

#MassTestingNowPH tweets as acts of citizenship: The rhetorical functions of tweets in pandemic-stricken Philippines

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Abstract

Constrained physical mobility and oppositional action during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines drove many Filipinos to turn to social media affordances, like Twitter's hashtags, as sites of free speech, dissent, and collective action. One of which, #MassTestingNowPH, called for the implementation of mass testing for the vulnerable population and objected to Rodrigo Duterte's militaristic pandemic response. This paper examined how #MassTestingNowPH tweets served as acts of citizenship and exerted their rhetorical functions in the digital space during this global medical crisis.

Using rhetorical political analysis, this research found that #MassTestingNowPH tweets manifested acts of citizenship by asserting citizens' rights and responsibilities, and exacting government's accountability in newly-formed ad hoc publics. Users criticized the country's COVID-19 response and the injustices of VIP testing for some of its officials. These criticisms enabled them to generate collective grievances for medical frontliners and the marginalized. With these sentiments, netizens called on their audiences to act on their judgment and assert their citizenship in online and offline platforms. These tweets, as acts of citizenship, performed three rhetorical functions: forensic, epideictic, and deliberative. This rhetorical process shaped Twitter's hashtag as an ad hoc public and the meaning of citizenship in our highly-networked world.

Keywords: COVID-19; #masstestingnowph; hashtag activism; acts of citizenship; rhetoric of tweets; Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

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COVID-19 pandemic and the Philippine response

Aside from serious medical and economic concerns, the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the later part of 2019 had also negatively affected the democratic rights and political engagement of citizens around the world (Celermajer & Nassar, 2020). As Amnesty International put it, the pandemic has exposed the “enormous contradictions and inequalities of our societies” (Valls, 2020, para. 1), including the gaps in healthcare infrastructures and the different capacities of leaders in resolving the crisis at hand. Countries like Taiwan, Vietnam, and South Korea strengthened their healthcare systems by applying preventive measures such as “agile test, trace, and treat systems to counter any flare ups; strong public-private partnerships in the health industry; effective application of technologies for information dissemination and contact tracing; and all this with less dependence on draconian lockdown measures” (Mendoza, 2020, para. 1) thus, effectively mitigating the impact of the pandemic on their economies. Meanwhile, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte waged a war against the virus consistent with his controversial violent rhetoric on policies against drugs, terrorists, and communists (Hapal, 2021).

On 17 March 2020, Duterte announced the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) as the immediate pandemic response of the government. The ECQ mandated a lockdown, limited people’s mobility, and required physical distancing and wearing of face masks for its population (Hapal, 2021). Violators received punitive sanctions from the police and military which were tasked to implement these “health” measures. This heavy reliance on its law enforcers to carry out the government’s pandemic response was observed to be “draconian,” “militarized,” and “police-centric” (Hapal, 2021) and blamed the *pasaway* (lawbreakers) for the spread of the virus. For Karl Hapal (2021), framing the country’s response to a global pandemic as a “war,” or a fight for the nation’s survival, aimed to justify illiberal measures of the government including the expanded power given to its law enforcement authorities.

Duterte’s opposition argued that he took advantage of this pandemic to enforce guidelines which undermined human rights and escalated his armed rule (See, 2021). He ordered the police and the military to shoot violators of the quarantine protocol (Billing, 2020) and arrest those who refused to get vaccinated (Reuters, 2021). Between March and July 2020, 70,000 people were arrested for violating ECQ rules (Westcott & Lagamayo, 2020). Amidst these heavy restrictions, Bloomberg’s COVID Resilience Ranking ranked the Philippines second to the last in 53 economies in terms of the number of vaccinated citizens, severity of lockdowns, fatality rate, and positivity rate

among other criteria (Madarang, 2021). While this militaristic approach to the pandemic was being implemented, political controversies surrounding Duterte still ensued (See, 2021). For instance, the Anti-Terrorism Act, which he endorsed, was legislated in July 2020 amidst scathing public criticism (Palatino, 2020). The law expanded the definition of terrorism and allowed the government to interrogate and detain anyone it tags as a terrorist. Its opposition argued that the lockdown was used to control resistance to the proposed bill (Westcott & Lagamayo, 2020). Another controversial move of the Duterte administration was the shutdown of ABS-CBN Corporation, one of the biggest broadcasting companies in the Philippines, after his allies in Congress refused its franchise because of irregularities (See, 2021). Opposition groups noted how this move impinged on press freedom and freedom to information during a time when news and information were crucial (Westcott & Lagamayo, 2020). For his critics, these political events manifested Duterte's tyrannical rule and war against his opposition.

While the public wanted to protest, gatherings related to these grievances were heavily policed because they break rules on mass gathering and physical distancing (Westcott & Lagamayo, 2020). Hence, they resorted to emerging protest sites like social media platforms. One of the earliest online protests was the call for free COVID-19 tests and preparation of local testing centers. Filipino Twitter users employed the hashtag #MassTestingNowPH as they "cite government reluctance to conduct mass testing, the failure to provide accurate information about the pandemic, and the delayed arrival of assistance to the poor" (Palatino, 2020, para. 6). The hashtag reflected the interconnectedness of the political, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic to the country. It trended multiple times from late March to mid-April 2020 and has garnered significant engagement and longevity compared to other hashtags during the start of the pandemic (Bunquin & Gaw, 2021). Although this gained traction, the government still refused and refuted the calls citing logistics and financial constraints (Rabino, 2020).

The ceaseless innovation of communication technologies introduces new sites where citizens can assert their rights and thrive as political actors (Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005). In this challenging context for physical protests during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper looked at the formation of an ad hoc public on Twitter through the hashtag #MassTestingNowPH. For Bruns and Burgess (2011), ad hoc publics host discussions and deliberations on issues the moment they first happened. Twitter users strategized the platform's affordances such as hashtag networks, trending lists, and the networked linkages of users to forward their causes and advocacy (Bunquin & Gaw, 2021). In this online space,

being and becoming a citizen can be manifested through tweets asserting their rights and offering responsibility to be a part of this public health and democratic discourse (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). Extending the work of Bunquin and Gaw (2021) on the digital witnessing dimension of the same hashtag network, this paper utilized a rhetorical lens in examining the use of tweets as a protest tool and a political language for ordinary Filipino netizens. How do #MassTestingNowPH tweets serve as acts of citizenship in fighting for their rights and exacting government's accountability during the COVID-19 pandemic? In relation, how do these digital acts of citizenship perform their rhetorical functions as they relate with their targeted audiences and inform Twitter's use as an ad hoc public?

This paper examined how Filipinos, in general, and Twitter users, in particular, adapted to new political environments to assert the fundamental nature of democracy—citizen participation. I explored how citizens continue to search for or create spaces to practice their citizenship in these challenging times. Ben-Hassine (2019) added that studying how citizens find and act in new democratic sites like social media should inspire policymakers to safeguard spaces for dissent and participation. Aside from establishing affinity with the political system (Hadler, 2015), citizens may have established an affinity to their citizenship, its rights, and responsibilities when they are given spaces to engage public issues. Finally, I ventured into characterizing the rhetorical functions of these tweets by examining how they responded to rhetorical situations (i.e., the pandemic as a medical and political situation) and how they related with and called on their audiences (i.e., fellow Filipinos) to act on their grievances too. Per Denise Wilkins et al. (2019), the rhetorical functions of tweets remain to be a significant topic in rhetorical and social movement studies. Studying the persuasive impact of tweets, especially on socio-political grievances, also contributes to the discourse on what it means to be a citizen in our globalized and highly-networked world.

Hashtag activism

Mobilization theory states that social media empowers non-traditional political actors to engage in sociopolitical issues (Lynn et al., 2020) as they recognize these platforms' potential to introduce some political changes (Rambukkana, 2015). Twitter is one of the online platforms utilized to communicate grievances and advocacy with the government and the public. It is a microblogging site where the main communication affordance are short messages called *tweets*, which are 280-character messages that users create and share to their followers to update them with their lives

(Tremayne, 2014). While primarily used for personal affairs, we have seen its utility in many online actions both organized and unorganized (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). The political use of Twitter “may intensify the relationship between political actors with other stakeholders, as it facilitates an easy and continuous discourse free from the constraints of official (and unofficial) gatherings” (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013, p. 292). One of its most strategized affordances for online protests is a hashtag used “to identify users with similar or opposing views, collate information from these users or on a topic, and interact with them” (Lynn et al., 2020, p. 437). Hashtags start with a number sign (#) and host conversations regarding a particular topic, even taboo ones (Tshuma et al., 2022). They often use keywords (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #LoveWins) as banners of their online protests. As a result, these hashtags become spaces for personal advocacy and political discourses which is known as hashtag activism (Tremayne, 2014).

Hashtag activism is the “act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” (Xiong et al., 2019, p. 3). It functions not only for information dissemination but also a call for mobilization, a repository of information where online users can quickly access pertinent knowledge about the cause, a vehicle to spread awareness and discussion, and an initiative towards transnationalizing a movement by creating global alliances (Gleason, 2013; Xiong et al., 2019). Many social movements also gained domestic and global exposure through the hashtag which puts pressure on important policy- and decision-makers (Fuentes, 2019). The possibility of transnational mobilizations through hashtag use was seen in many movements including the Black Lives Matter movement (Wilkins et al., 2019) and the youth democratization protests in Thailand (Ladia, 2022). This connective action provided by online spaces differs from that of traditional collective actions like protests. During the *Indignados* protests in Spain or the youth protests in Hong Kong and Thailand (Ladia, 2022), online protests on Twitter provided the communication requirements of offline protests thus, Twitter protests are not a substitute but a complement to on-site actions (Anduiza et al., 2014).

Being a significant part of technopolitics (Fuentes, 2019), hashtags reveal its rhetorical and performative components as they function not only in categorizing tweets but also in co-creating meaning and framing the agenda and collective identity with current and potential members of an online action (Wilkins et al., 2019). What makes hashtags interesting to investigate is their discursive power that gives its users agenda-setting

mechanisms to occupy these new spaces for their own advocacy (Xiong et al., 2019). This co-creation creates ad hoc publics on issues being talked about as they emerge in public consciousness (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Messages distributed using hashtags target specific audiences and publics which do not need to be personally related to Twitter users. Many Li et al. (2020) noticed how hashtags enabled publics to give attention to lesser-known issues thus, they have become a strategic repertoire of choice for many activists and movements.

Because of their online presence, hashtags also reach activists situated in different localities but with common public concerns thus, creating possibilities for transnational alliances (Gleason, 2013). For instance, the #MilkTeaAlliance established collective grievance against illiberal policies and infrastructures in many East and Southeast Asian nations (Ladia, 2022). The quick spread of information does not only reach far flung communities but also allows activists on the ground to spread crucial information to respond to government or police action (Ladia, 2022; Lefebvre & Armstong, 2016). Some hashtags are also used to frame national narratives in times of crisis. Junesse Crisostomo (2021) studied how Filipino Twitter users employed #PrayForMarawi to resolve their guilt as they witness the suffering of others during the Marawi siege in 2017. By performing their guilt redemption through their tweets, they shared this experience with other online spectators and established an online community built on their sentiments towards the similar event. In 2020, the hashtag #SamMoralesisOver was employed to demand accountability from a filmmaker involved in a catfishing scheme (Cañal et al., 2022). For Bonne Cañal et al. (2022), “cancel culture”, though having many definitions, encourages circulation of opinion and empowers marginalized groups to speak out on their grievances, especially if the offender is present in online platforms like Twitter. The use of hashtags in protests may also reflect the struggle of the groups using them. For the LGBTQIA+ movement in the Philippines, their online tactics, including the use of #SOGIEEqualityNow, highlighted not only the uniqueness of the community but also, their manifestation of solidarity for their followers and the public (Labor & San Pascual, 2022). This inclusive rhetoric reflected their position in Philippine society as marginalized and on the receiving end of offline and online discrimination. Indeed, the rise of social media actions restructure the processes of democratic and civic engagement (Tshuma et al., 2022).

In massive hashtag protests like the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, they were also able to host a space for counterpublics which challenge existing illiberal structures or worldviews (Wonneberger et al., 2021). The

former was used beyond the Ferguson case and the US and has transcended temporal and spatial restrictions in asserting that racial inequality still exists (Edrington & Lee, 2018) while the latter witnessed several countries localizing the movement's messages in their own languages and political environment. Aside from its global reach, it has also given birth to many other hashtags on the same issue: #WhyIDidntReport, #ChurchToo, and #BelieveSurvivors (Li et al., 2020). Performance scholar Marcela Fuentes (2019) asserted that hashtag activism produces a sense of collective identity and networks afforded by social media becomes "vehicles of emergence, memory, and resurgence in order to sustain mobilization and to broaden the scope of specific claims" (p. 99). She argued that this capacity of online actions fit perfectly with her concept "performance constellation." This culture of networked and coordinated online protests has brought synchronic convergence, global and local resonance, and asynchronous repertoires together. According to social media theorist José Van Dijck (2013, as cited in Fuentes, 2019), this affective affiliation is being empowered in and by collective protest spaces like Twitter's hashtag.

Although many scholars testified to the positive impact of Twitter use in civic engagement, there is still doubt on its real impact beyond online spaces. Gerry Lanuza (2015) argued that young people may be trapped in "slacktivism" or easy online activism, as they prefer to mobilize in online spaces than on-ground ones. This is brought about by neoliberal capitalist ideologies focusing on personal gains hoping these could turn into sociopolitical benefits. Further, homophily also happens in online spaces (Gleason, 2013). It was observed that Twitter does not promote deliberation and debate, as previously thought, because individuals are more likely to communicate with people having similar interests rather than those outside their circles. Twitter users who joined online actions also tend to favor one group: young citizens without formal organizational memberships and with privilege in internet connection and offline social networks.

While the online platform was also significant during many democratization movements' attempts to topple dictatorship, Mark Tremayne (2014) asserted that tweets do not hold real life impact since street protests are more concrete manifestations of public support. Bhekizulu Tshuma et al. (2022) added that this platform could also be used as part of the ruling party or government's propaganda. They mainly used Twitter for their personal campaigns, agenda-setting, and self-promotions (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). In recent times, Twitter use was observed to be a channel where disinformation was rampant which can silence dissenters especially among opposition groups (Wang & Caskey, 2016).

Tanja Bosch (2017) shared that power structures and hierarchies found in offline spaces may also be found in online ones. Access to the internet and knowledge of the platform are hurdles to a seamless participation for these netizens. It was also observed that online discourses require higher levels of education and a greater interest in politics which may pose a challenge to those new in this area of protest (LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2016).

Acts of citizenship in digital spaces

For Bart Cammaerts and Leo Van Audenhove (2005), citizenship is traditionally anchored on the borders of territorial states, the limits of a cultural community, a common social heritage, and/or political and social rights vested upon a person living in a state. In contemporary times where social media blur temporal and geographical limitations, people find digital platforms essential in sharing their thoughts, participating in discourses, and asserting their rights as part of a nation (Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005). Included in this changing and developing notion of citizenship is the evolving aspect of spaces where we can claim and perform our roles as citizens.

Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen (2008) stated that citizenship is not only acquired but also actively claimed by citizens. In their book, *Acts of Citizenship*, they explained that citizenship is an active pursuit in which people claim their rights and “responsibilize” themselves as political subjects since these rights come with duties and responsibilities. This process of transforming oneself as a citizen is reflected through acts of citizenship. These acts are “the way in which people conduct themselves and routinize certain habits in their bodies, develop certain behaviors, and follow certain rules” (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 20). Acts of citizenship include political “acts” that break away from routines, rules, habitual behaviors, practices and/or orders (Johns, 2014), and where “regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due” (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 2).

Chris Wells (2010) added that enactments of citizenship include being informed about relevant issues, participating in political communities, and taking part in formal political actions like voting and campaigning. Jessica Feezell et al. (2016) further explained that there is a form of actualized citizenship where citizens manifest their affinity to the state through public acts like rallying, boycotting, protesting, and signing petitions. From being passive, actualized citizens are expected to carry out political functions that make them an active part of the public sphere without any persuasion from the state or from activist movements (Feezell et al., 2016; Wells, 2010;). These

embodiments of citizenship are anchored on the acts that citizens perform to be able to include themselves in polity. This new definition reflects the communicative and performative dimensions of citizenship. If citizenship is analyzed as “acts or performances,” we focus on how citizenship is asserted and reproduced, and on how people act and react with others, make citizenship claims, and fight for their rights (Johns, 2014).

Several studies have used acts of citizenship as a framework in analyzing how citizenship is being asserted in contemporary times. Ranu Basu (2007) studied how constituents in Canada asserted their rights against the closure of public schools in their communities. Public consultations and protests were used to persuade those within their communities to stand up and fight for these rights. In Ludek Stavinoha’s study (2019), refugees in Europe performed claims-making by denouncing the European Union’s policies on refugee rights and practicing hunger strikes and mobilizations. In communicating these acts of citizenship, they assert their rights to humane treatment in refugee camps which can also evoke a response from the public, especially the governments, on their active participation in reclaiming these rights (Stavinoha, 2019). Tamara Caraus (2018) observed how migrant protests were good examples of how rights are fought for and how citizenship is enacted. She argued that acts of citizenship allow an analysis of citizenship not dependent on nation-states but on cosmopolitan identities. Since migrants are considered non-citizens, the assertion of their rights and responsibilities redefines boundaries of political subjectivity and belonging (Caraus, 2018).

Due to the popularity and ubiquity of social media, Stavinoha (2019) mentioned how everyday acts of resistance and being political subjects are now being performed and circulated through various media networks. Amelia Johns (2014) noted that online acts are considered a ‘rupture’ or “when political “acts” break away from routines, rules, habitual behaviours, practices and/or orders” (p. 75). This may include speaking out, looking out for the public good, or the rhetoric of “we, the people” and “we, the connected.” Isin (2008) added that enacting citizenships online may

disrupt habitus, create new possibilities, claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones; pose their claims in enduring and creative expressions; and, most of all, are the actual moments that shift established practices, status and order. (p. 10)

These ruptures also reflect that digital citizenship involves discursive and deliberative acts in online political spaces. In this process of performing

their citizenship, these citizens have also discursively created new political subjectivities, morals, and values other than what they initially fought for (Johns, 2014). This new definition of citizenship is also more inclusive and engaged. Digital citizenship does not differentiate between “us and other” but it asserts social good and common identities. The assertion of these acts of citizenship in online spaces transitions traditional citizenship concepts like rights in law (legality) and belonging to a sociopolitical entity (imaginary) to new spaces that signify their being and becoming a citizen (Isin & Ruppert, 2020).

Since online spaces are limited to certain language cues, verbal, visual, and aural symbols and acts like liking or commenting can be considered acts of citizens so long as they were utilized to perform rights-claiming and subjecting themselves to these rights (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). Thus, in their book *Being Digital Citizens*, Isin and Ruppert (2020) explained that these digital acts can be analyzed as speech acts since these digital actions were outputs of speaking subjects in relation to their political environment. As an extension of J.L. Austin’s work - *How To Do Things with Words*, using online language and actions disrupts the everyday discourse in these online platforms and reconfigures them as a space for subversion (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). Further, it is supported that these digital acts provide *velocity* or force to the performativity of online utterances and in transitioning from offline citizens to digital citizens. Fuentes (2019) also acknowledged the role of hashtags in various movements that assert citizenship in several parts of the world. She noted how hashtags have transitioned from being an indexical marker to being a more semiotic and political protest repertoire. Ultimately, hashtags as digital acts evoke an affective and persuasive power that encourages audiences and readers, as citizens, to affiliate with their values and causes (Fuentes, 2019).

When thinking about citizenship today, it is manifested in the webs of rights and responsibilities contextualized in the changing ethical, political, and social contexts where these political subjects reside in (Isin, 2008). Further, since the spaces are now blurred because of globalization and innovations in communication and transportation, citizens easily become more mobile and with them, they take and reshape what it means to be a citizen, including their rights, responsibilities, and new spaces for political engagement.

Methodology and data analysis

As a discursive and social space, Twitter relies on language and interaction for social influence (Bosch, 2017). Thus, this paper utilized a rhetorical

approach in exploring how tweets served as acts of citizenship in digital spaces to perform their citizenship and call on their fellow Filipinos to act on their grievances too. Tweets which used the hashtag #MassTestingNowPH served as artifact of the study. To extract relevant data, a Python export-tweets script was employed. Twint was utilized as an advanced data scraping tool programmed to gather relevant tweets from March - April 2020 - two months after Duterte announced the country's reliance on lockdowns, and not on mass testing, as the primary response to the pandemic. The initial run garnered 15,058 tweets. Only publicly available tweets at the time of data extraction were gathered which was a limitation to the study. The scraped data were reviewed to check any duplication and to verify if the tweets fall under the time range set. The second layer of validation was verifying the existence of the Twitter users. To ensure that these accounts are organic, they need to have been active on Twitter for more than a month before March 2020. They should also have a display photo and tweeted beyond their use of #MassTestingNowPH.

Further, to ensure engagement with Twitter users, the paper only utilized tweets with more than 100 reactions - defined as the combination of the number of likes, retweets, and replies which are signs of public engagement (Xiong et al., 2019). This was to categorize these tweets as engaging and possibly, a reflection of the discourse on this specific issue and timeframe. Only 286 tweets fit these criteria. To further the analysis on the impact of these tweets on the hashtag as an ad hoc public, the researcher included the 2,604 replies under the relevant tweets.

These tweets were analyzed using rhetorical political analysis (RPA). Contemporary political science scholars consider rhetoric as an object of investigation, on one hand, and "an analytical framework for the study of political language" (Price-Thomas & Turnbull 2017, p. 209), on the other. For Wilkins et al. (2019), language goes beyond intrinsic psychological processes as it is an actual reflection of the careful creation of functional, strategic, and persuasive arguments by their speakers. Thus, this analysis centered on the actors' discursive capabilities to influence their environment and how active they are in shaping the political messages they convey. Using RPA requires an investigation of the argumentative contexts and political machinations of artifacts and how these dimensions of language serve as public action (Finlayson, 2007) which can frame the issue, define opponents, call on allies, and globalize their agenda (Wilkins et al., 2019). In this case, #MassTestingNowPH tweets contained persuasive, affective, and argumentative potentials directed to multiple audiences, both online and offline (Price-Thomas & Turnbull, 2017) to connect to their democratic aspirations (Finlayson, 2022).

Since RPA needs a supporting framework (Price-Thomas & Turnbull, 2017), this paper was also guided by Isin and Ruppert (2020)'s digital acts of citizenship as they claim that netizens perform their citizenship through acts in online spaces. This framework deals with "how people use language to describe themselves and their relations to others and how language summons them as speaking beings" (Isin & Ruppert, 2020, p. 20). And in these performances of citizenship, they transform hashtags not just as a discursive space but also a space for contention for Filipino Twitter users especially when public protests were policed. By integrating rhetoric into political analysis, the focus now lies on the changing ideas, ideations, and language in politics and how political language manifests underlying political principles, constructs political culture, and reveals power relations in these new protest spaces (Price-Thomas & Turnbull, 2017).

Discussion

This analysis focused on how #MassTestingNowPH tweets were employed by Filipino Twitter users as acts of citizenship in this emerging protest space during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. Since Twitter was designed to be a microblogging site for personal updates for followers, online users who opted to protest using the platform ruptured not just its main purpose but also the sociopolitical routines of its users (Isin, 2008). Considering these tweets as citizens' acts of being a part of the public make citizenship both discursive and proactive in nature and reflect a meso-level political participation of citizens in informal spaces (Cammaerts & van Audenhove, 2005).

The analysis continued with how these tweets, as acts of citizenship, have rhetorical functions to relate to their online and offline audiences. Since social media is primarily driven by language, netizens use tweets to "enable them to come into existence, satisfy requirements, grow in size and influence, meet opposition from within and without, and effectively bring about or resist change" (Edrington & Lee, 2018, p. 84). I highlighted the underlying role of rhetoric in how Filipino Twitter users claimed rights in these new spaces. These "clusters of performances" in digital public spaces (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019) revealed the communicative rights afforded by these spaces to citizens (Johns, 2014) and the characteristics of Twitter as an ad hoc public during this critical time in the country.

Pandemic response and VIPs on trial: Acts as forensic rhetoric

For Ana Lopez-Sala (2019), people may transform themselves as active citizens by claiming their rights and advocating for principles of justice, liberty, and equality on how certain issues should be resolved by

the state. Especially during a medical crisis, assertions of citizenship were seen through advocating for social rights and equal access to medical care (Castañeda, 2013). Thus, Filipino Twitter users involved in the #MassTestingNowPH network performed their citizenship by verbalizing their thoughts on and criticisms of the government's pandemic response and exposing the injustices resulting from the COVID-19 test availability for select politicians.

Some tweets, as acts of citizenship, centered on grievances on what they deemed as wrong approaches such as the government's militaristic response to a medical crisis, its lack of urgency, and its request for emergency powers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Wrong government approaches

@natoreyes: We will win the war on #COVID19PH with more tests, not more arrests. #MassTestingNowPH is the key. Prioritize PUIs and frontline health workers and do surveillance testing on affected communities. Arrest the spread of the virus, not arrest the people.

@STPBasileo: Good morning all, mas kalmado na po ako pero imperative pa rin i-hold accountable ang mga nasa posisyon. Solusyong medikal, hindi militar. Tulong, hindi kulong. Bigas, hindi dahas. Serbisyo, hindi pasismo. #MassTestingNowPH #HealthForAll. [Good morning all, I am more calm now, but it is still imperative to hold accountable those that are in the position. Medical solutions, not military solutions. Aid, not jail time. Rice, not violence. Service, not fascism.]

Note: These tweets were from Renato Reyes, Jr. (2020a) published last 20 March 2020 and Leonard Javier (2020a) published last 8 April 2020.

Many users like @natoreyes and @STPBasileo articulated their grievances on the government's choice of methods in resolving the medical crisis. They voiced out their dismay over prioritizing militaristic response (e.g., arresting lawbreakers, threatening the opposition) than focusing on more effective and scientific methods. Most blamed Duterte and his interest for violent policies in the lack of preference for mass testing. Together with other users, they highlighted how the government lacked foresight, especially in collaborating with local government units in preparing test centers. Worse, for these Twitter users, while the impact was real and close, they felt that the government seemed to look at the crisis without a sense of urgency. As user @STPBasileo tweeted:

Figure 2

Lack of urgency

@STPBasileo: The threats are suddenly more real: Dreams delayed. Graduations postponed. Lives on hold. More scrounging for crumbs and resources, strained health workforce and facilities. Deaths. We will fight, but we can't do that without a sense of urgency. #MassTestingNowPH

Note: This tweet was published by Leonard Javier (2020b) last 22 March 2020.

In relation to the government's wrong approach, a heated discussion topic under #MassTestingNowPH was the request of the president to be given emergency powers which required additional budget to resolve the pandemic. Those who used #MassTestingNowPH opposed this move as they were wary that the government will abuse this authority and corrupt its funds. They suggested that the national government could do without the policy and instead, should get inspiration from the effective response of other countries and of local governments in promoting mass testing. Filipino Twitter users, like @iamraoulmanuel and @leahnavarro (see Figure 3), asserted through their tweets that an effective approach in resolving the virus should be science-based, urgent, accountable, and proactive, and not heavily dependent on dubious and emergency policies and rhetoric to combat the virus. Further, users demanded not just a proactive approach but also an accountable and transparent method in resolving the crisis.

Figure 3

No to emergency powers

@iamraoulmanuel: Weeks ago, DU30 could have already done a lot even without emergency powers. He can use calamity funds without emergency powers. This tyrant already has too much powers. Emergency action, not emergency powers. #MassTestingNowPH #COVID19PH

@leahnavarro: Giving special emergency powers to Duterte will not change how things are being run by this admin because the same bumbling idiots will still be in charge. #NoToEmergencyPowers #MassTestingNowPH

Note: These tweets were from Raoul Manuel (2020) published last 22 March 2020 and Leah Navarro (2020) published last 23 March 2020.

Aside from the call for these good governance values, affirmation of societal values like equality, justice, liberty, and solidarity, are acts performed traditionally in offline protest spaces but appropriated in digital spaces (Lopez-Sala, 2019). This is used to question policies or politicians who corrode these public values. For this hashtag, most of the tweets called out

politicians for their privilege in COVID-19 testing. Twitter users claimed that the government's complicity in the unequal access to tests provided to politicians and their families (see Figure 4). They tagged them as "very important persons" (VIPs) as they pointed out that public servants should put the country and their constituents first rather than practicing values such as selfishness, greed, irresponsibility, and apathy. Xiong, et al (2019) mentioned that name calling (i.e., very important persons) can be a rhetorical strategy which bifurcates between the good (allies) and the bad (enemies), and reflects the persuasive potential of tweets in creating a collective identity for the allies and collective judgment against the enemies. Interestingly, this sentiment was further seen in the hashtag #NoToVIPTesting which was commonly used together with #MassTestingNowPH (see Figure 4). Most of the topmost tweets in terms of engagement asserted the value of equality between the ordinary citizens and the elected ones. This fight for equality for health services pinpointed the government as the enabler of the prioritization, especially that the state did not penalize VIPs who did not follow testing protocols.

Figure 4

No to VIP testing

@_tallthinguy_: Politicians and their families are getting tested and some/most of them shows no symptoms, and here you are telling us that if we feel any of the symptoms don't panic, stay inside and drink our meds. I didn't know that getting tested is now a privilege. #MassTestingNowPH

@KPLCordillera: Meanwhile, politicians, business tycoons has reportedly having the privilege of conducting "home-service" COVID 19 testing. Join the #ProtestFromHome nationally-coordinated social media rally today, 8PM and use #MassTestingNowPH #NOtoVIPTesting

@torresjaysonn: Sumumpa kayong ipagpapauna ang sambayanang Pilipino bago ang inyong mga sarili. Anong karapatan niyong iprioritize ang sarili ninyo bago ang mga pasyenteng may malalang kondisyon? Bayan bago ang sarili. #NOtoVIPTesting #MassTestingNowPH [You took an oath to prioritize the Filipino nation before yourselves. Do you have the right to put yourself first before patients in worse condition? Nation first before the self.]

@superstarmarian: BRAKING NEWS! Lumabas na ang confirmatory tests para sa ilan nating mga Senador at naconfirm nga na NEGATIVE sila sa COVID-19!!! Bad News: POSITIVE sila sa selfishness, greed, irresponsibility, at apathy. Go, post pa more sa FB! #NoToVIPCovidTesting #MassTestingNowPH

Note: These online contents were tweeted by Kid (2020), Kabataan Partylist Cordillera (2020), Torres (2020), and The Fake Marian (2020).

To support arguments on the injustice of VIP testing and further aggravate online sentiments, Twitter users clearly described the negative impact of this unfair prioritization to two vulnerable sectors: (1) medical frontliners and (2) the poor population. For users like @marcboni, @dakila_ph, @titscentury, and many others, giving preference to politicians in terms of the elusive COVID-19 tests put these medical practitioners at grave risk (see Figure 5). Tweets also stated that these politicians “are only concerned about their self-interest and not of the Filipino people”. Tweets used elite, “*halimaw*” [monster], “*kakapal ng mukha*” [thick-skinned], “*hayop*” [animal] and “*walang puso*” [no feelings] to describe these VIPs and would question the values they hold: “*Anong karapatan niyong iprioritize ang sarili ninyo bago ang mga pasyenteng may malalang kondisyon? Bayan bago ang sarili.*” [Do you have the right to put yourself first before patients in worse condition? Nation first before the self.] (@torresjaysonn, 2020).

Figure 5

Impact on medical frontliners

@marcboni: Philippine Health Workers are DYING for the Country while VIP Politicians disturb their work to get tested #NOtoVIPTesting #MassTestingNowPH #MassTestingNow

@dakila_ph: Prioritize our frontline health workers, PUI/PUM, the communities with confirmed cases and the vulnerable sectors of the population, NOT the politicians and VIPs who are only concerned about their self-interest and not of the Filipino people. #MassTestingNowPH #NoToVIPTesting <https://t.co/69qRlivVT2>

@titscentury: THE FRONTLINERS DO NOT DESERVE TO DIE BECAUSE OF THE INCOMPETENCY OF THIS ADMINISTRATION. We need them more than these fucking politicians and the entitled elite. #MassTestingNowPH #MassTestingNowPH #MassTestingNowPH #MassTestingNowPH #MassTestingNowPH #MassTestingNowPH

Note: These tweets were from Marc Bonifacio (2020) published last 22 March 2020, DAKILA Philippines (2020) posted last 22 March 2020, and B (2020) published last 22 March 2020.

Aside from medical workers, Twitter users designated the marginalized population as vulnerable victims of the VIP testing. They argued about the irony of the situation stating that:

Figure 6

Impact on the poor

@josh_borja: While the rich and powerful get tested for the coronavirus, the greater majority of the country—often the poor and those underground in society are left to attend to their selves and their own needs. Now, more than ever, should we spend the people's funds for #MassTestingNowPH!

@SuperficialGZT: Working-class Filipinos are forced to choose between risking exposure to #COVID19 (keep working) and starvation. (stop working) Rich Duterte allies like Koko Pimentel choose to spread the virus to our overworked hospitals/frontliners. #KokoResign #DuterteVirus #MassTestingNowPH

Note: These tweets were from Zen (2020) published last 17 March 2020 and Superficial Gazette (2020) published last 25 March 2020.

They called on politicians to put ordinary citizens first since this is the call of their duty as public servants. This irony was further supported by netizens' narratives of how they or other healthcare workers were not able to get tested even if they needed it the most. Online activists who protested privileged testing also encouraged the public to name the politicians and not to vote for them in the elections. Feezell et al (2016) observed that citizens often perform their citizenship by asserting their own rights but also maintaining a sense of concern for others. This actualized form of citizenship manifested in these tweets of going beyond individual's rights and calling out to the government to prioritize more vulnerable and marginalized communities.

As acts of citizenship, these tweets were not only conversation markers and starters but also served a rhetorical function (Dawes, 2017) as they employed legal and imaginary forces to put guilt and judgment on certain political actors (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). For Aristotle (Kennedy, 2007), forensic rhetoric involves how sources of arguments aim to prosecute or defend what others have done in the past. A text using forensic or judicial rhetoric "tends to be concerned with demonstrating the motives (or absence of them) of a person, their character and thus the probability of their having acted in the way alleged" (Finlayson, 2007, p. 556). The legal impact of these tweets lies in their ability to create social categories and put involved political actors involved and their actions and decisions on a trial. Putting the government's response and its officials on public digital trial was done in two steps.

First, the #MassTestingNowPH tweets were able to categorize the enemies and the victims during the pandemic. By bifurcating politicians as greedy and the ordinary people as victims, and calling government's responses as militaristic and ineffective, they have painted these political

actors and the pandemic status quo as the enemies. These tweets also put a shadow of doubt on the sincerity of government actors and the responses in question. For Finlayson (2022), the rhetorical meaning of statements like these sow doubt on the hidden interests of political actors involved in these crises. In a way, the ethos (i.e., credibility, character, and competence) of the government and politicians was put to public trial which, in turn, empowered these tweets and their creators' ethos in argumentation. These politicians were "cancelled" because of their wrong motives (Cañal et al., 2022). Cancelling them, or demanding accountability from their actions, did not only spark dialogue from Twitter users but also, heightened the negative valence of emotions of the users and their audiences pushing them further to group these actors into social categories.

Second, the consistency of the rhetoric that public officials were greedy painted them as the traitors to their service and one of the factors why vulnerable sectors (i.e., medical frontliners and the poor) were negatively affected. This rhetorical strategy created social categories—public enemy and traitor, and victims—and in-group and out-group members of the society which their followers can easily identify and will be key for future collective grievances and actions (Tshuma et al., 2022). In this hashtag network, the trial for the politicians and the pandemic response was not only done for sentiments of justice but also, to relate with the democratic aspirations of their online and offline audiences.

#MassTestingNowPH tweets also asserted the rights of the Twitter users not only to share their grievances but also to claim their rights as Filipinos in these online spaces. The judicial rhetoric of the tweets 'universalized' the claim that not only the victims were affected but also those who have read their tweets since "the interests of some individuals are represented as serving the interests of all" (Tshuma et al., 2022, p. 277). For the audience, they are not only second- or third-hand witnesses because they are doing "connective witnessing" (Bunquin & Gaw, 2021). This could be considered a new form of digital acts too – of actively witnessing and participating in sociopolitical exigences in digital platforms. In this hashtag, they are not only passive readers or onlookers because the dialogical nature (Stavinoha, 2019) of the tweets advocated for the audience to create their own judgment towards the enemies.

For Twitter users who used #MassTestingNowPH, making rights claims and questioning injustice and inequalities subject them to being political subjects in new sites of citizenship performance. When they fight for their rights through forensic rhetoric, they have intensified their relationship not only with the state and its official actors, but also with other public stakeholders and incidental witnesses of their discourse (Ausserhofer

& Maireder, 2013). As Dawes stated (2017), sharing an experience of victimization transforms its audience not as a passive user of Twitter but temporary members of this hashtag community.

Honoring frontliners and factual information: Acts as epideictic rhetoric

Acts of citizenship also include performances of empathy for others who experience the same situation (Feezell et al., 2016). While Filipino Twitter users pinned the blame on elite and privileged politicians for the worsening impact of the pandemic on frontliners and the marginalized, their tweets also advocated for medical practitioners as “modern-day heroes” to commend their services to and sacrifices for the nation. Several tweets called for the prioritization of the frontliners as they were at the forefront of resolving this medical pandemic (see Figure 7). Protest tweets contained narratives of healthcare workers who got infected and those who passed on because of serving the country. The vilification of the VIPs in COVID-19 testing was used as a foundation not only to give preference to the real vulnerable population but also categorize these frontliners as more deserving of their rights to public health (Isin, 2017). This is the foundation of their call for mass testing - a policy that underscores equality for all.

Figure 7

Modern-day heroes

@yeyeboyyy: Since this tweet is getting attention, I just want to say:

1. Thank you for all our Filipino #Frontliners who deserve our gratitude. You are our modern-day heroes! ❤️☀️
2. Hindi ka dilaw, pula o asul, Pilipino ka. [Not yellow, red or blue, you are Filipino].
3. #MassTestingNowPH

@TestCOVID19PH: Your service is heroism. We wish our volunteers all the best and continuously call for the government to provide adequate support to all frontline workers—volunteer scientists included! #MassTestingNowPH

Note: The tweets featured here were from Yeh (2020) published on the 2nd of April 2020 and Scientists Unite Against COVID-19 (2020) posted last 30 March 2020.

Stavinoha (2019) also explained that in these acts of citizenship, tweets like these not only categorize people as political subjects but also, break categories which may traditionally mute some sectors in society. By calling frontliners as heroes, Twitter users catapulted them into a place where they could and should speak up for their rights because they “deserve it more than these selfish *trapos*” [traditional politicians] (@tedlt, 2020). In doing so, these acts recognized that there is a hierarchy preventing them from claiming rights and speaking up, but they can resist them.

Beyond the use of #MassTestingNowPH tweets to honor other frontliners, these tweets also honored the value of truth during these critical times. Online activists were also wary of the proliferation of pandemic disinformation which undermined their call for mass testing and an accountable government. Several tweets using #MassTestingNowPH responded to wrong information on COVID-19 specifically on the definition of mass testing, the possible cure for the virus, and the support of the public on the government's approaches (see Figure 8). With the speed of information provided by social media, this information was more likely to be consumed by ordinary citizens (Lefebvre & Armstrong, 2016) and can persuade them to mobilize (Isa & Himelboim, 2018). These tweets were not only directed to the public but also to those who proliferate fake information about the crisis and the real meaning of mass testing.

Figure 8

Pandemic disinformation

@sosyolohija: This is what we mean by #MassTestingNowPH: FREE testing for symptomatic patients, frontline health workers, and communities with confirmed cases.

#NoToVIPTesting #FreeMassTestingNow #COVID19PH

@lfs_cssp: Kapag sinabing #MassTestingNowPH, sino ba ang tinutukoy? Ang buong 109M na Pilipino ba? Hindi, ang prayoridad ay nasa:

1) patients with COVID-19 symptoms 2) frontline health workers 3) communities with positive cases at hindi dapat nauuna ang mga pulitiko at VIP! [When we say #MassTestingNowPH, who do we refer to? Is it the whole 109M Philippine population? No, the priority should be:

1) patients with COVID-19 symptoms 2) frontline health workers 3) communities with positive cases and not prioritizing politicians and VIPs]

Note: Both published on 22 March 2020, Ash Presto (2020) and the League of Filipino Students - CSSP (2020) clarified what mass testing means.

Online activists employing #MassTestingNowPH also used the platform to celebrate success and underscore the impact of online deliberation in political decision-making. On 14 April 2020, online users celebrated the decision of the government to conduct mass testing as part of its response against the pandemic (see Figure 9). This success, according to the activists, was influenced by the persistent support of the online action.

Figure 9

Successful online protests

@natoreyes: They will start #MassTestingNowPH on April 14. The persistent calls online and offline, from ordinary Filipinos to frontline health workers and supporters, produced concrete results. Keep speaking up, folks. Keep fighting. It's day 20 of the lockdown. #TulongHindiKulong

@Akbayan_Youth: Magsisimula na raw ang mass testing of patients under investigation (PUIs) and patients under monitoring (PUMs) sa April 14, 2020. At 🇵🇭 sino 🇵🇭 ang 🇵🇭 nagsabi 🇵🇭 na 🇵🇭 hindi 🇵🇭 epektibo 🇵🇭 ang 🇵🇭 pag poprotesta? #MassTestingNowPH [They will now begin the mass testing of patients under investigation (PUIs) and patients under monitoring (PUMs) on April 14, 2020. And who said that protests are not effective?]

Note: After the government's announcement of their version of mass testing, both Reyes (2020b) and Akbayan! Youth (2020) tweeted about the success of the call.

Tweets which honor the frontliners, promote the value of/for truth while blaming the VIPs and those who sow disinformation, and celebrating the initial success of the call had epideictic function. While this rhetorical strategy does not aim to call people to action, praising the honorable and blaming the shameful carry some rhetorical weight for the audience (Kennedy, 2007). Nominating medical workers as heroes became an "identity-making speech act" which affirmed and reproduced certain realities for the public (Tshuma et al., 2022). Praising them for their job amidst their suffering creates nationalistic overtones and preference for the oppressed which carry certain sentiments for its immediate audience (Crisostomo, 2021). The rhetoric of asserting the value for truth carried an epideictic function as they continued to blame those who proliferate disinformation for the ills of the nation, even beyond the pandemic. For these Twitter users, the VIPs were not the only ones to be blamed but also, those who viciously advocate for fake news during the pandemic.

These acts reflected how online activists designated themselves as truth-tellers and protectors in a pandemic of disinformation. #MassTestingNowPH became a repository of information about the pandemic and how to protect oneself in this medical crisis. Through this act, ordinary citizens who participated in this online protest were not just consumers of information but creators and factcheckers as well. As Rebecca Lefebvre and Crystal Armstrong (2016) noted, protests, even digital ones, resisted gatekeepers of information such as state-sponsored and mass media. These institutions did not have the sole ethos to deliver news because most of the informative tweets with most engagement were from ordinary citizens who used what they consumed and translated it to tweets that people

can easily digest. This rhetorical sensitivity to the language and content of the tweets manifested their awareness of the informative capacity of their messages and the affordances of Twitter as a space of informal learning.

#MassTestingNowPH and mobilization as solutions: Acts as deliberative rhetoric

While the tweets discussed above were acts of citizenship centered on questioning political orders, this section discussed the tweets which aimed to craft new spaces for performance of citizenship by claiming and enacting rights in non-traditional state infrastructures (Caraus, 2018). Digital spaces for citizenship performances allowed online activists to create hashtag communities as they relate with their concerns and assert an inclusive rhetoric of “we, the people” and “we, the connected” (Johns, 2014). Since the concerns of the pandemic were already universal (Tshuma et al., 2022), these acts aim to mobilize their immediate audiences to act on their grievances and on these inequalities.

Filipino Twitter users, through their #MassTestingNowPH tweets, did not stop in just questioning the government’s response but also suggested several actions to take. Of course, the main solution the online activists recommended was conducting mass testing in the affected population because this was backed by scientific research. Ordinary citizens proposed prioritizing mass testing for vulnerable citizens, preparing local government units’ capacities to test, tapping scientific organizations for research, and mobilizing Filipino scientists (see Figure 10). Most tweets collated relevant approaches by comparing our situation with other nations and presenting pieces of evidence backed by scientific journals or news articles.

Figure 10

Mass Testing Now!

@MassTestingNowPH: How to increase our nation’s capacity for #MassTestingNowPH:

- 👉 waive/expedite regulatory requirements for locally UP developed test kits
- 👉 tap academic and research institutions for equipment & facilities 👉
- call the natl govt via DOH/RITM to equip and mobilize our scientists

@josh4everyoung: #MassTestingNowPH because there are hundreds of asymptomatic, healthy, young people out there who can continue spreading the disease. Because mass testing and contact tracing are some of the best public health solutions to this health crisis.

@krizzy_kalerqui: Home quarantine and lockdown are simply NOT enough. Mass testing and isolation are the key factors in controlling the unseen enemy. Let's do what South Korea did! Hindi yung sasampalin ang veerus. [Not slapping the *virus* in the face.] #MassTestingNowPH

Note: Twitter users Mass Testing Now PH (2020a), Young (2020) and Miss Krizzy (2020) insisted on the necessity and urgency of mass testing as shown in their tweets published 22 March 2020, 17 March 2020, and 27 March 2020, respectively.

Netizens who supported mass testing also suggested other means of resolving the pandemic. They acknowledged that mass testing was only an initial step, but the government can initiate more solutions like building quarantine facilities and isolated hospitals, procuring protective gears, and institutionalizing effective contact tracing and communication systems. To respond to those users who questioned the veracity of their suggestions and, those who preferred the restrictive pandemic response of the government, users like @yearofthemonsy and @DrTonyLeachon insisted that these suggestions come from other countries and were proven to be effective by science:

Figure 11

Mass Testing Now!

@yearofthemonsy: The World Health Organization and a number of world leaders are pleading government to test, test, test. Many virus carriers are asymptomatic. If we want to trace the contacts, know who to admit, and curb risk, we must implement #MassTestingNowPH

@DrTonyLeachon: @ABSCBNNews Look at the countries in aqua - SK, Japan, SG, HK w flattened curves due to mass testings , early social distancing , and contact tracings without lockdowns. ECQ + mass testings = #FlattenTheCurve #MassTestingNowPH

Note: These tweets were from Mon Sy (2020) published last 24 March 2020 and Tony Leachon (2020) posted last 31 March 2020.

As these online activists performed their citizenship in this new protest space, they also reiterated the responsibilities of the government by tweeting messages that exact its accountability and its democratic values. These acts of citizenship underlined that citizenship requires asserting an individual's right to democratic participation in their government. The value of democracy was also fought for by tweets reminding the government to respect human rights even during the lockdown and for people to keep their loyalty to the nation (see Figure 12). These tweets were directed to government officials, politicians, and even to Duterte supporters who, according to tweets, blindly put themselves first before the nation. Reflective of what happens in offline spaces of protests, these online users called

their supporters to channel their anger towards exacting accountability to those who instigated these ineffective policies. They called to oust Duterte, for Health Secretary Francisco Duque III to resign, and to not vote for politicians who received preferential treatment when tests were scarce.

Figure 12

Responsibilities of the government

@jthomluna: Remember that your loyalty is to your country, and not to the President. We have an embarrassing and corrupt bureaucracy, a government run by buffoons, and unintelligent, inconsistent, foul-mouthed commander-in-chief. #OustDuterte2020 #MassTestingNowPH #275BillionBreakDown

@luimandapat: Wala naman akong ipo-promote so maghugas po tayo lagi ng kamay! ❗ ugaliin mag fact check! ❗ wag magpakalat ng fake news! ❗ gamitin ang critical thinking lalo na ngayon! ❗ maging mapagmasuri, mapagmatyag, at bantayan ang kaban ng bayan! #MassTestingNowPH [I am not promoting anything, so let's wash our hands! Always fact check! Do not spread fake news! Use critical thinking especially these days! Be mindful, aware, and on the lookout for the nation's funds!]

Note: These tweets were from Luna (2020) published last 2 April 2020 and Lui MD (2020) posted last 24 March 2020.

Beyond exacting accountability from the government, users who tweeted #MassTestingNowPH also acknowledged that resolving the pandemic is not only the government's responsibility but also a collective effort from the public. While citizenship is about asserting one's rights, it also includes being responsible for these rights as well. Isin and Nielsen (2008) defined this act of citizenship as *responsibilizing* oneself. Several tweets called for the cooperation of citizens by staying at home, following health protocols, and washing their hands. Citizens did not only claim rights but also subjected themselves to the rules and responsibilities affiliated with those rights. This act of citizenship threshed out the responsibility of the Filipino citizens to embody the values they are asking from the government and its leaders.

In relation, another enactment of citizen's rights was the call to come together and cooperate amidst a pandemic. These acts are traditionally expected of a citizen - informed about issues, active participant in political and community groups, and engaged in civic action like campaigning and voting (Wells, 2010). But certain acts were designed and maximized with consideration of Twitter's algorithm and affordances in order to assert their advocacy, reach out to new users, and also, communicate to those who already supported them (see Figure 13). Their calls include trending the hashtag, tweeting their own grievances, signing online petitions,

and communicating to policymakers, among others. Solidarity was also requested as citizen's action when they invited the people to sign their online petition for the government to prioritize mass testing and abandon their militaristic approach. Youth and student organizations also maximized this online space to call for volunteers and invite like-minded online users to a mass orientation. According to Nicole Curato et al. (2020), online spaces tend to connect like-minded individuals rather than those with different political opinions. Their call to invite online action was directed to those who already have the same opinion on the topic. These calls to action, in a different protest space, supported Caraus' (2018) argument that acts of citizenship redefined our boundaries of being political actors. And as sites for being and becoming citizens widened, more new actors would come in. This becomes a dialogical process of meaning-making for established members and new members of the #MassTestingNowPH community.

Figure 13

Call to action

@alfeomaga: Let's make #MassTestingNowPH and #NoToVIPTesting trend later tonight at 8:00 PM

@kaisaUP: Call and make a stand against the incompetencies of the officials handling the COVID-19 public health emergency! 1. Post these photos in your story tonight 2. Tag at least 5 friends and encourage them to do so as well #MassTestingNowPH #NOtoVIPTesting #NOtoEmergencyPowers

@racarreon: Let's sign this petition for COVID-19 mass testing in the Philippines!!! #MassTestingNowPH

@inaurner: Hello Twitter! Here is an updated list of all the Senators & House Members of the 18th Congress w/ their socmed & e-mail. <https://t.co/KtUL0EGvZ0> Let us reach out to our legislators to amplify our call for #MassTestingNowPH, #NoToVIPTesting & #NoToEmergencyPowers! #COVID19PH

Note: From 22-23 March 2020, Twitter users Omega (2020), KAISA UP (2020), Carreon (2020), and Boada (2020) used the platform to call on their followers and readers to action.

Hence, #MassTestingNowPH tweets also held deliberative rhetorical functions as it also offered a space for discussion and deliberation for netizens with the same cause (Kennedy, 2007). As Aleksandra Lewicki asserted, "a key feature of an act of citizenship is its capacity to evoke a response" (Lewicki, 2017, as cited in Stavinoha, 2019, p. 1217). Deliberative rhetoric stresses the arguments on which policies to support or which actions are more beneficial for the audience or the community, especially for their future. After subjecting politicians and the pandemic response on trial and honoring the medical workers for their work, #MassTestingNowPH

users have used these tweets to go beyond creating a collective identity but to suggest, if not advocate for, the best option for action.

This rhetorical function, of being able to gather in an online space to discuss possible solutions to a crisis also reflects the ability of Twitter to host users coming from different sectors but with a similar view of the issue. Its affordances, especially short word limits, algorithmic structure, and easy reply function, encourage its users to share their thoughts even in highly polarized discussions (Cañal et al. 2022). While these acts may also be employed in offline sites of protest, Twitter's free and easy access and broad reach have been advantageous to activists thus, many have been transitioning from offline to online sites of protest to respond to their immediate rhetorical situation (Labor & San Pascual, 2022; Ladia, 2022).

The deliberative rhetoric that #MassTestingNowPH employed has opened the space to different perspectives and political views. Netizens go beyond their own lives and practice their being a citizen in communicating and interacting with the public in an open space where everyone can share their thoughts with regards to plural values and experiences (Della Porta, 2005). Indeed, Donatella della Porta (2005) underscored the essence of the public working towards the public good during deliberation which was reflected by discussion on the topics stated above. Aside from the rhetorical strategy of calling on to their audiences, the call to action was not only the solution to the pandemic but also, what values Filipino leaders should possess and what the Filipinos deserve.

The rhetoric of/in #MassTestingNowPH tweets

In times of crisis like the pandemic, communication affordances and practices, and technological networks construct the “very condition of possibilities” for these political discourses (Stavinoha, 2019). For ordinary citizens against a militaristic government and with limited resources and mobility, the enactment of citizenship in online spaces revealed the inherent rhetorical strategies of activism. Users symbolically converged, collectively brainstormed, and proactively came up with alternative proposals towards the public good in a discursive manner. Since language is “the agent for social integration, the means of cultural socialization, the vehicle for social interaction, the channel for the transmission of values, and the glue that bonds people, ideas, and society” (Stewart et al., 2012, as cited in Edrington and Lee, 2018, p. 292), the #MassTestingNowPH tweets, which contained their performances of citizenship in new spaces, have also shaped the characteristics of Twitter as an ad hoc public during the height of this medical crisis.

Ad hoc publics emerge when new topics not yet being talked about by existing discourses arise (Rambukkana, 2015) and netizens pay selective attention to the certain issue (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). #MassTestingNowPH's ability to host a space with great speed and with broad access made it an essential ad hoc public during the start of the pandemic in the Philippines. For Bruns and Burgess (2011), "to include a hashtag in one's tweet is a performative statement: it brings the hashtag into being at the very moment that it is first articulated, and – as the tweet is instantly disseminated to all of the sender's followers – announces its existence" (p. 7). Thus, we can see how its users maximized its affordances for rhetorical impact.

Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) noted that moving together is a natural act for citizens who share the same values and interests not just to exchange information but also to get emotional support. This creation of an ad hoc public took place in an enclave free from institutional power and open to communicative networks among each other (Della Porta, 2005). Crisostomo (2021) argued that tweeting #PrayForMarawi functions as a performance of collective guilt during the Marawi siege. I view the #MassTestingNowPH tweets as a performance of collective and connective despair for Filipinos who want to act on the issue but were restricted because of the stay-at-home policies and Duterte's militaristic response to the pandemic. Thus, they engage those who read their tweets into a collective action.

Since these protests happened online, one striking affordance that was maximized by online users was the use of multiple hashtags. Because using multiple hashtags raises the possibility of increased visibility, more than 25% of the most engaged tweets used multiple hashtags. Aside from #MassTestingNowPH, hashtags they use include: #NoToVIPCovidTesting, #ProtestFromHome, #freemasstestingnow, #ICantUnderstandThePresident, #SolusyongMedikalHindiMilitar, #OustDuterteNow, #NoToEmergencyPowers, and #NasaanAngAyuda. During the start of the pandemic, some of these hashtags trended simultaneously allowing the Twitter trend to be filled with protest messages. This rhetorical strategy allowed these concerns to be amplified and to be shared even with networks outside this communicative sphere making incidental viewers as first-hand witnesses of the issue (Bunquin & Gaw, 2021). These online protests are now hyperlinked – making these online spaces interlinked public spheres of protests. This enables interaction between activists to their public, both followers and algorithmic audiences, as a viable interlocutor in this issue (Xiong et al., 2019). Nicholas Burbules (2002) underscored the importance of hyperlinks as navigational and semantic pathways. These pathways have potential to connect users with the same causes and increase their likelihood to communicate and associate

with one another. Fuentes (2019) added that trending topics highlight the platform's preference for quantity and intensity of tweets rather than quality which allows social movements to maximize this affordance for their cause.

Aside from hashtags, informative tweets were also designed as tweet threads (see Figure 14). This allowed a chain of related tweets to be maximized to become informal learning systems (Gleason, 2013) on Twitter. Users can easily follow the thread of information and learn about the arguments of one side.

Figure 14.

Thread of information

@masstestnowph: Bakit kailangan ng #MassTestingNowPH? [Why is #MassTestingNowPH needed?]

A THREAD:

@scoutmagph: We want #MassTestingNowPH and here's why (a thread)

Note: Information threads on mass testing were curated by users like Mass Testing Now PH (2020b) and SCOUT (2020).

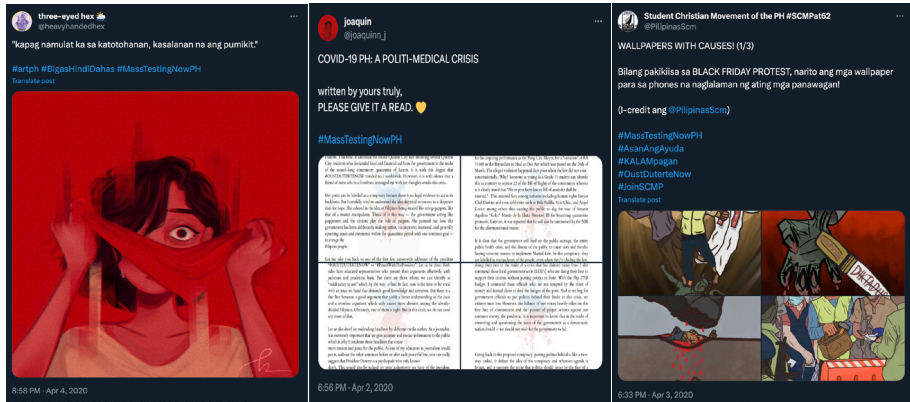
As an emerging ad hoc public, this informational capacity of Twitter was also maximized by activists to show how information can engage not just existing members of the organizations but also those who believe otherwise and those making their political opinions. Benjamin Gleason (2013) added that supplying information can make online users not just informed but also, publicly engaged. Aside from information threads, #MassTestingNowPH tweets contain evidence backed by scientific journals or news articles supported by hyperlinks. Aside from the ethos of using scientific evidence available on the internet, researchers found that hyperlinks help users to create decisions based on the information found in these links (Gleason, 2013). The distribution of information (i.e., personal opinions, news articles, scientific journals, experts' opinions, and experiments) in an online platform was deemed to be collaborative, participatory, and often driven by interest (Gleason, 2013). But this setup may also be vulnerable to disinformation. Gleason (2013) mentioned how online public discourse is a good opportunity for learning beyond traditional educational systems, a function that ad hoc publics greatly benefit from.

Interestingly, most of the tweets with high engagement contained not just verbal language of protests but also audiovisual materials (i.e., pictures and videos) to serve as evidence or entertainment. In fact, 134 of the 286 top tweets contained infographics, posters, video, or audio materials. Users added memes, videos, music videos, oratorical pieces, and even TikTok videos to their tweets to prove their point (see Figure 15). Ying Xiong et

al, (2019) highlighted the essence of social media platforms allowing users to create their own content without censorship. This is one of the reasons why some opted to conduct protests online because of a relatively lack of surveillance when compared to traditional physical protest spaces. Further, online users do not just consume this content, they also contribute to it and create user-general posts that allow them to include themselves in this meaning-making (Xiong et al., 2019).

Figure 15

Arts in the time of pandemic



Note: The illiberal nature of the COVID-19 response in the Philippines drew critique through digital forms of art (Three-Eyed Hex, 2020; Student Christian Movement of the Philippines, 2020) and essays (Joaquin, 2020).

As these online activists maximized the affordances of Twitter to their advantage, they have also transformed the relationship among citizens in this space. Isin and Ruppert (2020) mentioned how acts of citizenship can also refashion the relationship of the actors to one another and to their environment. In this case, Twitter’s hashtag has become a site of deliberation among like-minded citizens and contention to those who believed otherwise. By developing judgment through forensic rhetoric, honoring the roles of medical frontliners through epideictic rhetoric, and calling people to mobilize using deliberative rhetoric, Filipino Twitter users have created an online community of activists who are willing to deliberate on the attainment of their causes (Wang & Caskey, 2016) and speak of each other’s democratic aspirations. For those with similar opinions, they have created a collective identity focused on “I, we, they have a right to” as they asserted their rights and enacted their citizenship claims in these spaces (Isin & Ruppert, 2020).

The ad hoc public created by #MassTestingNowPH also witnessed people coming from diverse backgrounds from traditional influential

sectors like politicians, celebrities, and media outlets to contemporary influential figures like activist groups, content creators, and online opinion leaders. Even ordinary citizens, with only hundreds of followers, influenced the discussion. This supported Zizi Papacharissi's argument (2004) that online discussion decentralizes communication and enhances civic engagement. Della Porta (2005) highlighted that online deliberation is all about discussion among equals, and #MassTestingNowPH exhibited such openness to the access and the speaking rights of citizens who want to be part of the deliberation. It is observed that discussion under the hashtag tends to overcome traditional media gatekeepers and validates grassroots participation to escape government censorship (Isa & Himelboim, 2018). After all, this political equality in online discussion proves to support deliberative democracy (Curato et al., 2020).

Since the interest of the public had been captured, the ad hoc public, being "a patchwork of overlapping public spheres" (Bruns, 2008, as cited in Dawes, 2017, p. 185), not only gathered support but also dissent. Isin and Ruppert (2020) noted that digital sites can also be

striated in the sense that it is differentiated, fractured, segmented, and crisscrossing and in the sense that it embodies a multiplicity of authorizations, controls, filters, choke points, and boundaries. (p. 37)

These characteristics also influenced the kind of protest sites hashtags could turn out to be. While there was collective agreement on the hashtag #MassTestingNowPH towards the same goal, this ad hoc public can be a site of contention as well as it was swarmed by dissenters and government supporters too. Replies under politicians' tweets argued that they should be supportive of the government's response since they are a part of it—their own definition of acts of citizenship. Netizens who opposed the call for mass testing called these opinion leaders as biased, credit grabbers, communists, stupid, and fools. These name-calling strategies disregarded several core pillars of deliberation—being rational and being respectful (Strandberg & Gronlund, 2018) and proved what Mustafa Oz et al. (2017) mentioned that online spaces can be mired by incivility and impoliteness. These can endanger the created hashtag community in terms of membership and participation (Stivale, 1997, as cited in Papacharissi, 2004).

Netizens argued about the definition of mass testing and the requirements of establishing such a system. Some opposed the call for mass testing stating that the government cannot test all Filipinos and it is a waste of funds to do that, a rhetoric mimicking that of the government in their dissent towards mass testing. Even the term "mass testing" is being

contested, but those who support argued that terms might be changed by the nature of the call, to have tests accessible to those who need it, remained. Those who oppose mass testing insisted that it is impossible, stating the depletion of government funds, the readiness of the country, and the lack of laboratory resources. Some asserted that other countries did not prioritize mass testing but instead focused on lockdowns and requiring people to stay at home.

These dissent and contention made the space more conflicting than actual offline protest spaces. #MassTestingNowPH, as an ad hoc public, allowed viewers and readers to participate in an online political debate (Cammaerts & van Audenhove, 2005). While other researchers believe that contention can further polarize a group, Simone (2010) asserted that democracy should not focus on consensus - or having the same values as a group - since this produces hegemonies that may derail the main intention of deliberation. But instead, deliberation's main intention is to listen to as many voices, especially excluded ones, and encourage a variety of perspectives on how to resolve the matter at hand.

In this ad hoc public, the convergence of activists and their ideas served as a form of meaning-making for like-minded individuals towards a shared identity, goals, and a public judgment. For Price-Thomas and Turnbull, the rhetorical function of hashtags lies on how they negotiate with interlocutors in establishing their social distance from one another - "either bring individuals closer together (-), maintain their distance (=) or drive them further apart (+)" (2017, p. 277). Simone (2010) mentioned that online deliberation allowed citizens to construct a sense of community even if they are physically distant. Curato et al. (2020) asserted that deliberation happens when individuals practice deliberative agency - that even if an audience is not physically present—they are aware of who are their potential interlocutors. In this case, while #MassTesting served as an interactive space, these tweets are also geared towards the public to include them in the discussion and to the government to demand their rights as citizens. We see the synergy between online movements and social media in this situation. The possible interlocutors become global as Twitter allows for a global reach. John (2014) underlined that this collective sentiment and identity creates a rhetoric of "we, the people" and "we, the connected" which can be considered an act of citizenship too. But while these interlocutors are situated elsewhere in the world. The rhetorical functions of tweets allowed them to imagine a community where they are physically close to one another, as if in a traditional site of contention.

Caja Thimm, et al (2014) added that online deliberation may also emerge a new social context of everyday life that may pluralize means to

communicate as citizens and allows this free flow of expression to all citizens. The openness of the spaces also persuaded everyone to share their thoughts and insights towards cultivating the public judgment of deliberation too. But another deliberative opportunity was raised in terms of the impact of online protests on socio-political affairs. Dissenters to mass testing stated that discussion on policies should be made in political institutions rather than in online platforms like Twitter. Further, these netizens discounted the impact of online protests stating that they did not have concrete impact on political decision-making. This assertion that online protests may not be as effective or impactful reflects the findings of Tremayne (2014) that online movements received these doubts in terms of impact. As Bosch (2017) mentioned, Twitter as an ad hoc public allowed for a site of contention wherein individual citizens are free to reconfigure the space for their own use. The online platform allowed its users to deliberate and also, mobilize support and engage with one another not just on the problems but also the solutions to the pandemic. “[T]weeting may intensify the relationship between political actors with other stakeholders, as it facilitates an easy and continuous discourse free from the constraints of official (and unofficial) gatherings” (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013, p. 292). Further, Fuentes (2019) argued that Twitter and its hashtags can lend “enduring ephemerality” to the online protest which means that even if the interest in this ad hoc public die, it can also become digital archives where movements can go back to when they assert the same cause in the future. Indeed, as citizens explore new spaces for contention, they maximize affordable, accessible, and amorphous platforms and its affordances to push for their advocacy.

Conclusion

Rodrigo Duterte’s militaristic response to the COVID-19 pandemic served as the rhetorical exigence for many Filipinos who chose to use Twitter’s affordance, specifically #MassTestingNowPH, to air their grievances and assert their rights to effective and efficient medical services and governance. With this socio-political environment shaping the ways and means citizens could protest, they used their tweets as acts of citizenship performed in new spaces of contention. The design of #MassTestingNowPH allowed its members to “challenge the system, learn, socialize, work, play, network, do politics and exercise citizenship” (Ben-Hassine, 2019, p. 119). In this case, these tweets have become a performance of and an extension of their citizenships.

In the words of Isin and Ruppert (2020), enacting acts of citizenship in online spaces connote both being a subject to power and a subject of power. The first requires obedience and submission to the rights and

responsibilities of being Filipino citizens in the digital space. But the latter acknowledges that being a citizen in digital space also involves assuming an agency of power - that their actions and language matter in a democracy. We see this contemporary form of political subjectivity as citizens in how they assert their rights with their use of #MassTestingNowPH.

While Twitter is a contemporary form of protest space, we still observed acts of citizenship which are practiced in traditional protest spaces such as calling out the privilege of the politicians, advocating for values like equality, social justice, transparency, and accountability, pointing out the wrong approaches of the government, offering solutions, mobilizing for the common good (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). These acts are rooted in the rights and responsibilities of citizens as members of a nation. But the migration of protests from offline to online space also affected the acts of citizenship enacted by members of the hashtag community. Candice Edrington and Nicole Lee (2018) noted that the affordances of social media impact on the communication practices such as asserting one's rights as citizens and competing with ideas in a society. We saw new strategies of protests like trending the hashtag, communicating to both followers and the public, online petitions, reaching out to politicians' online accounts, and keeping archives and threads of information, among others (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). They used the platform to encourage other online users to trend the hashtag, join the protest from home, and attend educational online meetings. These acts in online spaces reflect what Isin (2008) noted that the concept of citizenship is ever changing and is continuously informed by the webs of rights and responsibilities in the different ethical, political, medical, and social environments that the citizens are in.

But aside from the acts of citizenship employed through the tweets, they also carried rhetorical functions that may shape citizen relationships and the rhetorical situation in the online platform. Through their tweets, they were able to amplify the emotions of the audience and put judgment on the government's response to the pandemic and the preference given to VIPs like senators and other officials for COVID-19 testing. These political actors and pandemic situations were endorsed as the main enemy of ordinary people, especially the medical frontliners and the marginalized ones. This forensic rhetoric enabled universalization of a common sentiment for the audience of the hashtag. Hence, it was also able to give way to epideictic rhetoric - praising certain actors for a job well done. In this case, medical workers were honored as they deserve prioritization in terms of healthcare since they were the most vulnerable population during those times. Deliberative rhetoric was observed in advocating for the best solution for the pandemic and mobilizing fellow citizens to enact their citizenships too in online and

offline spaces. While we see how Twitter's affordances shape how people protested during the pandemic, the rhetorical power of their tweets also changed the technological environment of Twitter, shaping its function not only as a space to share personal stories but also, a site wherein citizenship is enacted, and persuasion is performed. On the other hand, Twitter also provided "enormous velocity to the performative force of utterances" (Isin & Ruppert, 2020, p. 59) in that tweets could be read even in distant places, connect strangers with the same belief or attitude, and allow tweets to reverberate with users in an almost phenomenal speed.

Indeed, hashtags as ad hoc publics are part of a system of real-time, immediate, gut responses as well as sustained mobilization, their temporal and affective dynamics are important resources to fight hegemonic strategies that aim to dissipate civic engagement back into smooth consensus and apathy. (Fuentes, 2019, p. 92)

Examining #MassTestingNowPH depicted the synergy between and among acts of citizenship, rhetorical functions, and hashtags as ad hoc publics. The current medical and political crises revealed the citizens' resilience and resourcefulness as they continue to assert their advocacy in more challenging times. They practiced their citizenship in new spaces like social media that allow different tactics and a wider reach. In these enactments of citizenship, Twitter's hashtags are reconfigured as a site wherein citizens symbolically gather to assert their rights. As they open new communicative infrastructures of protests, these sites are not definite and can also become nodes where possible future contention on the same or related issues may arise (Rambukkana, 2015). And this process of continuous contention also supplies a public spirit to continue their fight towards their advocacy (Min, 2007). Therefore, to employ #MassTestingNowPH is not only to assert rights to an efficient government response during the pandemic but ultimately, to perform their Filipino citizenship, including their responsibilities and agency in, and to signal their belonging to new, evolving spaces for protest and nation-building.

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