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Meme-ingful Actions: Uncovering the Influence of Political Memes on Leadership Performance and Values Formation

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Abstract

Political memes circulate all over the digital world, exerting a profound influence on the political engagement of leaders. This study focused on identifying the influence of political memes on the political engagement of college student-leaders and explored the subsequent effects on their leadership performance and values formation. Grounded on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, this phenomenological study interviewed with ten open-ended questions, 15 college student-leaders (CSLs) from Central Luzon State University, Philippines. The data gathered underwent through Colaizzi's thematic analysis and were verified through data cross-checking. Results revealed that political memes have a significant influence on the opinion of student-leaders in the digital media, serving as one of the motivators for CSLs' engagement in political movements and activities. Despite the condensed information of memes, their widespread scope and entertainment mobilizes political discourse across social media. Thus, social media plays a crucial role in guiding leaders' political involvement, highlighting the importance of digital literacy in educating leaders for future generations. CSLs' interest in media entertainment and collective action reflects in the influence of political memes, shaping discourse and mobilizing peers, as a humorous and informative medium for driving societal change and directing political movements.

Keywords: Political Memes; Digital Communication; Social Media Consumption; Leadership Performance; Values Formation

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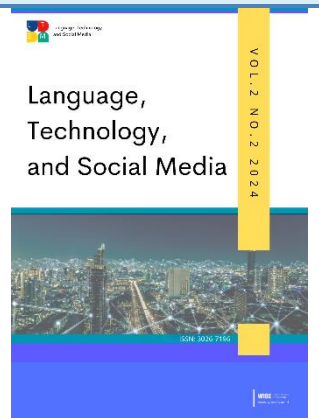
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INTRODUCTION

Political discourse in the digital world has become increasingly prevalent, fueled by the use of humorous content with memes. The prevalence of discourse with the utilization of memes manifests their role in influencing political engagement, particularly with the youth. Moreover, with the early exposure of the youth to leadership experiences in educational settings, their digital and political engagements influence the development of leadership performance and values formation. Understanding how political discourse through memes affects political engagement and leadership and values development is crucial in acknowledging how it can improve leadership skills and values formation among the young leaders in the contemporary digital age engagement.

Nowadays, political discussions have become widespread, with new forms of expression emerging [1]. These discussions have opened the doors for individuals to have a voice in governance, serving as a fundamental part of democracy. In the digital world, with the emergence of different forms of expression, from posting direct arguments in personal social media accounts to adding humorous political context in the form of memes, it rapidly changes societal trends. Particularly, memes have become one of the key characteristics of social media popular culture [2] [3]. Memes offer a visually compelling and easily shareable format that resonates with the generation of the youth, allowing complex ideas into a more digestible and entertaining content. In the digital era, memes have gone beyond their origin to emerge as a humorous or satirical way to express opinions, emotions, and insights [4] [5]. The accessibility, virality, and ability to form complex ideas concisely [6] have made memes particularly influential in developing information consumption and reshaping public discourse.

The proliferation of memes has mobilized those who distrust politics into active online participation [7], empowering political dissemination. From here, Social Learning Theory [8], posits that most online users observe and internalize behaviors, attitudes, and leadership performance depicted in political memes, influencing their political engagement with implications for their performance in leading and values formation.

The rise of social media has mainstreamed memes, making them easily recognizable to many users and ingrained in online culture [9]. Memes have been around more than the digital age, making them recognizable because of their frequent appearance in various social media platforms [10]. In the online community, they often utilize an understanding of meme messages to attract engagement, in seeking popularity and shares on social media. Consequently, on social media, it has been evident that political discourse has increasingly focused on the use of humorous content [9], to the point that in almost every political campaign, memes have become manifested to illuminate the progression of politics [11]. At the same time, a larger number of citizens disseminate and create political memes than traditional social media content on all platforms [12], heightening the levels of engagement through social media. Over time, the adaptability of political memes in converting complex political ideas into a more concise and accessible manner [6] effectively manifests the direct understanding of minorities, particularly young adults. Thus, the proliferation of political memes in the digital era has developed the dissemination and consumption of political information [9], harnessing their accessibility, virality, and concise interpretation of complex political concepts.

However, despite the widespread dissemination of political memes, people's beliefs often remain unchanged after engaging with memes that oppose their political stands. Instead, individuals

tend to engage more with political memes that align with their political ethics and principles, resulting in minimal changes in their attitudes and values. In one study, it was revealed that although online political memes are a creative way of political participation, they had no impact on voting decisions or insights of the participants, instead, they assist people on how to judge candidates and form their own beliefs about the political leaders [13]. This suggests that while political memes may not directly affect voting decisions, they play a vital role in shaping individuals' perceptions and understanding of political climates.

Memos, serving as both a critique and facilitator of social media engagement make it easier for individuals to voice their opinions, whether positive or negative, about a subject or issue [14], making it an effective tool for political discourse, media effects, agitation, and propaganda. Those memes that can evoke emotions are considered to spread quickly and to influence public opinion and discourse effectively [15]. Political memes, sharing similar characteristics, possess the ability to spread widely and ultimately influence public opinion. However, their impact is not without drawbacks, as internet memes can be manipulated to give destructive information [16]. The involved members of these communities consider themselves activists, driven by the desire to influence and shape political discourse. Beyond that, their primary objectives extend beyond mere participation; they seek to control the debates, draw in more supporters and followers, and possibly sway the opinions of social media users to amplify their message. With the appealing, witty, and entertaining characteristics of political memes, activists use these to damage the image of their opposing parties [17]. This approach to digital activism demonstrates the importance of political memes in driving political opinions of users online.

One study stated that memes had no effect on sentiments between groups, this suggests that other forms of interaction, like forming conversations with other users, may impact the shaping of the group dynamics. Political interest was likewise unaffected, indicating that it has little influence on political engagement. Moreover, memes' tendency may even contribute to political cynicism because they present political ideas in a lighthearted or ridiculous manner [18]. These findings highlight a combination of factors such as self-expression, amusement, and social identity that drive the adoption of internet memes. It positions the deployment of political memes inside civic actions, but it also issues a warning about the function and effects of memes on democratic processes, especially about exclusionary practices, oversimplification, and misinformation [19]. These concerns highlight the need for a critical understanding of the role of memes in shaping political discourse and political dissemination.

Moreover, memes, as a form of popular culture data, are cross-cultural; they abstain from following defined limitations established by society, culture, and language. This unique feature serves as an effective means to do better at curating messages and using humor to promote those messages, simplifying complex political topics so that they are easier to understand and consume. Consequently, people who engage in the meme culture are therefore more vulnerable to false information [20]. This disconnect between awareness and the creation of political memes suggests that may not necessarily contribute to an individual's knowledge of political discourse. Additionally, other findings suggest that meme makers lack political experience and that the fact that they don't seem to be motivated by the desire to teach their audiences is consistent with the conclusion that encountering memes concerning politics is not linked with political awareness [1]. Furthermore, studies found that encountering memes on social media platforms like Facebook has no significant influence on political knowledge. However, it does correlate positively with

increased engagement in online speech and involvement. This suggests that while memes may not directly enhance political awareness, they can foster greater participation and political discussions and activities within online communities.

Political participation is a crucial constituent in democratic citizenship as it provides sovereignty or authority within the society while making sure that the citizens are also able to contribute to making important decisions [21] [22]. This multifaceted concept of political participation encompasses the non-mandatory actions performed by the general public to be influential on the public and contribute to the society's formation of government leaders. This type of participation manifests through different activities, including voting, seeking information, discussing public issues, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives [23]. Nowadays, contemporary trends reveal that traditional methods of performing political participation, particularly among young people, have waned in popularity [24]. Comparing the older generation to the younger generation, it is shown that the younger generation is less interested and exhibits reduced participation when it comes to the traditional way of politics [25] and are less sophisticated in politics [26]. In this day and age, younger generations' response to these is by leveraging social media as a channel for online activism [27], with certain studies suggesting that it has heightened political engagement and participation among youth [28].

The Philippines, as a democratic country with a dynamic political climate, has a lot to cover about politics. According to COMELEC chairperson George Erwin Garcia, the youth comprised more than half of the 1.6 million people who applied for registration for the election. Studies revealed that Filipino university students have high political awareness and knowledge [29] but are seldom involved in political affairs [30]. This discrepancy between awareness and action suggests a gap that needs to be addressed in meaningful civic engagement. Nonetheless, most Filipino youths are leveraging the use of a mixed method, composed of social media and traditional platforms, to participate in issues concerning socio-political contexts [31]. This reflects the evolving nature of political participation, among succeeding generations.

For college student-leaders, who are defined as agents who advocate for a positive change in their environment [32], social media serves as a tool in spurring action for social and political change [33]. Fostering student leadership, particularly when perceived as real politics, is fundamental not only for enhancing political literacy but also for empowering students to advocate, represent, and engage in activism, thereby adequately contributing to the decision-making structures of students [34]. Additionally, when individuals have greater confidence in their knowledge of politics, they are more likely to engage in discussions about their political interests [35].

Political participation among students yields different effects on political behavior and civic engagement. As educated human beings, the students tended to exhibit rational thought and behave rationally in the context of politics [36], reflecting their ability to critically analyze political issues and make informed decisions. Additionally, a study has shown that a higher use of social media for political purposes has led to an improvement in young voters' online political participation [37], providing them with digital spaces to voice their opinions, engage in political discourse, and mobilize for political participation. This evolution in online and offline political participation among youth underscores its various effects on their political behavior, civic attitudes, and political consumption. Truly, through active participation in both online and offline political participation,

students not only develop a deeper understanding of political processes but also cultivate the minds of the succeeding generations for a sense of civic responsibility and agency.

Political memes have been found to significantly influence the political participation of individuals [38]. However, while engaging in innovative forms of participation enhances traditional forms of involvement [39], there remains a gap in understanding their long-term effects on leadership performance and values formation among youngsters, particularly student-leaders. Hence, further exploration into the relation of political memes in the shaping process of political engagement of college student-leaders is essential for informing effective leadership.

The values and performance of college student-leaders formed by their political participation remain deficiently understood. Most, if not all, previous studies about the political participation of college student-leaders focus on the number of students that perform political participation and on what medium they perform their political participation. Only a limited number of studies reviewed the effects of political participation on college student-leaders' overall performance. This study specifically (1) determined the influence of political memes on college student-leaders' engagement in political activities and (2) investigated the role of college student-leaders' engagement in political activities on their leadership performance and values formation.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach through a phenomenological approach; the researchers derived the idea from Bandura's concept, the Social Learning Theory [8], which served as the foundation of the objectives and questions of the study regarding the influence of observation of behaviors in one's own actions and beliefs. Built upon the notion that the media largely affects the actions of young adults, Social Learning Theory serves as the cornerstone of the study, uncovering the influence of political memes on college student-leaders' political engagement and its implications on their leadership performance and values formation, thereby guiding the development of leadership mentoring plans.

Population and Sample

Taking into account the heterogeneity of the population, through a purposive sampling technique, this research covered 15 college students with at least one (1) year of experience in leading an organization, totaling 15 college student-leaders identified and/or coded from CSL1 to CSL15, from Central Luzon State University in Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, Philippines.

Research Instrument

Data was gathered through interviews with the CSLs. In the interview and printed questionnaire, the researchers prepared 10 self-developed open-ended guide questions, focusing on (1) Political Memes on Political Engagement of College Student-Leaders (CSLs) (2) Political Engagement on the Leadership Performance and Values formation of College Student-Leaders (CSLs). The respondents were informed and consented to be documented in either face-to-face or online interviews while getting real-time transcriptions or audio and screen recordings. For the printed questionnaire, the subjects were informed and consented to take part in the study before they proceed to answer the provided questions.

Data Collection Procedure

After getting the approval of the CLSU Ethics Review Committee, the researchers personally approached CSLs from different colleges within Central Luzon State University (CLSU) to participate and become respondents for the study, then gave them consent forms.

After giving their consent, the respondents consulted the researchers with their preferred date and time of schedule either face-to-face or online. The interviews lasted for a week, at least (3) CSLs were interviewed per session. Using a semi-structured interview, the respondents answered a total of ten (10) questions. The researchers documented the responses through audio and screen recordings and real-time interview transcripts.

Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers examined the statements of student leaders to further acquire knowledge on the possible impact of political memes. Using the Social Learning Theory [8], the researchers organized, identified, formulated, clustered, interpreted, produced, and verified using the thematic method of Colaizzi (1978) on the grounds of the said theory, whether or not each student leader's statement is reliable by organizing and connecting their remarks from various organizations. Data cross-checking was likewise observed to guarantee the accuracy of the information and the reliability of the outcomes.

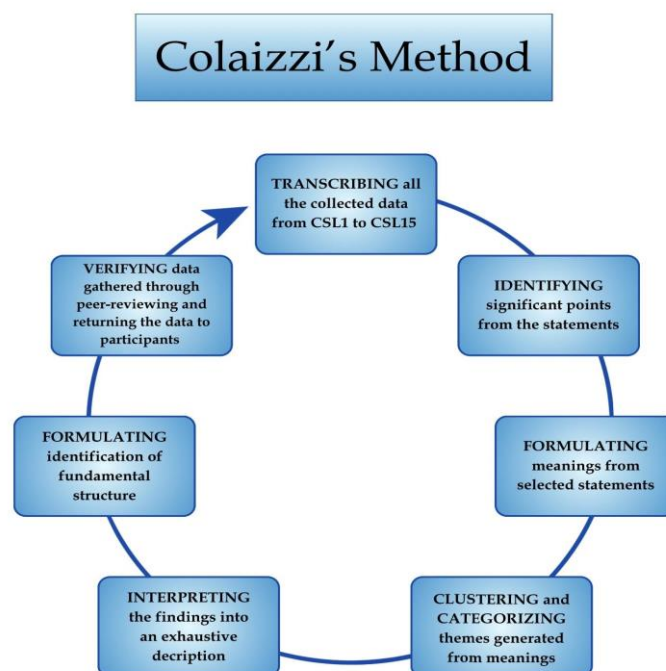


Figure 1. Data analysis procedures on the grounds of Colaizzi's thematic method (1978)

Limitations

Despite being useful in revealing how political memes impact college student-leaders' leadership performance and values formation, this study imposes several limitations. First, because the sample size was small and restricted to college student leaders from Central Luzon State University, the findings might not be as generally relevant outside of this particular setting. Furthermore, the

dependence on the data collected from a single campus may introduce biases specific to that institution that could potentially limit the external validity of the results. Additionally, this study does not take into account the potential age difference among the participants, which could affect the study’s findings as age is found to be a significant factor in shaping one’s perception, behavior, and level of political engagement [40].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

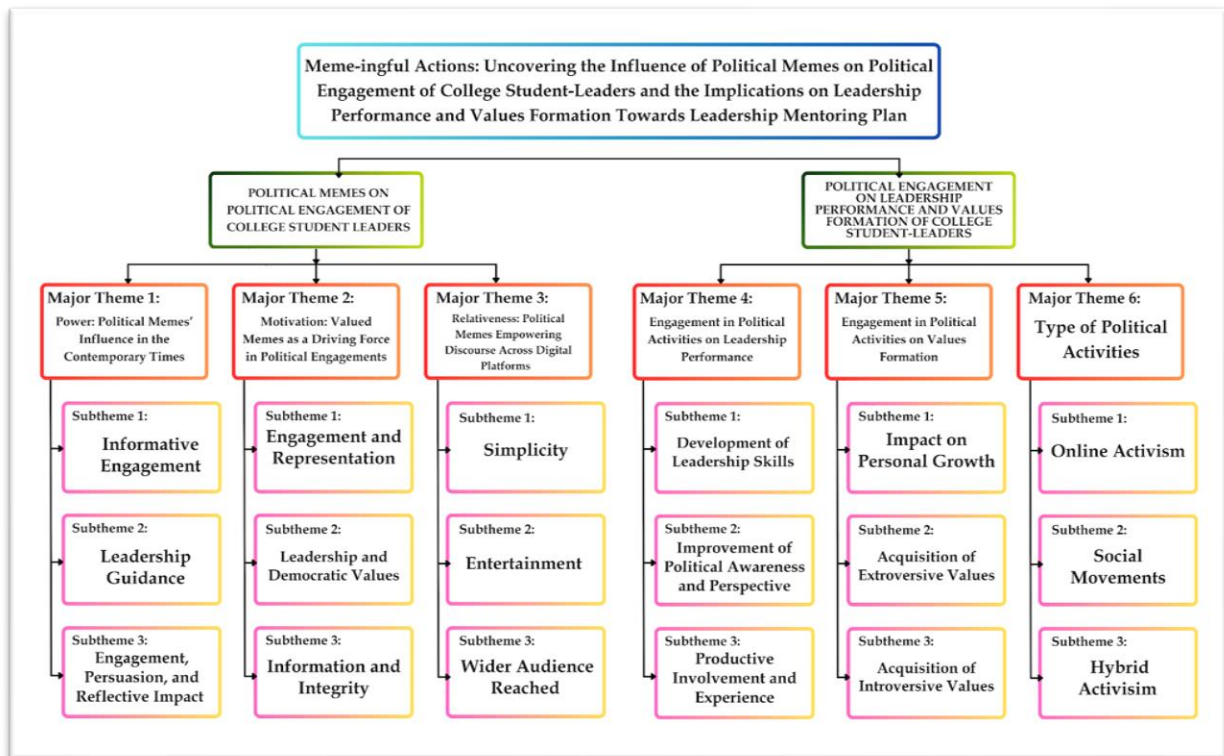


Figure 2. Thematic Analysis Findings

Power: Political Memes’ Influence in the Contemporary Times

Political memes have become extremely effective instruments for studying political environments and disseminating popular opinion in the contemporary era of technological growth. Some respondents saw memes as a mirror of the present political atmosphere, while others expressed the meme’s impact as a tool in *informing the populace in an eye-opening way*. As CSL12 stated:

“Like I said, the satirical memes regarding political views are very eye-opening, it is also very engaging for me as a student leader and I get ideas in a very short period of time like one swipe, “Ah so this is what's happening in this party.” It’s like that is where I see that I will do more research regarding that issue.”

Respondents’ responses suggested that the proliferation of memes across digital media, not only informs but also actively *molds public opinion through their reflection*. Most respondents interviewed were greatly influenced by the knack of memes in inserting humor in cryptic messages.

Additionally, Filipino culture is deeply rooted in humor, as evidenced by the country's ranking as one of the most positive and humorous countries in the Gallup Global Emotions Report [41]. This is particularly evident in respondents' answers as most of them highly engage in political memes as guidance for their attitude and principles. As CSL2 stated:

“As a college student, my political memes need to understand current trends and what improvements are necessary. I also need to determine what leadership stance to impart to my members or people to foster stronger bonds and facilitate meaningful discussions, leading to better decisions. This not only benefits our organization but also influences other students we engage with.”

Moreover, respondents have highlighted the great impact of political memes in blending entertainment with socio-political messages. While humor may attract initial engagement, the underlying messages within them can spark meaningful conversation, particularly as a **leadership guidance** to the student-leaders. This is due to the memes' ability to condense complex ideas into a concise manner, getting the curiosity of the consumers and motivating them to research more [6].

Motivation: Valued Memes as a Driving Force in Political Engagements

Political memes have considerable influence in shaping public opinion, driving motivation based on evaluations. While some memes foster **engagement, representation**, and even **challenge conventional leadership norms**, others raise concerns about **information integrity**. Respondents highlight the value of fact-driven memes, empowering individuals to verify accuracy and encourage their involvement in political issues. As CSL 6 and 4 stated, respectively:

“...some memes that caught my attention are fact-driven memes. Sometimes, political memes contain hidden meanings. Because of these memes, our first response is to fact-check if the information within that meme has a basis or not.”

“With regard to the specific type and subject of political memes that I find the least engaging, I think that would be the memes that display fake news. Since a lot of topics are circulating on social media, we need to identify if they are fake news. For me, these memes are the least engaging, we could say that it is not accurate with what truly happens to our community.”

Respondents' observation brings light to the evolving role of memes in political discourse. The recognition of hidden meanings within political memes adds a layer of substance to their interpretation, allowing consumers to fact-check. The circumstances speak of a desire for **transparency and accuracy** in political communication, motivating more engagement in political activities. This trend was evident in the 2022 Philippine presidential election, where the widespread dissemination of political memes, such as the infamous “bayaran” lines, influenced many Filipinos' perception and led them to believe that it was a fact due to its prevalence [42]. However, in times like this, it drives the student-leaders' participation more, as it enables the masses to see the truth on the dark side of their political climate. As CSL7 stated:

“If this meme is the type that is open to an issue that oppresses people, then I would subscribe to it. Those that show the dark side of Philippine politics, where it's like it's exposing the current events in our country... And from that, these are the memes that motivate me to engage more and try to educate people on how these political circumstances affect not only those who are in government or not only those who are student leaders but also all people...” Moreover, respondents point out that **engagement and representation** are pillars of any democratic society, which can also be found in political memes. By highlighting entertainment and those oppressed, these memes encourage individuals to participate in political activities.

Relatedness: Political Memes empowering Discourse Across Digital Platforms

Political memes are **very short** and do not give a lot of information regarding the issue they relate to. Despite that, they do have efficacious outcomes in shaping the values of college student-leaders. Respondents acknowledged the relatedness of using memes on social media to advocate political engagements. As CSL4 stated:

“Political memes are effective because they’re quick and easy to share and they are often funny and they spread widely and engage people who might not otherwise be interested in politics.”

Respondents stated that political memes are a great way to **entertainingly introduce political issues** across digital platforms. This is because memes have characteristics that make messages, presented in the form of humor, more digestible and easier to understand when addressing political issues [20]. Political memes use humor to capture and lengthen the attention of their audience while serving the purpose of providing significant political information. As CSL5 stated:

“...political memes serve as an example of activism since it uses its humorous content in order to encourage the audience by giving them knowledge and information, they need to be aware of our societal issues.”

Furthermore, college student-leaders recognize the **power to spread** political memes through the internet due to the interest of the youth and students. As far as political memes are concerned, social motivations are commonly heightened [19].

Engagement in Political Activities on Leadership Performance

Engagement in political activities is often done to fight for human rights and to spread awareness about politics. The respondents expressed their views on how their political activities affected their leadership performance. Most of them stated that it helped **develop their leadership skills**, while some said that they had **improved experiences, awareness, and perspective toward politics**. As CSL9 stated:

“...I got more confidence in myself that I can influence my colleagues to do the right thing and it's not like I'm forcing them.”

The respondents' responses implied that engaging in political activities had some **positive impacts on their leadership performance** as they became more active in participating in political activities, were able to view politics from a wider perspective, and developed different skills that improved their performance as student-leaders. Moreover, youth activism is associated with the youth's interpersonal skills having enhanced social capital [43]. Moreover, respondents also developed their emotional intelligence. As CSL15 stated:

“Through these activities, I can raise awareness and influence my peers. In terms of my leadership performance, it enhances my skills in communication and I also developed my critical thinking and empathy”

In addition to that, the respondents' responses also highlighted that engaging in political activities drove the respondents to acquire emotional responses such as empathy. Activism is said to be an opportunity for the youth to analyze and control their emotions in facilitating their organizing efforts and supporting their well-being [44].

Engagement in Political Activities on Values Formation

Values formation for college student leaders is crucial as it shapes their **character, integrity, and decision-making abilities (personal growth)**. Engagement in political activities can have a huge impact on their values formation. In line with the accumulated response from the respondents, most of them answered that engagement in political activities improved their awareness and knowledge about other people's differing perspectives, as a result, they became more understanding and respectful towards other people's opinions. As CSL13 stated:

“...student's needs are what you will target and that will be your basis for constructing...objectives when you consider activities or programs. I had a series of learning through these participations that I did... I had a sense of accomplishment as I saw my progress from being a “newbie” leader to the leader I am in the present.”

Respondents pointed out that everyone has their own opinions regarding politics, but because of that, they improved their awareness to differentiate between their professional setting as college student leaders and their political stance. This awareness helps them to be more responsible. Political participation had different effects on the political behavior of students. As educated human beings, students tend to think and behave rationally in the context of politics [36]. As CSL2 stated:

“Participating in political activities made me realize that once a student leader accepts his or her responsibility or obligation in their respective organization, their journey won't be a one-man journey. Rather, it would be a journey of them and their members, their organization as a whole. With that, student leaders shall be responsible not only for their reputation but for others also.”

Additionally, respondents claim that their **introverted values** also grow when engaging in political activities through acknowledging their worth and improving their self-esteem. **Extroverted values** are also affected when engaging in political activities leads these college student leaders to

realize the importance of being more considerate to their peers, thus helping them grow their social values. There is a significant interplay between factors such as political education and knowledge, political self-external and internal efficacy, and social media usage in fostering one's political participation, further enhancing their personal values [45], [46].

Type of Political Activities

Political activities come in different forms but with the same or similar purpose – to educate, to spread awareness, and to influence the decision-making of civil society. The respondents highlight the most common type of political activities done by the youth. Most of them answered **social movements** such as rallies and campaigns. However, as part of the youth, who are technologically driven, some student-leaders opt for online activism to spread awareness using media on social media platforms. **Hybrid activism**, which is a combination of both online activism and social movements, was also practiced by a minority of the respondents. As CSL2 and CSL13 stated, respectively:

“.. I also volunteered...in activities because it really made me feel empowered and it inspired me...I realized that as a woman, we also have the power to lead and redirect people.”

“For me, the house-to-house or the outreach programs where you would go into every corner of barangays...directly going on face to face or personal to the marginalized sectors.”

The respondent's response pointed out that political activities such as rallies had an impact on him/her because it didn't just become a way for them to advocate but also served as an inspiration for them to become a leader. Moreover, the respondent's response also highlighted that through participating in rallies, they felt empowered because having the gender that is considered to be submissive when it comes to the field of politics and leadership, they often questioned themselves if they could also possibly lead and redirect people. In politics, marginalization becomes a cause of why it is difficult for women to be directly involved in any political learning process [47].

CONCLUSION

Political memes became broadly used in social media, reaching many audiences, particularly the youth. As a result, political memes served as a driving force for college student-leaders in increasing their participation in political activities. Furthermore, their engagement in political activities nurtured their values which led to an enhanced leadership performance. As political memes continue to proliferate, their blend of humor and information empowers digitally literate youths, enabling student-leaders to address issues and advocate for marginalized demographics. In addition to their contemporary influence and motivational role, they promote increased political involvement among student-leaders by utilizing memes to spark meaningful discourse and community action. Furthermore, the increasing involvement of college student leaders in politics through interactive events such as campaigns and rallies emphasize the importance of collective action in raising public voices. However, there are several disadvantages with the influence of political memes. When organizational peers exhibit opposing perspectives, they may influence political viewpoints and present restrictions through spreading incorrect information. Hence,

further studies should also take into account additional elements, such as the personal beliefs of college student leaders, in order to evaluate their influence on peers who have different beliefs and the resulting effect on their leadership abilities. In conclusion, this study significantly improves leadership mentoring programs by examining the influence of political memes on the leadership performance and values formation of student-leaders. This offers important insights about how memes impact student leaders' political behavior, providing valuable insights on leadership techniques. These findings will enhance the foundations of effective youth leadership development and educate future leaders. Findings suggest further studies on the credibility of political memes as a medium of communication and their influence on factors beyond leadership performance and values formation, to deepen understanding of their role as an emerging tool for political movements.

LIMITATIONS

This study's findings are limited by its small sample size (15 college student-leaders) from a single university, which may not be generalizable. Additionally, it does not account for factors such as participants' prior political experiences or differences in political knowledge. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample and explore the long-term effects of political memes on leadership development.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

N.A.G.M. was responsible for conceptualizing the study, designing the research methodology, conducting the literature review, analyzing the data, writing the discussion and conclusion sections, and finalizing the manuscript. P.H.D.B. assisted in the conceptualization, data collection, and

analysis. S.L.R.C. contributed to the methodology, data analysis, and writing. F.M.L.T. helped with data collection, analysis, and manuscript revision. J.A.V. supervised the study, guided the methodology, and reviewed the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors utilized ChatGPT to enhance the clarity, coherence, and structure of the language used in this manuscript. Additionally, ChatGPT was used to generate visual representations of the data in the form of graphics. All content generated or refined with the assistance of these tools was thoroughly reviewed and revised by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final publication.

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