Evaluating the Communication Approaches of Political Campaigns Online of Female UST-SHS Students: How Electoral Disinformation and Online Attacks Influence Feminist Discourse Using Facebook

Jun Carlo Duldulao
University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines
joduldulao@ust.edu.ph

Maurice John Ramos
University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines
meramos@ust.edu.ph

Rosie Jane Mosquera
University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines
rsmosquera@ust.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

One of the implications of social media is its ability to provide unrealistic goals for politicians aspiring for national positions, causing social media users to rush their decisions of accepting these messages as truth and disregard other reliable sources of information. This study aims to explore how participation and communication plays an important role in effectively discerning qualified candidates, accessing political risks, conducting negotiations to reduce conflicts, and mediating opposing views of the situation. Young women, particularly first-time voters, are the focus of this study, as communication scholars perceive them as the most vulnerable members of the online community, especially when voicing their opinions on social media. Women aged 18 and 19 years old from HUMSS Strand in University of Santo Tomas Senior High School, Manila participated in a focus group discussion that targeted their experiences in communicating their political views, including their preferred candidates and their perception of disinformation online. Through the frameworks of sense-making, findings and results were analyzed to show negative comments regarding politicians and opinion-makers promoting disinformation and how young female learners can improve their communication approaches to people with diverse online culture.

Keywords: *social media, participation, disinformation, young women, first-time voters*

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic made social distancing a norm across the country, much of civic life – from political campaigning to voter registration drives – has shifted to virtual environments. This renewed emphasis on online space could increase engagements with young people, both through outreach from political parties, and campaigns and through youth-led media creation. Already, youth is hearing about elections more on social media than directly from campaigns, so this shift toward online engagement may better reach young voters, especially the new and first-time voters whom campaigns might not otherwise contact.

While online political engagements have been popular in developing countries, many of these political discussions hardly examine the needs of young women. Many literatures stress that young women must partake in political exercise for several reasons: the persistence of a culture of resistance regarding themselves as experts in political discussions (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006), young women are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based harassment online (Taft, 2010) and avoiding any confrontation from their peers (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004).

Although new media and political communication is not new, it must be admitted that facilitating such an approach is not an easy task. It is a challenge for communication scholars to promote political engagements online that are safe, secure, and empowering for people to make informed choices or decisions. Many communication studies have been conducted regarding the political communication approaches since its inception in the 1920s. Moreover, politics and communication have evolved through the years: from one-way, vertical approaches to two-way, horizontal approaches (Scanlon, 2006). Recent studies that communication approaches in political engagements emphasize collaboration and participation. Communication continues to be an essential tool in promoting effective political campaigns.

In this study, the researchers identified the role of young women in political engagements, specifically the first-time voters from the UST-SHS. The researchers also identified the role of women during the 2022 national election campaigns from the HUMSS strand. The students from the said strand are evaluated using the communication perspectives. In particular, this study will answer the following questions:
:
1) How are communication approaches on political engagements are used and understood by young women?
2) How can disinformation targeting young women undermine their participation in political discussion online?
3) How can Facebook users improve its community engagements with young women particularly with politics?

What is Information Disorder?

The sad reality is that we are living in the Age of Information Disorder. The guarantee and ideals of hyper-connected virtual communities of real-time access and rapid transfer of information are now dangerously tainted with compelling false and deceptive content. Fake news, a simple and generic umbrella term, is normally used to cover all sorts of malicious content ranging from propaganda, lies, hoaxes, rumors, and unfounded claims. However, because of the coordinated and intentional misuse of different media platforms and the complexities of the information ecosystem nowadays, 'fake news' may not cover all deceptive content anymore as some of the things we read online are not even fake and are genuine but are weaponized to propagate deception and mislead people.

The digitized world has become a breeding ground for trolls, clickbait, hashtags, and sham accounts among others to vilify netizen's perceptions. While some can do fact-checking and self-surveillance, many, knowingly or unknowingly, still fall prey to a condition called Information Disorder Syndrome. Kandel (2020) defined Information Disorder Syndrome as the sharing or developing of false information with or without the intent of harming; he further categorized

the severity of the syndrome into three grades: Grade 1 is the mildest where one shares false information with no intent of hurting others. Grade 2 is moderate where an individual shares false information with the intent of gaining money and power, but no intent of harming people. Grade 3 is the most severe form where one shares false information with the intent of harming others.

Months leading to the upcoming 2022 National Elections is the perfect storm that expose the deep-seated problem of Information Disorder in the country with the proliferation of partisan social media content ranging from memes to manipulated videos. In a report by advertising firms We Are Social and Hootsuite in 2021, the Philippines ranks 1st in the world for social media consumption, spending an average of 4 hours and 15 minutes each day. In another report by Global Social Media Use Ranking, as of January 2021, the Philippines ranked 6th, 10th, 11th, and 18th on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, respectively. These reports affirm our country's active online landscape, making it an ideal fertile ground for agents of disinformation.

Media and Political Polarization in the Philippines

Despite the country's archipelagic geography, diverse religious and ethnic lineage, and multi-political party set-up, one is generically called "dilawan", a seemingly derogatory remark linked with supporters of the Liberal Party or a "DDS" (Diehard Duterte Supporters) who are staunch followers of the current administration, with red as its party color. Additionally, the 2020 National election has paved the way for the emergence of new political terms "Pinklawan", a pun for VP Leni Robredo's political color Pink and her Liberal Party association, and "Uniteam" for loyalists of the coalition of Marcoses and Dutertes.

The political derby between these opposing political forces is further amplified by social media as a tool for propagating hyper-targeted dark political ads. As evident in campaigns in 2016 and 2019, social media, without editorial filtering and rigorous fact-checking, has been an avenue for fake news for all the electorate to see, and worst, share in real-time. The presence of troll farms, imposter websites, and paid social media influencers has created a culture of discord among netizens by magnifying candidates' missteps, overconcentration of one's biases, and endless ad hominem. These narratives and counter-narratives can throw decency out of the window and have resulted in family divides and unfriending and blocking friends. What has become evident is that we are living in an era of social media elections where polarized voters pin their votes and our country's future based on what they see and hear online.

Literature Review

The Spectrum of Political Disinformation

Ideally, social media is a tool that democratizes the electoral process; it levels the playing field for candidates who do not have enough campaign machinery and political backing. Social media has become an influential platform for highlighting political advocacies widely and freely. While social media has become a lifeline of information for political discourse, it has likewise become a hotbed for a wide array of misinformation and disinformation. The prevalence of memes and

troll accounts to manipulate trending topics and partisan pages to discredit legitimate news has polarized the electorate.

There are three kinds of information disorders, namely: a) Disinformation which is purposefully false and framed to cause harm, b) Misinformation which is untruthful content, with the person sharing it not realizing that it is deceptive and/or damaging, and c) Malinformation which are truth information that is shared and could cause harm. In his study, Wardle (2017) specified the complexity of the mis-, dis-, and mal-information spectrum weaponized to bypass truth and genuine content during the election:

- Satire and parody-no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool
- Misleading content-misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual
- Imposter content-when genuine sources are impersonated
- Fabricated Content-new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm
- False Connection-when headlines, visuals, and/or captions do not support content
- False Context-when genuine content is shared with false contextual information
- Manipulated Content - when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive

Given the crucial role of social media in the outcome of elections, the prevalence of the online disinformation ecosystem, ranging from propaganda pages, manipulated videos, clickbait to fake news peddler, endangers the democratic process as people are deprived of truth about their candidates. As truth decay thrives in the digital world, efforts to counter information disorder are of the essence.

Philippines as "Patient Zero"

Katie Harbath, Facebook's public policy director for global elections, in her 2018 speech famously named the Philippines as "patient zero" which highlights how entrenched social media is in the conduct of Philippine elections. The tide of fake and manipulated news has become endemic as the weaponization of the digital sphere is becoming more evasive (Pastor, 2022).

In 2017, a University of Oxford study titled "Troops, trolls, and troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation" examined how political parties in 28 countries used cyber troops in disseminating propaganda to shape public opinion. The study found that there is a systemic social media operation in the Philippines with Duterte's team hiring 400-500 cyber trolls to advance pro-government sentiments and target non-conformists through direct cyber harassment. Additionally, the government spent significant funding of around P10 million in employing trolls to generate content and engage social media users.

The current pandemic and existing government lockdowns make it hard to conduct in-person campaigning, hence social media has become an underground campaign platform where troll armies are mobilized to target the most vulnerable portion of the electorate. The organized creation of fake news to deliberately alter the electoral process dominates the digital sphere. The uptick of perpetuating hate comments and myths, memes, inorganic hashtags, and spliced videos among other months leading to the election only amplify the circumvention of facts and potentially tip the scale in any candidate's favor. Where stakes are high, as alarmingly as it sounds, it takes one viral content to decide the country's future.

Fake News Peddling as an Industry

The problem with political trolling in the Philippines is that it is systemic and hierarchical. The arm of disinformation and misinformation has been professionalized as politicians hire Public Relations and Advertising firms to architect politicians' brand and image. On the forefront of the organization are digital workers with one person owning dozens of Facebook and Twitter accounts to create illusions of organic engagement. These account holders and influencers seed one-sided partisan narratives to generate likes, shares, and views which in most cases serve as a basis for their compensation. Additionally, the recruitment of influencers for wider reach and community-level fake news peddlers lit flames of political dissension amplifying discord and division.

While netizens are used to seeing individual troll accounts, the brains behind the operation hide in plain sight in an open secret and often unregulated industry of digital political campaigning. Ong and Cabanes' (2018) report titled "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines" dug deep into how politicians recruit firms to architect disinformation to hijack mainstream media, manipulate and debase political discourse, and influence political outcomes. The report highlighted these seven key findings:

1. The use of fake accounts and paid influencers on Facebook and Twitter for political operations is widespread.
2. Politicians often employ campaign strategists from local 'boutique' advertising and PR agencies as chief architects of networked disinformation campaigns.
3. Ad and PR strategists rely heavily on "digital influencers" with 50,000 to 2 million Facebook or Twitter followers, as well as "community-level fake account operators."
4. Disinformation workers are financially, politically, socially, and psychologically driven in different ways.
5. Operating fake accounts for politicians works on always-on, flexible, and (self-) exploitative working arrangements as other online freelance workers.
6. Networked disinformation campaigns operate in two opposing dynamics: controlled interactivity which aims for collective participation and cooperation among disinformation workers who are informed by a common script; the other hand, volatile virality relies on these workers' insight and creativity in translating a script into social media post to achieve maximum, if uncontrolled, spreadability across decentralized network of communicative exchange.
7. While nobody admits to being a troll, everyone in the disinformation hierarchy seems to be engaged in various degrees of trolling.

A report titled "Politics and Profit in the Fake News Factory" published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in 2017 highlighted the existence of "disinformation actors for hire" entangled in an already problematic and complex digital disinformation industry. The proponents of the report, Ong and Cabañes, delineated the roles of these freelance actors in

propagating the information disorder epidemic in the Philippines:

- Search Engine Optimization Specialists-one in charge of managing the reputation of their clients and/or tarnish the reputation of their rivals. They are likewise in charge of upvoting their client's positive news and downvoting their client's negative news.
- Hackers/ DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) Attackers-one in charge of shutting down social media accounts of political rivals and media agencies.
- Digital Influencer Agencies- lend 'authenticity' to political messages, having cultivated intimate relationships with their fans and followers.
- Corrupt Journalists For Hire- provide credibility and media mileage to online disinformation campaigns as it is covered by mainstream news agencies.

Combatting Disinformation, Misinformation, and Malinformation

In image-based Philippine politics and a digital-savvy electorate, the propagation of digital political trolling endangers the toehold of the democratic process, hence the urgent call for initiatives to counter the problem of digital disinformation. While there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to combat truth decay, having more informed voters can help maintain some decency and integrity in our country's heavily precarious functioning democracy.

The challenge to combat truth decay is no easy task; the massive volume, the reach and accessibility, and the fast-changing landscape of online information are some of the many factors to refute dubious claims and unverified reports. While the task seems insurmountable, varied sectors have initiated countermeasures to debunk lies and propaganda. Collaborative efforts such as Tsek.ph composed of academic institutions, media organizations, and civil society groups, and other important undertakings such as Rappler's Moveph fact-checking webinars. In a 2021 study by Boses, Opinyon, Siyasat, at Siyensya para sa Pilipinas (Boses Pilipinas) spearheaded by Ateneo School of Governance (ASOG), data revealed that a little over half of youth respondents can spot fake news. Interestingly, 52.5 percent of the respondents only got six to eight correct answers to a 10-item fake news quiz. This means that there is a mismatch between the perceived ability to spot fake news to the actual performance of identifying fake news. The result only heightens the call for inter-sectoral efforts to counter dis-and mis- information through personal self-regulation, media, civic organizations, and academic institution voter's education initiatives. It takes a collective effort to combat fake news amidst a highly polarizing and crucial 2022 election (Khan & Chua, 2023).

Women's Vulnerability to Electoral Disinformation and Political Attacks

The process of interpersonal communication and group communication in political discussions has always favored social media, particularly Facebook. At present, citizens using social media are involved in the creation and exchange of ideas regarding policies and advocacies of state officials. However, despite the use of social media, the political participation patterns of young men and women differ significantly. Much literature related to political participation suggests that youth and gender inequalities persist particularly among young women (Taft, 2010). Factors and problems associated with the women's lack of participation online include

their culture of resistance regarding themselves as experts in political discussions (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006) and avoiding any confrontation from their peers (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004).

Young women often face multiple discrimination online, which in the end diminishes their motivation and opportunities for active engagement and participation in political discussions. Many qualitative studies showed that girls socialized nicely, and politely and tried not to hurt the feelings of others (Grasso & Smith, 2022). Ford and Wajcman (2017) stressed that the traits young women exhibit online posts as a major problem as this perpetuates the cycle of stereotyping, discrimination, and social exclusion from discussions related to politics. Nadim and Fladmoe (2021) added that online harassment has also become pervasive as men target "who people are" instead of "what people think" which is more likely to silence its target online.

The results of these studies indicate negative effects on young women which include being more cautious in expressing their opinion publicly (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021), greater opposition from family to participate in online political discussions (Bessant & Grasso, 2019), more likely to unfriend a Facebook friend over political disagreements or harassments (Miller et al., 2015), and post fewer political statuses on Facebook profiles in the future (Pzanfelt & Spies, 2019).

Media Literacy and Political Engagements

Media scholars and educators often assume that media literacy, beyond being a necessary digital-age survival skill, can inspire increased engagement and activity in political and civic lives for young students (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2017). This supports the notion that Media Literacy arms citizens with the necessary skills to critically make decisions in the exercise of their right to suffrage. As the use of digital devices and social media continues to proliferate, media and information literacy is now fundamentally implicated in the practice of citizenship (Hobbs, 2010); this makes civic literacy an essential component of the ecology of Media and Information Literacy. Proponents of media education have long championed its role in participatory democracy (Masterman, 1997).

However, there are still limitations as regards research supporting the correlation between media literacy and improved citizen participation. Some even worry that learning about media can nudge students toward disengagement, cynicism, and apathy (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). According to Ashley et al. (2017), understanding the relationships between media literacy and political engagements is vital for educators, scholars, and policymakers. It is essential to know these blank spaces where media literacy in the broader context of 21st-century education can address enhancing citizen engagement.

In recent years, there has been a rise of scholarly researchers concentrated on news media literacy, particularly on Facebook. Today's young people are living large chunks of their lives online and at the same time consuming a large amount of news on politics and government (Ashley et al., 2017). This study aims to gain knowledge about young women's use of social media, their consumption of political news, and their participation in politics using Facebook.

Materials and Methods

Sense-making Theory

Dervin (1998) discussed the effectiveness of Sense-making theory in confronting social problems concerning the use of information technology. The study of theory begins with the assumption that people using technology tend to create gaps especially when their ideas and beliefs are challenged. The theory states that neglected individuals, which include female students, have most of their activities within the online community valued less when compared to activities made by adults. To develop sense-making, teachers present human interaction as a way for affected students to engage online in intellectual conversations and discussions concerning the complex social problems that surround their subordinate status while using social media. The unique contribution of Sense-making theory is that it facilitates inquiry from the perspectives of the insiders (i.e., students) in the university rather than external categories of professionals and other social media users (Klein & Myers, 1999).

The guiding principles of Sense-making theory are organized into four elements: 1) a situation, 2) a gap, 3) an outcome, and 4) a bridge (Dervin, 1998). Learners narrate specifically the problems that they experienced online to the teachers using a communications technology tool. Second, the students' awareness of their social problems grants authority because it shapes their understanding of the constraints that they face online, thus affecting their decisions. In addition, the narratives provided by the students are derived from the ubiquity of the activities they relate to, including being victimized by opinion makers and less participation in political discussions online. Third, students narrate the consequences or impact of their experiences through a sense-making process where they have the potential to alter their relationships with social media users online depending on the outcome of the narrative. Finally, by allowing critical reflection and raising important questions, the students will attempt to recover from their previous setbacks as well as note the progress of their awareness (Dervin, 1998).

Data Gathering Method

The research used a qualitative approach to carry out the study. FGD questions were formulated using the theoretical framework of Sense-making as a guide. The researchers then pilot-tested these questions with a group of five senior high school students for around 15 minutes; these questions and FGD strategies were subsequently modified following the pilot test.

The researchers carried out non-probability methods of sampling to secure seven (7) first-time voters enrolled in the University of Santo Tomas – Senior High School, aged 18-19, females, and active in political discussions on social media.

The researchers formally invited each participant to the study by sending them personal messages through email with details about the study. Once the participants agreed to participate, they were divided and arranged into three groups relative to the participant's availability. All three researchers moderated and acted as documents for each FGD. The FGD took place using

the UST Zoom and Google Meet platforms.

The researchers asked the participants about their thoughts and opinions regarding the following political discussions:

1. According to Bessant (2010), youth participation in political engagements is more likely to occur using social media, particularly Facebook. Do young women have the same perception as well?
2. How do you conduct consultations regarding political candidates online? Do you provide opinions using the comment section, post photos of your preferred candidates, and participate in online surveys?
3. How do you obtain information online regarding voting literacy? What news organization do you usually watch or listen to?
4. Have you been victimized by false information online? Why did you believe such information?
5. Why are women targeted by disinformation? What do you think is the motivation behind this?
6. What do you think are the real consequences of disinformation on how you participate in online political discussion?
7. According to media studies, young women have a stronger tendency than men to be more cautious in expressing opinions publicly, after having received oppositional stances from men. Do you agree with this?
8. What have you learned from the experience so far regarding political participation on Facebook?
9. Were there any efforts to increase the involvement of young women in political discussions on Facebook? If so, how are they addressed in the online community?
10. Overall, do you think that men need to improve their knowledge on the values of women in the online community, particularly on Facebook? What suggestions do you have for them?
11. In your opinion, do you think that media education has positively influenced you to become more proactive in political and civic engagements? What focus do you think Media and Information Literacy subject should improve in discussing politics and new media?

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the FGD data inductively. Hatch (2002) explained that inductive analysis begins with particular pieces of evidence, putting them together to create a meaningful whole. The inductive analysis works effectively with a post-positivist approach as it answers narrowly defined questions on discussion data. The advantage of inductive analysis includes its ability to unearth meanings from complex data that have been gathered from broad information, providing a systematic approach for processing large quantities of data (Hatch, 2002). In this study, the researcher carried out inductive analysis using the following steps:

Step 1: Read the data and identify frames of analysis.

Step 2: Create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis.
Step 3: Identify salient domains, assign them a code and put others aside
Step 4: Reread data, refining relevant domains and keep a record where relationships are found in the data.
Step 5: Decide if your domains are supported by the data and search data for examples that do not fit with or run counter to the relationships in the domain.
Step 6: Complete an analysis within domains.
Step 7: Search for themes across domains.
Step 8: Create a master outline expressing relationships within and among domains.
Step 9: Select data excerpts to support elements in the outline.

Ethical Considerations

The following are some ethical considerations that were formally agreed upon by the researcher and the female student participants:

1. To give in-depth information concerning the FGD, the researcher presented the consent forms endorsed by the principal's office to every participant involved in the study. If no questions were raised, the participants are then obliged to sign the consent forms.
2. Students were allowed to refuse to answer specific questions they considered private or embarrassing.
3. To protect the identity of the participants, the researcher used pseudonyms in place of their real names in the FGD transcripts. This decision was also based on some respondents' request.
4. After transcription, the recordings and the written notes of the FGDs were all destroyed.
5. As a form of gratitude, the researcher gave certificates of participation and tokens to the participants after the discussion.

Analysis

The Grade 12 HUMSS female students of UST-SHS

To understand how female learners use social media to participate in political discussions, the researchers asked selected female HUMSS students of UST-SHS to share their stories concerning the good and bad circumstances they face on Facebook.

A. Communication Approaches on Political Engagements

Young women see social media, particularly Facebook, as means to communicate their political opinion to a large audience.

The shift to digital communication allows young women to share political opinions through virtual networks. When asked about youth participation in online political engagements, the respondents were unanimous in the view that Facebook is one of the most popular social media

sites among young people. One respondent stressed that internet anonymity encourages young people in cyberspace to be more comfortable in sharing their political beliefs which could be the opposite in face-to-face communication.

> *Jianna: I agree with what they said po that we use Facebook to participate in political engagements because mostly... Facebook is such a big network that we get to reach not only those that we know but more than the friends in our circle po. (Question #1, Youth participation in social media)*

Similar to Hobbs' (2010) findings, the use of digital devices and social media continues to proliferate, and media and information literacy is now fundamentally implicated in the practice of citizenship.

Young women engage in online political discussions often by sharing (or retweeting) posts as well as participating in polls.

In their accounts, the interviewees join online political discussions by reposting Facebook or Twitter messages based on credible sources or sharing other people's political stance that coincides with their own. Some of them argued that though they participated in election polls to publicly declare their preferred candidates, they have not been reached by offsite public opinion polling. One participant even stressed that she had not heard of anyone surveyed by big polling bodies. Interestingly, active engagement in political discourse was observed from the participants, but even more surprising, their critical observation on how some sectors were seemingly excluded from public opinion polls was seen.

> *Camille: I participated din po yung sa mga online survey kahit Twitter polls lang po siya or react react lang sa Facebook kasi personally po I don't see I don't get reached out po by big survey companies. And nagtataka po ako where they get their population. I haven't heard of anyone who got reached out by those survey companies [I also participate in online survey like Twitter polls or react on Facebook polls because personally I don't see, I don't get reached out by big survey companies. I am wondering where they get their population. I haven't heard of anyone who got reached out by those survey companies]. (Question #1, Youth participation in social media)*

The findings are coherent with Ong and Cabanes' (2018) report that the arm of disinformation and misinformation has been professionalized as politicians hire Public Relations and Advertising firms to architect politicians' brand and image. On the forefront of the organization are digital workers with one person owning dozens of Facebook and Twitter accounts to create illusions of organic engagement.

Young women strongly believe that election debates are important in understanding the platforms of political candidates. News organizations, in addition, are a staple source of reliable information.

For the participants, election debates are necessary to better scrutinize the position of

candidates running for public office. As explained by one student, watching political debates provides proper context to the discussion which is not always true with information circulating on social media, accentuating how transcripts are often already summarized. For most of the participants, while information can be taken on social media, it should be read from news media sites. News organizations that were credible sources of news were Rappler, ABS-CBN, Philippine Daily Inquirer, CNN, and Philippine Star as well as government internet sites like COMELEC's Vote Pilipinas website.

> *Jessica: I also watch debates po... Most of the debates of the presidential candidates I've watched. And it really helps a lot to know the candidates and what they stand for. And it helps clarify a lot of things po. Rather than just checking some posts that kind of live post these debates. I think it's more important to watch it yourself po kasi [because] it gives a lot of contexts that the entire transcript cannot be placed on social media, and they usually summarized points. (Question #2, Youth participation in social media)*

Similar to Khan and Chua's (2023) findings, looking for actual news media sites for viable news such as Tsek.ph and Move.ph would help the learners identify the actual news from fake news. Access to verified news is crucial to make better judgements about diverse political messages spread on social media.

B. Online Disinformation Targeting Young Women

Young women become victims of disinformation because of the inadequate information sources and basic fact-checking skills.

Inadequate information sources and basic fact-checking skills are some reasons cited by the participants that made them fall for false narratives and outright lies. One of them explained that she became a victim of online disinformation because her political sources are very limited to people whose political opinions are consistent with her own beliefs. Another participant stressed that the lack of fact-check methods and poor digital literacy skills should account for the widespread disinformation in the past and even at present times where people already have the means to fact-check information using search engine tools. People are easily persuaded by disinformation often when it is controversial or when it forces people to deal with the situation urgently, like the possibility of a volcano eruption.

> *Camille: I think I believe this po as an elementary student the political sources that I have is very limited, and it's confirmation bias din [too] on my part kasi because this is the source that confirms what I stand, what I believe, what I stand for, so I immediately believe the source po.*

> *Serena: So aside from the youth today, most of the people, who are usually older, don't really fact-check their information po. And it's usually before, it's usually more on urgency yung pag spread po ng information [when they spread*

information] especially if people are spreading something that is controversial.
(Question #4, Political disinformation)

The findings are coherent with Mitchell et al. (2015) stressing that citizen participation remains limited due to lack of skills on online engagements. Some are concerned that learning about media can actually persuade learners toward disengagement, lack of interest and skepticism.

Young women are victims of online attacks through misogynistic, sexist, and discriminatory remarks.

The participants on the whole agree that women are targeted by disinformation because, as one student straightforwardly put it, they are women. The misogynistic, sexist, and discriminatory remarks against young women stem from a patriarchal Philippines that sees women as the weaker sex. As argued by the participants, women's political views are often rejected because they are seen as emotional, easy to fool or manipulate, gossip or rumor-mongers incapable of engaging in political discourse. Another emphasized the expectations set by society on how women are expected to behave, be polite, and perfect. They are not expected to show a strong character or to be open about their political views which to the perception of one participant is regarded by many as the opposite of a quiet, poised image of a Filipino woman.

> *Jianna: I think that women are targeted by disinformation particularly, well, because they're women po. And our society even in the Philippines has a long history of misogyny because of the establishment of the patriarchy which goes on until today.*

> *Apple: I think that young women po are targeted because some people think that they are easy to fool po.*

> *Jessica: Because some think that they are better than young women.*
> *(Question #5, Political disinformation)*

Similar to the findings of Nadim and Fladmoe (2021), online harassment against young women have become pervasive as men target "who they are" instead of "what women think" which is more likely to silence its target online.

C. The Role of Facebook in Combatting Disinformation

Young women see the role Facebook as crucial in fostering an online community that involves women in political discourses.

All participants agree that it is necessary for social media sites, particularly Facebook to open opportunities for empowered leaders to be heard. As one participant argued, having that

representation drives young women to engage in politics and voice their opinions. Young women become less afraid of saying things in public knowing that like them they see empowered adults who are standing for something right, something that can help them and marginalized members of society. This call heightened the need for Facebook to protect women from online attacks or disinformation from trolls and other fake news purveyors.

> *Serena: I think the factor kung bakit marami pong young women ang mas vocal nowadays is that mas madami na rin pong female leaders na empowered kasi pagnakikita po namin na may babaeng leader na outspoken hindi na rin kami takot na ibigay opinions naming [I think the factor why young women are more vocal nowadays is that there are more empowered female leaders because when we see a female leader who is outspoken, we are no longer afraid to give our opinions]. (Question #10, Consciousness raising for female learners)*

Similar to the study of Khan and Chua (2023), informed voters including female learners made initiatives to counter the problem of digital disinformation. While there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to combat truth decay, better-informed voters can help retain some semblance of decency and integrity in online political discourses.

D. Media and Information Literacy and Political Engagements

Female learners believe that the Media and Information Literacy subject has properly equipped them with expertise in information and media messaging.

The female learners shared the same belief that the subject of Media and Information Literacy helped them engage in politics on social media, especially on Facebook. Learners also stressed that it helped them not only to discern the information conveyed to them but also to spread proper information knowing that they are educated.

> *Apple: Personally, I am thankful… given the privilege to receive media education… I said earlier na I was once victimized by disinformation… thankfully because of media education, I was enlightened and my perspectives changed po regarding my engagements in the political field.*
>
> *Jessica: For me personally po, media education has influenced me and without social media and media education po, I would not be engaging in politics on social media… when you have a platform being able to spread proper information knowing that you are educated.*
>
> *Fiona: For me in particular, media literacy subject has equipped me with information and expertise on media messaging. Mas alam ko na po kung ano ba yung goal video na eto, ng ads na eto sa Facebook.*
>
> *(Question #11, Consciousness raising for female learners)*

Ashley et al. (2017) stressed that media scholars and educators often assume that media literacy encourages civic engagements among young students. Masterman (1997) also claimed that supporters of media education have long advocated the role of media literacy in participatory democracy.

Female learners believe that the subject could still be improved in terms of discussing political participation in social media.

Learners stressed that while the MIL subject benefitted them in terms of political engagements online, they believe that it still needs to improve, especially in discussing sensitive and controversial topics related to politics and governance.

> *Jessica: For Media and Information Literacy subject I think what should be improved on especially in discussing politics... I think I would like to see more controversial topics in Philippine society po. I think it's a high time to discuss conservative takes that have been influenced by our colonizers for the longest time... like how we discriminate each other, unrealistic beauty standards. All of that po.*

> *Artesia: As for new topics sa MIL, I think it's important po for us to know how troll farms work and the growing machinery of discrimination and how we should combat it kasi. We shouldn't be left in the dark how the system works.*
> *(Question #11, Consciousness raising for female learners)*

Similar to Mitchell et al. (2015) findings, research between media literacy and citizen participation still needs improvement. For Ashley, Maksl and Craft (2017), media educators, scholars and policy makers must work together in order to enhance the MIL subject on topics relating to political discussions as well as improve the citizen engagement of female learners.

Discussion

A. Summary

After completing the primary requirements, the researchers began conducting the data-gathering process. Using purposive sampling, the researchers together with the HUMSS Strand Chair gathered a small number of female learners with similar backgrounds in using social media to discuss specific topics on political engagements. The participants were asked to sign consent and agreement forms to ensure the learners' availability. The study was conducted using the Zoom account of one of the researchers with seven (7) participants. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 19 years old, the minimum age required to vote. Two researchers took turns in facilitating the questions while the third acted as an observer. The FGD was carried out with the participants concerning their involvement in political participation and engagements in social media while observing their behavior patterns in answering the questions. The FGD lasted for one (1) hour and the session was documented using the Zoom recorder. This ensured a proper documentation process. After the FGDs were transcribed, the files were completely deleted. The

gathered data were then inductively analyzed using Sense-making theory.

B. Conclusion

The Political Engagements and Communication Approaches of HUMSS Female Learners from UST-SHS on Facebook

The female students of UST-SHS, particularly from the HUMSS Strand, believe that social media such as Facebook allows them to communicate their opinions to a large audience. They also shared that one great advantage of using cyberspace is that it offers internet anonymity which provides them with more comfort in sharing their political beliefs which is the opposite of face-to-face communication. However, with this year's coming election, female learners believe that disinformation and misinformation have been professionalized by politicians as they hire Public Relations firms to form their brand and image. To illustrate, some of them participated in election polls to publicly declare their preferred candidates, but they have not been reached by offsite public opinion polling. One participant even stressed that she had not heard of anyone surveyed by big polling bodies. Female learners also believed that the lack of reliable sources of information and basic fact-checking skills online are some reasons why they fall victim to outright lies and false narratives. One of the participants stated that she became a victim of online disinformation because her political sources are very limited to people whose political opinions are consistent with her own beliefs. Another participant stressed that the lack of fact-check methods and poor digital literacy skills should account for the widespread disinformation in the past and even at present times where people already have the means to fact-check information using search engine tools. Finally, every female learner agreed that women's political views are often rejected because they are seen as emotional, easy to fool or manipulate, gossip or rumor-mongers incapable of engaging in a political discourse.

Improving the Political Discourse Online Using Better Communication Approaches

During the latter part of the focus group discussions, female learners gave several proposals for improving political discourses and discussions online. Learners stressed that it is necessary for social media sites, particularly Facebook to open opportunities for empowered leaders to be heard. As one participant argued, having that representation drives young women to engage in politics and voice their opinions. Additionally, young women become less afraid of saying things in public knowing that like them they see empowered adults who are standing for something right, something that can help them and marginalized members of society.

While young learners agreed that learning the MIL subject benefitted them in terms of political engagements online, they believe that the subject could still be improved especially in discussing pressing and sensitive topics such as how troll farms work and the growing machinery of discrimination. In addition, learners proposed that they should learn to combat these bad elements in the media so they do not be left in the dark about how the system works.

C. Implications

This study offers two key implications for mitigating the effects of gender discrimination and future research on feminist discourse:

First, teachers and facilitators at school must recognize how important the subject of Media and Information Literacy is to learners. Providing the necessary competencies to learners regarding online community engagements will enable them to spread information properly as well as respond to various community members with varying opinions and statements regarding politics and governance. Regardless of what particular interventions are needed for their learners, teachers should always learn to emphasize the importance of proper communication online through dialogues and collaboration to achieve the intended results.

Second, in terms of future research, the focus group discussion questions and methods used in this study can also be used by researchers to evaluate other political participations and engagements in other schools that offer secondary education, particularly the senior high level. More importantly, the methods of this study can be used to formulate and propose different participatory approaches for female learners when discussing politics online.

D. Recommendations

This research proposes the following recommendations for future research concerning female learners aspiring for clean and impartial political discussions on social media particularly on Facebook:

1. Research on communication approaches on how online community members should conduct proper political discourses with young voters, specifically female learners. Social media users should identify effective communication methods which include creating a safe online environment where all people are welcomed, valued, and respected – regardless of differences. The members of the online community must learn to observe netiquette at all times.
2. More research on the roles of media educators, scholars, and policymakers on how they could enhance the curriculum of MIL, especially in discussing political communication with students. During the discussions, female learners were concerned about the lack of fact-checking skills whenever they encounter different sources of information online thus making them vulnerable to false narratives and outright lies.
3. A more in-depth discussion on the use of available media on Facebook. For learners to better scrutinize the position of the candidates running for public office, MIL educators should promote to students exploring possible media tools on social media such as watching videos, reading the accomplishments through infographics, and listening to the podcasts offered by these aspiring politicians. Using every media available provides proper contexts for the discussion circulating on social media, helping the students discern more of whom to vote for in the coming elections.
4. A more in-depth discussion with the participants concerning how female learners try to change their circumstances despite their problems in using social media for political discourse. The researchers found that students have a lot to say about their resilience against fake news and online attacks. Perhaps a deeper discussion on the resilience of

women could help facilitate the researchers' knowledge of female learners' ability to cope up with marginalization and power relations in the online community.

The researcher found the importance of studying political discourse online using Development Communication and Media and Information Literacy due to the profound effects that they have on female learners involved. It is important to make further developments in women's participation in political discourses and electoral disinformation because the way female learners view themselves and their online community is integral to their social development. This research would greatly benefit the field of communication and MIL because of the insights it provides concerning politics and misinformation which can be the basis for future work on empowering female students in online communities.

References

Ashley, S., Adam M., & Craft, S. (2017). News media literacy and political engagement: What's the connection. *Journal of Media Literacy Education. 9(1), 79-98.*

Bessant, J. & Grasso M.T. (2019). Security and the liberal-democratic state: Criminalizing young people's politics. *Revista International de Sociología 77(4), 140.*

Dervin, B. (1998). Sense-making theory and practice: An overview of user interests in knowledge seeking and use. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 2(2). 36-46.*

Ford, H. & Watchman, J. (2017). Anyone can edit, not everyone does: Wikipedia's infrastructure and the gender gap. *Social Studies of Science 47(1). 1-19. DOI: 10.1177/0306312717692172*

Grasso, M. & Smith, K. (2022). Gender inequalities in political participation and political engagement among young people in Europe: Are young women less politically engaged than young men? *Politics, 42(1), 39-57.* DOI: 10.1177/02633957211028813

Hargittai, E. & Shafer, S. (2006). Differences in actual and perceived online skills: The role of gender. *Social Science Quarterly, 87(1), 432-448.*

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings.* New York City, NY: State University of New York Press.

Hobbs, R. (2010). *Digital and media literacy: A plan of action.* Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute.

Hooghe, M. & Stoole, D. (2004). Good girls go to the polling booth, bad boys go everywhere: Gender differences in anticipated participation among american fourteen year olds. *Women and Politics, 26(3), 1-23.*

Kandel N. (2020). Information disorder syndrome and its management. J*ournal of the Nepal Medical Association, 58(224), 280–285.* https://doi.org/10.31729/jnma.4968

Khan, R.E., & Chua, Y.T. (2023). *Countering disinformation tools and initiatives in the Philippines.* Denmark: International Media Support.

Klein, H.K., & Myers, M.D. (Mar 1999). A set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretative field studies in information systems. *MIL Quarterly (Special Issue), 23(1), 67-97.* http://www.qualauckland.ac.zn/klein-myers.pdf

Lacsamana, B. H. (2021, July 21). *University-based Research to Combat Election Disinformation. Business World Online,* The Nation. https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2021/07/01/379506/university-based-research-unit-to-combat-election-disinformation/

McCargo, D. (2022). Philippine Elections 2022: Why Leni's Fifteen Million Votes Were Not Enough. *Contemporary Southeast Asia.* 44(3), 357-420. DOI: 10.1355/cs44-3a.

Mahtani, S. & Cabato, R. (2019, July 26). Why crafty internet trolls in the philippines may be coming to a website near you. *Washington Post, Asia and Pacific.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html

Masterman, L. (1997). *A rationale for media education*. In media literacy in the information age, edited by Robert Kubey, 15-68. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Miller, P.R., Bobkowski, P.S., Maliniak, D. & Rapoport, R.B. (2015). Talking politics on facebook: Network centrality and political discussion practices in social media. *Political Research Quarterly, 68(2),* 377-391.

Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., & Matsa K. (2015). *Facebook top source for political news among millennials*. Pew Research Center. Accessed June 18, 2015. http://www.journalism.org/2015/06/01/facebooktop-source-for-political-news-among-millennials/

Nadim, M. & Fladmoe, A. (2021). Silencing women? Gender and online harrassment. *Social Science Computer Review. 39(2), 245-258. Oslo, Norway.* DOI: 10.1177/0894439319865518

Ong, J. C. & Cabañes, J.V. (2018) *Architects of networked disinformation: Behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake bews production in the Philippines*. Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines. 74. https://doi.org/10.7275/2cq4-5396

Pastor, P. (2022, June 19). Philippines, patient zero in fake news epidemic, can learn from Finland. *Inquirer. net.* https://globalnation.inquirer.net/204626/ph-patient-zero-in-fake-news-epidemic-can-learn-from-finland

Pzanfelt, H. & Spies D.C. (2019). The gender gap in political participation: Evidence from germany. *Political Research Quality. 72(1), 34-48.*

Rappler. (2018, June 24). F*acebook's Katie Harbath on Protecting Election Integrity.* Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ1wcpsOtS4&ab_channel=Rappler

Research Guides: Fake news, Misinformation & disinformation: Types of misinformation & disinformation. (n.d.). https://shawneesu.libguides.com/c.php?g=651556&p=4570051&fbclid=lwAR3TRAUr12z MlGttXAl8kx_a0WrDY5eZap7CLzIczuZEIf4bCbYXeshgZ00

Scanlon, E. (2006). Collaboration and problem solving in science using information technology. B*ritish Journal of Education Technology, 26(3), 227-228. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8535.1995.tb00348.*

Taft, J. (2010). *Rebel girls: Youth activism and social change across the americas.* New York, NY: University Press.

Wardle C, Derakshan H. (2017, February). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making [Internet] 109.* Strasbourg (FR): Council of Europe. https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-inter-disciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html#