The Impact of Protest Art in the Philippine Social Media Landscape during the COVID-19 Lockdowns of 2020: A Study on the Responses of Artists and Audiences

Jihan Marie Claire G. Ferrer

The year 2020 marked the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses of the Philippine government towards the struggles of the citizens. While many Filipino Twitter users aired out their concerns through social media text posts, a specific community in Twitter known as #ArtPH chose to create artworks as a response to these current events. These artworks gained popularity through likes and comments. Using the Reader Response Theory, this research project investigates their influence towards the public online audience. While Rosenblatt (1995) defined the theory towards the interpretation of texts, the theory was also related to visual media as the reader would have an individual response based on their demographic and culture. The study analyzes ten popular posts that provided commentary to the news events in 2020, gathering the responses of the audience through comments and public quote retweets. Content analysis is used to determine the common themes and emotions of the audiences' reactions.

Keywords: *Social Media Activism, Activist Art, Social Media Posts*

Social media are powerful tools for spreading information that has led to the easier organization of activist movements. Online activism has taken up many forms, from the use of symbols, or visual representation, to integrating more complex statements in their posts. Social media mainly facilitate activism in three ways: allowing individuals to express themselves, allowing members to organize and challenge negative input on the movement, and negotiating shared realities (Greijdanus, Hedy, et al 51). These may be done through the use of hashtags–labels that signify the relation of the content to a certain topic–attached to posts, the use of audio-visual content, or images, in order to bring forth discussion on certain topics, possibly engaging others to join the movement. One method of pushing for discourse is the posting of artworks on social media, carrying a message related to what the artist advocates for.

In order to understand the phenomenon of social media protest art, it is important to analyze the elements of protest art, investigate the aspects of social media activism, and understand how these two elements can converge toward spreading a message further.

Protest Art and Its Purpose

Art is recognized for having the potential to advocate for social change, with many artists in the Asia-Pacific region creating artworks related to the social issues that they are experiencing, such as: colonialism, poverty, cultural loss, and injustice (Turner 3). It is acknowledged that there is no specific formula in determining the success of activist art as it is classified as an art, not a science. In this regard, it is noted that the success of the message of activist art depends on the aims of the original artist (S. Duncombe 127).

The involvement of art in the discussion of protest is also acknowledged. In findings made by Sanz and Rodriguez-Labajos, after analyzing the impact of art towards the anti-coal movement in Oakland through various protest movements, it is revealed that education is greatly connected to art protest movements, where such artworks engage the audience, and manage to organize the community and promote participation. Their findings involve art playing a role in the organization of activist groups, as well as adding a layer of inclusivity into the social movement sphere. This is attributed to the aesthetics of the artworks, combined with

their meanings towards the social movement. While there were no direct findings with how art managed to cause any material changes to the protest, it is observed that art has contributed to the increase of participation in activism. Thus, all findings result in the success of the protest (49-52).

In the discussion of activist artwork, S. Duncombe identifies the aims of activist artists: [1] Foster Dialogue, [2] Build Community, [3] Make a Place, [4] Invite Participation, [5] Transform environment and experience, [6] Reveal Reality, [7] Alter Perception, [8] Create Disruption, [9] Inspire Dreaming, [10] Provide Utility, [11] Political Expression, [12] Encourage Experimentation, [13] Maintain Hegemony, and [14] Make nothing happen. These aims focus on creating a space to speak up about social issues, to disrupt reality, and to "make nothing happen." Duncombe explains this as a counter to the main issue of the contemporary world, which is to produce items that are required to function (120-125).

Dumcombe does not leave out the possibility of bad activist art; it is important to take into consideration the aesthetics and political content of the artwork. If the artist fails to create an artwork that attracts and challenges the minds of viewers, then the artwork will not move people, and will be considered as useless.

Social Media and the Spread of Activist Messages

In relation to the scene of politics, C. Duncombe states that tweets have a correlation with politics and emotion. Tweets can employ a certain emotion to be passed around, allowing people to share a certain emotion that is in relation to the emotions that is presented. This phenomenon is connected with empathy, a concept in neuroscience which discusses how people create images based on texts they read or situations they hear about (410-413). Through this, the paper indicates that Twitter, a social network focused on the creation of short posts, can display registers which can shape discourse: representation and provocation. Such reactions either lead to people using this to their advantage in creating a movement, encouraging others to feel similar emotions, or to provoke emotion for the sake of disrupting conversation, such as online trolls.

Retweetability of tweets, or the act of resharing tweets either with or without a comment input from the user, can also be considered as a metric of popularity within tweets. "One way to connect with other Twitter users, and the main way that a message can spread beyond a user's usual audience and even 'go viral" (Potts et al. 72). While retweets are considered as a positive action in achieving the goals of activists in terms of spreading the message, mobilization and participation in movements among retweeters are not guaranteed, especially since there is no proper link to determine this.

It is also identified that hashtags are utilized to help propel discourse. According to Lee, tags are characterized as the following: [1] Tags are user-generated writing, [2] Tags are meaning-making resources, and [3] Tags and Conversational. Common themes are also identified: [1] Tags as carriers of attitudes and emotions, [2] Tagging mediates and is mediated by offline social practice, and [3] Tagging as a multilingual practice (1-3). Yang adds that hashtags are used as a way to help make terms, narratives, and information more accessible due to the easy search function on these, as well as the easy routinization of these and how these can become popular and common to use (16).

Towards an Understanding of Protest Art through Social Media

The research works toward understanding the impact of protest art through the analysis of comments and responses under the post. It seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the common comment themes exhibited by the comments and quote retweets of each post? What are the differences between the responses in the Quote Retweets and the

Comments? What are notable differences between the engagement of content cross posted on different platforms?

This research seeks to approach these questions using the lens of the reader response theory. The theory identifies the significant role of the reader's contribution to the creation of textual meaning. It can be found in New Criticism or brain-based psychological perspectives. While this theory was developed by David Bleich, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt's exegesis on the reader response has been most influential. The transactional theory of reading is given life by Rosenblatt, who draws inspiration from John Dewey's work and abandons the word "interaction" to refer to reading as a "transaction." This theory takes into consideration the diversity of readers, either culturally or historically. The main point of the framework is to recognize the reader's interpretation based on what they know and how they understand the text. If there is no reader to interpret the text, then the text itself would have no meaning.

While the reader response theory relies heavily towards texts and the pedagogy of teaching literature to children, the theory can also be applied to multimodal texts which include the use of images. Sipe analyzed the behavior of children towards picture books, uncovering results that 23% of the analyses were focused on the images of the book. These types of responses of children towards picture books are categorized into the following: analysis of illustrations (analysis); stories related to other stories and media (intertextual); connections to students' own lives (personal); merging of real world and story world (transparent); and usage of books as a springboard for creative play (performative) (ch. 6).

The study focuses on ten popular art posts made on Twitter under the hashtags "#ArtPH," "#PHIndependenceArt2020," and "#JunkTerrorBillNow," which gained popularity during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. The posts are deemed popular if these have over 1,500 likes and 500 retweets. The hashtags of these posts guarantee that the artwork is created by a Filipino, and the content of the artwork is related to significant Philippine events. To protect the identity of the accounts of the artists involved, all artists will be given a pseudonym.

The responses were analyzed using content analysis. The objective of content analysis is "to systematically transform a large amount of text into a highly organized and concise summary of key results" (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz 94). The responses, which consist of both comments and quote retweets, are provided with a theme based on the response, whether they are positive, negative, or neutral. Afterwards, codes are provided for the responses, categories are determined based on the codes, where they would provide a collective reason based on the data.

If the post can be found outside of Twitter, then comparisons are made between the content of the feedback in Twitter and on the other social media platform it is posted in, and another round of content analysis takes place, following the same method. Both data are compared, and this determines the failure or success of the message of the artwork.

Audiences' Responses to Artworks

The artists whom the artworks belonged to are labeled as Artists A to I. Artist I has two artworks, both fit the criteria, while the rest of the artists have one artwork each. These ten artworks are analyzed based on the responses of the audiences which can be found in the comments of the quote retweets. After the posts are analyzed, three categories are determined: Positive, Negative, and Unknown Intention. The Codes under Positive are the following: Artist Centered Content (examples are praising the artist or cheering the artist on), Art centered content (examples are comments praising the art itself with no mention of the artist), Sharing Content (requests for sharing to other social media platforms, or adding information to the conversation), and contributing memes (sending funny images in relation to the message).

For the Negative category, the Codes it consisted of are: Hostile and Correcting. Hostile comments present pure threats to the art or the artist, while Correcting means someone sharing information against the message.

The Unknown Intention category contains the following Codes: Humor (jokes and memes about the content of the art, but not expressing agreement towards the message), Promotion (Promoting one's own account or content), Clarification (Asking questions regarding the situation), and Unclear comment (either consisting of tags with no context, emojis with unclear meanings, inside jokes that cannot be determined by the researcher, or messages with unknown meanings).

It should be noted that due to the Twitter user's ability to restrict their account for public access, the displayed number of comments and quote retweets do not match the total analyzed feedback in this study. This is due to the users' content with private accounts which cannot be accessed publicly through any means. A similar statement can be made regarding deleted comments, which are still counted by the system. These types of comments are identified with a notice regarding this.

Topics in Comments and Retweets

In the analysis of the comments and images, it is important to highlight the posts that received high amounts of comments and quote retweets on Twitter. Two posts fall under this category. First, a post made by Artist A with an animation–or a GIF– that cycles through various police uniforms, highlighting the issues of police brutality in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and in the United States of America. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show graphs of the total number of comments and retweet categories.

Looking closely at the comment codes, it can be seen that quote retweets show a higher percentage of individuals sharing content to others in a positive manner through tagging other people, or adding information as regards the Hong Kong protests. It should also be noted that quote retweets can be seen in a different language, indicating unity in the Police Brutality topic. Meanwhile, all negative reactions for both comments and quote retweets are placed under the Correcting Code. These consist of people defending policemen, stating that it is not good to send this message due to generalization purposes.
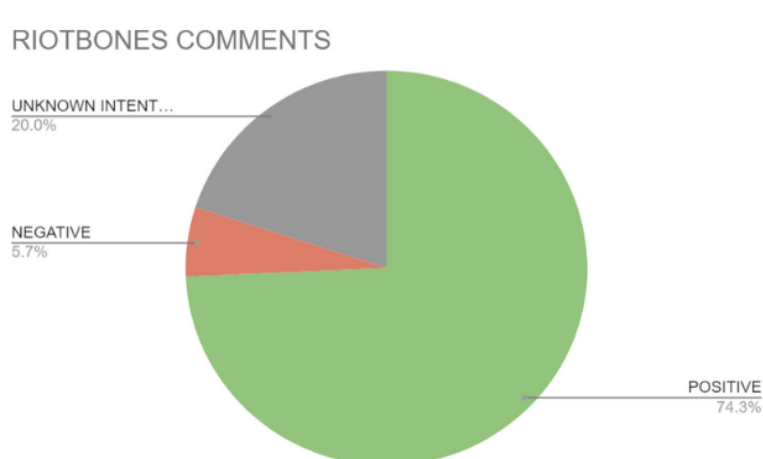

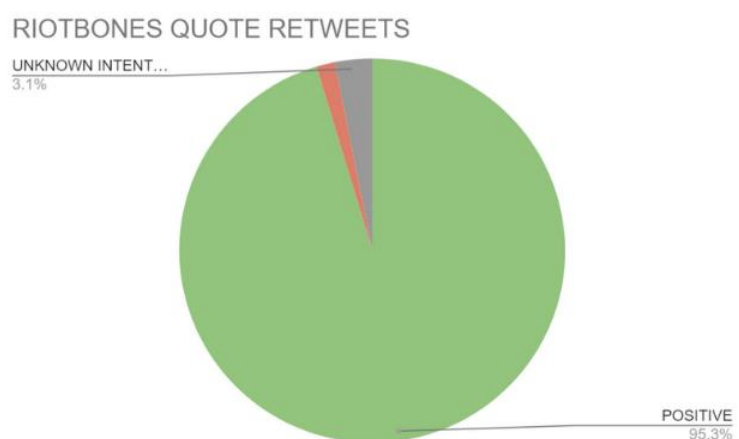**Figure 1.1.** Comment categories in Artist A's artwork

Figure 1.2. Retweet categories in Artist A's artwork

In a similar pattern, one of Artist I's analyzed artwork garnered 50 visible comments and 464 visible quote retweets. As seen in Figure 2.1 and 2.2, both comments and retweets present mostly positive category responses. The three Negative category comments represent hostile statements against the movement, with one indicating the failure of eradicating fascism, and the other sending a personal threat to the artist. The other positive comments and quote retweets focus more on the art content, pointing out the details and references displayed by the artwork.
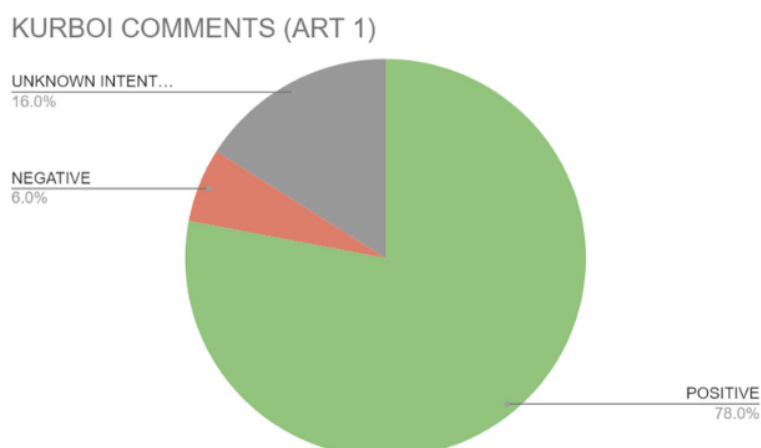

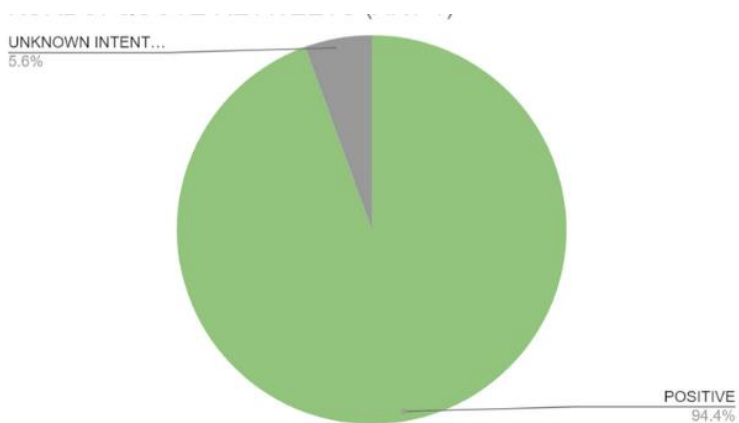**Figure 2.1.** Comment categories in Artist I's artwork

Figure 2.2. Retweet categories in Artist I's artwork

The observations made in both artworks are in line with C. Duncombe's statement regarding sentiments shared through social media, highlighting the positive reactions that come from the majority agreeing with the message. It is also noted that the negative comments show some kind of hostility towards the message of the artwork (410-413).

Similarly, posts with a small number of comments and quote retweets still displayed feedback placed under the Positive category. This reception shows that the majority agrees with the message that is being sent, and shows their support for the artwork. This action has brought together people who have similar perspectives on the topic, thus causing them to provide their support using retweets and comments. The following section looks into the various comment codes in order to further understand the impact of protest artwork.

The Difference between Quote Retweet Codes and Comment Codes

In terms of the content of the comments and quote retweets, patterns on what the topic of the majority discusses vary on the post being analyzed. Out of the ten analyzed artworks, three posts have exhibited differences in the content of Quote Retweet Codes and Comment Codes. Artists A and B have the majority of their comments under the Art-Centered Code, while the majority of their Quote Retweets focuses on Sharing Content. This pattern indicates that while the comments show appreciation for the use of symbols in the artwork, the Quote Retweets use the artwork to enhance the message through the use of text statements. This is connected to Yang's statement (16) on hashtag use in posts. While the hashtags the users indicated in Quote Retweets are similar to those used on the post of the artist, the user successfully tied the sharing of the artwork with their own personal narrative. This action echoes the statement of the artist, and adds some level of engagement with the artwork, the one who retweeted the work, and the audience of the individual who retweeted the work.

On the other hand, six artworks have similar majority in the content of both quote retweets and comments, with two artworks having both majority Quote Retweets and Comments contain the Sharing Content Code (Artist C and Artist F) and four artworks having both majority of Quote Retweets and comments contain the Art Centered Code (Artist G, Artist H, and both of Artist I's analyzed artworks). Excluded from this count is the work of Artist E which has no comments, but all its Quote Retweets are Art Centered. These results do not differ as it shows how the viewers both appreciate the details of the artwork, and use hashtags to add to their narrative.

Based on the data provided, the most prominent codes out of the ten identified Codes are Sharing Content and Art Centered. With feedback on Sharing Content being related to tagging others into viewing the work or placing hashtags to show solidarity with the message, this can be connected to discussion on how engaging protest tweets can spark conversation (Seelig et al 24; Yang 16). Meanwhile feedback that is Art-Centered sparks a conversation among engaging users as they highlight positive aspects about the artwork and how this relates to the political topic at hand (Sanz and Rodríguez-Labajos 49-50). These findings show that the overall impact of protest art to the viewer is how it manages to spark a conversation among users in the online sphere. While the topic of conversation varies, the discussion revolves around the fact that the viewers mostly agree and relate with the message.

Identifying Similarities and Differences in Cross-posted Content

Out of the ten artworks that were presented, only three works have been located in platforms outside of Twitter: both works of Artist I, and Artist E. It is worth mentioning that Artist G stated that he would post this artwork plate on Facebook, but the post cannot be found at the time the research was conducted. It can be assumed that while these works may have previously been uploaded outside of their Twitter platform, artworks may have been deleted or archived and the content cannot be retrieved.

As the platform reach to be examined is on Instagram, a photo and video sharing social media network, analysis is only limited to the comments of the post. While Instagram allows the sharing of posts through its Story feature, this content cannot be traced to how many people shared it in their own Instagram Stories, as well as there being limitations to the viewers of the content. For one, it is mostly only viewed by the followers of the account, and while followers can choose to share the post using the options provided in the app, another issue is how long the content will be up. Instagram Stories are only around for 24 hours before automatically being deleted by the system, further limiting its reach to audiences.

Artist I's first artwork has a total of 336 comments, with 88.89% being positive comments, where the most prominent category is with 75.93% being under the Art-Centered Code. The second artwork has 49 comments, where 96.08% are under Positive Theme, and 80.39% of these comments are classified under the Art-Centered Code. On the other hand, 100% of Artist E's Instagram comments are under Positive Theme, where all these comments are classified under the Art-Centered Code.

The majority of the comment content is no different from their Twitter counterparts, but it is noted that the three artworks have more comments than the posts on Twitter. To add, the means of engagement on Instagram differ from those in Twitter, so this does not necessarily mean that one post is performing better than the other, especially with the lack of a determined number of Instagram Stories made about it. Haq et. al explains that due to Instagram being limited to image sharing on personal profiles, users would share content such as symbols to further raise awareness, specifically images that are representative of offline activist activities. Despite these limitations, it is agreed that Instagram's follow network is important in this type of activist message sharing (8).

Conclusion

Based on the results presented, the impact of protest art based on the analysis of social media comments and reactions focuses on the engagement of users on the artwork. With the focus on details of the artwork, it allows a space for discussion among the viewers. This space for discussion either reinforces ideas with those who had similar opinions on the political event or brought attention to this topic. The results also present that others used the artwork and its positive reception as a means to share their own opinion, which is in relation to the message that is trying to be spread. With these observations seen in the social media sphere, social media protest art has tackled the aims of Activist Artwork that Duncombe (2016) has presented. This opens new opportunities to spread information and awareness on a certain topic, where work can be shared and discussed by a larger audience. While there are those who disagree with the message, the majority of viewers agree with the message, relate to the content, and even feel empowered knowing that many people share similar perspectives. As the spirit of social media activism continues beyond the pandemic, it is important to understand its reach. This is especially true for social media artwork and how it can impact these political movements through the message it attempts to share to not only the followers of the account, but to those who will encounter it on their feeds, as well.

References

Duncombe, Constance. "The politics of Twitter: emotions and the power of social media." *International Political Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2019, pp. 409-429.

Duncombe, Stephen. "Does It Work?: The Æffect of Activist Art." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 1, Project Muse, 2016, pp. 115–34. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2016.0005.

Greijdanus, Hedy, et al. "The psychology of online activism and social movements: Relations between online and offline collective action." *Current opinion in psychology*, vol. 35, 2020, pp. 49-54.

Erlingsson, Christen, and Petra Brysiewicz. "A hands-on guide to doing content analysis." *African journal of emergency medicine*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2017, pp. 93-99.

Haq, Ehsan-Ul, et al. "Screenshots, Symbols, and Personal Thoughts: The Role of Instagram for Social Activism." *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2022*. 2022.

Lee, Carmen. "Introduction: Discourse of social tagging." *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 22, 2018, pp. 1-3.

Potts, Amanda, et al. "Exploring 'success' in digitally augmented activism: A triangulated approach to analyzing UK activist twitter use." *Discourse, context & media*, vol. 6, 2014, pp. 65-76.

Sailunaz, Kashfia, and Reda Alhajj. "Emotion and sentiment analysis from Twitter text." *Journal of Computational Science*, vol. 36, 2019, 101003.

Sanz, Teresa, and Beatriz Rodriguez-Labajos. "Does artistic activism change anything? Strategic and transformative effects of arts in anti-coal struggles in Oakland, CA." *Geoforum*, vol. 122, 2021, pp. 41-54.

Seelig, Michelle I., et al. "A new culture of advocacy: An exploratory analysis of social activism on the web and social media." *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2019, pp. 15-29.

Sipe, Lawrence R. *Storytime: Young children's literary understanding in the classroom*. Teachers College Press, 2008.

Tomacruz, Sofia. "Duterte Declares State of Public Health Emergency amid Rise in Coronavirus Cases." *Rappler*, 9 Mar. 2020, www.rappler.com/nation/253833-duterte-declares-state-public-health-emergency-rise-coronavirus-cases-march-2020/.

Turner, Caroline. *Art and social change: Contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra, ACT: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 2004.

Yang, Guobin. "Narrative agency in hashtag activism: The case of# BlackLivesMatter." *Media and communication*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2016, p. 13.