Article

Studying Humor Seriously: The Potential of Humor in Political Participation

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Abstract: Humor has long served as more than mere entertainment. It is a powerful tool for engagement and reflection. This study examines how audiences in Cebu City perceive the use of humor in political participation, particularly in online and offline protests. It investigates recurring humor themes, the perceptions of audiences on the topic, and the potential of the use of humor in forwarding policies. Drawing from David Hector Monro's humor classifications, John C. Meyer's humor functions, the Major Theories of Humor, and Sheldon Gen & Amy Wright's policy advocacy framework, the research employs expert-driven content analyses and one-on-one interviews to provide an in-depth exploration of this phenomenon.

The findings highlight humor's ability to transform critical political messages into creative narratives. It captures attention, fosters dialogue, and encourages civic participation by making advocacy more engaging. However, while humor effectively raises awareness and inspires discourse, its direct impact on policy making is less evident. Despite the absence of concrete policy outcomes, humor still serves as a catalyst for public mobilization and cultural shifts. Even more so, humor in protests offer significant potential to influence enhanced democratic engagement over time.

In the Philippine context, where humor is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, it emerges as a creative and compelling force in advocacy efforts. This study emphasizes the importance of leveraging humor's unique capacity to connect with audiences and amplify calls for change. By addressing its limitations and maximizing its strengths, humor has the capacity to become an even more intentional and influential component of political participation.

Keywords: humor, audience perception, political participation, protests, policy implications

Introduction

"Man by nature is a political animal." Regarded as the father of political science, Aristotle posited the well-known idea in the field that man is a "political animal" because man is a social creature with the capacity of speech and moral reasoning. It represents the fact that humans are social animals that have an innate need for community and social interaction, and that these needs are what make life worthwhile and ultimately happy (Krause 2019). In such a case, man is destined to be a sociopolitical being.

Philippine politics, like that of other countries aiming for meaningful social change, has been shaped by the existence of social movements from colonial times to the present. Colas (2002, p. 67) defines social movements as prolonged and purposeful collective mobilization by identified, self-organized groups in direct confrontation with specific power structures, with the goal of attaining socioeconomic and political change. The Philippines has a robust history of civic and political activism. The nation's history of protests dates back to its struggle against Spanish colonizers (Stephens 1990). Its history is also evidenced by the People Power Revolution in 1986, which deposed a dictator, and another instance in 2001, when collective mass action unseated a corrupt president. These events highlight the importance of public opinion and political participation in governance. Political participation, which seeks to influence policy on select policymakers, extends beyond traditional methods to include activities like protesting, signing petitions, and using social media for advocacy (David 2013; Lorenzana & Soriano 2021).

In a climate that increasingly calls for awareness and active involvement in advocacy, it is essential to explore strategies that effectively communicate messages and engage audiences. Political participation, which has been defined by Uhlaner (2015) as the voluntary actions that members of the general public do to directly or indirectly influence public policy, has been expanding and evolving over time. It is therefore valuable to

examine the approaches used to drive social change. Advocacies are often driven by urgency and passion, but what happens when humor takes center stage? In political movements, humor has emerged as a powerful tool — not just for entertainment, but for dissent, persuasion, and engagement. Humor is a performative pragmatic accomplishment that requires a variety of communication skills, including, but not limited to, language, gesture, and visual imagery presentation (Kempson, Fernando, and Asher 2012). Laughter and smiling can be seen as behavioral responses to humor (Ekman and Rosenberg 1997; Ruch and Ekman 2001), and jokes are an expression of humor. Humor, when incorporated into political participation, particularly in protests, can play a significant role by rendering an audience more amenable to persuasion through the introduction of creativity rather than relying on didactic elements (Branagan 2007; Hart 2007). This suggests that humor can balance critical messages with a lighthearted touch and make political communication more relatable. Ancheta (2017) examined how humor is deployed in Philippine popular cultural forms:

> "Humor is, in fact, a Filipino national weapon — one that is utilized not only to reflect social foibles and cultural beliefs that allow Filipinos to find belonging in using humor as a response to crippling national horrors, but one that is used to train an apparently disparaging look at themselves as victims of embarrassing and painful historical, political, or cultural circumstances."

Protests have evolved over time and adapted to new challenges and opportunities presented by technological advancements (Dabu 2017). What once took the form of placards and rallies has now expanded into viral memes and digital campaigns. Advocates conducted their campaigns through online protests by using creative visuals and hashtags, and spread their messages across online platforms such as websites, blogs, and social media sites. This proves that resistance finds a voice in every era. In fact, the evolution of protest extends beyond visual symbols and slogans. Protests have embraced humor as a pervasive element deeply embedded in language and present in all cultures (Meyer 2000). For instance, Deinla (2021), reporting through ABS-CBN News, highlighted how humor was employed during the 2020 Independence Day protest, where, amid the surge of red-tagging incidents at the time, one advocate creatively held a placard stating, "Label as a jowa, hindi as a terrorist!" implying a witty remark underscoring the absurdity of unjustly branding individuals as terrorists while using the language of romantic relationships to drive the point. In the digital sphere, politically satirical cartoons have gained traction as a form of protest, utilizing irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, and ridicule through clever wordplay and visual metaphors to critique sociopolitical issues. This is exemplified in the work of visual artist Kevin Eric Raymundo (2024), popularly known as Tarantadong Kalbo (2024), whose cartoon features Senator Cynthia Villar in relation to her involvement with a resolution concerning the construction of Captain Peak's Resort on the environmentally-protected Chocolate Hills in Bohol (Obedencio 2024). The satire emerges from the contradiction

between Villar's portrayal and her role as chairperson of the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

Political humor, which is delivered through various mediums, refers to aspects of the political world and can express criticism while maintaining social relations (Branagan 2007; Kayam et al. 2014). It can be a powerful tool in political communication as it can influence thinking, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals and societies. Thus, humor can be employed to create a sense of belonging by addressing painful experiences encountered in collective struggles. At the same time, it is important to recognize that humor is not exclusively a tool of dissent. Humor can also be mobilized by those in power or their supporters as a counter-narrative. For instance, the "Erap jokes" of the 1990s, which circulated widely to poke fun at former President Joseph Estrada's frequent word mix-ups and misinterpretations that portrayed him as comically naive, were later embraced by Estrada himself. He appropriated the jokes as part of his public persona, reframed ridicule into relatability, and strengthened his populist image in the electorate. Taken together, this demonstrates humor's dual function — it can challenge authority, but it can also be strategically deployed by those in power or their supporters as a counter-narrative that helps sustain those in power rather than destabilize them.

Meyer (2000) postulated that humor has a mysterious nature due to its complexity, but some things that researchers in the field have been able to discern is that cultural differences play a role in the perception of humor, as well as linguistic ties due to the shared communicative experience of a social grouping (Ancheta 2017; Gordon 2015). As such, the preliminary data for this study was gathered on a national scope, and the environment of this study was delimited to Cebu City to obtain contextualized data on the perception of humor in political participation. There are limitations to this study such as the availability and willingness of audiences to participate in this study; the influence that the perspectives and biases of the audiences may have on the study; the lack of existing literature on humor in political participation locally; and the utilization of international frameworks in the conceptual framework of this study. This study operates under several assumptions: (1) Humor is an effective tool in political participation, particularly protests; (2) Humor significantly influences how audiences perceive political participation; and (3) These perceptions may have policy implications and suggest that humor in political participation could shape policy outcomes. Based on these assumptions, the study hypothesizes that humor serves as an effective tool in political participation, particularly in protests, by influencing audience perceptions within Cebu City. In turn, these perceptions may lead to policy implications.

To achieve the study's objectives, four theories were applied in the process: Monro's Classification of Humor, Meyer's Humor Functions, the Major Theories of Humor, and Gen and Wright's Policy Advocacy Framework

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David Hector Monro's Classifications of Humor

Monro (1953) identified eight recurring types of humor. "Wordplay" involves the manipulation or alteration of words, such as misspelling and mispronunciation. "Small Misfortunes" refers to humor arising from the reversal of typical expectations, such as laughter provoked by accidents. "Want of Knowledge or Skill" stems from the simple ignorance of things or the simple faults of others. "Veiled Insults" highlight subtle or disguised forms of mockery. "Importing into One Situation What Belongs to Another" provokes laughter by introducing actions or elements from an unrelated context. "Indecency or Vulgarity" consists of risqué or indecent humor that should traditionally be subdued. "Anything Masquerading as Something it is Not" is considered as role play or impromptu acting wherein a humorist adopts a different voice or persona to create comedic effect. Lastly, "Nonsense" is defined as "logically incongruous," where the absurdity of a situation provokes laughter. This study utilized these eight recurring types of humor in classifying the humor themes present among audiences within Cebu City.

Major Theories of Humor

There have been explorations of humor spanning back to thousands of years of western thought, and the major theories of humor, which are fundamental to the study of humor, have been reduced to three: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruity Theory (Perkins 2023). The Superiority Theory is a theory of humor which posits that laughter expresses feelings of superiority over others or over a former state of selves (Martin 2007). The Relief Theory looks at humor as a means to vent excess energy. Freud (1928), in "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," discussed that an audience subconsciously builds up tension, and when the punchline comes, tension is released. The Relief Theory puts forward the assumption that laughter, as provoked by humor, provides audiences a release from the stress and psychic pressures from living in a society. Lastly, the Incongruity Theory assumes that humor is found in something perceived to be incongruous, or something that violates an audience's mental patterns and expectations. To enrich the analysis of humor and its potential in political participation, this study utilized these major theories of humor.

John C. Meyer's Humor Functions

In applying John C. Meyer's (2000) humor functions framework, it analyzes how humor and its specific themes are perceived by audiences in Cebu City's political participation, particularly protests. Meyer (2000) classified four functions of humor: "Identification", which reinforces solidarity with shared beliefs; "Clarification", which makes complex issues more accessible; "Enforcement", which upholds social norms while

marginalizing opposing views; and "Differentiation", which accentuates divisions between groups. Given that audiences' perceptions of humor depends on their familiarity and agreement with an issue, Meyer's framework (2000) provides insight into how humor in protests influences public engagement and political discourse in Cebu City.

Sheldon Gen & Amy Wright's Policy Advocacy Framework

The policy advocacy logic model and framework of Gen & Wright (2013) may be used as a tool to examine the perceptions of the audiences of humor and its specific themes in protests, relative to the policy implications thereof. In particular, this study applied the "First Goal: Enhanced democratic environment" strategy to analyze the public's political influence in the policy-making process and seek resulting public policies that are more representative of the public's interests. This was used in order to focus on analyzing the perceptions of audiences on humor in political participation, which was operationalized through: (1) Sense of Urgency; (2) People and Relationships; and (3) Specialized Knowledge and Skills of the advocates. Thereafter, the strategy was employed to analyze activities of engaging and mobilizing the public. Following such, this study then analyzed the proximal outcomes of a democratic environment, and an impact of a public-centered policy-making.

Additionally, this study also applies the "Second Goal: Public pressure" strategy to analyze a variety of advocacy activities, including information campaigns, community organizing, and coalition building, which persuades the public on policy issues. This was used to focus on analyzing the perceptions of audiences on humor in political participation and policy implications, which will be measured with the inputs of: (1) Sense of Urgency; (2) People and Relationships; (3) Specialized Knowledge and Skills of the advocates; and (4) Material Resources. Thereafter, it will analyze activities of: (1) Engaging, and mobilizing the public; (2) Coalition Building; (3) Information campaigning; (4) Reform efforts; and (5) Defensive activities. After such, the proximal outcomes of changes of public views, and changes of decision makers' views were analyzed to determine if there are distal outcomes with policy adoption, and impacts of changes for target population, and changes in services and systems.

These theories offer an organized method to studying how humor works in political involvement and how it can influence policy results. Using Monro's (1953) classifications of comedy, the study can systematically identify the types of humor found in online and offline protests. These classifications provide a foundation for examining how humor is strategically used in political participation. Meyer's (2000) functions of humor also provide a framework for exploring how audiences perceive and engage with humor in political participation.

With these theories, the following methodology was conducted.

Methodology

Cebu City has a rich history in policy advocacy through civil society participation (Conales 2016). It is for this reason that Cebu City was chosen to obtain contextualized data on this phenomenon within a local setting. This study used a qualitative-exploratory research design to explore the perception of humor in political participation in Cebu City.

Expert-driven content analyses and one-on-one interviews were conducted to examine humor themes in online and offline protests, and their perceived impact. First, the expert-content-driven analyses were conducted with five experts from the fields of communications, linguistics, and politics, to determine the contents of online and offline protest reference materials following the humor themes as classified and presented by Monro (1953). Afterwards, a series of one-on-one interviews was conducted with 20 young adults aged 18-26 residing in Cebu City possessing at least a high school diploma. This age group was deliberately chosen as they represent a demographic that is actively engaged in social and cultural developments and is continuously exploring their perspectives on societal issues. As Greengross (2013) notes, cohort effects significantly shape how individuals produce and appreciate humor, since people of different ages engage with humor in distinct ways. By focusing on this age group, the study captures how political humor is understood and reinterpreted within a cohort that is both digitally immersed and socially active, while also delimiting the scope of analysis to avoid mixing their humor practices with those of other age groups.

The purpose of this study was to explore Cebu City audiences' perceptions of the use of humor in political participation, specifically protests, and the potential policy implications. It particularly attempted to uncover the humorous themes present in both online and offline protests, and how the public views these themes in the context of political participation. Furthermore, the study aimed at assessing the broader policy implications of humor in political involvement by drawing on its findings. By addressing these research problems, the study enlightens the function of humor as a tool for political participation and its potential impact on policy implications.

Results and Discussion

Humor themes, Online protests, and Offline protests

Preliminary data were gathered by sourcing various reference materials to identify the types of humor themes present. These were categorized into online and offline protests, with experts determining the specific humor themes in each.

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The humor themes present in Figure 1 are "Veiled insults" and "Wordplay." It contains "Veiled Insults" since it demonstrates a subtle offensive remark of calling Imee Marcos' face as a "National Treasure" due to the funding allegations of her cosmetic surgeries, and "Wordplay" since the hashtag "#MarcosMagnanakaw" tied the wordplay along with the veiled insult. In Figure 1, the Superiority Theory is identified as the act of mocking Marcos' alleged cosmetic surgeries as an expression of superiority by the advocate over the public figure.
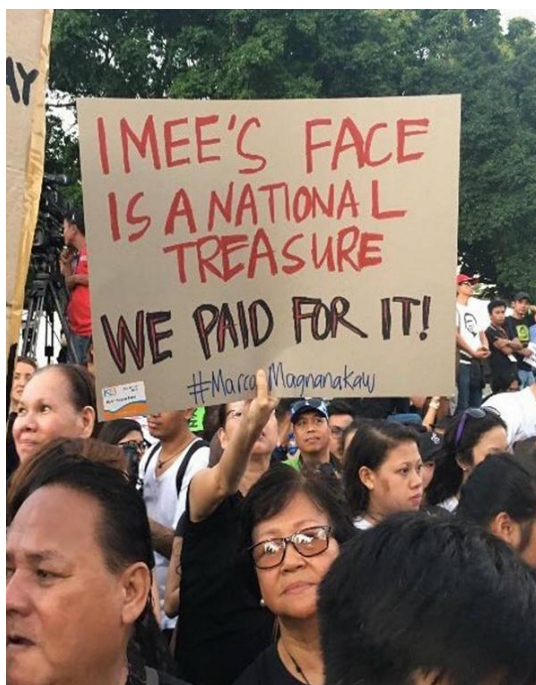

Figure 1. Advocate holds an "Imee's Face is a National Treasure! We paid for it! #MarcosMagnanakaw" placard.
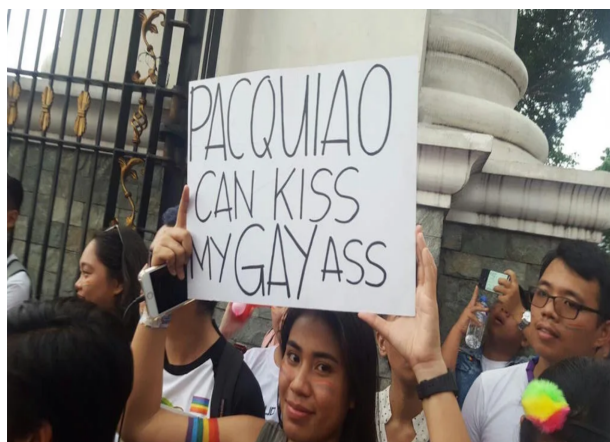

Figure 2. An advocate at a Pride Protest holds a "Pacquiao can kiss my gay ass" placard.

Figure 2 was labeled with "Indecency or Vulgarity" because it is a form of dissent against famous professional boxer and former Senator Manny Pacquiao's homophobic statements against the LGBTQ+ community. The Incongruity Theory is identified in Figure 2 by violating an audience's mental expectations by using vulgar language.

Figure 3. Advocates protest against the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020.

Figure 3 was labeled with "Anything masquerading as something it is not," because it depicts former president Rodrigo Duterte as a puppet of US and China imperialists; and "Importing into one situation what belongs to another," because the armed men behind him symbolize extrajudicial killings and the power play of his administration. Additionally, the Incongruity Theory is identified in this Figure due to the incongruity between the depiction of former president Rodrigo Duterte as a puppet of imperialists.

Figure 4. An advocate at a Pride Protest holds a "Willing to do a backflip for SOGIE Equality. Ang Pride ay protesta" placard.

Experts identified Figure 4 to contain "Want of knowledge or skill" since it shows humor through the advocate's inability to do a backflip due to their physical disposition; "Wordplay" since the advocate shows his determination for SOGIE Equality despite his

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condition; and "Nonsense" stems from the absurdity of their willingness to attempt the backflip, provoking laughter. The Relief Theory is identified due to the use of humor to make light of a situation that is otherwise dire.

Figure 5. An advocate holds a "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun...damental Rights" placard during a protest on Women's Day.

Figure 5 features "Wordplay" by referencing a pop-culture song implying gender equality. It advocates for equal rights, asserting that women deserve no less. It also includes "Importing into one situation what belongs to another," by integrating a pop song into the serious issue of women fighting for fundamental rights. The Incongruity Theory is identified due to the combination of the lyrics to a light-hearted pop song and a serious political message.

Figure 6. Students of the University of Santo Tomas protest against the university's Office for Student Affairs (OSA)'s media censorship of TomasinoWeb.

Figure 6 features University of Santo Tomas students protesting "media censorship" by the Office for Student Affairs (OSA) after it ordered TomasinoWeb to remove a post of students in "Type B" uniforms entering a 7-Eleven and issue a public apology. The placard "You can't spell OSA without OA" uses "Wordplay" by highlighting "OA" (overacting), a Filipino term for exaggeration, in OSA's acronym to enhance the protest's comedic impact. "Veiled Insults" subtly mock OSA's actions as excessive. "Want of Knowledge or Skill" questions OSA's judgment, and "Nonsense" arises from the absurdity of censoring a trivial post. Additionally, the Superiority Theory is identified because critiquing the judgment of OSA could be an expression of superiority by the advocates over the institution.

Considering that political participation, specifically protests, has evolved through the years due to technology, this study deemed it necessary to also include online reference materials in the preliminary data. This study collected four online reference materials, and the humor themes of each reference material were also identified by experts.
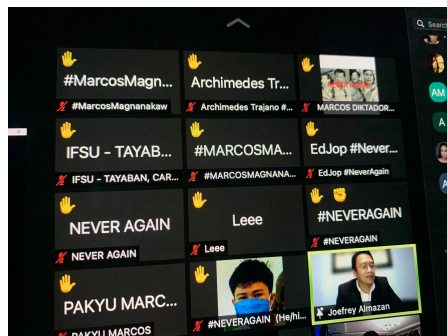

Figure 7. Students protest during an online Student Congress with Sandro Marcos.

For Figure 7, students protested Sandro Marcos' presence at an online event by changing their names to slogans like "Never Again," "#MarcosMagnanakaw," and human rights victims' names, such as Archimedes Trajano. Experts identified "Indecency or Vulgarity" in the bold language; "Veiled Insults" in the implicit critiques; and "Anything Masquerading as Something It Is Not" in the use of false identities for symbolic protest. The Incongruity Theory is identified due to the incongruous situation of changing online names symbolically into slogans as a form of protest.
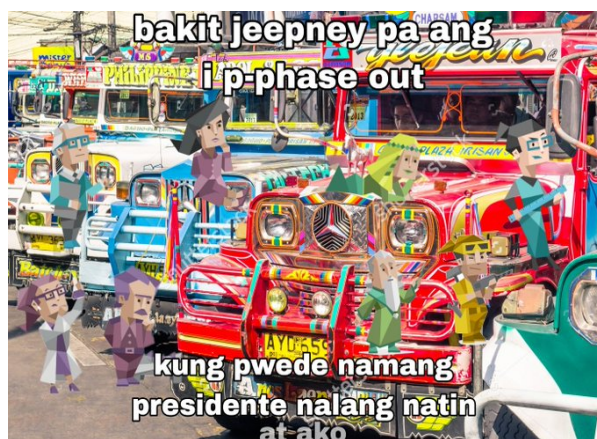

Figure 8. A satirical meme referring to the PUVM Program, implying phasing out the President instead of traditional jeepneys.

In Figure 8, "Nonsense" arises from the illogical comparison of phasing out jeepneys to phasing out the President or oneself; "Wordplay" from the satirical caption's phrasing; and "Veiled insults" from the critique of the government by implying leadership change is more necessary. The Relief Theory is identified due to humor being used to turn an

otherwise negative situation, *i.e.,* the jeepney phaseout, into something one can laugh about by using a punchline ("*Kung pwede namang presidente nalang... at ako.*").

Figure 9. A political cartoon of Senator Risa Hontiveros and former Mayor Alice Guo posted by Tarantadong Kalbo on Facebook

Experts identified Figure 9 to contain "Wordplay" because Tarantadong Kalbo's use of the Meteor Garden reference involves "Wordplay" through the red card; and "Importing into One Situation What Belongs to Another" by humorously applying F4's fictional red card concept to political critique, which creates a sharp yet comedic commentary on real-world allegations. In Figure 9, the Incongruity Theory is identified because of the incongruous situation of applying F4's fictional red card to critique the situation of former Mayor Guo.

Figure 10. An edited meme of Jollibee in a bat costume posted on Twitter.

In Figure 10, "Nonsense" arises from the absurdity of "Jollibat" in a "Wuhan China Branch," humorously exaggerating conspiracy theories about the virus's origin. "Veiled Insults" subtly critiques the discriminatory stigma linking the virus to Wuhan. "Importing

into One Situation What Belongs to Another" emerges from blending Jollibee's cheerful image with a pandemic-related theme. The Incongruity Theory is identified due to the incongruous situation of combining Jollibee's image with the pandemic.

Perception of Audiences on Humor in Political Participation

The analysis of the one-on-one interview data revealed several key sub-themes concerning the respondents' perceptions. These findings highlight the nuanced ways in which young adults in Cebu City perceive and engage with humor in political participation, influenced by their levels of political engagement, generational background, political affiliations, and the specific humor themes employed. The medium of humor in protest also influences its reception. While humor is generally accepted, sensitivity towards certain topics remains crucial.

Political Engagement and Reactions to Humor in Political Participation

The respondents exhibited varying levels of political engagement, which influenced their reactions to the humor presented in the reference materials. Based on their responses, they were classified into four categories based on Meyer's (2000) humor functions.

Eleven respondents were classified under "clarification". These respondents demonstrated the ability to understand the context of the political humor in the reference materials and share their perspectives on the underlying issues, even if they considered their political engagement to be 'average'. For example, a respondent understood the humor criticizing Duterte's foreign policy, another respondent agreed with the message of a reference material despite disagreeing with its approach, and another respondent showed awareness and even developed positive stances on certain topics due to their engagement as a former student photojournalist at protests.

Only two respondents were classified under "identification". These respondents were highly politically engaged, actively expressing their views, participating in protests, and providing comprehensive responses. These responses consequently indicated a strong connection with the issues presented. For instance, one of these respondents is involved in the National Democratic movement with firsthand experience of government attacks on activists. The other respondent, being affiliated with Kabataan Partylist, had spoken at protests and offered a detailed analysis of a meme related to the West Philippine Sea conflict.

A total of seven respondents were associated with "enforcement". These respondents exhibited lower levels of political engagement but could comprehend some of the material's context due to being largely influenced by online encounters. For instance, one respondent was aware of the issues surrounding Alice Guo because the issue was viral

on social media, but this respondent offered a contrasting opinion on the humor used. Similarly, a political science student with superficial knowledge of the issue shared views on the sensitivity of the Alice Guo reference material. Other data showed a respondent being "loud in private" about their political opinions, and another respondent, while not politically active, provided a comprehensive understanding of a reference material criticizing politicians.

None of the respondents were classified under "differentiation". This suggests that no one expressed strong opposition to the reference materials despite being familiar with the issues. It is, however, worth noting that some respondents showed hesitant chuckles, possibly due to the implied expectation of humor, and may indicate a reluctance to share contrasting opinions.

"Clarification", as defined by Meyer (2000), makes a complex issue more accessible. This humor function was the most common among the respondents, putting forward the finding that most of the respondents, despite being 'average' in their political engagement, are still able to understand the context of the political humor in the reference materials and share their perspectives on the underlying issues. Humor, then, can serve as a crucial step towards social awakening and conscience formation. Additionally, the humor function "identification" reinforces solidarity with shared beliefs by fostering a sense of belonging and collective struggle (Meyer, 2000). The two respondents who identified with this humor type showed that humor has the capacity to support committed engagement to a movement.

Different Perceptions According to Different Cohorts

The collected data explored how perceptions of humor in political participation differ based on generational preferences and political affiliations.

Each generation perceives humor in protests differently. The older generation tends to view it as offensive or disrespectful and would rather use serious and frank communication than sarcasm or wit. This reaction is greatly shaped by traditional upbringings and a general dissatisfaction with vulgarity. On the other hand, the younger generation, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, generally enjoys humor in protests, most notably in the forms of memes and wordplay. The younger generation also uses humor as a coping mechanism for serious issues without entirely discounting their severity. Moreover, it is noted that the variation in media exposure of each generation, such as the contents found on social media, also contributes to varying abilities relating to diverse types of humor across generations.

Political beliefs and biases also determine how individuals respond to humor in protests. Individuals tend to embrace humor that caters to their perspectives, but are

offended when it is directed at their preferred candidates or parties. Others even see humor in protests as a personal attack on themselves and not as a broader critique of political issues. There is also a perceived dichotomy in how political groups use humor in protests, where left-leaning groups tend to be more likely to incorporate humor into their advocacy, while right-leaning groups might not use humor or their humor may be seen as "tone-deaf". Ultimately, a person's perception of humor in protests depends not just on their political stance but also on their awareness and engagement with the issue being discussed.

Effective or Ineffective Humor Themes in Protests

The frequency and perceived effectiveness of different humor themes were analyzed based on expert-identified categories.

Humor Themes	Effective	Ineffective
Wordplay	19	1
Small misfortunes	2	3
Want of knowledge or skill	4	2
Veiled insults	10	2
Importing into one situation what belongs to another	7	1
Indecency or vulgarity	4	10
Anything masquerading as something it is not	6	3
Nonsense	5	4

Table 1. Tally of the effectiveness of each Humor Theme according to the Respondents.

"Wordplay" stood out as the most recognized humor theme in both online and offline protests. Respondents found it the most effective because of its creativity and its ability to deliver a strong message. On the other hand, "indecency or vulgarity" was seen as the least effective with many considering it shallow and lacking real criticism. Interestingly, the experts also noted that this type of humor appeared the least in the reference materials. "Veiled insults" ranked as the second most effective, as it fits well with 'pinoy humor', which technically offers a clever yet indirect way to highlight political issues. The humor theme of "importing into one situation what belongs to another" was also well received. Other themes like "want of knowledge or skill" and "anything masquerading as something it is not" had mixed reactions from the respondents but were generally seen as moderately

effective. Meanwhile, opinions on "nonsense" and "small misfortunes" were more divided, with the experts pointing out that "small misfortunes" were not present in the reference materials. Online protests tended to use more subtle humor, often relying on "anything masquerading as something it is not", while offline protests leaned more towards "want of knowledge or skill" and "nonsense".

Appropriate or Inappropriate Topics in Political Participation

In general, the respondents expressed that humor is appropriate for political participation as long as it is used thoughtfully, at the right time, and with sensitivity to the context. However, several sensitive topics were identified that respondents felt should not be addressed with humor in protests, including family and relationships, gender and equality, mental health and well-being, violence and abuse, human rights and justice, and war and crimes against humanity. These topics were deemed to require sensitivity and respect, particularly for victims and their families. Despite this, a contrasting view was presented which suggests that even "inappropriate" humor can be effective by sparking conversation and drawing attention to the issue.

The 'Why' and 'How' of Humor in Political Participation

The Superiority Theory enriches the analysis by providing why certain types of humor are effective in protests. It allows the advocates and the audiences to feel intellectually, or perhaps also morally, superior to the ridiculed figures. This sense of superiority can reinforce group identity and rally support against a common "inferior" opponent.

The Relief Theory views humor as a means to vent excess energy, releasing subconscious tension and psychic pressures from societal living. One of the major findings of this study is that the younger generation uses humor as a coping mechanism for serious issues. Political participation, specifically protests, involves high stakes and emotional intensity. However, humor offers a psychological outlet through tension release (laughter) that makes engagement more sustainable and less overwhelming. The finding that humor can render an audience more amenable to persuasion is also supported by this theory. When tension is released through humor, an audience may become more open to receiving critical messages that might otherwise be met with resistance.

The Incongruity Theory explains why unexpected juxtapositions and absurdities grab the attention of audiences and make messages memorable. It captures the attention of an audience by defying logic and expectation.

Humor has the capacity to empower (Superiority Theory), to relieve (Relief Theory), and to reveal (Incongruity Theory). Altogether, the different facets of humor can be utilized

to spark awareness and perhaps even incite collective reflection. These are necessary first steps towards civic engagement and potentially, social change. Humor, then, can ignite the momentum that drives democratic action.

Policy Implications of Humor in Political Participation

Based on data from previously examined themes, this research explored the policy implications of humor in political involvement using Gen and Wright's (2013) logic model and framework. It targets two important strategic goals: "Enhanced Democratic Environment" and "Public Pressure." Applying these frameworks, the analysis indicated how humor may be a spur to civic involvement, impact public discourse, and alter policy outcomes.

First Goal: Enhanced Democratic Environment

A common response from the respondents on the importance of humor in political participation would be its major impact on audience awareness and sense of agency. This, in turn, would promote a democratic environment that is focused on the development of public policies. Many of the respondents also mentioned that humor acts as a catalyst for further participation in political issues, which would allow for more diverse representation in policy discussions.

Strengthening civil society's influence and capabilities creates a more inclusive democratic environment—one that promotes policy adoption and results in significant changes for target groups, as well as improvements in services and systems. Jessica Resch, President of the Sangguniang Kabataan Federation and ex officio Councilor, created City Ordinance 2660, which is an example of civil society's influence. This law established the SOGIESC Pride Empowerment Council, which creates programs and activities that are consistent with the city's gender and development plans. It also established concrete consequences for discriminatory words and offenses against the LGBTQIA+ community, emphasizing the importance of legislation in protecting marginalized populations.

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FIRST GOAL: ENHANCED DEMOCRATIC ENVIRONMENT			
Inputs *(Advocates)*	Activities	Proximal Outcomes *(Audiences)*	Impacts *(Goal)*
Sense of Agency -Sense of empowerment and political power, Will to challenge status quo, and Ability to identify and define problems **People and Relationships** -Leadership, Ability to organize collective action, and Strategic partnerships **Specialized knowledge and skills** -Strategy, Research, Media, Public relations, Lobbying and Application of humor on protest materials	**Engaging and mobilizing the public** -Rallies, convenings, protests	**Democratic environment** -Governance: Transparency/ Accountability improved -Civil Society: Power and Capacity enhanced -Audiences' Perceptions on Humor on Political Participation	**Public- centered policy-making**

Table 2. Table analysis using the First Goal: Enhanced Democratic Environment Strategy and Logic Model by Gen & Wright (2013)

As shown in Table 2 above, the "inputs" driving this issue include a "Sense of Agency," where the LGBTQIA+ community and their allies actively challenge the status quo and engage in the political process; "People and Relationships", which enable the organization of collective action and the formation of strategic partnerships; and "Specialized Knowledge and Skills," where humor in protest materials and the use of social media amplify advocacy efforts. The activities associated with these inputs involve mobilizing the public through rallies, convenings, protests, and marches, fostering widespread participation and awareness. As a result, the expected "proximal outcome" is a democratic environment characterized by transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. Ultimately, the broader impact is public-centered policymaking, exemplified by the approval of Ordinance 2660, which institutionalizes protection and initiatives for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Second Goal: Public Pressure

This strategy engages in a variety of advocacy activities, including information campaigns, community organizing, and coalition building, to persuade the public on policy issues, to which is appropriate with the data collected.

Respondents stressed the importance of humor in political engagement, citing its major impact on public awareness and a sense of agency. This, in turn, impacts public opinion, which can eventually sway decision-makers' viewpoints and actions. A significant example mentioned by a respondent was a Facebook post by CDN Digital (2024) that featured a misplaced light post built in the center of the road. The post, captioned "Here

are photos of the infamous light post circulating on social media this Thursday, June 20, as it sits idly in the middle of the road," immediately gathered popularity, eliciting 1,400 reactions, including 1,000 laugh reactions, 317 likes, and 11 angry reactions.

The humor-laden public response went beyond social media, with Cebu City people actively posting about the matter, making it a widely publicized concern. According to SunStar (2024), the public outcry forced Cebu City Acting Mayor Raymond Alvin Garcia to act immediately. Garcia ordered the removal of the misplaced lamp posts along Osmeña Blvd. as part of the Cebu Bus Rapid Transit (CBRT) project, following complaints and viral photos. This case demonstrates how, when used strategically in political discourse, humor may increase public involvement and inspire concrete policy responses.

SECOND GOAL: PUBLIC PRESSURE

Inputs (Advocates)	Activities	Proximal Outcomes (Audiences)	Distal Outcomes (Audience and Policy Makers)	Impacts (Goals)
Sense of Agency -Sense of empowerment and political power, Will to challenge status quo, and Ability to identify and define problems	**Coalition building** -Forming coalitions **Engaging and mobilizing the public** -Rallies, convenings, protests, writing letters	**Democratic environment** -Civil Society: Power and Capacity enhanced **Changes in Public views** -Changes in awareness, beliefs, attitudes, values, saliences of issues, behaviors (Strengthened base of support: increased public involvement, levels of action)	**Policy adoption** -Changed, improved policy	**Desired changes for target population** **Desired changes in services and systems**
People and Relationships -Leadership, Ability to organize collective action, and Strategic partnerships	**Information Campaigning** -Research, policy analysis, white paper			
Specialized knowledge and skills -Application of humor protest materials	**Reform efforts** -Pilots, demonstrations	- Audiences' Perceptions on Humor on Political Participation		
Material Resources	**Defensive activities** -read and react to opponents -Read and react to climate	**Changes in decision-makers' views** -Getting on political agenda -Political will		

Table 3. Table analysis using the Second Goal: Public Pressure Strategy and Logic Model by Gen & Wright (2013)

Based on Table 3 above, the "inputs" influencing the public response to the misplaced light post issue include a "Sense of Agency," as individuals were prompted to take action after seeing the viral Facebook post; "People and Relationships," which played a crucial role in amplifying the issue through the widespread sharing of posts; "Specialized

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Knowledge and Skills," demonstrated through the use of humor as a form of dissent; and "Material Resources," with CDN Digital's post serving as a catalyst for public discourse due to its extensive reach within Cebu City.

The identified "activities" include "Coalition building" through stakeholder networking; "Engaging and Mobilizing the Public" by strengthening their capacity to participate in civic discourse and influence decision-making; "Information campaigning" through media advocacy to raise awareness and amplify public engagement; and "Defensive activities," in which the public actively monitored and responded to the issue. These combined efforts resulted in practical consequences for the target population in Cebu City, such as policy and infrastructural reforms, as demonstrated by the Cebu City Government's decision to remove the misplaced lamp post. This issue and how it was resolved demonstrate the importance of humor in political participation in motivating government action, which resulted in the desired changes of the target population residing in Cebu City, and desired changes in services and systems through the Cebu City Government, removing the post in the middle of the road.

Despite the public-centered outcomes observed in the lamp post issue, the research indicates that similar humorous protests did not yield equivalent results. Respondents highlighted many instances where humor was utilized as a form of political expression; nonetheless, the majority of such instances did not lead to shifts in decision-makers' viewpoints, the adoption of new policies, or actual gains for the target population, services, or systems. While humor has shown promise for affecting political engagement and public conversation, its overall impact is not significant. As a result, while this study acknowledges humor as a tool for engagement, it has yet to be identified as a consistently significant or transformative force in policy change.

The findings indicate that humor is an effective and powerful instrument for political participation, particularly in protests in the Philippine context. Its playful and imaginative way of relaying essential issues has a significant impact on public perception and participation. In Cebu City, the use of humor in political discourse not only draws attention but also increases audience receptivity, making complicated or contentious matters more understandable. This demonstrates humor's potential as a strategic weapon for increasing civic involvement and influencing public discourse.

While humor may not be a direct instrument for policy creation, its role in shaping the political landscape is as significant. It fuels public discourse, strengthens civic engagement, and reinforces the democratic principle that governance should be for and by the people. As Cebu City continues to navigate the intersection of humor and political participation, policymakers must recognize that humor is not just a reaction to politics — it is a force that can shape it.

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Conclusion

In Cebu City, audiences of political participation, specifically protests, have demonstrated that humor is a transformative tool and significantly influences their perceptions in political participation. Various humor themes are utilized by advocates, with each humor theme evoking a variety of responses from audiences, influenced by their individual experiences and level of awareness. Much like trying to swallow dry oatmeal, information can sometimes feel difficult to absorb, especially when the topics are complex. However, by adding hot water — or humor, in this sense — into the bowl, we can transform that dry context into something easier to digest.

Despite humor being an effective means to raise awareness and capture the audience, it must be coupled with other means in order to reach legislators and make significant policy implications. While advocates hold the pen when utilizing humor as a tool in political participation, when they write placards and edit memes, it is the legislators who hold the pen and authority in signing policies that address sociopolitical issues. In conclusion, an array of humor themes are present in political participation, specifically protests, and humor significantly influences the perceptions of audiences, but its policy implications cannot be classified as significant.

For future researchers, humor in political participation remains a rich field of study and is one that calls for deeper exploration. Gen & Wright's Policy Advocacy Framework (2013) offers a pathway to understanding how legislators perceive humor and its policy implications. Conducting key informant interviews with lawmakers would further reveal the nuances of humor's role in governance. Additionally, Meyer's (2000) Humor Functions framework can shed light on how social pressures shape audience perceptions. Future studies should also examine the reluctance of some individuals to express opposing views, more specifically, whether silence alters humor's impact. Furthermore, since this study primarily focused on younger generations, understanding how older demographics perceive humor in protests could provide a more holistic view of its effectiveness and acceptability.

For policymakers, the message is clear: humor is not just entertainment — it is political expression, a tool of resistance, and a voice of the people. In today's digital age, where political dissent can take the form of satire, memes, and creative wordplay, safeguarding freedom of expression is more crucial than ever. Rather than stifling creativity, empowerment, and civil discourse, democratic institutions must embrace them. More importantly, policymakers must recognize that advocates are not adversaries but key players in shaping a better society. These individuals invest time and effort in raising awareness about issues that impact everyday lives. A government that listens, rather than silences, fosters an enhanced democracy. Engaging with citizens, including those who use humor as a political tool, demonstrates a commitment to transparency and accountability.

In order to maintain fundamental rights, policymakers in Cebu City can lead by example by drafting an ordinance that ensures freedom of speech, expression, and peaceful assembly as guaranteed by Article III, Section 4 of the 1987 Constitution. By doing so, they would not only deter potential violations but also reaffirm that humor, when used for the purpose of advocacy, is a legitimate and powerful form of political participation.

Ultimately, humor has the power to break barriers, spark conversations, and make advocacy messages more engaging and relatable. Even individuals who do not consider themselves as engaged politically are able to understand the context of a sociopolitical issue because of the humor employed in protest materials. The ability of humor to simplify the complexity of issues, then, should not be seen as a weakness but a strength, as it can open avenues for audiences to engage more meaningfully with these issues. It may be too bold to claim that humor can change a nation; but humor can spark a person's mind, and it is changed minds that shape the world.

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