

Constructing Counterpublics: Gen Z Students Reclaim Martial Law Memory through DYUP Sugbo

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Abstract: In the Philippines, renewed debates over Martial Law memory unfold in an information landscape shaped by algorithmic distortion, historical revisionism, and generational divides. As youth increasingly turn to digital and peer-driven sources of information, the question of how Generation Z engages with the legacy of Martial Law becomes pressing, particularly in academic and civic contexts. This study investigates how a cohort of UP Cebu students enrolled in the general education course *Wika, Panitikan, at Lipunan sa Ilalim ng Batas Militar* (PS 21) conceptualize and communicate narratives about Martial Law to their peers through campus radio. It focuses on the production of *Batbat*, a ten-episode student-led radio program aired via DYUP Sugbo, which sought to translate historical truths into accessible and resonant formats for Gen Z listeners. Using reflexive thematic analysis of asynchronous interviews with 34 students and grounded in counterpublic theory, the study explores how student broadcasters frame alternative historical narratives and address challenges in engaging with a skeptical or digitally distracted audience. Cultural memory and civic media frameworks inform the broader analytical lens. Findings reveal that students moved from inherited “Golden Age” myths to a more critical, evidence-based understanding of Martial Law. They utilized storytelling, humor, interactivity, and peer-oriented language to overcome disinformation, emotional resistance, and intergenerational tension. DYUP Sugbo functioned as a youth-driven counterpublic where historical memory became an act of civic participation. The study affirms the value of integrating creative media production into history education to resist distortion and foster democratic memory.

Keywords: Martial Law (Philippines), Generation Z, media literacy, historical distortion, disinformation, campus radio



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Introduction

As debates over historical memory intensify in both physical and digital spaces, questions about how the youth engage with the legacy of Martial Law have taken on renewed urgency. Within the university, students find themselves navigating a fractured information landscape, where inherited myths, algorithmic distortions, and institutional silences often intersect.

This study turns to a particular site of youth meaning-making: a campus radio project created by students at the University of the Philippines Cebu. Through this media initiative, students explore how to make Martial Law legible to their generation, not simply by recounting facts but by translating difficult histories into narratives that resonate. Before turning to their strategies and reflections, the paper first situates the political resurgence of the Marcos family, the changing role of Generation Z in civic discourse, and the institutional context of the Wika, Panitikan, at Lipunan sa Ilalim ng Batas Militar or PS 21 course.

The Marcoses in Philippine Politics

Almost forty years after the dictatorship of then-Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was toppled, even though he has long passed, his political dynasty has continued to thrive in the country. Many members of his family have been elected to key roles in the government, including his son Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., who became the second presidential candidate to be elected by a majority since the inception of the Philippine Republic (Vera Files 2023).

It is worth noting that their rise to power and prominence in the mainstream has never been about luck at all. A whistleblower in 2020 revealed that the Marcoses had spent millions of dollars to revamp their image and fix their reputation through social media with the help of the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica (ABS-CBN News 2020). By microtargeting social media users with content that is positive toward the Marcoses, they have, brick by brick, changed more and more Filipinos’ perceptions of the Marcoses over the past few years. Because of this, there has been a resurgence of disinformation tactics that aim to make people forget about the atrocities committed during the Marcos patriarch’s presidency (Ong and Tapsell 2022).

For example, in recent years, more and more social media videos have been produced on various platforms like Facebook (Ong and Lanuza 2024) and YouTube (Talamayan and Candelaria 2025), claiming that the Marcos dictatorship was a “golden era” for the Philippine economy, where many Filipinos were prosperous and abundant. This is contrary to the reality, where many were struggling to make ends meet or were hungry



(Dios et al. 2021; Hill 1982), or worse, dead due to the human rights violations they experienced (Talamayan 2021; Sales 2021).

Gen Zs: The Newest Addition to the Philippine Electorate

There has been a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Three years after the start of the Marcos Jr. presidency, there seem to be cracks in his influence on the electorate. Generation Z, also referred to as the Centennials, Internet Generation, iGen, or Post-Millennials by some academics, now makes up the largest portion of the Philippine population. Descendants of Millennial and Gen X parents, they were born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller and Grace 2016). They often describe themselves as trustworthy, thoughtful, kind, open-minded, and accountable (Javate 2018), yet members of older generations frequently misrepresent them, labeling them as lazy and overly dependent on technology (Seemiller and Grace 2016).

As more and more Millennial and Gen Z voters gain the right to vote, they have gradually demonstrated their power in choosing the leaders who will serve in government. Since they made up the majority of voters in the 2025 elections (Mateo 2025), they undoubtedly have significant influence over election outcome, especially in the upcoming 2028 presidential election, which could be the make-or-break moment for Philippine democracy.

The Wika, Panitikan, at Lipunan sa Ilalim ng Batas Militar (PS 21) Course

In 2019, a new course titled *Wika, Panitikan, at Lipunan sa Ilalim ng Batas Militar* (Language, Literature, and Society Under Martial Law) was first offered at the University of the Philippines Diliman as a general education elective. Its main objective is to educate students about the truths surrounding Martial Law (Mateo 2019). It is a three-unit course offered by the Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas.

A year after it was first introduced in UP Diliman, Communication program associate professor Dr. Marie Rose Arong brought the course to the University of the Philippines (UP) Cebu during the second semester of academic year 2020–2021 (Arong 2022). According to Arong (2022), it was crucial to bring the course to this specific constituent unit because many “students (most Filipinos really) see Martial Law as a disconnected moment in history, similar to our revolutions during the colonial period. The distance of time, perhaps, has benefits, but one drawback is that the human element of remembering gets lost. This GE, PS 21, hopes to trace that loss and create a sort of map to this concealed fissure in our nation’s story.”



First taught at UP Cebu at the height of the pandemic, the course was offered remotely to mostly Communication students who were interested in learning the truth about Martial Law in the country. It is also worth noting that these students may have a particularly deep connection with the course, as the press was one of the institutions stifled during the Marcos dictatorship (Rosenberg 1974; Lent 1974). Students have the opportunity to study historical events to equip themselves with the knowledge necessary to understand what transpired during those periods. By engaging in this examination of the past, they can develop a more informed perspective on historical developments.

Since its first offering in UP Cebu, there have been changes in the course delivery. With mobility restrictions now lifted, students are back on campus for face-to-face classes. Additionally, more students from other programs, such as Political Science, Statistics, Biology, Computer Science, Psychology, and Fine Arts, have enrolled in the course. With this, it cannot be denied that the topics covered in this course are beneficial in ensuring students are equipped with the knowledge to combat disinformation and historical distortion surrounding Marcos' Martial Law.

The Batbat Radio Program

The Batbat radio program was conceptualized by students enrolled in the PS 21 class during the first semester of academic year 2024–2025 as part of their final requirements. One of the goals of the Batbat radio program is to reach as many people as possible so they can pass on their knowledge about Martial Law. The radio program was first aired on DYUP Sugbo, the official campus radio of UP Cebu, on September 20, 2024 (Villaester 2025), through both on-campus broadcast and online streaming via popular platforms like YouTube and Spotify. It concluded its 10-episode season on November 29, 2024.

Produced mostly by senior Communication students and junior Statistics students, the program featured the following episodes:

- Understanding Martial Law: Historical Context and Reasons
- The Propaganda Machine: Language and Imagery of the New Society
- Media Under Siege: Press Freedom and Censorship
- Voices of Resistance: Literature and Art as Forms of Protest
- The Role of Education: Curriculum Changes and Indoctrination
- Grassroots Movements: The People's Struggle Against Oppression
- Personal Narratives: Stories from the Martial Law Era
- Martial Law and Human Rights: Violations and Aftermath
- Lessons from Martial Law: Reflecting on Democratic Values and Governance
- The Continuing Narrative: Martial Law's Legacy in Contemporary Society



Each episode featured at least two Bachelor of Arts in Communication students and two Bachelor of Science in Statistics students. The students were given the liberty to create the structure of each 30-minute episode and to develop their own brand for the program, including the program intro and extro, as well as a public service announcement. They also had the freedom to tweak the flow of each episode. For example, some groups invited guest speakers to share their stories, while others incorporated games to make the program more engaging.

Counterpublics, DYUP Sugbo, and the Gen Z

Building on the practices observed in Batbat, this study draws on counterpublic theory as articulated by Fraser (1990) and expanded by Warner (2010) to examine how Gen Z student broadcasters at UP Cebu construct alternative narratives of national history through DYUP Sugbo. Counterpublics are communicative arenas that emerge in response to exclusion from dominant public spheres. They enable marginalized voices to articulate oppositional worldviews that contest hegemonic narratives.

DYUP Sugbo functions as a youth-driven counterpublic. In a context where Martial Law memory has been distorted by textbook censorship and state-sponsored revisionism (Pangalangan et al. 2018; Lizada 2025), student broadcasters reclaim suppressed narratives through dramatization, emotional storytelling, and editorial framing. These acts reflect what Fraser describes as “parallel discourse,” confronting sanitized portrayals of the Marcos regime and centering victim testimonies.

Gen Z’s role is pivotal. As digital natives born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace 2016), they shape this counterpublic using memes, peer-based language, and hybrid storytelling. Despite generational stereotypes (Javate 2018), Gen Z is emerging as a politically engaged cohort. Their cultural fluency enables them to translate historical memory into accessible formats, especially for their peers.

DYUP Sugbo is not simply a media outlet but a generational counterpublic. Students do not just participate in oppositional discourse, they create it. Their work constitutes civic and ideological labor, narrating Martial Law as historical warning and truth-telling as responsibility.

This study also draws from cultural memory (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995) and civic media frameworks (Jenkins et al. 2016), but counterpublic theory remains central to understanding how student-led media acts as a form of historical resistance and democratic agency.



The Research Questions

It is established in this paper that the majority of the voting electorate in the last elections were part of the Millennial and Gen Z generations (GMA Integrated News 2025). Therefore, it is crucial to highlight how important their voice is now more than ever. Although it is worth recognizing that they have elected more progressive voices to key positions in recent elections, many conservatives and public officials who backed Marcos have also secured important roles in institutions such as the Senate and Congress. This voting bloc is not a monolith.

This is where the PS 21 students come in. As members of Gen Z themselves, they bring insights into the perspectives, preferences, and media habits of their generational peers, particularly within the context of the UP Cebu student community. While they may not represent the entire Gen Z population in the Philippines, their lived experiences as UP students offer valuable, localized understanding of how to craft messages that resonate with their immediate audience. As they produce the radio program on Martial Law, it becomes essential for them to consider how to engage fellow Gen Z listeners meaningfully and responsibly through content that is relevant, compelling, and grounded in historical truth.

With this, the paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do Gen Z students conceptualize and frame the narrative of Philippine Martial Law when communicating to their peers through campus radio?
2. What challenges do Gen Z students face in communicating the complexities of Philippine Martial Law to their peers through campus radio, and how do they address these challenges?

Methodology

To address the research questions, 48 students enrolled in the general education course PS 21 during the first semester of Academic Year 2024–2025 were invited to participate in an asynchronous online interview. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. A total of 34 students completed the survey, which was administered via Google Forms between November 25 and 29, 2024. The cohort consisted of 20 Bachelor of Science in Statistics students, 11 Bachelor of Arts in Communication students, and 3 Bachelor of Science in Biology students.

Although the study did not collect formal demographic information such as age or enrollment status, the course is typically composed of undergraduate students aged 18 to 22. Based on institutional norms, it is reasonable to infer that most participants belong to Generation Z. However, the possibility of delayed enrollees or students outside this



generational cohort is acknowledged. Thus, while participants are framed as Gen Z communicators, this is a contextual assumption rather than a formally verified demographic claim.

The interview instrument consisted of 12 structured, open-ended questions delivered asynchronously. Each question was designed to align with one of the study's two guiding research questions: (1) How do students frame Martial Law narratives for their fellow Gen Z listeners? and (2) What challenges do they encounter in communicating this history through campus radio?

To explore how students understand and frame Martial Law, the following questions were asked:

- How do you personally view the Martial Law era in the Philippines?
- What factors or sources have shaped your perspective?
- What resources or materials have been most influential in forming your understanding of Martial Law and its impact on Philippine history?
- How confident are you in your ability to identify disinformation about Martial Law?
- Can you share any experiences where you encountered conflicting narratives about this era?
- How has access to technology and online platforms influenced your understanding or communication of Martial Law's history?

To examine their communication strategies and challenges as student broadcasters, participants were asked:

- What considerations do you prioritize when planning a radio program about Martial Law for your peers?
- What specific challenges have you faced in communicating the complexities of Martial Law to your audience, and how have you tried to overcome them?
- What strategies do you believe are effective in engaging your fellow Gen Z students in discussions about Martial Law?
- How do you decide on the themes or narratives to highlight in your radio program about Martial Law? Do you aim for a specific tone or approach?
- How do you assess whether your radio program successfully informs and resonates with your Gen Z peers about Martial Law?
- What suggestions would you offer to improve the reach and effectiveness of campus radio programs in communicating historical topics like Martial Law?

While not intended to elicit deep personal narratives, some responses revealed incidental insights into family influences, prior beliefs, and emotional responses. The structured format allowed students to reflect on their roles not only as learners but as active knowledge-sharers and peer educators.



Thematic analysis followed (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2017) a reflexive approach, with an experiential and realist orientation. Themes were developed to represent the patterned meanings in students' responses, grounded in what participants said rather than how they said it. The analysis emphasized semantic content over latent meaning or language structure. While the study did not adopt a formal discourse-analytic lens, the researcher drew contextual insights from course content such as conceptual metaphor theory and media framing (Charteris-Black 2004; Lakoff and Johnson 1980) to situate student perspectives within broader meaning-making practices. These frameworks informed the interpretation of responses but did not drive theme generation.

To support the early stages of coding, the researcher used ChatGPT as a technical aid to manage and organize the large volume of qualitative data. Anonymized student responses were entered into the AI platform, and prompts were used to surface recurring ideas, suggest initial codes, and group conceptually related responses. This process aligned with Colaizzi's (1978) method of extracting significant statements and formulating meaning units. However, ChatGPT's role was strictly limited to data structuring.

Final coding and interpretation were conducted by two human coders, the primary researcher and a peer collaborator, through a collaborative and iterative process. ChatGPT's outputs were reviewed critically and modified or discarded as needed. Only codes deemed conceptually sound and aligned with the research questions were retained. The final thematic map was developed through multiple cycles of reflection, discussion, and refinement, ensuring interpretive depth and contextual fit. This approach aligns with emerging best practices for responsibly integrating AI in qualitative workflows (Bijker et al. 2024; Nguyen-Trung 2025; Yan et al. 2023).

Although the term "collaborative" is used to describe the coding process, it refers specifically to the collaboration between the researcher and the second coder. Student participants were not involved in the analysis or interpretation of data. There was no member-checking, co-analysis, or co-authorship, in line with ethical protocols for research involving current students.

To enhance analytic transparency and align the study's thematic analysis with its guiding research questions, the following table maps each research question to the corresponding interview prompts and emergent themes. This framework guided the thematic coding and ensured that data interpretation remained rooted in participants' responses and the study's central inquiry.

Research Question	Interview Question	Emergent Themes
RQ1: How do Gen Z students	• How do you personally	• Students moved from



conceptualize and frame the narrative of Philippine Martial Law when communicating to their peers through campus radio?

- view the Martial Law era in the Philippines?
- What factors or sources have shaped your perspective?
- What resources or materials have been most influential in forming your understanding of Martial Law and its impact on Philippine history?
- How has access to technology and online platforms influenced your understanding or communication of Martial Law's history?
- What considerations do you prioritize when planning a radio program about Martial Law for your peers?
- How do you decide on the themes or narratives to highlight in your radio program about Martial Law? Do you aim for a specific tone or approach?

- inherited myths of Martial Law as a "Golden Age" toward a critical, evidence-based recognition of its violent and repressive realities.
- Students adopted an empathetic, neutral, and accessible tone to foster critical reflection without alienating their audience or minimizing the trauma of Martial Law.
- Students approached campus radio production as a civic and pedagogical act, designing programs that were fact-checked, emotionally engaging, and relevant to Gen Z audiences.

RQ2: What challenges do Gen Z students face in communicating the complexities of Philippine Martial Law to their peers through campus radio, and how do they address these challenges?

- How confident are you in your ability to identify disinformation about Martial Law?
- Can you share any experiences where you encountered conflicting narratives about this era?
- What specific challenges have you faced in

- Despite increased confidence in evaluating sources, students' media literacy was continually tested by the scale, speed, and emotional appeal of Martial Law disinformation online.
- Engaging peers with the complex history of Martial Law required



	<p>communicating the complexities of Martial Law to your audience, and how have you tried to overcome them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies do you believe are effective in engaging your fellow Gen Z students in discussions about Martial Law? • How do you assess whether your radio program successfully informs and resonates with your Gen Z peers about Martial Law? • What suggestions would you offer to improve the reach and effectiveness of campus radio programs in communicating historical topics like Martial Law? 	<p>students to navigate emotional fatigue, generational resistance, and apathy among their listeners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students employed Gen Z-native strategies like humor, memes, short-form videos, and peer language to make Martial Law memory relatable and accessible across digital platforms.
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Table 1. Alignment of Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Emergent Themes

Results

The findings of this study reveal how UP Cebu students, as Gen Z communicators and memory workers, navigated the political and emotional complexities of Martial Law to produce peer-oriented radio content grounded in truth-telling and civic urgency. Through reflexive thematic analysis, six interlocking themes emerged that trace the students' shift from inherited myths to critical engagement, their evolving media literacy in the face of digital disinformation, and their strategies for constructing a youth-led counterpublic through DYUP Sugbo. These themes illuminate how storytelling, emotional resonance, and platform fluency became tools not only for historical narration but for contesting silence, distortion, and generational apathy.



Students moved from inherited myths of Martial Law as a “Golden Age” toward a critical, evidence-based recognition of its violent and repressive realities.

Many students entered the PS 21 course holding ambivalent or unexamined views of Martial Law. These views were shaped more by familial anecdotes and algorithmic nostalgia than by verified historical accounts. For some, the period was initially imagined as a time of order, economic growth, or discipline. One student recalled:

“In my childhood days, I viewed the Martial Law era as something that was amazing as people around me refer to it as the 'Golden Age' of the Philippines.”
(P3)

These early beliefs were often inherited from parents, relatives, or community elders whose accounts emphasized infrastructure and stability while omitting the regime’s brutal underside.

However, as students engaged with more diverse and critical sources, ranging from academic texts to archival documentaries, their perspectives shifted significantly. One student narrated this transformation candidly:

“When I was in high school, like many others, I believed that the Martial Law era in the Philippines was a 'golden age'... However, in 2022, my view of that era changed dramatically. Through careful examination and reflection, I gradually came to recognize Martial Law as one of the most devastating and traumatic chapters in our nation’s history.” (P9)

This journey of political awakening was not accidental. It was catalyzed by sustained exposure to institutional platforms of memory, such as the PS 21 curriculum and immersive exhibits like 1081, which foregrounded the voices of Martial Law survivors and the suppressed historical record. As one student put it:

“The Martial Law era in the Philippines is a complex chapter in history, marked by both development and suppression. Personally, I see it as a time when infrastructure and economic initiatives were pursued, but these were overshadowed by widespread human rights violations, curtailment of freedoms, and corruption.” (P2)

Academic literature, including works like Gene Segarra Navera’s *Metaphorizing Martial Law* (Navera 2018), equipped students with the language and tools to dissect the regime’s rhetorical manipulation and ideological framing. Documentaries such as *Batas Militar* (Ifurung and Red 1997) provided not just facts but affective weight, grounding abstract violations in the real pain of those who endured them. These multimodal



experiences allowed students to move beyond anecdotal impressions and cultivate what one participant described as “a more complete view of Martial Law’s impact on the Philippines.”

The digital sphere played a paradoxical role. It enabled unprecedented access to primary sources, survivor testimonies, and scholarly critiques. At the same time, it exposed students to a flood of revisionist content that glamorized the Marcos regime. One participant observed:

“Access to resources has become more convenient with the internet, but this ease of access also makes information vulnerable to manipulation, with fake news and historical distortions proliferating online.” (P6)

Such distortions did not go unchallenged. Students described actively cross-checking sources, interrogating their own assumptions, and developing a critical eye for historical claims that circulated on social media. This analytical shift, from passive recipients of inherited memory to active curators of historical truth, was central to their development not only as students but also as emergent civic agents. The recurring experience of unlearning, re-learning, and witnessing deepened their conviction that Martial Law must be remembered not as a neutral policy era but as a defining struggle over truth, justice, and collective memory.

Despite increased confidence in evaluating sources, students’ media literacy was continually tested by the scale, speed, and emotional appeal of Martial Law disinformation online.

While students expressed growing confidence in evaluating sources, their experiences also revealed how the digital landscape continues to challenge their ability to discern truth from manipulation, particularly when it comes to Martial Law. Formal instruction, critical coursework, and media literacy training have helped many sharpen their skills. One participant shared:

“I’m fairly confident in identifying disinformation about Martial Law, thanks to my exposure to credible sources provided by our Prof., and to our yearly commemoration of Martial Law.” (P28)

Others echoed this sense of preparedness, citing the Philippine Studies course as instrumental in shaping their critical awareness.

“I’d consider myself above average in confidence, thanks to our PhilStud class. We went into a lot of research about that period, so I feel equipped to handle most situations.” (P15)



Yet, despite these gains, students remained acutely aware of how disinformation spreads, especially in emotionally charged, algorithm-driven environments. One participant noted:

“Access to resources has become more convenient with the internet, but this ease of access also makes information vulnerable to manipulation, with fake news and historical distortions proliferating online.” (P30)

Several described digital platforms like TikTok and YouTube as spaces of contradiction. These platforms democratize access to historical content, but also serve as breeding grounds for revisionist narratives.

“These same platforms have also become breeding grounds for disinformation, where false narratives are propagated to distort history. This dual nature of technology underscores the need for critical thinking and media literacy.” (P24)

“One notable experience involved encountering disinformation on TikTok, where trending videos often glorify Martial Law and downplay or erase the human rights abuses and corruption of that era.” (P12)

Such encounters were not limited to online spaces. Some students shared experiences of ideological conflict within their own families. One participant recounted:

“One experience I can share is when I told my family that the Marcos regime politicized calamities by manipulating relief goods. My Tita disagreed strongly, which shows how censorship during that time limited access to accurate information, leaving lasting gaps even today.” (P23)

Despite these challenges, students consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining a rigorous and reflective approach to historical claims. Critical thinking, source triangulation, and respectful dialogue emerged as key tools in their strategy to resist distortion.

“Through media and information literacy studies, I have become more confident in identifying disinformation about Martial Law. I make it a point to verify that my sources are credible, and even when they appear reliable, I cross-check them with other trustworthy materials to ensure accuracy.” (P31)

This same sentiment was echoed by another participant:



“Through media and information literacy studies, I have become more confident in identifying disinformation about Martial Law. I make it a point to verify that my sources are credible, and even when they appear reliable, I cross-check them with other trustworthy materials to ensure accuracy.” (P21)

Students also recognized that social media can still serve as a productive space for dialogue and political education, provided that users are equipped with the skills to navigate its risks.

“Online platforms have also made it easier to engage in discussions, share perspectives, and contribute to raising awareness about this crucial period in Philippine history.” (P19)

“Access to technology and online platforms has significantly democratized information, making it easier and more affordable to learn about Martial Law. Reliable historical materials, documentaries, and survivor testimonies are now just a few clicks away.” (P13)

Taken together, these reflections portray a student body that is aware of both its potential and its vulnerability in the disinformation age. Their efforts to resist revisionism by verifying facts, listening actively, and speaking carefully reflect not only academic skill but civic responsibility. The political weight of their task is clear. In an era of manufactured nostalgia, the labor of truth-telling is not just technical; it is moral.

Students approached campus radio production as a civic and pedagogical act, designing programs that were fact-checked, emotionally engaging, and relevant to Gen Z audiences.

In designing their campus radio programs, students demonstrated a deep sense of responsibility, treating the project not merely as a class requirement but as a civic and pedagogical act. They understood the stakes of communicating Martial Law history in a digital era rife with distortion, and they committed themselves to accuracy, relevance, and emotional resonance.

Many participants emphasized the importance of credibility. They were conscious that misinformation thrives when unchecked, especially in media. One student explained,

“As a group, we prioritize accuracy by using well-researched and credible sources.” (P4)

Another added:



“I strive to ensure that the information I present is as accurate as possible. I make sure that the documents and clips I use as references are backed up by credible accounts, not just rumors or gossip. I also double-check my sources to verify their accuracy.” (P7)

Yet factual accuracy was only part of their strategy. Students were equally invested in making the broadcasts emotionally engaging and relevant to their peers. They understood that historical content would not resonate with Gen Z audiences unless it was delivered in ways that felt personal and urgent. One participant explained:

“Sharing personal stories or testimonies from people who lived through the era can make the topic more impactful.” (P29)

Others recommended creative digital strategies to “capture their attention and spark curiosity.”

Many deliberately linked Martial Law to present-day struggles. The goal was not only to recount history but to underscore its continued relevance, particularly in the context of youth activism, democratic backsliding, and disinformation.

“Lastly, we consider relevance, connecting the lessons of Martial Law to current issues to encourage meaningful discussions.” (P32)

“It’s also effective to link the past to current issues, showing how Martial Law’s legacy influences today’s political and social landscape.” (P22)

These connections were reinforced through strategic choices about themes and narrative framing. Students often highlighted human rights violations, youth resistance, and the erosion of civil liberties. They chose these themes deliberately, not for shock value, but because they reflected contemporary challenges.

“We prioritize themes like human rights, freedom, and justice and often focus on personal stories to make the topic more relatable.” (P16)

The use of firsthand accounts was especially significant. Testimonies from Martial Law survivors helped humanize history and bridge the gap between abstract knowledge and lived experience.

“We emphasize personal stories to humanize the discussion, highlighting the lived experiences of those affected by Martial Law. By sharing these accounts with empathy, we aim to create an emotional connection that goes beyond facts and allows listeners to reflect on the human cost of the regime.” (P25)



Some students also focused on the legacy of youth resistance, seeing in it a mirror for their own generational responsibilities.

“Our themes and narratives center on the youth resistance in Cebu during Martial Law. This aligns with our keynote speaker, a youth advocate, to ensure relevance and resonance with our target audience.” (P17)

Another participant reflected:

“Highlighting the importance of youth activism during Martial Law is crucial, as it parallels current struggles against authoritarian tendencies, such as the implications of the Anti-Terrorism Act.” (P10)

To make these themes accessible and engaging, students proposed using interactive media strategies such as social media teasers, embedded sound clips, live Q&As, and guest speakers. These methods aimed to meet their generation where it already lives—online—and to create a participatory, not merely consumptive, learning experience.

Overall, these efforts reveal a thoughtful and politically engaged approach to educational media production. For the students, historical communication was not about nostalgia or neutral documentation. It was a form of activism, a way to contest forgetfulness, honor the memory of those who resisted, and reassert the role of the youth in shaping democratic futures.

Engaging peers with the complex history of Martial Law required students to navigate emotional fatigue, generational resistance, and apathy among their listeners.

Students encountered a range of emotional and interpersonal barriers while communicating the realities of Martial Law through campus radio. These included misinformation, emotional strain, generational resistance, and the difficulty of capturing and holding the attention of an audience not always inclined to engage deeply with historical topics.

A key challenge was contending with the persistent spread of misleading or idealized views of the Martial Law era. Many students described how inaccurate narratives, often passed down through generations or shared widely online, made it difficult to present a truthful and balanced perspective. One student reflected:

“One of the biggest challenges in communicating the complexities of Martial Law is dealing with misinformation and the resistance to credible information.



Many people either romanticize the era or dismiss its impact entirely, making it hard to present a balanced view.” (P11)

Another shared a more personal struggle,

“These conflicts also arise within my own family. My mother, aunts, and uncles continue to believe many of the myths surrounding Martial Law. While their beliefs can be frustrating, I approach discussions with respect, mindful of the generational gap in understanding this period.” (P20)

The issue of apathy or disconnection from history among Gen Z peers also surfaced as a significant hurdle. Students noted that although their generation has greater access to information, that access does not always translate into curiosity or understanding. To reach these peers, many emphasized the need for delivery formats that are both relevant and emotionally engaging. One participant explained:

“This isn't the first time people have heard about this topic, so our challenge is to make it memorable. We want to present the information in a way that's both refreshing and captivating, keeping people engaged. However, it's a double-edged sword because the topic is serious, and we need to stay on track with our program's objectives. Finding a way to make it fresh and engaging while staying true to the subject matter has been a challenge.” (P27)

Tackling traumatic aspects of Martial Law, such as torture, disappearances, and systemic abuse, introduced emotional challenges of its own. Students expressed how heavy the material could be—not just for the audience, but also for themselves as hosts and creators.

“In communicating the complexities of Martial Law to our audience, we encountered several challenges, particularly due to the emotional weight and sensitive nature of the topic. Discussing human rights violations, enforced disappearances, and the suffering endured by many during Martial Law can be overwhelming for both the audience and the program hosts.” (P33)

To navigate these barriers, students employed a mix of empathy, strategy, and creativity. When faced with opposing or misinformed views, they responded by anchoring their content in evidence while maintaining a respectful tone.

“One specific challenge is addressing the polarized views about Martial Law, as some audiences may have strong biases or misinformation. To overcome this, I focus on presenting verified facts and using a respectful tone to foster open dialogue.” (P18)



They also turned to storytelling and the arts to evoke empathy and deepen engagement. Testimonies from survivors, as well as poems and music, were used to humanize history and create emotional entry points for listeners who might otherwise tune out. In addition, students worked to show how Martial Law was not a closed chapter of the past but a living history that resonates in contemporary struggles, such as disinformation, democratic erosion, and ongoing debates about civil liberties.

Finally, students embraced Gen Z's digital preferences. They proposed the use of interactive and visual formats like polls, quizzes, multimedia posts, and short-form content distributed via social media. These tools allowed them to deliver serious content in more digestible forms without diluting the message.

Taken together, these efforts reveal the students' nuanced understanding of their audience and the historical moment they are speaking into. Their work illustrates not only the challenge of teaching Martial Law history to a distracted or resistant generation, but also the creative, emotionally intelligent ways in which that challenge can be met. In confronting emotional fatigue, misinformation, and generational divides, these students turned campus radio into a space for critical reflection, collective memory, and civic education.

Students employed Gen Z-native strategies like humor, memes, short-form videos, and peer language to make Martial Law memory relatable and accessible across digital platforms.

Recognizing that traditional methods of historical instruction may not resonate with their peers, students intentionally designed their Martial Law communication strategies to align with Gen Z's digital habits, media preferences, and emotional sensibilities. They emphasized that to truly engage their generation, information must not only be accurate but also accessible, visually engaging, and emotionally resonant.

A central strategy involved embracing the digital platforms that dominate Gen Z's daily lives. Apps like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube became tools not just for entertainment, but for political education. As one student explained,

“One effective approach in engaging my fellow Gen Z students in discussions about Martial Law is leveraging social media and digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to share bite-sized, visually engaging content, such as infographics, short videos, and memes. This method resonates with Gen Z because they spend a significant amount of time on social media, and their short attention spans are best suited for quick, engaging formats like reels,



shorts, or TikTok videos. These platforms allow me to present information in a digestible way that captures their interest.” (P1)

Students also highlighted the importance of storytelling, especially when rooted in firsthand accounts. They believed that narrative, whether drawn from historical documents, interviews, or dramatized scripts, could bridge the emotional gap between their generation and a past they did not live through.

“Relatable storytelling is key. Sharing personal stories or testimonies from people who lived through the era can make the topic more impactful.” (P1)

Linking historical memory to contemporary issues was another tactic for making Martial Law relevant. By identifying parallels between past abuses of power and current political concerns, students hoped to highlight the urgency of remembering history correctly.

“It’s also effective to link the past to current issues, showing how Martial Law’s legacy influences today’s political and social landscape.” (P8)

To engage a generation used to participatory media, students proposed interactive and playful formats like digital polls, Q&A sessions, and even games. Humor, especially when channeled through memes, was also viewed as a legitimate and strategic tool, provided it did not trivialize the suffering of Martial Law victims.

“Involving Gen Z students in discussions regarding Martial Law is easiest when the approach is viewed as accessible and relevant. Posting short clips, documentaries, or infographics on social media platforms is effective because they have visual appeal and are easy to understand.” (P26)

“As a fellow Gen Z, with a short attention span, with no interest in radio (in this increasingly digital world), I believe one of the things that can appeal to them, especially on social media, is through humor or memes. I feel like most Gen Z cope through humor. But not humor in a way that minimizes the experiences of those who were tortured and killed, but humor in a way that (factually) criticizes the Marcoses.” (P34)

Students were also mindful of the emotional demands of the topic. Martial Law is not just a historical lesson; it is a wound that continues to be felt across generations. In this context, students saw the need for spaces of respectful dialogue and empathetic listening, especially when disagreement or emotional fatigue arose. By pairing rigorous fact-checking with peer-oriented communication and affective sensitivity, they aimed to make Martial Law education both intellectually honest and emotionally reachable.



Together, these approaches reflect an intentional, values-driven effort to reach their generation where they are. By merging credibility with creativity and emotional connection, these students transformed digital platforms into counterpublic spaces, informal but powerful venues for reanimating historical memory and resisting disinformation in ways that feel urgent, relevant, and authentically Gen Z.

Students adopted an empathetic, neutral, and accessible tone to foster critical reflection without alienating their audience or minimizing the trauma of Martial Law.

In crafting their radio programs on Martial Law, students were deeply intentional about their tone. They recognized that the topic carries immense emotional weight, particularly for survivors and families affected by the violence and repression of the era. For this reason, they sought to communicate historical truths without retraumatizing listeners or alienating peers who may hold conflicting views. Their tone was designed to be empathetic, neutral, and accessible, enabling honest engagement with a painful past.

Students prioritized emotional sensitivity and respect in how they conveyed their message. Rather than relying on sensationalism or aggressive rhetoric, they chose approaches that centered on truth, care, and connection. As one student explained,

“We aim for a neutral and thoughtful tone, avoiding sensationalism. Our goal is to foster understanding rather than pushing a particular agenda, allowing our peers to form their own perspectives based on the information presented.”
(P4)

This approach was not about minimizing the gravity of Martial Law but about making the conversation possible. Aware that some listeners may feel discomfort or defensiveness, students used tone as a bridge. They chose words and formats that encouraged openness rather than confrontation, understanding that reflection requires psychological safety.

To support this, students integrated storytelling, poetry, music, and firsthand testimonies. These forms added emotional dimension to historical facts, helping listeners connect personally with the content. These creative methods helped move the conversation from abstract data to lived experience, encouraging listeners to imagine what it felt like to endure those years.

Accessibility was also a key concern. Students intentionally avoided overly academic or formal language, opting instead for clear, casual phrasing and relatable examples. They



understood that engaging Gen Z requires not just relevant content but also a tone and style that feels familiar and inclusive. One student reflected:

“In our case, we chose to make it more casual and not seem to be that serious so that our audience would feel safe listening to our radio program. Also, we specifically add examples that people could relate to so that they could somehow feel that they are part of the audience.” (P10)

Through this careful balance, fact-based but humanized, critical but kind, students created radio programming that invited conversation rather than shut it down. Their tone enabled dialogue about one of the most contested periods in Philippine history, while upholding the dignity of those who suffered and the right of their generation to seek truth for themselves. By fostering a safe, inclusive, and reflective listening space, they modeled how history can be taught in ways that are both emotionally intelligent and socially transformative.

Discussion

DYUP Sugbo as a Youth-Led Counterpublic in the Post-Authoritarian Public Sphere

The radio program Batbat, produced and aired through DYUP Sugbo, can be theorized as a dynamic counterpublic space. It is not only situated outside dominant narratives of Philippine history, but also actively pushes against them. Michael Warner (2002) defines counterpublics as discursive arenas where subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. DYUP Sugbo, in this context, is not merely a university-run media platform. It functions as a generative, youth-driven site of ideological struggle where suppressed memories of Martial Law are revived and rearticulated through a Gen Z lens.

The students involved in Batbat are not passive participants in a pre-existing counterpublic; they are shaping it. They choose the stories that get told, foreground testimonies of Martial Law survivors, invite non-mainstream guests, and intentionally frame their content through language and aesthetics resonant with their generation. These acts of curation and mediation are ideological. As they determine what is included, what is emphasized, and how it is delivered, the students perform what Warner calls “ideological labor”: constructing memory that resists the sanitized, revisionist scripts promoted in mainstream narratives.

The counterpublic character of Batbat lies not only in its oppositional content but also in its imagined audience. The student broadcasters are speaking directly to their peers, fellow Gen Z Filipinos, who may not have lived through Martial Law but must contend with



its afterlives in contemporary politics. By addressing their generation in a voice and format they understand, the students call a specific public into being. This is not a passive audience of information recipients. Rather, it is a community of listeners engaged in an emergent form of horizontal memory transmission.

Gen Z Aesthetics and the Emergence of a New Counterpublic Register

The generational identity of the student broadcasters profoundly shapes the contours of DYUP Sugbo as a counterpublic. As digital natives, Gen Z students possess a fluency in multimedia expression that allows them to create hybrid narrative forms. These include memes, dramatizations, testimonial snippets, affective commentary, and even pop culture references. Such forms represent a novel register of dissent that is emotionally resonant and accessible to their peers.

Unlike traditional activist communication, which may emphasize formal rhetoric or ideological slogans, Batbat adopts an aesthetic marked by humor, affect, and informality. This allows for emotional proximity between storyteller and audience, reinforcing trust and relatability. These students are not afraid to be unpolished, ironic, or emotionally raw. Their storytelling does not adhere to academic detachment or state-sanctioned neutrality. Rather, it is grounded in empathy, urgency, and civic imagination.

This generation's participation also unsettles the stereotype of Gen Z as apathetic or politically disengaged. The labor involved in producing Batbat, from historical research and scriptwriting to interviewing survivors and shaping content, demonstrates deep emotional investment and civic commitment. Far from being passive consumers of historical content, these students are actively producing counter-memory and counter-narratives.

Despite their enthusiasm, student broadcasters confronted several challenges in curating Martial Law narratives. The emotional weight of engaging with traumatic histories, the threat of historical revisionism, and the difficulty of sustaining peer engagement in a fast-paced digital culture posed significant obstacles. Rather than retreat from these barriers, the students met them with generational strategies: blending historical accuracy with affective storytelling, translating complex themes into accessible formats, and deploying humor and irony to build emotional proximity with their audience. These acts of adaptation reflect not just resilience, but a deliberate effort to ensure the memory of Martial Law remains legible, resonant, and resistant to erasure within contemporary youth discourse.

Becoming Public Through Storytelling

In narrating Martial Law, the students are not merely delivering content. They are becoming political actors. Although they may not self-identify as activists, their actions fall



squarely within the realm of civic agency. By performing public memory work, they participate in what Warner (2002) terms the "becoming public" of counterpublics, creating new forms of community, consciousness, and discourse.

Moreover, their storytelling is performative. It calls into being an imagined community of young Filipinos who reject historical distortion and refuse amnesia. This horizontal mode of memory transmission subverts the vertical, top-down flow of textbook history. It asserts that Gen Z, despite their temporal distance from Martial Law, has both the right and the responsibility to shape the narrative.

DYUP Sugbo, as shaped by Gen Z, does not simply oppose dominant historical accounts. It offers an alternative civic pedagogy grounded in peer-led memory, creative dissent, and the refusal to forget. Through these acts of storytelling, selection, and framing, a new counterpublic is being forged—not in the streets, but on airwaves, through scripts, in laughter, and in remembrance.

These findings gain added urgency in light of ongoing efforts by the Philippine government to revise curriculum content related to Martial Law in basic education. Recent moves by the Department of Education under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. have included proposals to reframe or soften references to the dictatorship, particularly by replacing terms such as "dictatorship" with more neutral language in social studies modules. This curriculum shift reflects broader attempts to recast national memory and is part of what some scholars have termed "state-sponsored revisionism" (Cayabyab 2023). Within this shifting landscape, student-led programs like Batbat on DYUP Sugbo function as counterpublic spaces that reclaim historical narratives, foreground the experiences of victims and survivors, and resist the erasure of traumatic pasts through civic storytelling and performative media.

Conclusion

This study explored how a group of Gen Z students at the University of the Philippines Cebu conceptualized and communicated the complexities of Martial Law through DYUP Sugbo, the university's campus radio. Anchored in counterpublic theory, the findings reveal how student-led media, situated within an academic framework, can function as a generative space for ideological resistance and civic engagement. Through Batbat, students constructed alternative narratives that foregrounded survivor testimonies, emotional truths, and peer-oriented storytelling. These narratives offered an accessible and affective counterpoint to dominant historical accounts.

Rather than portraying Gen Z in broad terms, this study highlights how one specific cohort, students enrolled in the PS 21 course, formed a youth-led counterpublic that



contested historical revisionism through creative media work. Their choices of content, tone, and platforms reflect a localized but significant intervention in historical memory-making. As digital natives, they used informal, hybrid, and emotionally resonant strategies to call their peers into a reflective public. In doing so, they transformed a course project into a civic endeavor.

The challenges they faced, including misinformation, emotional weight, and intergenerational tensions, were met with thoughtful and platform-aware strategies. Social media and pop culture were not distractions but tools that extended the reach and relevance of their message. DYUP Sugbo became a context-specific counterpublic sphere, shaped by pedagogy, generation, and place.

While the findings cannot be generalized to all Gen Z youth, they illustrate the pedagogical value of integrating critical media production into history education. In the context of looming elections and increasing historical distortion, the Batbat experience suggests that carefully designed academic spaces can nurture democratic memory and support the emergence of counterpublics that reframe the past with honesty, empathy, and agency.

AI Use Declaration

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and NotebookLM were employed during the writing process of this study to support grammar correction and ideation. Specifically, AI-assisted platforms were used to refine sentence structure, enhance clarity, and ensure academic tone consistency. Additionally, generative AI was utilized during the early stages of writing to assist in brainstorming and organizing initial ideas. All content, arguments, and interpretations remain the original work of the author, and the use of AI did not influence the analysis, data interpretation, or the study's conclusions. The author maintained full intellectual and ethical responsibility throughout the research and writing process.

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