



Article

Covert political campaigning: Mapping the scope, scale, and cost of cross-platform election influence operations

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Abstract

This study investigates gray areas of contemporary political campaigning from a political economy perspective. Using qualitative field and digital methods, computational methods, and economic modeling, it analyzes the scope, scale, and cost of commissioning

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social media influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. The researchers find that there is a high demand for influencers to campaign for candidates, characterized by premium and dynamic incentives under informal and obscure arrangements. We identified 1425 influencer accounts across the four social media platforms that engage in covert political campaigning and categorized them into seven types. The cost of these influencer-led campaigns is estimated to range from USD 27M following a pay-per-post compensation model, to USD 10.9M using a retainer model. This article serves as a model for both election research and election policy by providing a modular framework that addresses knowledge gaps in various country contexts.

Keywords

Computational method, cross-platform, disinformation, economic modeling, elections, field research, influence operations, political campaign, political economy, social media influencer

Introduction

Political campaigns used to have well-defined boundaries—a publicly known campaign team with a coherent campaign message and a repertoire of communication strategies, ranging from participating in media interviews and debates, to targeted advertising and ground campaigning. These boundaries have expanded in the last decade, making it hard to demarcate the actors, messages, and tactics of the campaign. Campaigns started to enlist non-traditional campaigners to extend their reach such as hyper-partisan media (Starbird et al., 2023), social media influencers (Goodwin et al., 2023), and partisan online communities (Sinpeng et al., 2020). Candidates and their intermediaries have been blatantly manipulating facts and seeding misleading narratives to gain political advantage (Soares and Recuero, 2021). Some campaigns have commissioned covert operatives to do “black ops” campaigning online to manufacture support for their candidates, or coordinate attacks against the opposition (Keller et al., 2020; Ong and Tapsell, 2022).

These developments make it difficult to ascertain and attribute political communication as they trespass the normative and regulatory boundaries of political campaigning. The entanglement of official and unofficial campaign efforts, such as those led by covert campaigners like influence operations (IO) (Udupa, 2024) provides candidates plausible deniability for unscrupulous campaign tactics and disguises the involvement of complicit actors as political participation. These complications also pose a challenge for empirical research in identifying the units of analysis, defining boundary conditions, and linking election outcomes to political communication. The same issues affect policy-makers and civil society in their election monitoring and regulation of campaign spending and election integrity (Tucker, 2023).

This study proposes an interdisciplinary approach to define the boundaries of political campaigns that fall within the gray areas of contemporary political campaigning. It analyzes the case of political campaigning by social media influencers in the 2022

Philippine Elections, focusing on the scope, scale, and cost of enlisting influencers as campaigners. First, it investigates the political-economic conditions that demarcate the scope of influencers commissioned for political campaigns through digital ethnography and qualitative field research. Second, it identifies the scale of the network of influencers likely involved in covert political campaigns across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok through multi-dimensional indicators using computational methods. Third, using data from the first two components of the research, it builds an economic model that estimates the cost of employing influencers for political campaigns in the elections at the national level.

The researchers found that the scope of covert political campaigning is defined by a high demand and a finite supply of influencers to campaign for political candidates. The market is characterized by premium and dynamic incentives for influencers with the right combination of social capital and political notoriety under informal and obscure arrangements by political intermediaries. Based on 18 network, behavioral, and content indicators, we identify 1425 influencer accounts across four social media platforms that engage in political campaigning for presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the elections, clustered into seven types based on their communication strategies. The cost of these influencer-led campaigns is estimated to range from USD 27M following a pay-per-post compensation model, to USD 10.9M using a retainer model that accounts for influencers commissioned on a fixed but regular price for their service.

This article presents a conceptual and methodological framework for defining the boundaries of the constantly moving field of political campaigns, with influencers as exemplary covert political campaigners. It builds on the nascent research on political influencers (Riedl et al., 2023), and the broader mediatization of politics (Esser and Strömbäck, 2013) by new media logics and their strategic use for political leverage. A critical contribution of the research is its interdisciplinary methodology that integrates qualitative social science and computational communication methods, which is uncommon in communication research (see Ophir et al., 2020) and extends its empirical utility using economic modeling. This article serves as a model for both election research and election policy by providing a modular framework that addresses gaps in knowledge about the scope/scale/cost of covert IO specific to each country or regional context.

From political campaigns to influence operations

Political campaigns are a defining character of democratic elections by informing voters of available political choices, and mobilizing electoral participation among citizens (Norris et al., 1999). While these functions persist over time, political campaigns have evolved given changing political fields, media ecosystems, and voter networks. The first stage is characterized by party campaigning through the partisan press (Norris et al., 1999) that engages the existing voter base “rather than bring new voters and change their original party affiliation” (Eibl and Gregor, 2019: 4). Parties were front and center in the campaigns, communicated through local partisan newspapers and in-person communication.

The second stage paved the way for professionalized campaigning that expanded partisan communication to mass audiences through mass media like radio and television (Norris et al., 1999). Political specialists also shifted the campaign focus from

parties to candidates (Farrell, 2006). The third stage introduced personalized campaigning that targets specific voter segments (Norris et al., 1999) through narrowcasting and microtargeting (Semetko and Tworzecki, 2017). Political marketing professionals integrate data-driven techniques to centralize campaign operations and develop multi-media strategies to communicate across various voter profiles and needs (Esser and Strömbäck, 2013).

More recent developments in political campaigning draw but significantly depart from these norms and practices. Disinformation has been a distinct feature of major political campaigns since 2016 across North America (Linvill and Warren, 2020; Starbird et al., 2023), Latin America (Soares and Recuero, 2021), and Asia (Ong and Tapsell, 2022; Udupa, 2024). These political campaigns covertly produce and disseminate “false, inaccurate, or misleading information” (European Commission, 2018: 3) to manipulate public opinion and gain political leverage. Disinformation is part of the classical propaganda toolbox (Miller and Robinson, 2019), except that it is now widely used in both authoritarian and democratic contexts and involves digital manipulation of information (i.e. fake news, memes, deep fakes) and computational propaganda techniques (i.e. bots, trolls, algorithmic manipulation) (Woolley and Howard, 2018). It is designed to manufacture public support (Keller et al., 2020; Linvill and Warren, 2020), intensify ideological, racial, and ethnic divisions (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Yadav et al., 2023), and legitimize undemocratic policies (Sinpeng et al., 2020; Soares and Recuero, 2021).

Another key development is the rise of proxy political campaigners. Politicians and parties on and off election season harness the network of hyper-partisan media outlets (Starbird et al., 2023), ideological communities (Marwick and Lewis, 2017), and partisan audiences (Sinpeng et al., 2020) to co-opt public opinion, recruit supporters, mobilize their base. Influencers are also new political operatives who level and interpret mainstream politics for their audiences (Schmuck et al., 2022) and in the process, “legitimize and amplify political messages” (Goodwin et al., 2023: 1613). These novel political actors are mobilized for both above-board and illicit campaigns, except that in the latter case, their involvement is undisclosed and their strategies straddle between persuasive partisan framing and manipulative strategies (Sinpeng et al., 2020; Starbird et al., 2023; Woolley, 2022).

These emergent forms of political campaigning introduce new dynamics that challenge or complicate the historically defined boundaries of campaigning. First, campaigns are increasingly decentralized from the party and politicians, to professionals and intermediaries outside the political establishment. Political consultants and marketers are already integrated into contemporary political offices and parties (Esser and Strömbäck, 2013; Farrell, 2006; Norris et al., 1999), but disinformation campaigns and networked propaganda introduced further outsourcing of campaign work to intermediaries characterized as covert or in the shadows (Semetko and Tworzecki, 2017). These political operatives complement professionals who work on the above-board campaign through underhanded messaging and “black ops” infrastructure (Ong and Tapsell, 2022; Udupa, 2024). Because trolls, hyper-partisan media, and influencers are embedded in digital social networks, their campaign strategies are “a more hybrid form, demonstrating both top-down and bottom-up dynamics that are more akin to cultivation and improvisation” (Starbird et al., 2023: 1).

Second, the normalization of disinformation and the multiplicity of off-book campaigners expand the latitude of campaign messaging outside of the establishment platform. Political communication in these boundary-expanding political campaigns is not restricted to the party line and can oscillate between disinformation and hyper-partisan propaganda, or between issue-specific messaging and infotainment packaging. For instance, campaigns that employ influencers have less control over the message as the latter attempts to balance “producing authentic content and meeting the expectations of a political campaign” (Goodwin et al., 2023: 1623–1624). As such, it is difficult to evaluate which political messages are campaign-driven, user-generated, or in-between as unofficial campaigners exercise more leeway in their content to maintain persuasiveness while accomplishing their political objective.

Given its expanded scope and repertoire of strategies, political campaigns operate more as “influence operations,” a form of propaganda that seeks to “undermine information systems and manipulate civic discourse” (Bradshaw and Henle, 2021: 4598). These operations use a range of tactics from outright disinformation to the coordinated mobilization of support for or threat to specific personalities or groups. States and political groups have been engaged in IO for decades (e.g. state-sponsored campaign for the invasion of Iraq, corporate campaigns promoting climate change denialism) (Yadav et al., 2023). However, it is only now that IO capitalizes on digital media infrastructures such as data, algorithms, and networks that not only advance their tactics but also make it more accessible to study and for some actors, to emulate (Bradshaw and Henle, 2021).

A key characteristic of IO is the covertness or non-transparency of its operations, its funders, and target audiences (Yadav et al., 2023), which in the context of political campaigns gives candidates and parties plausible deniability of their involvement (Fallorina et al., 2023). IO became more mainstream in the aftermath of the 2016 US Election, with evidence of foreign interference by Russian bots and trolls, and domestic manipulation through political microtargeting by the Trump campaign and Cambridge Analytica (Woolley and Howard, 2018). Covert, systematic manipulation was also documented in the 2016 and 2019 Philippine Elections (Fallorina et al., 2023), 2019 Indian Elections (Yadav et al., 2023), and 2018 Brazilian Elections (Soares and Recuero, 2021) through a variety of strategies such as astroturfing, disinformation, and threats of political violence in social media platforms and chat apps.

This research focuses on the Philippines as an advanced case of the boundary-expanding trajectory of contemporary political campaigning. The wholesale transfer of American democratic processes to an otherwise underdeveloped Philippine nation-state led to fragile political institutions, elite concentration, and entrenched patron-clientelism (Teehankee, 2017). These conditions positioned elite-owned mass media to play a significant part in political processes. Some manifestations of media logic serving as a proxy for political logic include the personality-centric character of Philippine politics (Teehankee, 2017), the prevalence of celebrity politicians, and the heavy hand of political consultants in political campaigns (Perron, 2010).

The Philippines is also an early adopter of digital media for political communication (Lorenzana and Soriano, 2021), and later on a first mover in using disinformation campaigns (Fallorina et al., 2023). It opened the gates for “gray” campaigning through state-sponsored IO (Ong and Tapsell, 2022), participatory disinformation campaigns

(Sinpeng et al., 2020), and covert and overt influencer engagement (Soriano and Gaw, 2022) across three election cycles (Fallorina et al., 2023). Election regulation, however, primarily focuses on campaign spending caps on advertising, including digital and social media ads, and excludes most non-advertising forms of campaign communication. Then-candidate-now-president Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos allegedly spent zero on Facebook advertising (Salazar, 2022) despite being the most visible in the platform. Recent regulation requires reporting contracted “social media associates” such as influencers (Commission on Elections, 2021) but no candidate has complied with this mandate.

These developments in political campaigning, and in political communication, more broadly, challenge the heuristics that researchers use in studying elections and campaigning such as only analyzing candidate-owned and paid media assets or elite actor messaging. Even when there is theoretical interest in the expanded scope of campaigns, the covert aspects of the campaign are more difficult to empirically identify and evaluate, except retroactively (Tucker, 2023). This research attempts to empirically demarcate the boundaries of contemporary political campaign by studying influencers involved in covert political campaigning by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How are influencers commissioned for covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine Elections?

RQ2: What is the extent of their participation in covert political campaigning across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok?

RQ3: What is the estimated cost of commissioning influencers for covert political campaigning?

Methodology

The research takes a political economy lens that builds on scholarship on organized social media manipulation by states and political parties (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018) and disinformation economies operating within government and through commercial enterprises (Ong and Tapsell, 2022). It also responds to Abhishek’s (2021) call for an “institutional approach” to propaganda research of identifying complicit actors and institutions such as political parties and platform companies. We investigate the underpinnings of IO as a political enterprise that exploits existing economic conditions (i.e. gig economy, creator economy) and weak regulatory structures (i.e. campaign finance, platform governance). Specifically for the 2022 Philippine electoral races, political campaign infrastructures are already buttressed by the disinformation industry (Fallorina et al., 2023) and the marketing and public relations (PR) industries (Ong and Cabañes, 2019). These two industries are complicating the boundaries of political campaigning while also being useful proxies to our analysis through their normative industry practices, strategic playbooks, pricing schemes, and so on.

This research focuses on investigating the covert mobilization of social media influencers in political campaigns who are “content creators that endorse a political position,

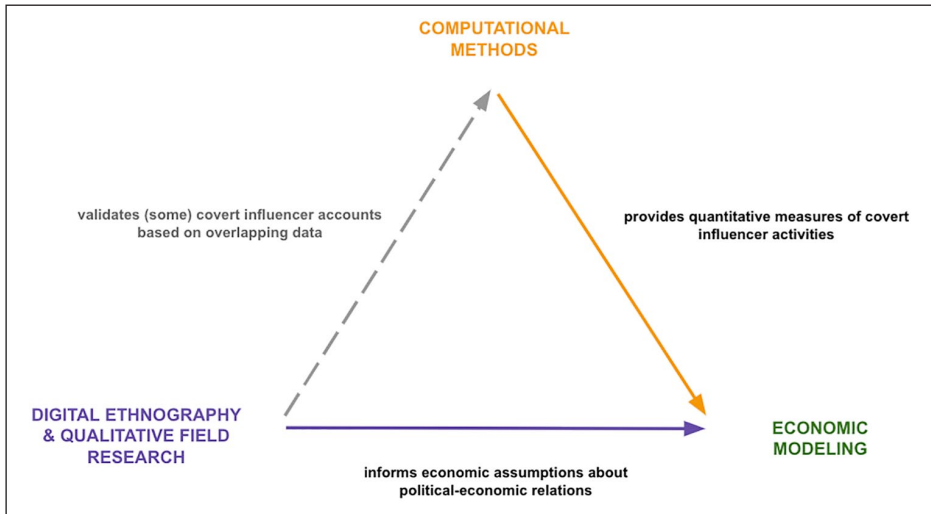


Figure 1. Triangulation of methods.

social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share” on social media (Riedl et al., 2023: 2). We limit our definition to influencers whose popularity is *native* to social media through a distinct set of communicative mechanisms (i.e. authenticity, intimacy) (Hudders et al., 2020) and we excluded mainstream opinion leaders like journalists and politicians as they confound the “alternative” influence exclusive to novel political actors like influencers (Soriano and Gaw, 2022). Influencers represent boundary-crossing campaign activities by coordinating with but operating outside of the official campaign (Goodwin et al., 2023), often promoting strategic but “gray” political messages (Soriano and Gaw, 2022). Despite this ambiguity, they are more visible than other covert operatives given their public figure status (Woolley, 2022) and have clearer economic incentives in participating in campaigns such as direct payments, platform monetization, and political access (Goodwin et al., 2023; Woolley, 2022).

Platforms are also part of the political economy because they define the status of “influencers” based on their monetization rules, and govern “permissible” covert political campaigning. As such, the researchers took a cross-platform approach and examined different influencer campaign activities across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. At the time of research, all these platforms were fully accessible for data collection through various tools: CrowdTangle for Facebook, Twitter academic API, YouTube Data Tools, and Apify for TikTok.

Following these considerations, the study engages in an interdisciplinary methodology that triangulates the methods below to generate estimates of the scope, scale, and cost of the operations (Figure 1). Triangulation was designed to ground the assumptions of the economic modeling (Method 3) based on real political-economic relations (i.e. transactions, scope of work, rates/fees, etc.) derived from the qualitative field research (Method 1) and to provide the multiplier statistics (i.e. number of accounts, followers,

post count, duration) about identified covert influencer accounts from the computational methods (Method 2). Methods 1 and 2 are executed consecutively, with the former partially validating the list of covert influencer accounts of the latter.

Digital ethnography and qualitative field research

The first set of methods aims to establish the actors involved in the operations, their relationships with each other, and their scope of work in the political campaigns. The researchers first conducted a digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) of the top three presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the elections from October 2021 (filing of candidacy) to May 2022 (elections) on official social media channels. The ethnography analyzed the official campaign vis-a-vis the influencers linked to the campaigns and used it to identify initial leads for the field research (Supplemental Appendix A for protocols).

The researchers then facilitated 21 semi-structured interviews (Supplemental Appendix B for guide) with a wide array of actors involved in covert political campaigning, specifically influencers (11), campaign managers and staff (5), and political and advertising consultants (5) (Supplemental Appendix C for profiles). Securing interviews was difficult given the covert nature of the operations and hostile partisan divides in the election, requiring the researchers to triangulate the interview data across these different actors. Because our data are based on accounts of informants who *willingly disclosed* their covert involvement, we note that there may be other mechanisms of recruitment we have not accounted for. These two methods sketch the scope of the political influencer “market” and the political-economic dynamics that shape it.

Computational methods

The second set of methods seeks to define the scale of the operations online by identifying the influencers likely engaged in covert political campaigns and their characteristics and strategies. The researchers designed a multi-dimensional framework comprising 18 indicators to examine influencers involved in the campaigns based on their network, behavioral, and content characteristics (Table 1, see Supplemental Appendices D–F for details). These indicators were derived from a review of propaganda, disinformation, and political campaign research to capture the diversity of influencer political communication. The data are derived from a large comprehensive dataset of all users engaged in election discourse, from which a dataset of influencers accounts was created across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok ($n=44,530$) based on the platforms’ minimum follower account for monetization (10,000 followers, except for YouTube with 1000 subscribers minimum).

Each influencer account was scored in each of the 18 indicators, with scores normalized on a scale of 0 to 1. Given an overall score weighted equally across the dimensions, the researchers identified the upper-bound outlier accounts per platform as evidence of anomalous political behavior characteristic of covert political campaigning. This threshold is based on the *distribution of social media activities* of all influencers engaged in electoral discourse and may be adjusted given more data points (i.e.

Table 1. Eighteen indicators of covert political campaigning based on network, behavioral, and content dimensions.

Indicator	Definition
Network	
Centrality	Location of account in a network-based degree, eigenvector, and betweenness centrality
Edgweight	Measures strength of relationship, with abnormally high scores indicative of coordination
Co-tweet and co-share network	Number of connections to users identified to be tweeting or sharing the same content, signaling coordination work
Connectedness to disinformation source	Number of connections to known websites and pages sharing disinformation
Behavioral	
Having same-name accounts	Accounts who possess a name similar to professional news sources to make themselves appear credible or legitimate
Distributed amplification	Practice of sharing the same link with other users simultaneously to manipulate trends
Post recurrence	Practice of sharing the same content within the same period, without directly linking the original source of the content
Sharing from known fake news sources	Number of times an actor shared content from known fake news sources
Pseudonymity	Accounts that appear non-political but slip in political content
Sock puppetry	Practice of having an account across multiple platforms
Commenter behavior	Practice on YouTube of having the same set of commenters or comments across the same videos
Content	
Partisanship	Overt association with partisan identities, personalities, and ideas
Antagonism and de-legitimization	Undermines the credibility and discredits the work of the media, academics, civil society, etc.
Misogyny and prejudice	Attacks individuals and organizations based on their identity
Conspiracy and manipulation	Promotes content deemed as deceptive, misleading, and conspiratorial
Self-ascription	Ascribes accounts as an “independent” or “alternative” source of the news and political opinion

comments, follower-following network). Additional analysis of K-means clustering and qualitative content analysis (Supplemental Appendix G for protocols) was also conducted among the shortlisted influencers to group them into types based on their pattern of cross-platform strategies and behavior. Note that only 13 of 18 multi-dimensional indicators that apply across the four platforms were used for the clustering, but

the earlier process of shortlisting used the 18 indicators and platform-specific cut-offs. The result from the second set of methods is to generate a quantitative estimate of the scale of covert influencer campaigning using social media metrics.

Economic modeling

The third method takes the data from the first two methods and uses them to estimate the cost to commission influencers in presidential and vice-presidential campaigns in the elections. The economic model is based on the market assumptions from the qualitative methods and the market quantities from the computational methods, calculated against marketing industry pricing from a sample of proprietary influencer rate cards ($n=300$) (Supplemental Appendix H for procedures). These influencer rate cards are primarily for commercial brand partnerships and do not necessarily capture known and unknown pricing factors distinct to political campaigning (i.e. partisanship, political capital, reputational risks, etc.). Average pricing may also vary based on the firms negotiating the rates (i.e. size of business, contract bundling, intermediaries, etc.). The industry rates are our conservative baseline price given the finite supply of influencers in the market in demand by multiple political actors at different levels of electoral races. The industry price per post was derived as a polynomial function of the number of followers, which allows the researchers to account for how follower count affects per-post pricing in a non-linear way. Because the platforms for commercial influencer marketing differ from political influencer marketing, the price was set agnostic of platforms.

Covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine Elections

The following discussion presents an overview of the scope, scale, and cost of covert political campaigning by social media influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections. From the findings of the digital ethnography, it is critical to establish that the official electoral campaign and the influencer-led campaign operate separately, with the latter echoing the message of the former without directly tagging or mentioning the candidate. It looks “grassroots” by design with the influencers endorsing political candidates but the candidates generally do not acknowledge their endorsement. This stands in contrast to self-identified “volunteer” influencers who openly campaign for candidates in coordination with their respective campaign teams. Many influencers, however, are in the gray area as they perform campaign work in various degrees of covertness and thus, are difficult to demarcate from civic political participation. This section focuses on the triangulating evidence of their participation in covert political campaigning and defining the purview of their campaign work.

Scope of campaign

Social media influencers are in high demand during election seasons according to the research informants. The influencers interviewed are aware of other influencers commissioned by opposing political camps, while campaign managers enlist influencers as

part of their campaign strategy. Cognizant of this opportunity, micro-influencers—those with smaller following (10,000–50,000 followers)—create engaging election content to attract commissions from official campaigns, in addition to platform monetization. Because there are a finite number of influencers who are willing to do this covert campaign work, influencers often have the upper hand setting rates, with their services considered “premium.”

Findings from the interviews identify six common tasks asked of influencers as part of the campaign: amplifying campaign messages (e.g. share/repost official campaign posts), creating bespoke campaign content (e.g. endorse the merits of the candidate), disparaging competition (e.g. react negatively to speeches of opposing candidates), debunking truth claims (e.g. fact-check claims in interviews), opining on political topics (e.g. discuss candidates’ position on issues), and spinning narratives (e.g. exaggerate candidate performance or criticisms). While other campaign operatives can perform these tasks too, influencers are preferred for their platform expertise of producing content bespoke to the platform vernacular (e.g. splice clips on TikTok to compare two candidates) and their direct relationship with their followers (e.g. exclusive interviews with candidates).

There are no set market rates for this kind of work, but historical performance, social capital, and political notoriety are some of the factors that influence differences in compensation. Established influencers with long-standing relationships with their political clients and are already on “retainer” or “payroll.” Others are hired on a “trial” pay-per-post basis and are assessed for retention if their campaign content “clicks” with the target audience. Several informants identify big-name influencers that could be “bought” for exorbitant amounts, with “millions paid to them because they are famous, they are well-known . . . [they] get to set the price” (Political consultant 1). Influencers are also hired for their political notoriety, with one political strategist preferring “angsty” influencers, as “political PR, or persuasion for that matter is always a two-handed discipline. There’s an open hand that always pulls up and there’s a fist that should smite your enemies” (Political consultant 2).

Incendiary language and aggressive strategies are encouraged to signal credibility and authenticity among disaffected audiences of traditional politics. Anonymous influencers are also sought after given their uninhibited ability to engage in partisan commentary while evading risks and scrutiny. Additional incentives are provided based on seasonality and openness to the reputational risk of changing camps:

The team of [redacted] offered me PhP 25,000 (USD 495) at the start of election (period) but I said no. Three months before the start of the election they offered me PhP 50,000 (USD 977), I said no. Last two months of the elections, they offered me PhP 250,000 (USD 4,872) but I said no. (Influencer 5)

These engagements are all arranged informally, with neither written contracts nor non-disclosure agreements. One informant said that “it’s actually very discreet. There’s no email, no paper trail except for a Viber group chat that I have with her” (Political consultant 1). The contracts are unnecessary as campaign teams can verify outputs on the influencers’ social media accounts. Despite some incidents of pirating influencers from

opposing camps, requiring non-disclosure agreements is not a common practice. One informant describes the relationship as a “Mexican stand-off” such that public disclosure will lead to mutually assured destruction of their reputations.

The obscurity of their transactions is further compounded by the layers of intermediaries between politicians and influencers, making it implausible to make direct connections between the parties. One informant considered this anonymity as a form of security: “I was not scared if I will get hit outside, because they do not know me and I will not be tracked. I was laughing that even if they find my team, no one else will get caught” (Political consultant 4).

Scale of campaign

The research identified 1425 influencer accounts across four social media platforms engaging in covert political campaigning, about 3% of the total influencer accounts ($n=44,530$) subjected to the 18 multi-dimensional indicators (Figure 2, only shows 13 cross-platform indicators). Given platform-specific thresholds, most of these influencers are on YouTube (584) and TikTok (544), followed by Facebook (207) and Twitter (89) (Table 2). Notably, TikTok had the least number of influencer accounts posting election-related content ($n=4266$) but almost 13% are deemed to be involved in covert political campaigning. In contrast, Facebook had the most number of influencer accounts talking about the elections ($n=21,007$) but only about 1% present evidence of anomalous campaign activities.

The influencer-campaigner accounts vary in their participation in covert political campaigns across the three dimensions of analysis and the platforms (Supplemental Appendices I–K for summary statistics). The network indicators imply that the influencers leveraged networked affordances to partake in coordinated campaigns. YouTube influencers’ high eigenvector centrality and strong edge weight with mainstream channels suggest that they publish on a variety of election and political topics and as a result, are recommended together with prestige channels (i.e. news media, politicians). TikTok influencers coordinate their campaign through partisan hashtags exemplified by their high degree centrality, led by the most popular accounts with high eigenvector centrality. Wide distribution is the main strategy of Facebook influencers (high outdegree, betweenness centrality, and edge weight), with some connected to disinformation communities. Twitter influencers score high in its co-tweet network, implying the use of retweets and quote tweets within a narrow window of time to promote their candidates’ political agenda.

Only Facebook and YouTube influencers displayed outlier behavioral characteristics. Facebook influencers engage in coordinated link sharing and post recurrence, indicating that they not only tend to share the same links but also the same “scripts” in their campaign posts. They also have sharing patterns from known disinformation sources. About 7% of the YouTube influencers had the same comments and/or commenters on their videos, indicating some level of coordination to boost the content. Other behavioral indicators such as having same-name accounts, pseudonymity, and sock puppetry are generally not present among the identified influencer accounts.

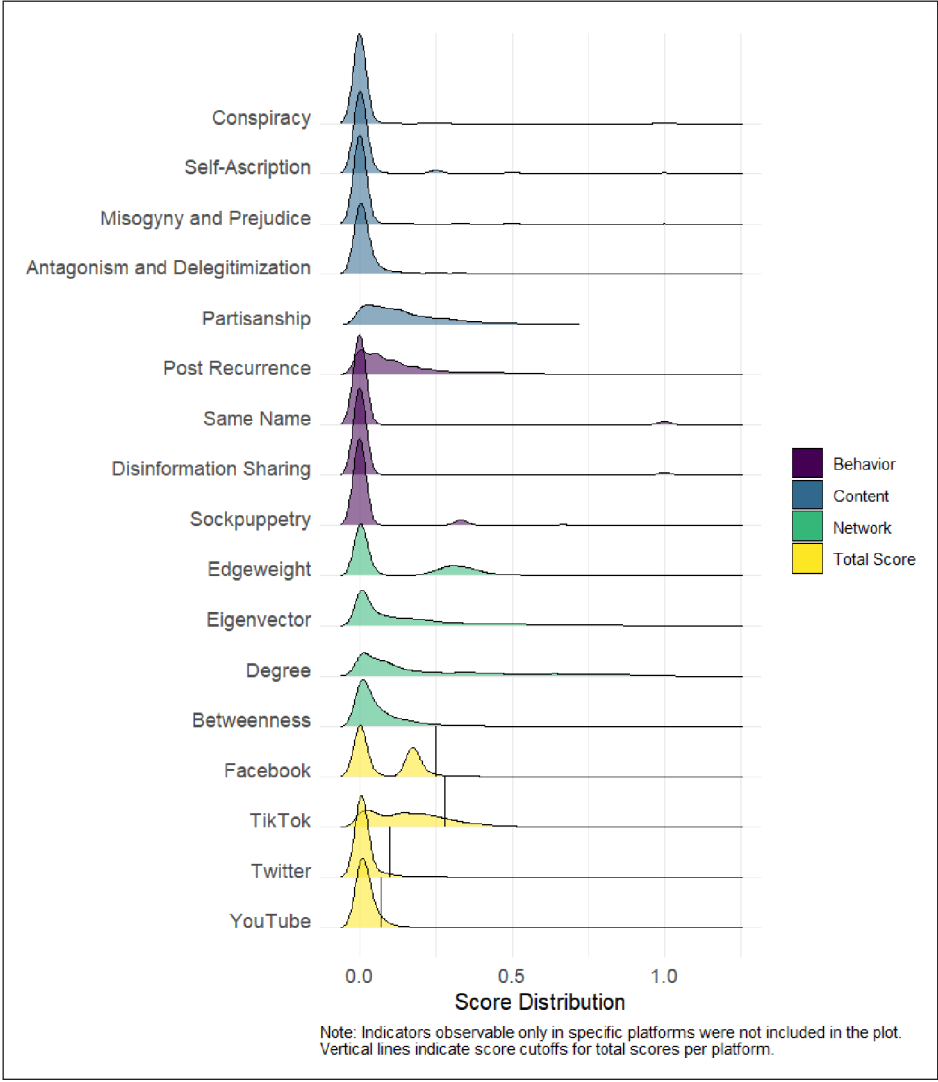


Figure 2. Distribution of influencer accounts ($n=44,530$) score in the 13 multi-dimensional cross-platform indicators, and totals per platform.

For the content dimension, influencers exhibit outlier partisan messaging across all platforms, with some influencers in specific platforms also engaged in other objectionable speech (Supplemental Appendix L for top keywords). Facebook influencers scored high in partisanship and antagonism, as well as in self-ascription, or the claim of being “independent” or “alternative” from other sources. Apart from exhibiting overt partisanship, self-ascription is common among YouTube influencers, while Twitter influencers

Table 2. Summary statistics of influencer accounts engaged in covert political campaigning per platform.

Influencer account		Follower count			
Platform	N	Mean	Std. dev	Min	Max
Facebook	207	187,146.19	343,068.60	10,024	3,307,942
TikTok	544	118,130.00	660,124.26	10,000	12,400,000
Twitter	89	40,456.24	63,205.81	10,017	474,500
YouTube	584	270,552.70	1,015,415.28	1010	16,100,000

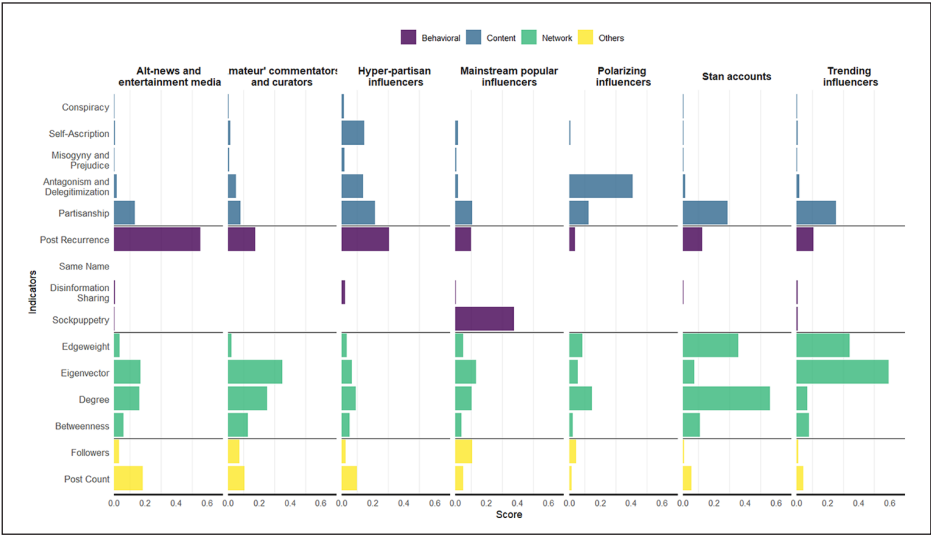


Figure 3. Seven types of covert political influencers based on K-means clustering.

post antagonistic content against opposing political candidates and parties. On TikTok, there was some evidence of misogynistic content together with partisan posts. Conspiracy and manipulation are not evident themes in the influencer posts.

The identified covert political influencers were grouped based on the set of indicators in which they scored high using K-means clustering across 13 cross-platform indicators (Figure 3). Seven distinct types were identified and were further analyzed qualitatively based on their communication strategies: (1) “amateur” commentators and curators, (2) hyper-partisan influencers, (3) “stan” (fan) accounts, (4) trending influencers, (5) alt-news and entertainment media, (6) mainstream popular influencers, and (7) polarizing influencers. Supplemental Appendix M provides details on each type, specifically on their average follower count, key indicators, self-presentation, topics discussed, discursive and engagement strategies, perceived audience, and degree of covertness.

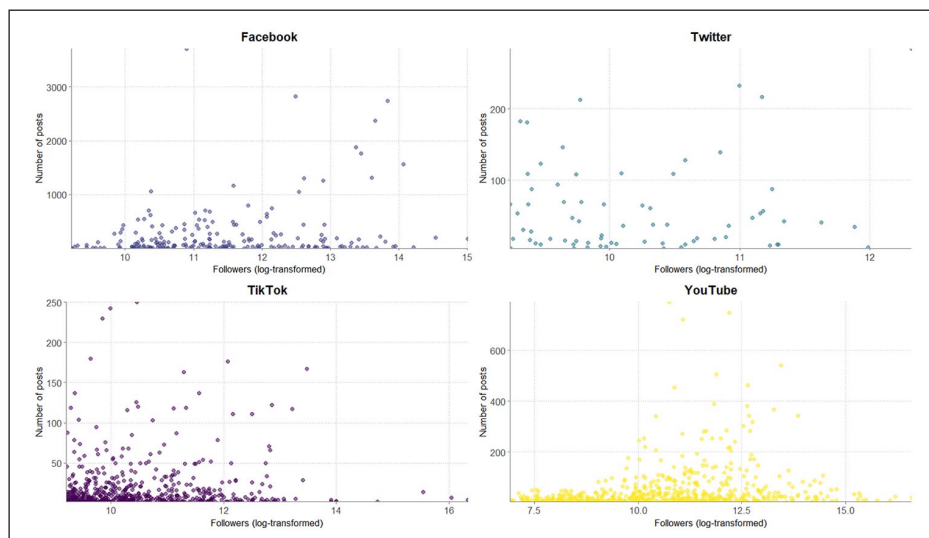


Figure 4. Follower count and post count distribution among covert political influencers.

Cost of campaign

Critical to appraising the cost of the campaign were the data from qualitative field research on the differentiated pricing models for specific tiers of influencers. The first model is the pay-per-post model where influencers are compensated per agreed-upon number of posts, and the second is the “retainer” model when influencers are paid an assumed fixed price on a rolling basis irrespective of the number of posts produced. While influencers with high number of followers may likely be on a retainer, influencers whose content “works” for the campaign may also be similarly remunerated. This is reasonable to assume given the variance in the follower count and posting behavior derived from the computational data (Figure 4), with some influencers posting more heavily than others across tiers that might indicate that they are on a retainer.

The study produces the estimation frameworks based on these two pricing models using the average marketing industry rates. However, no benchmark was used for the estimation as they are considered unreliable: (1) campaign spending caps are not strictly enforced, (2) digital media ad spending is only available for Facebook and not on other platforms, and (3) no candidate disclosed spending on influencer marketing.

The pay-per-post model estimates a total cost of PhP 1.5B (USD 27M) spent on influencers across the four platforms (Table 3), given the formula $\text{cost} = \text{quantity} \times \text{price}$ based on follower count. Facebook recorded the highest cost at PhP 939M (USD 16M) given influencers with a high average number of followers (205K) and a high average number of posts (252), followed by YouTube at PhP 460M (USD 7.9M) with a similar average subscriber count but fewer number of posts on average. TikTok has an estimated spend of PhP 94M (USD 1.6M) and Twitter has PhP 42M (USD 721K) with more modest averages. The anomalous estimates for Facebook may be partially explained by it being

Table 3. Pay-per-post model estimates per platform.

	Sum of followers	Average number of followers	Average number of posts	Average cost per-post (PhP)	Total cost (PhP)	Total cost (USD)
Facebook	42,541,172	205,513	252	14,752	939.4 M	16 M
Twitter	3,097,525	34,804	57	10,328	42.2 M	7.9 M
YouTube	171,112,160	293,000	51	16,337	460.6 M	1.6 M
TikTok	92,256,400	140,421	15	12,412	94.3 M	721 K
Total					1.5 B	27 M

Table 4. Retainer model estimates per platform.

	Total cost with only pay-per-post (PhP)	Total cost with retainer (PhP)	Total cost with retainer (USD)	% Change
Facebook	939.4 M	311.4 M	5.3 M	−67%
Twitter	42.2 M	25.7 M	3.7 M	−39%
YouTube	460.6 M	213.5 M	807K	−54%
TikTok	94.3 M	47.49 M	429K	−50%
Total	1.5 B	600 M	10.9 M	

the Philippines’ largest social media and has been historically used for political campaigning (Simpeng et al., 2020). Facebook posts also range from low-production content (i.e. text only) to high-production content (i.e. long-form video), making it accessible and flexible for influencers to produce numerous content formats.

Accounting for the influencers assumed to follow a retainer model who are in the upper-bound of the cost-per-post distribution (75th percentile), the estimated total cost is projected to be PhP 600M (USD 10.9M) (Table 4). The cap on pricing for top influencers has reduced Facebook’s cost by 67% to PhP 311M (USD 5.3M). YouTube spending has also decreased by 54% to PhP 213M (USD 3.7M), while the TikTok and Twitter estimates are 40% and 39% smaller at PhP 47M (USD 807K) and PhP 25M (USD 429K), respectively. What this exemplifies is that over 50% of the spending per platform in the previous model is attributable to the top quartile of influencers who have high follower counts and/or high number of posts.

These pricing differences reflect the distribution of influencers based on their cost-per-post and cost-per-account relative to their follower count. The pricing for the pay-per-post model captures the linear distribution of the cost-per-post corresponding with the follower count, which means that the follower count largely influences the projected influencer compensation (Figure 5). The retainer model, however, shows a more nuanced distribution with some low- to mid-range influencers having a high cost per account presumably given their high volume of posts endorsing the candidates (Figure 6). There are key differences between platforms as well, with YouTube influencers exhibiting more consistent posting behavior relative to size, and Facebook influencers are relatively more dispersed in the distribution and thus more diverse in

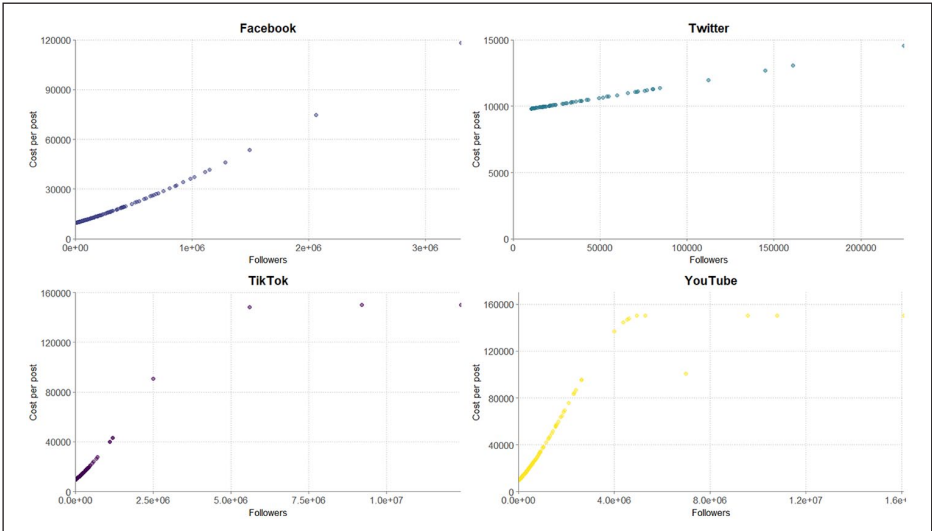


Figure 5. Cost-per-post distribution for the pay-per-post model.

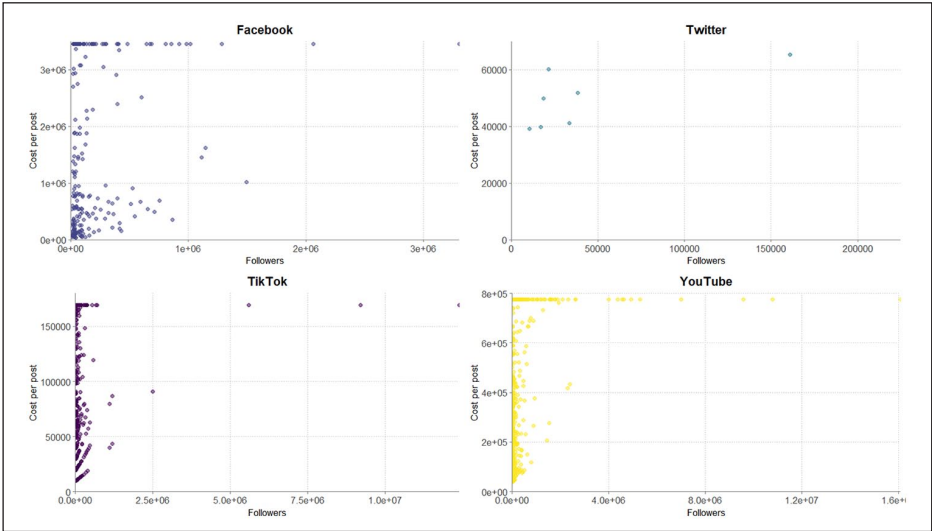


Figure 6. Cost-per-account distribution for the retainer model.

their posting behavior (i.e. post types, post frequency, target audiences). TikTok and Twitter influencers are also more scattered, with a concentrated cluster of accounts on the lower end of follower size count to have been on retainer. This may be because TikTok engagement is driven more by algorithmic visibility than the number of followers, while Twitter may have varying clusters of influencers.

Research toolkit for contemporary political campaigns

The research attempts to demarcate the boundaries of contemporary political campaigns from a political-economic perspective. Through the empirical investigation of the scope, scale, and cost of mobilizing covert social media influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections, we were able to trace the involvement of influencers in political campaigns from the field where they are enlisted by political intermediaries, to the networks on social media where they engage in a wide variety of covert campaign strategies. Based on our estimates given the best available data, commissioning influencers costs 27–10.9 M USD only for the campaigns for the top two executive positions, a category of political spending currently undocumented and whose regulations are unenforceable given the covert nature of the campaign. Other studies on Philippine Elections document the expansion of IO at the regional and local elections (Fallorina et al., 2023), implying that the actual extent and expenditures of covert campaigning are larger than these estimates.

The study underscores the conceptual collapse between political campaigning and propaganda (Semetko and Tworzecki, 2017), on one hand, and the propaganda and political participation (Starbird et al., 2023), on the other hand, that create the gray areas of contemporary political communication. It articulates the interaction among the political necessity of covert, intermediated campaigning to secure political advantage, the economic incentives of complicit actors, and the relational character of political engagement (Riedl et al., 2023) that normative campaign strategies are unable to address. This means that political campaigns should be conceptualized not only as a form of streamlined, strategic communication but as a dynamic process that leverages political-economic opportunity structures.

There are two major implications of this research. First is that political campaigns can expand their boundaries because of boundary-spanning actors and strategies. The political landscape is characterized by an increasingly socially fragmented and politically polarized audience (Gethin et al., 2021) who distrust political and media institutions (Bennett and Livingston, 2020) and are increasingly perceptive to deceptive tactics such as bots and trolls (Semetko and Tworzecki, 2017). Official campaigns operate within the normative expectations of political campaigning, but the “unofficial” elements are what make these campaigns competitive and responsive to this changing political landscape. In particular, influencers act as brokers who bridge these social and political cleavages and navigate gray areas that other campaigners such as the media and celebrities are unable to do. Their distinct position as popular but “ordinary” actors within “local” digital communities (Woolley, 2022) who can engage in the “authentic” performances of politics and navigate platform logics to gain visibility (Soriano and Gaw, 2022) make them ideal campaigners.

Conceptually, we need to identify these fractures and obscurities that can be brokered or mediated for political leverage before drawing the new boundaries of political campaigns. In the Philippines, voter segments are divided along class and regional lines and are neither tied to specific political parties nor ideologies, but they can be mobilized to support politicians that resonate with their political sensibilities (Sinpeng et al., 2020). Covert political campaigns perform brokerage to fill this mobilization opportunity

through astroturfing and disinformation (Ong and Tapsell, 2022). Heightened political polarization in advanced democracies requires the same brokers to not only bridge partisan divides but also harness the political affect of these communities to voluntarily campaign for candidates (Starbird et al., 2023). Even in authoritarian contexts, leaders and their parties need brokers to reduce the perception gap between propaganda and reality during purported competitive elections to maintain regime support (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018). Using this analytical lens allows us to map the starting points from which to redraw the boundaries of political campaigns.

The second implication of the research is the need for concrete and to a certain extent, actionable approaches in accounting for the new boundaries of political campaigning. The framework of the research of mapping the scope, scale, and cost of covert political campaigning is designed to articulate the expansion of the campaign in explicit terms (i.e. particular political-economic arrangement, specific manipulative strategies, and range of estimates of costs). Because the covert aspects of political campaigns are inherently ambiguous, it was necessary to generate manifest evidence through an interdisciplinary methodology that built on and innovated the methods previously used in this broad field of research (Keller et al., 2020; Ong and Cabañes, 2019; Starbird et al., 2023, among others). These methods are on their own substantive but are inadequate in mapping the complex and amorphous phenomenon of contemporary political campaigns. Together, they complement each other's empirical limitations.

Ethnographic research (Ong and Cabañes, 2019; Udupa, 2024) establishes the playing field of covert IO, identifying the objectives and motivation of various actors, and materializing the socio-technical infrastructures and economic incentives that buttress this shadow but lucrative industry. Computational methods capture the network of political operatives on social media and their repertoire of manipulative strategies (Soares and Recuero, 2021; Starbird et al., 2023), which this research built on by triangulating multiple indicators that were previously separately studied. While earlier research documented the economic cost of IO using secondary sources (i.e. investigative journalism, industry reports) (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018), entirely new to this area of research is the use of economic modeling that derives estimates from both primary data (i.e. field and social media data) and secondary data (i.e. industry data) to make covert operations *overt* in financial terms. The study's focus on estimating the cost of influencers in IO is both innovative and practical as it estimates a specific aspect of IO and benchmarks its valuation of a shadow economy against the formal economy of the promotions industry. Producing cost estimates makes the problem of election IO concrete and actionable for policymakers. The integration of these methods in this research enabled us to oscillate with high fidelity between the macro-level analysis of the field, its infrastructures, networks, and markets, and the micro-level manifestation of the phenomenon as performed by individual actors with their discrete strategies and political-economic incentives.

This research serves as a toolkit for researchers studying contemporary political campaigns, elections, and democracy, more broadly. Earlier versions of this research have been presented in conferences and workshops where researchers and journalists identified its potential use cases in different political contexts with varying election regulations. In the United States, campaigns openly use influencers for campaigns, but

they are often subsumed into digital and social media spending and contracted through third-party firms (Lai, 2022). Estimating actual election spending on influencer marketing can use the economic modeling component of this research and would benefit from the abundance of industry data and investigative reporting in this area. In India, influencer marketing for political campaigns is an open secret, and there are established pricing for political posts across micro to mega influencers in multiple platforms (Mollan, 2024). However, the scale of these operations is largely unknown and can be approximated by the computational method component of the research with more context-specific indicators, such as content indicators on hate speech against ethnic minorities. Brazil has laws prohibiting the employment of influencers for campaigns (InternetLab, 2021), but it does not preclude engaging anonymous or niche influencers. This presents empirical challenges where legal restrictions hinder qualitative field research, and thus the computational methods in this research can be repurposed to scope the field and could provide openings for ethnographic work. In other words, this research functions as a template that researchers can adapt, remodel, or develop to address specific gaps in evidence in their respective country contexts.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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