Meme-ingful visual: Exploring the pragmatic implications of memes in political polarization through semiotic analysis

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Abstract

In today's digital landscape, memes have shifted from mere entertainment to cultural artifacts that shape political conversations online. They condense ideologies into images, words, and symbols that spread rapidly across social media, often blurring the line between humor and persuasion. Within this context, the primary aim of this study is to analyze political memes through a semiotic and pragmatic lens, grounded in Barthes' Semiology Theory, to examine how visual and textual elements, such as color, text, and symbols, construct meaning and influence public perception. Thirty political memes from the 2022 Philippine national elections were studied, together with responses from ten second-year college students, to identify key signifiers and audience interpretations. Findings revealed that colors, textual labels, and gestures were not random choices but ideologically saturated signs representing political identities and affiliations. Colors pink, red, and green, terms like "Leni Lugaw," "Leni Lutang," "Magnanakaw," and "Unity," and gestures such as the "L" sign and peace sign functioned as symbolic shorthand that reinforced or critiqued political personas. Through Barthes' framework, memes operated on denotative and connotative levels, embedding ideological meanings beneath surface humor. Audience interpretation was shaped by political alignment, symbolic literacy, and social media exposure, reinforcing polarization through echo chambers and confirmation bias. At the same time, memes carried a dual role: intensifying divisiveness through satire, mockery, and symbolic boundary-making, while fostering unity by affirming shared identity, solidarity, and community among like-minded groups.

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1. Introduction

The digital age has transformed traditional communication into multimodal forms where images, texts, and videos converge to generate meaning. Among these, internet memes have emerged as a powerful cultural and rhetorical tool shaping public discourse and socio-political engagement. Political memes, in particular, serve as vehicles of persuasion, satire, and commentary. They condense complex issues into accessible formats, influencing perceptions and reinforcing ideological positions. As AlAfnan (2025) highlights, political memes act as potent tools for critique and ideological messaging. They are not merely humorous but semiotic artifacts that transmit meaning through pragmatic signals and shared cultural references. This role is especially evident during elections, where memes are weaponized to promote candidates, undermine opponents, and polarize audiences (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). In the 2022 Philippine elections, memes became instruments of both propaganda and resistance, shaping narratives around Leni Robredo, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., and Sara Duterte.

Given their ubiquity, political memes warrant scholarly analysis. This study examines the semiotic and pragmatic functions of memes to understand how they contribute to political polarization. It specifically explores how signifiers such as colors, textual labels, and gestures create meaning, and how audience interpretation is influenced by ideological alignment and digital exposure. By addressing these questions, the research contributes to critical discussions on media literacy and responsible digital citizenship.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the semiotic construction of political meaning in memes, (2) to examine the pragmatic implications of these memes in reinforcing or challenging ideological divides, and (3) to propose an educational output that strengthens critical engagement with digital political discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political Memes as Multimodal Semiotic and Pragmatic Constructs

Political memes have emerged as a pervasive mode of online discourse, shaping political communication, audience interpretation, and political polarization. Different scholars provide varying explanations for the semiotic and pragmatic nature of political memes, with some focusing on their function as participatory media (Gal et al., 2016; AlAfnan, 2025), while

others weigh their capacity to perpetuate ideological biases and lead to political polarization (Guess et al., 2019).

In semiotic and pragmatic political meme analysis, a number of scholars concur that it operates as multimodal signifiers, integrating visual, textual, and cultural signs to produce meaning. Based on Barthes' (1967) semiotic theory and Zappavigna (2020) posit that political memes were dynamic sign systems, in which meaning was continually being constructed and renegotiated through audience engagement. Chandler (2022) goes further, claiming that digital media made the semiotic meanings more fluid because the audience itself continually reinterprets political symbols as a response to changing socio-political situations.

In pragmatics, Levinson (2017) and Gal et al. (2016) explained how political memes depend on implicit meaning, including irony, hyperbole, and intertextual allusion, to resonate with audiences. This was further supported by Limor and Tamir (2021), who emphasized how political memes utilized pragmatic cues to build layered meaning, enabling both subtle persuasion and explicit critique. In the same vein, Wiggins (2019) emphasized context in the interpretation of memes as their rhetorical potential resides in how they were able to inscribe political allusions that necessitate audience knowledge to fully understand.

While authors such as Zappavigna (2020) and Gal et al. (2016) highlighted the participatory character of political memes, others warn against the exacerbation of ideological polarization by them. Studies conducted by Bakshy et al. (2015) and Pecile et al. (2025) indicated how algorithmic content curation promotes political echo chambers that restrict access to opposing viewpoints and amplify existing biases. Anderau and Barbarrusa (2024) also contended that memes help polarize by reducing complicated political problems into effectively charged narratives that promote in-group favoritism and out-group hostility.

Conversely, other scholars considered political memes as digital resistance. Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) and Bjola and Papadakis (2020) pointed out the way memes act as subversive instruments in limited media environments, allowing for political critique and activism. This is consistent with the argument of Tuters and Hagen (2019), who argued that memes evolved in local political environments, thus presented themselves as important tools for grassroots movements. Nonetheless, Guess et al. (2019) and Marwick and Lewis (2017) coined that oversimplification of political rhetoric by memes could impede critical thinking and constructive conversation, more so cementing political polarization in politics.

Despite extensive research on the semiotic and pragmatic dimensions of political memes, gaps remain in understanding their long-term influence on political attitudes and behaviors. While some studies explored their role in ideological reinforcement (Tucker et al., 2018), further research is needed to examine how meme exposure shapes political engagement over time. Additionally, while scholars acknowledge the dual nature of political memes as both tools of resistance and propaganda (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020), the mechanisms through which they transition between these roles remain underexplored. Future studies should also investigate how different audience demographics interpret and respond to political memes, particularly in non-Western contexts where digital media usage differs significantly.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Roland Barthes' Semiology Theory (1964), which analyzes signs and how meanings emerge at both individual and systemic levels. Semiology explains how the signifier (form) and the signified (concept) work together to create meaning. In political memes, this framework examines them as visual-linguistic signs whose meanings, shaped by culture, intertextuality, and ideology, are often implicit. Barthes' theory is relevant as it highlights the interplay of signifiers (visual and textual elements) and signified (associated meanings), often manipulated for rhetorical and ideological purposes.

By applying Semiology, this study analyzed political memes as meaning-making tools serving communicative and persuasive functions. It revealed how memes construct and convey political messages, influence perceptions, reinforce biases, and foster polarization, ultimately positioning them as both communicative and divisive instruments in online discourse.

Figure 1

Barthes' Semiology Model

Linguistic Landscapes
(MEMES)

SIGNIFIER SIGNIFIED
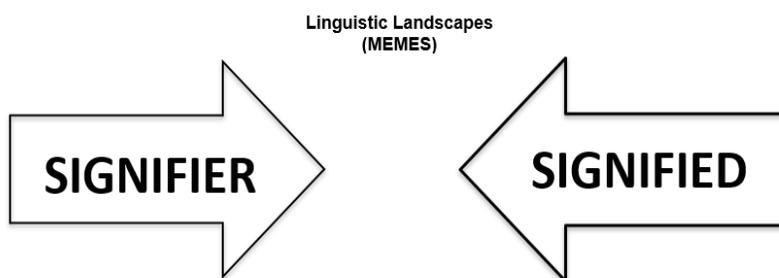
3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using semiotic and thematic analysis. Thirty political memes circulating on Facebook from March to May 2022 were purposively selected based on engagement metrics such as reactions, comments, and shares, ensuring significant audience reach (Chang et al., 2025). The analysis was framed through Roland Barthes' Semiology Theory, focusing on the signifier-signified relationship across visual and textual elements, particularly colors, symbols, and captions.

To assess audience interpretation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten second-year students from the College of Sciences, Technology, and Communications, Inc. Participants were chosen based on purposive sampling criteria: at least 18 years old, active on Facebook, familiar with meme culture, and with prior coursework in linguistics and sociolinguistics. The sample size followed principles of data saturation (Guest et al., 2006) and the Information Power Model (Malterud et al., 2016). Ethical considerations were observed by securing informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Signifier, Signified, and the Bond Between Signifier and Signified

The first part of the discussion centers on the semiotic analysis of political memes. This is a process that seeks to identify how meaning is built using visual and textual means, with special attention given to how the signifier, the material form a sign has, is connected to the signified, the conceptualized meaning it signifies. Political memes, here, are not simply funny online items but multimodal signs that embed complex political meanings through cultural, historical, and ideological symbols. Thematic analysis revealed key visual trends that organized the findings, particularly regarding the symbolic use of color in the 2022 Philippine elections.

The first theme, Dominant Political Colors, explores how pink, red, and green function as primary signifiers in meme content. Pink, associated with Leni Robredo's 2022 campaign, becomes a visual code for progressive change and grassroots-driven volunteerism. Memes depict pink through campaign paraphernalia, protests, and saturated imagery, reinforcing its link to a citizen-led movement. However, exaggerated pink visuals also signal irony, framing the campaign as performative. This contrast suggests that pink holds multiple, sometimes conflicting, meanings depending on framing and context.

Figure 2

Meme on Leni's political color

| Leni LOSER | A Pink Ridicule for Leni | #IFlushNA10To | Yellow No More: Leni's Political Makeover |

Pink appears frequently as the dominant visual element in memes, establishing its strong connection to Robredo's movement. Some memes present pink straightforwardly to signal political affiliation; others use exaggerated styling or props to introduce satire. In both cases, pink operates as a recognizable semiotic code. Politically, pink was intentionally embraced by Robredo's camp as a departure from the traditional yellow, with supporters ("kakampinks") rallying behind it as a symbol of hope, inclusivity, and reform. Robredo stated pink represents "our hopes to overthrow this current leadership," while the South China Morning Post (2022) called it a "visual shorthand" for reform and resistance.

Far from arbitrary, pink functions as a semiotic device, linking visual cues to campaign ideologies. Whether used sincerely or satirically, pink emerges as a dominant signifier and rhetorical anchor, demonstrating the flexibility of color to express solidarity or enable critique. This visual and symbolic flexibility continues across memes that present pink through labeled objects, familiar figures, and layered satire, not just for aesthetics but to signify political reinvention. The shift from yellow to pink represents a deliberate realignment with a people-driven narrative (Yap, 2022). Even in memes where yellow appears, pink dominates through framing and typography, affirming its new visual identity. These juxtapositions highlight tensions in how Robredo's symbolism is received, as a bold declaration or satirical target. Yet pink consistently anchors both admiration and skepticism.

This selective and strategic use of pink reveals its expressive and rhetorical functions. While it conveys unity and reform, exaggeration enables dissent and reinterpretation. As Alturas et al. (2024) point out, pink was chosen to realign with a people-led movement and break from party tradition. Memes amplify this symbolism, serving as tools for both support

and satire. Milner (2018) adds that exaggerated visuals in memes often signal ironic detachment, allowing political narratives to be reshaped through humor.

Figure 2

Meme on BBM's political color

| Forced Unity Displayed | The Flag Argument | BBM Supporters' Dilemma with Pinklawan's Positivity |

Red, prominently associated with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.'s campaign, traditionally symbolizes nationalism and power. In political memes, red functions as a signifier of steadfast support among Marcos's followers, often accompanied by imagery emphasizing unity and resolve. In satirical contexts, however, red is intensified or paired with authoritarian symbols to critique the administration, suggesting manipulation and historical revisionism. Dark red tones and high-contrast visuals imply aggression, portraying supporters as fervent or uncritical.

This symbolic duality appears in memes that use red to express camaraderie and unity, while others employ it ironically, often through ambiguous tone or placing red on unlikely figures, to evoke critique or emotional detachment. These portrayals show how even powerful symbols like red can be recontextualized through meme culture. Wang et al. (2018) emphasize red's global association with authority, dominance, and prestige, deeply rooted in both culture and psychology. In the Philippine context, red is historically embedded in political legacy and dynastic branding, functioning as both visual identifier and emotional trigger. However, memes reveal how such established meanings can be subverted through humor, irony, and strategic framing.

The dual representation of red in memes underscores its flexibility, and fragility, as a semiotic tool. While some affirm red as a marker of BBM loyalty, others repurpose it to critique

or question the sincerity of political branding. This detachment from fixed meaning illustrates how memes can transform color into a contested symbol. In a digital landscape, red becomes both a rallying banner and a vehicle for satire.

This pattern is reinforced by meme content pairing red campaign attire with exaggerated expressions or sarcastic captions. Even when red clearly signals affiliation, other visual cues, like facial emotion or textual tone, introduce doubt, critique, or emotional contradiction. The result is visual irony, challenging red's traditional association with strength. As noted by Alturas et al. (2024), red is often misinterpreted due to its historical and psychological weight. While intended to evoke unity and patriotism, red in meme culture becomes a dual-purpose code, simultaneously affirming and undermining its symbolic power. Political colors, as these memes show, are not static; they are repurposed in real time to either consolidate identity or provoke contestation in digital discourse.

Green, as a meaningful semiotic code, surfaces in political memes in connection with Vice President Sara Duterte's 2022 campaign. It functions as an emblem of continuity, stability, and military-linked governance, recalling her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte. Memes frequently feature green in campaign clothing, merchandise, and backgrounds, reinforcing its role in sustaining the Duterte political brand. When paired with Marcos Jr.'s red, green symbolizes political solidarity, aiming to appeal to voters who value discipline and order. Yet, opposition memes challenge this symbolism, using green-tinted visuals to frame Sara Duterte's rise as dynastic rather than merit-based, thereby questioning her autonomy and legitimacy.

Across meme formats, green asserts its semiotic role even when not dominant, appearing in subtle visual accents that symbolize Duterte support. Its combination with red encodes the Marcos-Duterte alliance, but satirical tones often complicate the intended message. In such contexts, green becomes not only a sign of alliance but a means to critique the partnership's authenticity or coherence.

In meme culture, green operates as a visual shorthand for Sara Duterte's political identity. Supportive memes use bold green hues to evoke strength and stability, while critical ones reframe the same color to highlight concerns around political inheritance and succession. As Alturas et al. (2024) notes, the red-green combination graphically underscores the alliance narrative of order and continuity, visually appealing to constituencies aligned with these values.

The strategic application of green in memes serves dual purposes. Affirmative uses construct a sense of trust and discipline consistent with Duterte-era governance (Calimbo, 2016). Conversely, critical uses of green emphasize nepotism and the continuation of political dynasties, with Regilme and Untalan (2016) asserting that memes satirize Sara Duterte's identity as inherited rather than earned. This dichotomy shows how a single color can transmit divergent meanings depending on meme framing.

Thus, green becomes a potent semiotic tool, simultaneously reinforcing authority and enabling critique. It encapsulates the complexity of Philippine political symbolism, where color codes are not merely decorative but actively shape political discourse and identity. As Teehankee (2022) argue, the color-coded nature of Philippine politics reflects deeper ideological divides, amplified in meme culture where colors like green, red, and pink evolve into dynamic markers of partisanship, satire, and symbolic contestation.

The second part of the analysis focuses on how connotative language and symbolic gestures in political memes contribute to shaping partisan identity and public perception during the 2022 Philippine elections. The theme of Connotative Identity of Politicians uncovers the use of recurrent labels such as "Leni Lugaw," "Leni Lutang," "Magnanakaw," and "Unity," which are strategically deployed in memes to construct or deconstruct political images. Through repetition and framing, these terms influence political discourse and become tools of both ridicule and empowerment.

Figure 3

Connotative language and symbolic gestures in political memes

A Taste of Irony:
Lugaw vs. Junk Food

Lugaw Over Marcos

Quiet but Cutting: When Silence
Isn't So Silent

The sub-theme of reappropriation of political symbolism is evident in the way the term "LUGAW" evolves from a pejorative label into a symbol of political identity. Initially employed by critics to mock Leni Robredo's grassroots feeding initiatives, "LUGAW" is used as a code for inadequacy and lack of leadership substance (Thompson et al., 2024). However, Robredo's supporters reclaim the term, turning it into a representation of resilience, essential service, and connection to the masses. In this reclaimed form, "LUGAW" becomes a counter-narrative against elite-driven politics, symbolizing sustenance, humility, and availability.

This reclaiming of the term "Lugaw" is demonstrated through memes that juxtapose it with junk food or political opponents, using humor and exaggerated contrasts to elevate "LUGAW" as a symbol of authenticity and moral leadership. These memes employ colloquial language and cultural references, emphasizing simplicity, humility, and courage, often contrasting these with perceived deficiencies in opponents. The use of humor, such as highlighting "may itlog," becomes both a form of comic relief and a vehicle for political critique and empowerment. This aligns with Gal et al.'s (2016) assertion that internet memes are not trivial, but forms of participatory politics, enabling communities to assert identity, challenge authority, and spread ideologies. In the Philippine context, "LUGAW" memes illustrate how digital culture reshapes political narratives and public perception.

Additional meme formats highlight the dual nature of the "Leni Lugaw" label, which continues to be used both pejoratively and as a reclaimed symbol. These memes often contrast emotionally charged mockery with composed responses from Robredo's character, portraying her as rational amid chaos. This reflects how meme culture enables both ridicule and resistance, turning labels into performative spaces for political debate. As Highfield and Leaver (2016) notes, memes operate as both commentary and conversation, shaping how figures are collectively understood. The evolution of "Leni Lugaw" underscores the power of memes to mobilize support, reframe identity, and contribute meaningfully to political discourse through accessible and visually coded formats.

The term "lutang," meaning "floating" or disconnected, is used in memes to portray Leni Robredo as incoherent or unintelligent. This narrative emerges from isolated verbal slips and awkward moments, which are removed from context and repeated to construct an image of incompetence. Memes exaggerate errors, such as math mistakes or nonsensical phrases, using absurd imagery and visual clutter to amplify confusion and reinforce the caricature of "LUTANG."

Figure 4

Leni's political symbolism memes

We Don't Mock, Except When We Do

Leni Answering Moments

These portrayals demonstrate how memes simplify complex personas into digestible stereotypes. Humor serves as a Trojan horse for political delegitimization, embedding negative associations while entertaining viewers. This reflects how meme culture flattens nuance, reducing identity to mocked, viral moments. This practice supports Maly's (2018) argument that decontextualization in digital spaces is a potent strategy for eroding credibility. In the Philippine context, the "Leni Lutang" meme exemplifies how digital platforms are used not just for commentary, but for actively shaping public perception through repetition and ridicule.

Figure 5

BBM's political symbolism memes

When the Shoe Fits Mysteriously Fits

When 'Magnanakaw Marcos' Hits a Nerve

Who's Your Bias Thief?

The use of "Magnanakaw" serves as a label to attack the credibility and legitimacy of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s political career. This term is repeatedly emphasized in memes to reinforce associations with corruption and ill-gotten wealth, portraying Marcos Jr. as inseparable from his family's controversial legacy. The power of this label lies in its textual repetition and visual emphasis, often using all-caps typography, contrasting color, and accusatory tone to highlight its message. Memes apply this term across formats, parodies, declarative slogans, and satirical dialogues, to create a strong rhetorical impact. These strategies elevate the accusation to the level of cultural memory and civic messaging.

Memes adopting this narrative function not merely as entertainment but as tools of political resistance and digital activism. The strong association of Marcos Jr. with "magnanakaw" draws from historical documentation, particularly from the Philippine Commission on Good Government (PCGG), which estimates the Marcos family stole between $5 billion and $10 billion during the dictatorship (Claudio, 2023). These issues remain central to public discourse, especially in meme formats that blend humor, parody, and institutional critique.

Other meme variations draw from pop culture formats to subversively critique political fandom. For instance, formats inspired by K-pop or K-drama fan culture frame the term "magnanakaw" as a satirical twist on celebrity worship. These memes cleverly critique the idolization of political figures by likening it to fan behavior detached from critical thinking.

The continued use of "magnanakaw" demonstrates how memes blend satire with historical fact, reinforcing unresolved grievances and turning them into political arguments. The meme becomes a bridge between documented injustice and present-day political critique.

Figure 6

Unity: The never-ending speech
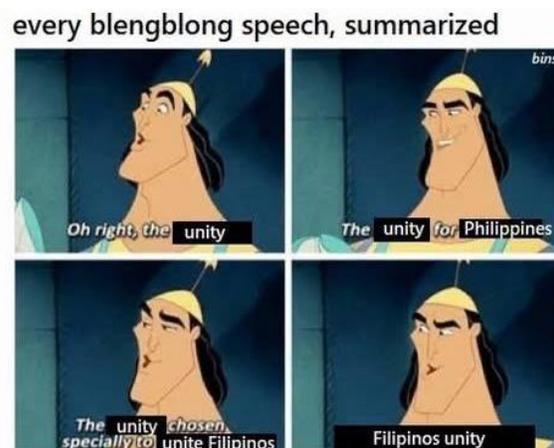
"Unity" is portrayed in memes as a buzzword that loses meaning through repetitive and vague usage. Though originally intended to inspire national reconciliation during Marcos Jr.'s 2022 campaign, memes often depict "unity" as an overused slogan devoid of substance. The phrase appears in overly simplistic or sarcastic contexts, highlighting its function as a rhetorical device rather than a genuine political commitment.

Memes addressing this narrative often rely on exaggerated speech bubbles, grammatically awkward phrases, and repetitive captions to emphasize the slogan's emptiness. Through humor, they portray "unity" as a formulaic campaign trope rather than a vision with actionable goals. This satirical portrayal reflects growing public dissatisfaction with symbolic rhetoric and the demand for tangible governance. The meme critiques a political culture where buzzwords dominate discourse while avoiding accountability. As Lehrer et al. (2022) point out, slogans like "unity" are often employed to generate emotional appeal while sidestepping difficult debates. Similarly, Loquias and Adriano (2024) note that while "unity" was effective in election messaging, it lacked follow-through in governance. Memes depicting "unity" critique not just the word but the communication style of the Marcos administration. They call attention to the gap between symbolic language and concrete policy, using humor to expose rhetorical fatigue and call for authentic leadership.

Generally, the recurring narratives in political memes, "Leni Lugaw," "Leni Lutang," "Magnanakaw," and "Unity," act as rhetorical tools that alter viewer perception and reinforce political narratives. Their meanings are dynamic, not fixed, and shift based on historical, cultural, and digital contexts. Repetition, in both satirical and supportive tones, helps qualify or disqualify political figures, turning language into an ideological weapon.

For persuasion, critique, or resistance, the repeated use of these terms in memes serves as a central force in shaping political consciousness. AlAfnan (2025) highlights how social media enables the viral spread of such narratives, while Ryabchenko et al. (2019) emphasize their capacity to evolve with political developments. Thus, political memes become more than images, they are iterative texts that shape public opinion, political identity, and civic engagement.

The final theme, Symbolic Gestures in Partisan Identity, explores how nonverbal symbols like the "L" sign and peace sign convey political allegiance. The "L" sign, popularized in support of Leni Robredo during the 2022 elections, became a powerful visual marker of

civic participation, democratic reform, and resistance to authoritarianism. It was widely used in rallies and digital campaigns as a symbol of solidarity and progressive activism.

Figure 7

Leni's symbolic gesture memes

L sign: Angat Buhay   A Pink Ridicule for Leni   Leni LOSER

However, in meme culture, the "L" sign was reinterpreted through irony and satire. While some memes preserved its association with empowerment, others exaggerated or mocked it, reducing it to emotionalism or reframing it as a pejorative "loser" sign. These transformations demonstrate how political symbols can be easily appropriated and weaponized in polarized digital discourse. As Gal et al. (2016) note, gestures like the L sign are vulnerable to memetic transformation due to their visual simplicity and cultural familiarity. In the Philippine context, its historical link to the "Laban" movement made it meaningful, but also open to reinterpretation. Ladia (2022) stresses that political symbols are crafted to shape narratives, while Alturas et al. (2024) emphasize that these become battlegrounds of ideological tension and memory. The L sign's evolution, from hopeful emblem to object of satire, illustrates how digital platforms reshape political messaging. Its meaning, whether empowering or mocking, is not fixed but negotiated through meme conventions, public reception, and partisan divides.

The peace sign, symbolizing harmony, reconciliation, and unity, was a key visual element in Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.'s campaign. Frequently used in rallies and digital platforms, it reinforced his narrative of healing and forward movement, appealing to voters who prioritized peace over political conflict.

Figure 8

BBM's symbolic gesture memes

| Forced Unity Displayed | When 'Magnanakaw Marcos' Hits a Nerve | The Flag Argument |

However, as the campaign became increasingly polarized, the symbol was ironically recontextualized in memes. While some depictions maintained its sincerity, others juxtaposed it with contradictions, emotional outbursts, or exaggerated visuals, questioning its authenticity. In meme culture, the peace sign appeared amid satire, anger, or performative nationalism, blurring its intended meaning. This shift illustrates Chandler's (2022) concept of denotation vs. connotation: though the peace sign denotes calm, its connotative meaning in memes often signals contradiction or uncritical allegiance. Its historical links to Filipino democratic movements further complicate its symbolic repurposing.

According to Largado et al. (2024), this ironic framing critiques the emotional logic of partisan loyalty, especially when sincerity clashes with behavior. In digital discourse, the peace sign shifts between sincerity and sarcasm, reflecting a deeper struggle over symbolic ownership and narrative control. As Gal et al. (2016) suggests, internet memes are agents of cultural meaning, allowing users to remix and reinterpret political messages. Both the L sign and the peace sign, central symbols in the 2022 Philippine elections, demonstrate how partisan gestures undergo transformation in digital meme culture. Once clear emblems of reform and unity, these signs have been recoded through satire and contradiction. The L sign becomes subject to ridicule, reframed as a mark of defeat or emotionalism, while the peace sign, originally meant to promote harmony, is often placed in contexts of political tension or ironic excess. These evolving meanings underscore the fluidity of political symbolism in online discourse, where gestures are not static but constantly negotiated across platforms, ideologies, and interpretations.

4.2. Pragmatic Implications of Political Memes

Semiotic Construction of Political Identity and Meaning. Political memes act as condensed ideological texts, where color, text, and gesture all become indicators of political affiliation and allegiance. Pink, red, and green were not used as purely aesthetic options but as codes representing political personalities, pink for Leni Robredo (hope, empathy, resistance), red for Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (power, nationalism), and green for Sara Duterte (power, continuity). These colors triggered immediate recognition and emotional response.

According to Garcia (2025), pink has undergone feminist re-signification in recent years, increasingly utilized to represent strength, compassion, and moral clarity, qualities often gendered in political discourse. This aligns with how pink in these excerpts is not merely a branding mechanism but a visual embodiment of Robredo's political values and ideological positioning, fostering an identity rooted in empathy, resistance, and counter-hegemonic femininity. Moreover, red's connotations in the Philippine context are not merely visual but historically and ideologically loaded. The color red has long been associated with authoritarian strength, nationalism, and populist leadership (Alturas et al., 2024). These connotations, when paired with Marcos Jr.'s campaign rhetoric and political legacy, intensify its affective and ideological resonance. In digital meme culture, such associations become entrenched through repetition, as memes continually reframe and reinforce red as the color of BBM—not only through campaign visuals but also in grassroots-level meme production. Alongside pink and red, the emergence of green as a politically charged color, widely recognized as the visual hallmark of Sara Duterte's campaign. This supports the idea that visual semiotics in political memes are not just informative but also persuasive. Colors are imbued with ideological emotionality, where green evokes images of strength, nationalism, or continuity, often linked with Duterte's legacy. This emotional connection aligns with the findings of Domiszewska, (2023), who argues that colors in visual communication carry social and cultural connotations that can influence perception and allegiance.

Textual labels also carried strong ideological weight. Terms like "Leni Lugaw", "Leni Lutang", and "Magnanakaw" framed candidates negatively, while "Unity" attempted to establish a positive image for Marcos Jr. The epithet "Leni Lutang", a recurring label used to delegitimize Vice President Leni Robredo's intellectual credibility and leadership capacity. The phrase draws from Filipino slang, with "lutang" connoting a person perceived as mentally "absent," "floating," or incoherent. This pattern of attack aligns with Wiggins' (2019) concept

of discursive framing, where political memes isolate behaviors or speech patterns and exaggerate them into generalized character flaws.

Following this, the epithet "Leni Lugaw" was used to trivialize Robredo's public image by reducing her to a symbol of simplicity and inadequacy. While seemingly benign or even humorous on the surface, this label operates as a memetic device that delegitimizes her political persona through culinary metaphor. This tactic reflects what Milner (2016) terms strategic memetic compression, the reduction of complex political identities into emotionally charged soundbites or symbols that proliferate across digital networks. The use of food as a metaphor is particularly effective in this case due to its cultural intimacy and symbolic resonance in the Filipino context. "Lugaw," while an everyday staple, becomes here a proxy for inadequacy and insignificance. The seemingly humorous label thus masks a deeper ideological project: delegitimizing Robredo's leadership by recasting her efforts as comically inconsequential. On the other hand, the epithet "Magnanakaw" emerges as a rhetorically charged signifier aimed at Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., extending beyond ridicule into the domain of moral judgment. Unlike the epithets directed at Robredo that seek to delegitimize through personal trivialization or perceived incompetence, this label functions as a historical and ideological indictment. This also operates within what Highfield and Leaver(2016) terms meme cycles, wherein emotionally resonant labels recur across platforms until they sediment into perceived truths.

In contrast to attack labels such as "Leni Lugaw" or "Magnanakaw," the word "Unity" emerged in political memes favoring Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. as a key ideological slogan. Instead of being used as an epithet meant to delegitimate a figure, "Unity" is a marketing slogan employed tactically, an aspirational semiotic sign that is supposed to transmit political legitimacy, stability, and collective reconciliation. This corresponds to Lopatiuc's (2023) idea of affective publics, where political stories are crafted not only through ideological consistency but also via emotional aesthetics, phrases, visuals, and catchphrases that connect with a public's longing for coherence or optimism in times of political discord.

Gestures such as the "L" sign and the peace sign played dual roles. The "L" sign became widely associated with Leni Robredo, functioning as a visual and affective symbol of her campaign. Its use in memes and campaign materials created a semiotic shorthand for her leadership style, values, and political identity. According to Highfield and Leaver (2016), such symbols represent platform vernaculars, recurring digital symbols that shape online political

communication. Perlman (2018) supports this by describing "compressed iconicity," where simple gestures like the "L" sign gain symbolic power through repetition and circulation. This compression allows for emotional allegiance and in-group recognition in fast-paced digital environments. Similarly, the peace sign is consistently linked to Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (BBM). It evolved into an automatically recognized gesture, symbolizing campaign themes such as unity, peace, and stability. Participant narratives underscore how this gesture, through its frequent appearance in rallies and memes, became a memetic icon. As with the "L" sign, the peace sign functions as a compressed ideological symbol, conveying a rich emotional and political message in a simple, repeatable form. Gerbaudo (2015) reinforces this by highlighting how visual simplicity enables political symbols to accrue dense meaning and emotional resonance.

Audience Interpretation and Exposure Bias. The interpretation of political memes is deeply influenced by the viewer's political alignment, media exposure, and symbolic literacy. Rather than being passively received, memes are actively decoded based on prior beliefs and emotional attachments. Political alignment shapes how elements such as colors and gestures are understood, what is empowering for one group may seem oppositional or absurd to another. These interpretations are often reinforced by familial political culture and shared partisan narratives, reflecting affective partisanship and motivated reasoning. The role of exposure also becomes critical; individuals unfamiliar with political symbols may interpret them in apolitical or superficial ways, revealing the impact of symbolic fluency on meme comprehension. This aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, as memes are decoded differently based on political awareness and social positioning. The result is a semiotic asymmetry where memes function as ideological affirmations in echo chambers but lose potency among less politically engaged users. These dynamics illustrate how meme reception mirrors broader issues of polarization, symbolic inequality, and digital literacy, reinforcing existing divides rather than bridging them (Bode & Vraga, 2018; Milner, 2018).

Social media, particularly Facebook, plays an active role in the circulation and reinforcement of political narratives through memes. Rather than functioning as passive distribution tools, platforms like Facebook shape what political content users encounter, privileging emotionally resonant and ideologically affirming materials via algorithmic curation. As participants note, meme exposure during the 2022 election was dominated by color-coded content that repeatedly associated politicians with symbolic hues. These color-

symbol associations circulated rapidly and became normalized through repetition, aligning with Dommett et al.'s (2024) concept of "platformization" and Highfield and Leaver's (2016) notion of digital engagement as routine political behavior. Repetition amplified their influence, embedding them within daily scrolling and shaping political perception. Memes thus become part of a broader symbolic ecosystem where users do not merely consume but participate in meaning-making through sharing and remixing. This aligns with Törnberg's (2018) view of social media as contagion systems that favor emotionally charged, partisan content, leading to ideological echo chambers and polarization.

Emotional and Stylistic Framing for Persuasion. Political memes are not only informational but also affective and aesthetic tools, using color, typography, and visual satire to evoke emotion and shape interpretation. Color serves as an instant emotional trigger, pink may evoke hope or femininity, while red signifies aggression or authority, embedding political associations even before text is read. These associations persist beyond election cycles, functioning as mnemonic devices that deepen affective recall. Humor and irony further enhance emotional resonance, making ideologically loaded content more palatable or impactful. Typography also operates as a persuasive tool: large, bold, or capitalized fonts mimic shouting and intensify emotional reactions, especially when attached to derogatory terms like "lutang" or "magnanakaw". These design choices make messages feel urgent, memorable, and ideologically charged. Visual satire, finally, employs symbols such as the "L" or peace sign to ridicule or reframe political meanings. Satirical memes blend humor and mockery to trigger emotional responses, laughter, offense, or anger, thereby shaping public opinion not through argument, but through affective manipulation. In these ways, political memes operate as emotional and ideological instruments, reinforcing identity and deepening political division through symbolic shorthand.

4.3. Political Polarization in Online Discourse

This explores how political memes contribute to patterns of polarization in online spaces by functioning within a dynamic communicative space where their influence depends on both design and reception. Memes can reinforce political borders by inscribing visual signs of affiliation, compounding aggressive discourse, and distributing symbolic markers that separate "us" from "them," potentially deepening ideological rifts and fostering exclusionary group dynamics. At the same time, memes can facilitate solidarity by uniting supporters

through shared symbols, humor, and emotionally resonant language, allowing users to reclaim identities and promote positive associations around political figures or causes.

Meme-Driven Divisiveness. Memes act as potent instruments of ideological separation by encoding political loyalties through visual cues like color and symbols, and by utilizing emotionally charged language. Their widespread distribution via social media, often amplified by algorithms, deepens group antagonism and solidifies binary understandings of political identity.

Color operates as a powerful semiotic tool, instantly signaling political alignment and shaping audience interpretation. Certain hues, such as pink for Leni Robredo and red or green for Bongbong Marcos and Sara Duterte, become symbolic of group membership. This visual shorthand promotes both identification and prejudice, reducing complex identities to mere aesthetic choices. As noted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), visual codes acquire cultural meaning, while Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model explains how viewers derive politically charged interpretations. Color-coded memes, especially when repeated, foster symbolic division and intensify political labeling (Pikkat, 2018).

Political memes often utilize emotionally charged labels such as "Lugaw," "Lutang," or "Magnanakaw" to frame political figures negatively. These insults act as semiotic devices that simplify political discourse and deepen affective divides. Repetition normalizes these labels, embedding them into public consciousness and turning them into tools of ideological condensation (Mason, 2018). This process reinforces voter bias and affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), as meme language becomes part of a larger digital ecosystem prioritizing emotional engagement over critical discourse (Balocco, 2022; Effron, 2022).

Symbols like hand signs and emblems, once neutral, are recontextualized in memes to mock or exclude opposing political groups. These symbols become emotionally charged identifiers, triggering immediate interpretations and group affiliations. Their memetic use fosters boundary-setting and affects perception and behavior, aligning with theories of sticky signs (Overgaard & Coleman, 2024) and empty signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The repetition of such symbols reinforces affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), and social media algorithms further amplify their divisive potential by prioritizing emotionally reactive content (Bessi et al., 2016; Gal et al., 2016).

Political memes serve not only as reflections of polarization but as agents actively producing it. Through the strategic use of color, emotionally charged language, and symbolic

imagery, memes construct ideological boundaries and shape digital political subjectivities. Their pragmatic function extends beyond humor or commentary, they perform the politics of division, embedding polarization into everyday digital interaction.

Meme-Driven Unification. While much discourse around political memes highlights their divisiveness, this section stresses their capacity to unify like-minded communities. Political memes function as bonding agents, offering a shared symbolic language that expresses mutual support, reinforces group values, and builds collective identity. Circulated especially during campaign cycles or political conflict, these memes act as virtual rituals that signal membership and emotional resonance through sentimentality, humor, and cultural references. Rather than merely spreading ideology, they create a sense of community among supporters who recognize themselves in the content. As memes are shared and interacted with, they generate a feedback loop of belonging and empowerment, becoming participatory texts that fortify in-group solidarity in a fractured digital media environment.

Political memes bring together similar-minded people through common visual cues like hand gestures and colors, which serve as indicators of collective identity and emotional ties. These symbols operate as cultural shorthand that solidifies group membership and shared beliefs. Symbols such as the "L" hand sign and the peace sign are affective shorthand for allegiance and collective purpose, functioning as digital rituals that affirm belonging, what Oezmen and Frankenberger (2020) describe as the memetic construction of community. Their perceived exclusivity strengthens in-group boundaries, echoing Jenkins and Carpentier's (2022) idea of "participatory culture" where users co-create meaning. Color symbolism also serves as a unifying mechanism. Aligning with a political color becomes an act of "emotional branding" (Casiraghi et al., 2022), with color creating visual coherence and ideological unity. These practices form affective publics (Zhao, 2019), networks emotionally connected through shared media. In this context, memes become emotionally resonant and culturally situated texts that mediate relationships within political groups. Through repeated use of symbols, slogans, and color, they reinforce affective bonds and sustain community, transforming digital platforms into expressive and supportive political spaces.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that political memes play a significant semiotic and pragmatic role in shaping meaning, framing political identity, and influencing public discourse in the

digital sphere. They operate as multimodal signs that merge visual and textual elements, such as colors, words, and gestures, to trigger cultural and political connotations that generate ideological messages. Colors like pink, red, and green symbolized political affiliations, while repeated monikers such as "Lugaw," "Lutang," and "Magnanakaw" reinforced reputations and public perceptions. Hand signs, including the "L" and peace signs, became potent political identifiers reinterpreted as satire or criticism, demonstrating the fluidity of the signifier-signified relationship.

Beyond their semiotic value, political memes functioned pragmatically as ideologically charged tools that constructed meaning through audience interpretation, emotional appeal, and digital circulation. Their ability to condense political messages into resonant visuals and texts fostered strong affective responses, shaped political alignment, and intensified echo chambers, often polarizing rather than uniting public opinion. Nevertheless, these memes also provided a shared symbolic language that affirmed group identity, emotional solidarity, and community belonging, transforming online interactions into participatory political expression.

It must be noted, however, that this study is delimited to the analysis of political memes and does not encompass other forms of political communication, such as campaign speeches, news coverage, or advertisements. The research focuses on the semiotic and pragmatic significance of memes in political dialogue rather than on audience impact or psychological effects. Limitations include the subjective nature of meme interpretation, the evolving traits of digital culture, and the influence of external sociopolitical factors on meme reception. Despite these constraints, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how political memes shape discourse, influence perceptions, and reinforce ideological divisions within digital spaces. Ultimately, political memes emerge as dynamic communicative instruments that both divide and unite, serving as powerful agents of ideological expression and collective identity in contemporary digital political discourse.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the College of Sciences, Technology, and Communications, Inc. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearances by the Research Ethics Board.

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