, 2022). In the digital culture context, such expressions transform into memes, parody videos, and satirical content that circulates rapidly on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, platforms highly popular in the Philippines (Isip Tan et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study proposes three key research questions: first, how humor and memes function as media for political articulation within Filipino digital culture (Moreno-Almeida, 2021; Putra et al., 2022); second, how the social and cultural characteristics of the community influence the reception and interpretation of political satire (LaMarre et al., 2009; Shao & Liu, 2019); and third, how humor-based digital practices evolve from mere entertainment into social movements that have tangible effects on political awareness (Johann et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2025). Answers to these questions will broaden the understanding of digital politics that is not solely based on rationality or formal ideology, but also on the dynamics of popular culture that animate new forms of political participation.

This study argues that humor and satire within Filipino digital culture are cultural strategies used by society to negotiate power and build political solidarity. In a society with a long history of colonialism and social inequalities, humor serves as a social mechanism enabling people to criticize elites without openly challenging them (Uyheng & Montiel, 2021). Through memes, parodies, and online jokes, citizens can express political frustration, mock elite behavior, and creatively articulate collective aspirations (Calimbo, 2016). However, humor does not always operate as a form of resistance; in certain contexts, it can also be used to reinforce political propaganda through the spread of humorous yet misleading narratives (G. De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021; Mascha, 2010). Thus, political memes become a dual arena between popular expression and power manipulation (Elmore & Coleman, 2019; Ivan Franko National University of Lviv et al., 2025). In this framework, digital humor reflects complex social dynamics: it can act as a tool of emancipation while simultaneously serving as an instrument of hegemony. Therefore, to fully understand Philippine digital politics, an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural, technological, and political perspectives is necessary. Such an approach allows us to see that behind the laughter, sarcasm, and virality of memes lie serious communication practices, a societal effort to negotiate political participation within a still-hierarchical

system. Hence, this study argues that humor is not merely entertainment but a complex representation of emotional politics, identity, and social struggle in the digital age.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach using the literature study (library research) method to ensure data accuracy, transparency, and research rigor (Creswell, John W., Creswell J. David, n.d.). This approach enables the researcher to deeply understand the phenomenon by examining ideas, theories, and findings from various relevant academic sources. In a qualitative context, literature studies emphasize the subjective and interpretive dimensions of data, allowing the researcher to identify meanings, values, and socio-cultural contexts contained in scholarly works (Norman K. Denzin; Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2005). This approach enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon from the emic perspective, although accessed through written representations in texts, and opens space for exploring the views, experiences, and knowledge constructions built by earlier researchers or authors. The objects in this study include various academic literatures, journal articles, scholarly books, research reports, and digital documents relevant to the research topic. These sources were selected purposively based on relevance, academic validity, and contribution to the field (Snyder, 2019). The research design is exploratory-qualitative, aiming to identify patterns, concepts, and theoretical tendencies emerging from the literature without being constrained by specific hypotheses. Data collection was carried out through four stages: source identification, data search in academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar, literature selection based on keywords and topics, and classification of sources according to analytical themes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Virginia Braun et al., 2012). The researcher performed source and theoretical triangulation to maintain validity and reliability. Thus, this literature study not only compiles information but also critically interprets the knowledge constructions that shape the understanding of the social and cultural phenomena examined.

Humor as a New Political Language in the Philippines' Digital Culture

The emergence of humor and satire as a new political language in the digital Philippine society represents a significant evolution in contemporary political communication practices. This shift marks a transformation from traditional political communication, hierarchical and formal, to a more fluid, participatory

form rooted in popular culture. In this context, humor is not merely entertainment, but a discursive strategy and a form of social resistance against power. As (Tesnohlikova, 2020) argues, humor and satire in the political sphere function as an autonomous cultural form that enables society to challenge ideological domination without engaging in direct confrontation. In a society with a long history of colonialism, repression, and social inequality like the Philippines, humor becomes a social expression rich with political meaning.

Historically, Filipino society has been known for its expressive, flexible, and socially adaptive communication style. Humor plays a central role in building social relationships and strengthening community bonds. Oral traditions such as balagtasan (poetic debates), komedya, bodabil, and sarsuwela served not only as entertainment media but also as spaces where social critique and political satire could be articulated safely and intelligently (Calimbo, 2016). In these traditions, laughter is not merely an emotional release, it is a tool to negotiate social tensions and confront political repression. This reflects what James Scott (1990) calls hidden transcripts, a covert discourse used by subordinated groups to express dissatisfaction with domination.

In the digital era, the transformation of humor into a new form of political discourse becomes evident through the proliferation of memes, parody videos, TikTok sketches, and other humorous content widely circulating on social media. Digital memes have become a key component of political humor because of their viral nature and their ability to reach large audiences quickly and participatorily (Febriana et al., 2023; Деркач et al., 2023). This participatory nature turns digital humor into an open space of meaning production, where ordinary citizens can act as producers of political discourse. Based on a synthesis of the literature, digital humor in the Philippine political context serves multiple interconnected functions, which are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Functions of Digital Humor in Philippine Politics: A Literature Synthesis

Function	Characteristics	Media Examples	Socio-Political Impact	References in Literature
Indirect Criticism	Avoids direct confrontation; uses irony and local symbols	Memes, parody videos	Allows expression of discontent without social risk	Calimbo (2016); Sabala et al. (2024)
Solidarity Building	Forms collective identity through shared jokes	Facebook groups, online communities	Strengthens community bonds and social movements	Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014); Toron (2010)

Symbolic Resistance	Deconstructs dominant discourse through hyperbole and parody	Memes with local icons (jeepney, fiesta)	Challenges official narratives and political myths	Calimbo (2016); Shrodes (2020)
Affective Participation	Engages emotions and sensations instead of formal ideology	TikTok content, viral memes	Increases youth political engagement	Lorenzana & Soriano (2021); Mendelson & Papacharissi (2010)
Social Therapy	Copes with political pressure and crises through humor	Pandemic, natural disaster content	Cultural resilience and collective healing	Ungar (2018); Chaves (2022)
Propaganda & Disinformation	Engineered humor for political agendas	Misleading viral content	Polarization and weakened critical awareness	G. De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao (2021); Penney (2020)

Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

As shown in Table 1, digital humor operates across a broad spectrum, from a tool of resistance to an instrument of propaganda. These functions are not mutually exclusive but often overlap in practice, reflecting the complexity of digital political dynamics in the Philippines. For instance, the same meme can simultaneously function as political criticism and as a reinforcement of community solidarity. According to (Shrodes, 2020), humor in the digital context functions as a political possibility, a space in which society, especially young people, can reject oppressive ideologies through creativity and collective participation.

This phenomenon is highly relevant in the Philippines, a country known as one of the world's highest social media users. Data from We Are Social (2024) shows that Filipinos spend an average of more than four hours a day on social media, with Facebook, TikTok, and X (Twitter) as dominant platforms. This digital ecosystem creates a new public sphere where political humor can be disseminated, negotiated, and reinterpreted by wider society. (Lorenzana & Soriano, 2021) explain that social media has become an arena of affective politics in the Philippines, where emotions, laughter, and satire shape new landscapes of political participation. In this context, humor is no longer merely an individual expression, it becomes a political symbol binding online communities through shared affect. The role of humor in digital political discourse goes beyond entertainment. It functions as a cultural code enabling society to navigate and negotiate complex political realities. Digital political humor acts as a subtle yet sharp mechanism of critique, deconstructing dominant ideologies and opening space for the public to critically engage with issues of governance, public policy,

and corruption. (Calimbo, 2016) demonstrates that political memes in the Philippines frequently use popular cultural symbols to challenge established power structures. Politicians, for instance, are often portrayed as ridiculous cartoon characters, symbols of corruption, or authoritarian figures stripped of legitimacy. In this sense, humor becomes a semiotic tool that dismantles the image of power, making it “laughable” and thus partially diminishing its authority.

(Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014) adds that humor can serve as a unifying tool within social movements, as it facilitates solidarity among diverse groups under a shared sense of discontent. In the Philippine context, this is evident in online movements that use memes and satirical videos to express resistance against perceived repressive power. Collective laughter becomes a marker of emerging political identities rooted in shared experiences and digital expression. Furthermore, the increasing integration of political humor into everyday digital interactions significantly affects youth political engagement. (Harveena Kaur A P Mahinder Singh & Puyok, 2021) show that exposure to satirical content increases political awareness and encourages social action among Southeast Asian youth. For Filipino millennials and Gen Z, digital humor serves as a medium for light yet critical political reflection. Humor helps them grasp political complexities without engaging in rigid or elitist discourse. Within the framework of connective action proposed by (Bennett & Kruse, 2015), participation in creating and sharing political humor can be viewed as a form of flexible, decentralized collective action, where individual identities connect through creative expression rather than a singular ideology.

However, the effectiveness of political humor in fostering social engagement is not always linear. On one hand, humor can cultivate critical awareness, yet on the other, it may also produce political cynicism. (Lorenzana & Soriano, 2021) note that many Filipino social media users consume political humor solely for entertainment, without internalizing its deeper political messages. (Calimbo, 2016; Kushin et al., 2022) Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) describe this phenomenon as affective participation, a form of political participation driven by emotions and sensations rather than ideology or concrete action. Nonetheless, they emphasize that such participation remains important because it opens accessible and aesthetic pathways for younger generations to develop political awareness. From a cultural perspective, digital political humor in the Philippines also serves as a space for negotiating national identity amid globalization. Appadurai (1996) describes this phenomenon as glocality, the blending of global expressions with local values. Filipino political memes frequently use local symbols, such as jeepney, barangay, or fiesta, to highlight

national issues, creating a sense of closeness between political discourse and the everyday experiences of citizens. In this regard, digital humor becomes a bridge between global popular culture and local traditions embedded in the nation's collective consciousness.

Beyond critique, humor also serves therapeutic and adaptive functions in coping with socio-political tension. Ungar (2018) refers to this as cultural resilience, a society's ability to maintain social endurance through cultural expression. During crises such as political conflict, natural disasters, or pandemics, Filipinos often use humor as a mechanism of collective coping. By laughing at absurd or stressful situations, they not only release emotional pressure but also preserve social unity and collective hope. Ultimately, the interaction between humor and digitalization in the Philippines demonstrates how technology and culture can synergize in shaping new forms of political participation that are more inclusive and creative. Digital political humor is not merely a mode of expression, it is a new form of civic literacy that requires emotional intelligence and symbolic awareness. In an era of algorithms and information overload, humor offers an efficient means of conveying political messages without losing human warmth. Thus, laughter becomes a distinctive form of critical consciousness in digital societies, light, fast, yet sharp and reflective.

As (Tesnohlikova, 2020) concludes, the power of humor lies in its ability to transform political discourse structures without violence or agitation. In the Philippine context, humor becomes a "soft weapon" against authoritarianism, polarization, and political fatigue. By laughing at power, society not only expresses dissatisfaction but also reclaims democratic space in more participatory and egalitarian forms. Therefore, digital political humor can be viewed as a new manifestation of a "democracy of laughter", a civic practice that combines intelligence, creativity, and courage in confronting the absurdities of modern politics.

Humor and Memes as a Medium of Digital Political Articulation

In the Philippine digital landscape, humor and memes have emerged as dynamic media for political articulation, enabling citizens to express criticism toward those in power, public policy, and social issues such as poverty, inequality, and corruption. The widespread use of political humor functions as a form of vernacular creativity, grassroots creativity rooted in everyday experiences, that provides space for people to articulate social and political critique through easily shareable content on social media (Calimbo, 2016; Kushin et al., 2022). Political memes are effective because their simplicity and humoristic appeal allow

complex ideas to be easily digested by a broad audience, thus accelerating the circulation of discourses of dissatisfaction and criticism toward authorities. This phenomenon is rooted in the long-standing Filipino communication tradition that relies on humor and satire as subtle ways of conveying truth and mocking power without direct confrontation. In digital contexts, this tradition transforms into a fluid and creative form of political participation, where humor is not merely a tool of entertainment, but also a mechanism for interpreting political reality, building social solidarity, and negotiating citizens' positions in relation to state power (Soriano, 2013).

The interaction between spontaneous grassroots satire and strategically engineered humor produced by political actors creates a complex landscape of political discourse in digital spaces. Memes originating from ordinary citizens are often used to ridicule political figures, mock public policies, or criticize specific social phenomena, inviting the public to think critically about official state narratives. Such memes serve as symbols of resistance against elite discourse domination and open space for more democratic discussion. Conversely, humor engineered by campaign teams or political actors is used to reinforce certain power agendas. This type of humor risks weakening public critical awareness by turning political critique into easily consumable entertainment (Baulch et al., 2022; Penney, 2020). The tension between these two forms of humor illustrates the dilemma of digital political communication, where high entertainment value may obscure substantive political messages. (Uyheng & Montiel, 2021) note that emotional politics in the Philippines often replace ideological politics, leading memes initially intended as satire to instead contribute to social polarization and political banality. Nevertheless, the push and pull between these forms of humor demonstrates the distinctive character of Philippine digital politics, flexible, improvisational, and symbolically playful, where humor becomes a site of negotiation between citizens and elites, between resistance and propaganda, and between political awareness and mass entertainment (Penney, 2019).

Visual discourse analysis of political memes reveals that such content constructs alternative political spaces that challenge official state narratives and mainstream media. Through a combination of symbols, text, and imagery, memes create participatory dialogues that represent marginalized voices often excluded from formal political conversations. (Calimbo, 2016) shows that Filipino political memes employ semiotic strategies such as parody and hyperbole to deconstruct political myths and expose contradictions in the rhetoric of power. Meanwhile, (Soriano, 2013) argues that digital political humor in the Philippines often functions as a form of "laughing against," a means

through which citizens mock unjust policies or authoritarian leadership. By employing laughter, people can express dissent without resorting to high-risk direct protest. Memes highlighting public policy failures, for example, frequently use humor to expose the absurdities of governance or bureaucratic inefficiency. In this sense, laughter is not merely an emotional reaction but a political strategy that transforms frustration into social energy for discussion and participation (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Through humor, the boundaries between the serious and the playful become blurred, generating new forms of activism that are more fluid, creative, and socially accessible.

One of the most significant aspects of this phenomenon is the growing political participation of young people through digital humor. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok have become major arenas for Filipino youth to express their political views. Memes and satirical content serve as effective tools for discussing public issues in ways that are entertaining and aligned with their digital communication styles (Jalli, 2025; Zhu et al., 2019). Research indicates that engagement with political humor not only deepens young people's understanding of public issues but also increases their motivation to participate in offline political activities such as protests, social campaigns, or public discussions (Kushin et al., 2022). Humor plays an important role as an "emotional bridge" that connects serious issues with lighthearted modes of expression, creating safe spaces for dialogue without falling into extreme polarization. Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) refer to this phenomenon as affective publics, communities bound together by shared emotions in digital spaces. In the Philippine context, collective laughter through memes generates a new form of political solidarity, not grounded in formal ideology but in shared experiences as citizens confronting the absurdities of political systems. However, some scholars warn that the impact of political humor on critical awareness may be ambivalent. When humor prioritizes entertainment too heavily, it risks reducing political reflection and turning important issues into mere jokes (Uyheng & Montiel, 2021). Thus, a balance between substantive critique and comedic presentation is necessary to ensure that humor remains an enlightening democratic tool rather than merely an escape from reality.

The evolution of humor in Philippine political discourse demonstrates its dual capacity: as a tool for criticizing power and as a vehicle for civic participation. On one hand, humor opens wider democratic spaces by enabling citizens to negotiate the meaning of power through witty and everyday language. On the other hand, humor reflects the complexity of contemporary activism, which no longer depends on conventional forms of resistance but instead operates through symbols, laughter, and digital virality. More broadly, this

phenomenon illustrates how affective politics works in the digital era, where emotions, humor, and online engagement become new drivers of active citizenship. The interplay between grassroots satire and engineered humor reveals increasingly decentralized political dynamics, in which citizens play a creative role in shaping public opinion. Thus, humor is not merely a mirror of social reality but also a tool for transforming political culture in modern Philippine society, embodying a form of digital citizenship that is critical, reflective, and intelligent in confronting power in the age of new media.

Socio-Cultural Character and Interpretations of Political Satire

In the context of contemporary Philippine society, humor and satire are not merely forms of entertainment but function as complex social mechanisms for understanding and responding to political situations. This phenomenon has become increasingly prominent in the digital era, as social media has emerged as the primary space for citizens to express political views and comment on social issues. According to (Kamath & Alur, 2024), digital expressive forms such as political memes, satirical videos, and other humorous content play a significant role in “mediating social critique” in ways that are culturally acceptable. Within a society known for upholding values of politeness and social harmony, humor serves as a symbolic language that allows the public to voice dissatisfaction without engaging in direct confrontation. Humor in Filipino culture is deeply rooted in social structures shaped by Catholic values, collectivist traditions, and colonial legacies. Since the Spanish and later American colonial periods, humor has served as a survival strategy for communities facing oppression, inequality, and repressive power. (Chaves, 2022) notes that “Filipino folk humor always contains traces of colonialism and religiosity,” making it not merely a joke but also a tool for negotiating identity and social position. Therefore, in the realm of digital politics, the use of humor and satire reflects continuity between oral traditions and modern expressions, where society channels critique through entertaining yet sharp forms.

Political satire in the Philippines often employs irony and parody as forms of symbolic communication. (Sabala et al., 2024) assert that such satire functions as a mechanism for criticizing power structures while still maintaining social norms of politeness and respect. In political memes, subtle commentary on politicians, public policies, or social events becomes a way for citizens to participate in political discourse. For example, when government policies are perceived as neglecting the lower class, citizens often express criticism through ironic memes, such as depicting officials as absurd or hyperbolic cartoon

characters. This strategy enables the public to articulate disagreement without using confrontational language that may invite social sanctions.

The interpretation and production of political satire in the Philippines are deeply shaped by specific socio-cultural values. Table 2 below synthesizes these key cultural factors and their influence on digital humor practices.

Table 2

Socio-Cultural Factors Shaping Political Humor in the Philippines

Cultural Factor	Influence on Humor	Evidence from Literature
Pakikisama (Social Harmony)	Humor as a tool for maintaining social relationships	Sabala et al. (2024); Cabbuag (2025)
Hiya (Shame & Honor)	Criticism delivered indirectly to avoid embarrassment	Kamath & Alur (2024); Uyheng & Montiel (2021)
Colonial Legacy	Humor as historical resistance	Chaves (2022); McMahon (2004)
Oral Tradition	Continuity from oral to digital expression forms	Calimbo (2016); Tesnohlikova (2020)
Catholic Values	Avoidance of open conflict	Del Castillo et al. (2023); David & Nadal (2013)
Collectivism	Humor as group solidarity reinforcement	Toron (2010); IKAPI (2024)

Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

As Table 2 illustrates, Filipino digital humor cannot be separated from its socio-cultural roots. The values of pakikisama and hiya, in particular, create a unique communication style where humor serves as a ‘safe zone’ for political expression. This cultural framework explains why indirect criticism through memes is often more effective and socially acceptable than direct confrontation in the Philippine context. Interestingly, the cultural characteristics of Philippine political memes display distinctive features that set them apart from similar phenomena in other countries. The strong cultural values of pakikisama (social harmony) and hiya (social shame or honor) make Filipinos likely to avoid direct confrontation in public spaces (Cabbuag, 2025). In this context, humor becomes an elegant way to convey critical messages without causing open conflict.

Political memes thus serve not only as entertainment but also as powerful instruments of communication. (Trillò & Shifman, 2020) argue that memes act as a “bridge between entertainment and activism,” facilitating social dialogue through formats that are light, visual, and easily understood. In the Philippine context, humorous styles are often light-hearted, ironic, and filled with wordplay, aligning with the expressive and adaptive communication preferences of society. (Jalli, 2025) adds that digital humor can “merge political participation

and cultural creativity” in an inclusive manner, allowing each individual to become a producer of meaning rather than merely a consumer of messages.

Interestingly, the cultural characteristics of Philippine political memes display distinctive features that set them apart from similar phenomena in other countries. The strong cultural values of *pakikisama* (social harmony) and *hiya* (social shame or honor) make Filipinos likely to avoid direct confrontation in public spaces (Cabbuag, 2025). In this context, humor becomes an elegant way to convey critical messages without causing open conflict. Memes that are humorous, ironic, and subtly satirical enable society to discuss sensitive issues such as corruption, poverty, or public policy in a light yet meaningful manner. Thus, political satire functions as a “safe zone” where criticism can be expressed without violating norms of politeness. Generational differences also play an important role in understanding digital humor in the Philippines. Younger generations, who grew up with social media, tend to view digital satire as a creative form of resistance against oppressive power structures. They interpret humor as an expression of a new political identity, more fluid, participatory, and collaborative (Sabala et al., 2024). In contrast, older generations often interpret political memes merely as light entertainment without deeper political meaning. This interpretive divide reflects a broader digital cultural gap, not only in technology adoption but also in political awareness and cognitive frameworks. As (Cabbuag, 2025) explains, “memes become an intergenerational space that both separates and connects old and new ways of thinking about politics.”

Furthermore, digital humor in the Philippines functions as a space of collective memory, where historical experiences and colonial traumas are reprocessed through laughter. IKAPI (2024) asserts that digital satire frequently invokes memories of colonialism and authoritarianism, not merely to ridicule them but also to reflect upon them. Humor becomes a tool for marginalized communities to invert power relations and ridicule political elites who have long dominated public discourse (Kamath & Alur, 2024). Through memes, citizens discover ways to convey critique in a populist, accessible manner. Even when directed at powerful figures, the humorous framing makes such critique less likely to be categorized as hostile or defamatory. Here, humor operates as a strategic mechanism of soft resistance.

Moreover, the digitalization of politics through humor expands civic participation. When conventional politics often feel distant and exclusive, memes create new spaces for citizens to engage in political discussions informally and enjoyably. As (Trillò & Shifman, 2020) note, humor enables the “democratization of political discourse” because anyone, regardless of formal authority, can express opinions. In the Philippine context, this becomes crucial as it broadens

political access for youth, women, and lower socioeconomic groups who are often marginalized in formal political arenas. As (Toron, 2010) concludes, humor in postcolonial societies is “an arena in which identity and power are renegotiated through laughter.” In the Philippines, laughter is not merely a sign of joy, it is an expression of reflective political consciousness, a symbol of resistance against domination, and a means of reclaiming people’s agency amid hegemonic power.

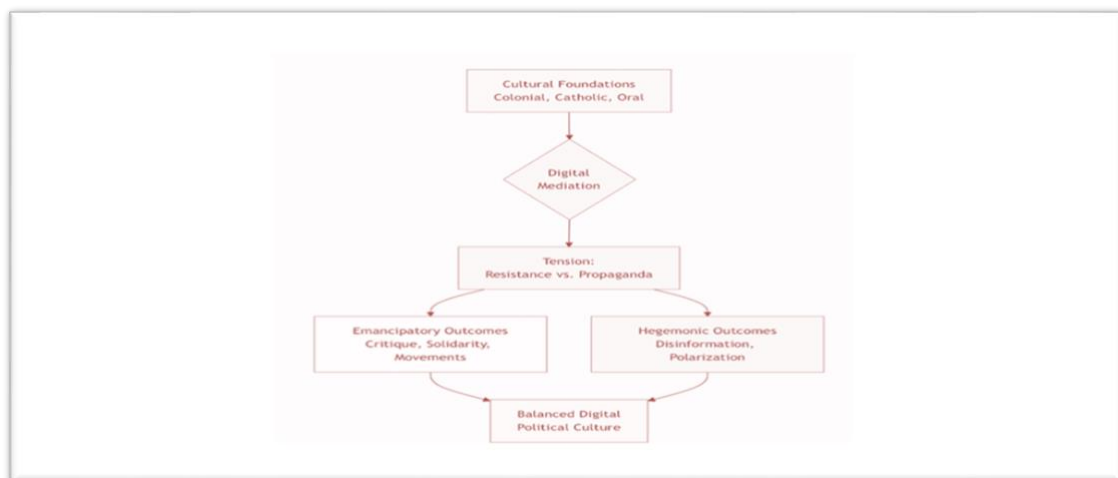
Thus, digital humor in the Philippines represents a new form of active and critical digital citizenship. It becomes a tool for negotiating power, criticizing social inequality, and articulating postcolonial identity through communicative and cultural means. Within digital spaces where political discourse is often clouded by propaganda and disinformation, humor offers an alternative: a form of communication that is intelligent, inclusive, and liberating. In this context, laughter is not an escape from political reality but rather a strategy for confronting it in a more humane way.

From Humor to Movement: Political Transformation in Meme Culture

Within the complex, historically layered cultural landscape of the Philippines, humor and satire function far beyond mere entertainment tools. They serve as social, political, and cultural mechanisms that enable citizens to manage social tensions, negotiate power, and express political perspectives subtly yet profoundly. The transformative journey from traditional humor practices to digital social movements can be visualized through the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Digital Political Humor in the Philippines



Source: Author’s synthesis based on literature review, 2025.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the transformation of humor in Philippine digital politics involves multiple interconnected layers: from historical-cultural foundations to digital mediation, and finally to socio-political outcomes. This framework helps explain how seemingly trivial memes can evolve into significant social movements by operating through culturally resonant mechanisms of expression.

In the digital era, particularly with the widespread use of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), and TikTok, these functions take on new forms through digital expressions, especially political memes, parody videos, and viral humorous content. These forms do not merely elicit laughter but also contain significant social and political critiques of power, inequality, and deeply rooted social structures. As noted by (Kamath & Alur, 2024), political humor in the Philippines operates within a social context deeply shaped by Catholic values, colonial legacies, and entrenched social hierarchies. In a society that culturally prioritizes politeness (*hiya*) and social harmony (*pakikisama*), humor becomes an effective communication strategy for delivering criticism without provoking open confrontation. Thus, laughter and satire not only provide an escape from social pressures but also function as tools of negotiation between ordinary citizens and established power structures.

The Philippines' long colonial history under Spain and the United States has shaped the way society perceives authority and power. (Chaves, 2022) observes that humor within Filipino society often carries historical dimensions, wherein laughter becomes a symbolic rejection of the colonial domination and social inequalities inherited from the past. In other words, laughter is not merely an expression of joy but also a form of cultural memory that recalls experiences of oppression and transforms them into collective reflection. Here lies the power of humor, it can turn historical wounds into liberating public discourse, allowing society to laugh at rulers, systems, and even themselves as part of a broader process of social healing. In the digital context, the roles of humor and satire become even more complex. (Sabala et al., 2024; Uyheng & Montiel, 2021) explain that digital expressions such as political memes constitute a "new symbolic arena" where Filipinos negotiate identity, power, and morality. Political memes often employ parody, irony, and hyperbole to mock public officials' behavior, highlight unjust policies, or protest social inequalities. Through humorous visuals and light language, such social critique becomes accessible and widely accepted, even among groups previously disengaged from formal political discourse.

(Trillò & Shifman, 2020) emphasize that political memes operate at the intersection of entertainment and activism. With their viral capacity, memes have

the potential to transform political participation into a more informal, creative, and enjoyable activity. In the Philippines, lighthearted humor, wordplay, and expressive visuals make memes an inclusive social language, an embodiment of the “democratization of political communication” (Jalli, 2025). Through humor, citizens do not merely observe politics; they become active actors shaping public opinion and influencing national political narratives. However, as (Cabbuag, 2025) points out, generational differences shape how digital satire is interpreted. Younger generations, raised in digital environments and familiar with online expression, tend to view memes as creative resistance against political injustice. For them, humor represents intelligent and courageous political expression as well as authentic civic engagement. Meanwhile, older generations often perceive memes merely as light entertainment without deeper political significance. This interpretive difference reflects the existence of a digital culture gap in Philippine society, where the political meaning of laughter depends heavily on social context and generational experience.

Interestingly, behind their light and humorous appearance, digital humor also serves as a symbolic weapon against oppressive power structures. (Kamath & Alur, 2024) highlight that satire allows society to “fight without fighting”, criticizing authority through means that do not generate direct threats. In a society often governed by norms of politeness and rigid social hierarchies, such strategies are crucial. Humor creates a middle ground between political seriousness and freedom of expression, a space where citizens can articulate critique without risking social security. This function of humor is not new in Filipino culture. IKAPI (2024) explains that laughter has long served as a form of “cultural resistance” within postcolonial Southeast Asian societies. Through laughter, people learn to ridicule oppressors, reject hegemony, and restore their sense of social agency. In the Philippine digital context, this function has transformed, laughter is no longer confined to community halls, marketplaces, or performance stages, but spreads widely through online networks.

Additionally, digital humor in the Philippines reflects the spirit of collectivism and social solidarity. Political memes are often created and distributed not by single individuals but by online communities who share similar sociopolitical concerns. (Toron, 2010) describes this phenomenon as “participatory postcolonial communication,” in which cultural expressions such as humor are used to reclaim public space from the dominance of official discourse. Here, humor becomes a unifying language, strengthening social bonds and fostering communal resilience in the face of sociopolitical pressures. However, political humor in digital spaces also carries ambiguity. On one hand, it may serve as an emancipatory tool giving voice to ordinary citizens; on the

other hand, its light, viral nature may risk trivializing serious political issues. As (Sabala et al., 2024) caution, laughter may divert attention from political substance and turn resistance into easily consumable entertainment. This highlights the need for critical awareness: political humor must be understood not merely as comedic material but as a reflective communicative form that stimulates public dialogue and social awareness. Memes and digital humor also play an essential role in shaping the nation's collective memory. When society laughs at political events, they are actively rewriting history in a more popular and participatory format. According to (Chaves, 2022), such expressions demonstrate how postcolonial societies "use laughter to control the narrative of the past." Through humor, Filipinos not only remember but reinterpret their collective experiences of power, colonialism, and social injustice.

Ultimately, the production and reception of digital political satire in the Philippines cannot be separated from the intricate interplay of culture, religion, and history. Humor functions as a dynamic social language, a tool for navigating power structures, challenging norms, and reinforcing collective identity. It also illustrates how Filipinos merge oral tradition and digital modernity to create discursive spaces that are inclusive, reflective, and participatory. As Toron (2010) asserts, "laughter in postcolonial societies is not a sign of surrender but a symbol of resurgence." Within the Philippine context, digital laughter becomes a form of intelligent resistance, an expression of hope and social solidarity. Thus, political humor not only represents critical attitudes toward power but also revitalizes civic consciousness and collective empowerment in an increasingly fast-paced digital media environment.

Conclusion

This study finds that digital humor and satire are not merely forms of entertainment, but constitute a new social and political language that plays an important role in expressing criticism, resistance, and the collective identity of society in the digital age. These findings provide a broad and meaningful understanding of how laughter functions as a cultural communication mechanism that enables citizens to navigate social pressures, negotiate power, and convey political aspirations without resorting to confrontational pathways. In postcolonial societies such as the Philippines, humor becomes a clever and reflective way to negotiate relations between the people and those in power, while simultaneously demonstrating societal resilience in facing political and social hegemony. Scientifically, this research makes an important contribution to studies of political communication, digital culture, and postcolonial scholarship by showing that online humor practices are not merely spontaneous expressions,

but are also complex forms of political articulation. This study enriches the understanding of memes and digital satire as instruments of political communication rooted in local cultural values, and illustrates how these forms of expression contribute to the formation of critical public consciousness.

Thus, this research opens pathways for developing theories on the relationship between popular culture, digital media, and political participation in Southeast Asia. However, this study has limitations because it is a literature-based inquiry that relies on secondary data and conceptual interpretation. Such an approach does not directly capture public perceptions and real-life practices, making further empirical research necessary to deepen existing findings. Future studies are recommended to employ digital ethnography or netnography to better understand the dynamics of social media interactions, perceptions of political humor, and its impact on public awareness and political participation. In addition, topics such as the role of gender in political humor, algorithms and the dissemination of digital satire, and cross-country comparisons in Southeast Asia are also worth exploring further in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of humor as a form of contemporary political culture.

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