

Defenders Defending Duterte: Positioning Analysis of Apologists' Defenses of Former Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte in the Context of Making Rape Jokes

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Abstract

Introduction: In the Philippines, the act of making a rape joke is considered rude, inappropriate, and unacceptable and the ones making rape jokes are criticized for their behavior. As a presidential candidate, Mr. Duterte was forced to apologize for his rape joke during a campaign in 2016. However, in 2017, then newly-elected President Duterte uttered three rape jokes in three different public events and was defended by two kinds of apologists: Presidential Spokespersons and Pro-Duterte social media supporters.

Objectives: This study explores how official and social media apologists defended the President through various positions that ascribed him the right to make rape jokes, the Filipino people as having the duty to accept rape jokes, and women as having the duty to accept being the object of rape jokes.

Methods: Using a sample of official government statements and public Facebook posts, major storylines and positions in the defense were identified and the implications of these were discussed.

Results: There were six ways that President Duterte was positioned as to have certain rights that justified his use of a rape joke. Individually and collectively, these ultimately provided President Duterte the right to make a rape joke while placing the duty on citizens to allow President Duterte to excuse his rape joke.

Conclusions: Knowing how President Duterte and citizens were positioned to make and accept rape jokes would enable society to challenge these positions and construct counter-positions that will defend women against rape jokes.

Keywords: Apologists, Duterte, Rape, Rape Joke, Positioning, Social Media.

Introduction

In political discourse, humor has been used to communicate offensive messages because these are made to look like jokes and thus allow the speaker to avoid both the opposition and consequences that typically result from serious expressions that are similarly offensive (Attardo, 1993; Bill & Naus, 1992; Johnson, 1990; Meyer, 2000). Humor has been shown to have the ability to shield a speaker from negative consequences of expressing offensive messages such as about rape or sexual abuse and harassment through (a) the ambiguity of the situation of simultaneously communicating two messages and (b) the perceptions of people about the speaker, the joke, and the social context in which it is used. In addition, it can also (c) have a negative abrasive effect on both the audience and the targets of the offensive humor which is enhanced by the social context and status of the speaker and can (d) stretch the boundaries so what is considered offensive or inappropriate becomes acceptable (Attardo, 1993; Bill & Naus, 1992; Derks, 1995; Derks & Berkowitz, 1989; Johnson, 1990; McCallus, Ford, Goodwin, and Schnerre, 2017; Meyer, 2000).

In Filipino society, sexist remarks, especially rape jokes or comments which make light of rape, are looked down as rude and improper. Those who make such remarks are forced to apologize as they find themselves in a position that is difficult for them and their supporters to defend (Curato and Ong, 2018).

In just the last five years prior to the Duterte presidency, there were three incidents of famous and influential personalities who had to apologize for making joking remarks about rape. The first involved comedian Vice Ganda, who, during a concert-comedy show, made fun of newscaster Jessica Soho and said that she would be a target for a gang rape. The second incident involved SM Supermalls, the largest shopping mall operator in the Philippines, which had to pull out all shirts with a slogan diminishing the impact of rape by describing it as a “snuggle with a struggle.” After pictures of the shirt sold in the teen boys’ section went viral and netizens reacted angrily. SM pulled out the shirts from all of its stores and issued a statement of apology (Barber, 2014). The third incident involved an actress, Nathalie Hart, who posted on Instagram that “If rape is inevitable, lay back and enjoy it!” After netizens again reacted that her post was insensitive, she made a public apology on both her Instagram and Facebook accounts which also made the rounds of the mainstream press.

Each one who apologized made an effort to explain their side of the situation by claiming that it was a bad joke or that there was some

misunderstanding, yet each one still felt enough social pressure to apologize. In April of 2016, then presidential candidate Rodrigo Roa Duterte found himself in the middle of controversy after a video was uploaded of him making a rape joke during a campaign rally. Then candidate Duterte was defiant and unapologetic for most of the week after making the joke, which may be because the joke he made was one he had used before during a speech in January earlier that year which had not gathered much media attention at the time (Robles, 2016). Despite candidate Duterte's publicly stated refusal to apologize, his public relations team issued an apology which he flip-flopped on before grudgingly acknowledging that he had read and approved the statement of apology (Ho, 2016). His campaign team may have been forced to do so because his act of turning a morally offensive act into a jest could have spawned a scandal to end his presidential ambitions (Thompson, 2000 in Curato and Ong, 2018).

Fast forward to 2017, and after winning the presidency, now President Rodrigo Roa Duterte had come to be known as "vulgar, but honest" (Obordo, 2016) and for making many sexist and rude remarks among other things. In 2017 alone, President Duterte made three rape jokes in official public statements in the span of 8 months. The first rape joke was made on May 26 in Iligan City while speaking to soldiers who were to be deployed to Marawi to enforce martial law. Translated, his exact words to the soldiers were: "Pag naka-rape ka ng tatlo, aminin ko na akin iyon." ["If you end up raping three women, I will claim that I was the rapist."] The second rape joke was made on July 14 during a speech before Filipino diplomats in Davao City. His words before the diplomats were: "What I don't like are kids (being raped.) You can mess with, maybe Miss Universe. Maybe I will even congratulate you for having the balls to rape somebody when you know you are going to die." The last comment about rape in 2017 was made on December 19 during a speech at Malacanang Palace with legislators and other key government officials in attendance for the signing of the national budget and the TRAIN law. His words before the many high government officials alluded to the rape of a former Filipina movie actress and beauty queen who had been abducted and raped in 1967 and whose case brought national attention to the crime of rape: "May I be forgiven by Maggie dela Riva? During our time, ang mga niri-rape doon, magaganda talaga [the ones being raped in the past were really beautiful women]... Worth going to jail and worth dying for."

Unlike the previous examples of famous personalities, including when Mr. Duterte was only a presidential candidate, President Duterte never apologized for any of his 2017 rape jokes. While there have been public comments both in traditional media and social media condemning the boorish words of the president, he was not forced by social pressure to apologize. Also, unlike previous examples in the past, President Duterte was ably defended by apologists on two fronts by official presidential

spokespersons and by unofficial social media supporters, among others. Although President Duterte's term as president ended last June 2022, his high popularity numbers despite his making of rape jokes for which he never apologized show how these two groups have successfully explained the president's words and seemingly allowed him to utter the rape jokes with impunity. This discrepancy between how Filipinos have previously responded to a public or political figure or

entity making a rape joke to what happened with President Duterte in 2017 is the area of interest in this study. In particular, this study seeks to learn how President Duterte had been positioned by his defenders in such a way as to be able to make rape jokes and for his rape jokes to be accepted when it was clear that previously they would not have been.

Objectives

While the literature mostly explains the effects of rape jokes and its implication, to victims and society in general, in the context of the Philippines, there is scant literature on the phenomenon, particularly when a President is the one involved. And since the President has a relational connection to the citizens, we investigated the positions that the President is placed in by the apologists who were official spokespersons and the pro-Duterte bloggers and social media supporters who influence public opinion and perception of the President.

This study sought to answer the following questions: (a) how is PRRD positioned by key officials and social media apologists to have the right to make rape jokes and how are the citizens positioned to have the duty to accept that jokes?; (b) what storylines emerge in episodes of PRRD making rape jokes?; and (c) what are the corresponding rights and duties of the positions?

Because of these research objectives, positioning theory was used as a discursive approach in identifying the positions ascribed to President Duterte which give him the right to utter rape jokes (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). The starting point of positioning theory is the idea that the constant flow of everyday life is fragmented into distinct social episodes (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). A social episode has three basic features: the participants' rights and duties or moral positions, their conversational history or sequence of interactions, and the specific dynamics of that one single episode (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

A participant's position in a social episode is a reference made to a person's moral or personal attribute that corresponds to a particular right or duty (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). For example, when a public official is positioned as a "powerful leader" he might be assigned the duty to do anything he wants because he can, while citizens who are positioned as "powerless" are given the duty to accept all the actions of the former (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). When positions are named,

corresponding rights and duties are also identified, which form the acceptability of the limitations of social actions (Harré & Slocum, 2003). The acceptability of the acts, particularly the rape joke of Duterte, were investigated to better understand the moral order enacted by the members (Slocum-Bradley, 2009) in the dynamics of the social episodes involving statements of presidential spokespersons and Pro-Duterte online supporters of President Duterte after he made the rape jokes. Since moral order is a system of rights, obligations, and duties assigned by society, together with the criteria by which people and their activities are valued (Harré, 1987) how President Duterte was positioned by presidential spokespersons and pro-Duterte bloggers limited the possibilities of citizens action through the assignment of rights and duties (Bartlett, 2008 ; Harre & Van Langenhove, 1999).

While the literature mostly explains the effects of rape jokes and its implication, to victims and society in general, in the context of the Philippines, there is scant literature on the phenomenon, particularly when a President is the one involved. And since the President has a relational connection to the citizens, we investigated the positions that the President is placed by the representatives or the official spokespersons and the pro-Duterte bloggers and social media supporters who influence public opinion and perception of the President.

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted using positioning theory as a framework. Data from official statements of Presidential spokespersons and timeline posts of pro-duterte bloggers and social media supporters was analysed. Validity was checked through comparison of researchers' coding and feedback from PhD students and Psychology professors from the Psychology Department of Ateneo de Manila University.

Participants

The statements of two spokespersons of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte from the Presidential Communications Operations Office and five prominent pro-Duterte bloggers/social media supporters were purposively sampled for the study. Criteria for selection of spokespersons was based on a) who were spokespersons officially assigned to speak to the media for the President Duterte at the time of the rape jokes and b) who were spokespersons officially assigned to speak to the media who made unambiguous reference to the rape jokes. Criteria for the selection of bloggers was determined by a) which blogs were recognized as being pro-Duterte in the nature of their posts, b) which of these blogs had a large following, and c) which of these blogs reacted by posting about the first rape joke issue.

Materials

Official statements published by the Presidential Communications Operations Office of Malacañang Palace with reference to rape jokes uttered by the President and Facebook timeline posts of prominent Pro-Duterte bloggers and social media supporters were gathered. For the statements of the official spokespersons, materials were gathered by searching the website of the Presidential Communications Operations Office with the search term “rape” and then going through the 37 search results including Press Briefings and Media Interviews with Presidential Spokespersons and the President. For the statements from bloggers supportive of the President, the five bloggers were selected and coded as Blogger 1, Blogger 2, Blogger 3, Blogger 4, and Blogger 5. Statements from these bloggers were taken from their Facebook posts and status updates by searching Facebook for the term “rape joke” in posts made by each blogger for the year 2017 and then for the months of May and July 2017. Additional posts from 2017, but not from May and July 2017, were also included if they touched on the rape jokes made by the President during May and July.

Data analysis

Manual data analysis was done following Positioning Theory. Using the methodological framework of positioning theory by Harré and Moghaddam (2003), the analysis involved the identification of: (a) the storylines used by spokespersons and pro-Duterte bloggers; (b) the subject positions made available in each storyline, and the subject positions actually ascribed by the spokespersons and pro-Duterte bloggers to President Rodrigo Roa Duterte and citizens; and (c) the corresponding rights and duties of the positions.

Validity Check

For this study, validation was made through certain procedures. From the conceptualization of the study until its final form, it was subjected to numerous critique, iterations, and questions for improvement made by psychology PhD graduate students and psychology professors from the Ateneo de Manila University. Revisions were made taking into account the comments and suggestions. The reflexivity of researchers was constantly checked and coding of positions was counterchecked by the researchers, psychology graduate students, and professors.

Results

What emerged from the analysis of the statements of official presidential spokespersons and unofficial social media supporters which defended President Rodrigo Roa Duterte in making the rape jokes is that there were six ways President Duterte was positioned. The six positions are tied to six storylines which position President Duterte in such a way as to have certain rights, eight in total, that justified his use of a rape

joke. While seven of these rights are directly related to the context of the speech act and may be considered first level rights, individually and collectively, the seven rights ultimately provide President Duterte the right to make a rape joke. In addition, as Moghaddam and Harre (2010) since it is “with words that we ascribe rights and claim them for ourselves and place duties on others,” while President Duterte was ascribed rights, the citizens have likewise been given duties. Again, while seven of these duties are directly related to the rights relative to the speech act and may be considered first level duties, individually and collectively, the seven duties ultimately demand of the citizens to allow President Duterte to make a rape joke. The positions, storylines, rights for President Duterte, and corresponding duties for citizens are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 *Clusters in Defense of President Duterte’s Use of Rape Jokes: Positions, Storylines, Rights Assigned to the President, and Duties Imposed on Citizens*

POSITIONS	STORYLINE	RIGHT of DUTERTE	DUTY of CITIZEN
Duterte is an accountable commander-in-chief.	Duterte is a responsible and supportive Leader.	Right to speak to the soldiers in his own way to show his support for our troops <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to understand and support the commander-in-chief of our armed forces <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is pro-women.	<i>husgahan siya kung ano talaga ang ginawa niya:</i> Duterte has a track record of supporting women’s rights.	Right to speak the way he does because his actions and accomplishments matter more <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to understand that this is his way of speaking and to support him <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte speaks the language of the masses.	The masses “get him.”	Right to speak to the masses in a way that they will understand <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to understand that this is his way of speaking <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is a typical Filipino.	Sexist jokes are part of Filipino Culture.	Right to speak like a typical Filipino <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to understand that this is a normal way of speaking <i>Duty to accept a rape joke as normal</i>

POSITIONS	STORYLINE	RIGHT of DUTERTE	DUTY of CITIZEN
Duterte is a father figure.	Duterte is a tired but well meaning daddy.	Right to be forgiven for a mistake (rape joke) Right to utter a rape joke	Duty to forgive him for his rape joke Duty to accept a rape joke
Duterte made a mistake.	Rape joke was unnecessary.	Right to be forgiven for a mistake (rape joke) Right to utter a rape joke	Duty to forgive him for his rape joke Duty to accept a rape joke
Duterte is being inappropriate.	There is a time and place for everything.	Right to be forgiven for a mistake (rape joke) <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to forgive him for his rape joke <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is focused on the important issues.	There are more important issues than rape jokes.	Right to be supported <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to support the President <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is the better alternative.	Rape joke is a lesser evil than fraud, hypocrisy, and elitism.	Right to be supported <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to support President Duterte <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is being picked upon.	Rape and sexual harassment are worse than rape jokes	Right to be defended from unfair attacks <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to support him <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is a victim.	Rape joke was taken out of context	Right to be defended from unfair attacks <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to support him <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>
Duterte is a victim.	Duterte is a victim of selective criticism from the LP and the CHR.	Right to be defended from unfair attacks <i>Right to utter a rape joke</i>	Duty to support him <i>Duty to accept a rape joke</i>

Position 1: President Duterte as a Commander-in-chief.

In defending the Martial Law rape joke, the leadership traits of President Duterte were emphasized. He was positioned as a leader, a Commander-in-Chief who will never desert his troops and who would be answerable for the actions of his men and who earns the right to speak to his troops in his own way to show his support for them. Indirectly, this grants him the right to utter rape jokes while the citizens are issued the duty to accept the jokes. As social media supporter # 5 puts it,

“he didn't say that their victory is also his victory. He's not the kind of leader who would take credit and leave his men sort their troubles. He's more into ensuring his men that they have a Commander-in-Chief who would be held accountable for whatever transgressions they would do. Here, he is cheering on our nation's heroes, like a fan welcoming them from a battle well fought.”

In this storyline, the President is given the right to utter the rape joke as his way of showing his care and support for his soldiers while the citizens are left with the duty to accept the rape joke as the words of a person positioned as a good leader, a fan even, but ultimately, as a Commander-in-Chief. Examples of data extracts supporting the first position of Commander in Chief are found in Table 2.

Table 2 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as a Commander in Chief:

I hope our officials would refrain from making that rape remark worse by using terms such as "heightened bravado" and "hyperbole." We know what Duterte meant: If his soldiers did something wrong, which includes rape, then he would be held accountable. It's not an encouragement to rape but a reminder that whatever his soldiers do, it's his ass in the line. It's a very rough and bold statement of taking ownership. That's just Duterte. Because sink or swim, it's the captain's fault.

Cluster 2: President Duterte as pro-women, a champion of women.

In defending President Duterte after a third rape joke was uttered, the accusation that the President is anti-women was countered by claims that position President Duterte as, in fact, pro-women. To argue for this, the Davao City experience, where President Duterte served as mayor for more than two decades, was invoked. Local government unit programs that advocated for the protection of women in Davao City were enumerated. This position was presented in a storyline that asserts that President Duterte has already done so much for women. In fact, Presidential Spokesperson B even said, “*husgahan siya kung ano talaga ang ginawa niya*” or to judge him based on what he has done (and not what he just said) which positions the President as one who has a

proven track record of being a champion of women's rights. Correspondingly, he is given the right to speak the way he does, even to issue rape jokes, since his actions and accomplishments matter more. Because of this, citizens have the duty to accept the rape jokes. Table 3 provides a sample extract supporting this position of being Pro-women.

Table 3 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as Pro-women:

"Davao City is a trailblazer in upholding the rights of women..."

"When it comes to policies as a Mayor, Pagdating po sa polisiya niya bilang mayor, Davao is recognized as one of the friendliest cities to women..."

Cluster 3: Duterte as a Typical Filipino.

After President Duterte made a rape joke in the context of raping a Miss Universe, the statements in his defense tended to emphasize the charisma of President Duterte with the masses and his innate ability to speak their language. Despite being born in an affluent political family and educated in the language of law, President Duterte comes across as a common man and even anti-elitist and anti-intellectual. Against a backdrop of sexism and patriarchy in Philippine society, rape jokes are made to appear as normative among the masses. Thus, this positions President Duterte as a typical Filipino and one with the masses. This gives him the right to speak to the masses in a way that they will understand and the right to speak like a "typical" Filipino. This, in turn, gives him the right to utter rape jokes. At the same, citizens are being imposed the duty to accept his way of speaking and, ultimately, his rape jokes. Samples of data extracts supporting the position of President Duterte as a Typical Filipino are found in Table 4.

Table 4 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as a Typical Filipino:

It is wrong for the President to joke about rape in an appropriate situation. But it is wrong to say that rape was never used in ordinary conversations and as humor. For example "Look at you, you look like you've been raped!". "Please be mindful of how you sit, people can see your underwear. Its as if you want to be raped!" "When will I be raped by Ian Veneracion (A famous Filipino actor)." "Give me a break, or else, I will shou, Rape! Rape! Rape! Haha!" "Oh dear, your food is so messy. It's worse than being raped!". It is acceptable because the context is right. The President is wrong, but let us not create things that are not real just to criticize him.

Obviously, their views are shaped by information that comes to them in English. The supposed rape comment of Duterte could be well understood in a Visayan context. However, we must remember that the world isn't Visaya, and no matter how one explains a comment shaped by a particular language, one cannot always make other people understand it fully. Even Tagalog folks have a hard time understanding Visayan jokes.

Cluster 4: Tired, but well-meaning daddy.

In this line of defense that is found only with Blogger 3, President Duterte is addressed and positioned as a tired and overworked father figure. In this storyline, the President, like a father, is one who has only the best intentions for his children, but who may have made a mistake from overwork. The President is given the right to have made the rape joke and the joke is excused on the premise that the president-father must be exhausted. As a result, the citizens should understand and appreciate how hard working the President is. By positioning President Duterte as a father figure, with all the cultural undertones that color that idea, and then using the more informal and *malambing* or affectionate “daddy,” this positions President Duterte as one who deserves to be forgiven for who he is and all he has done. This implies then that the citizen should accept the rape joke by forgiving it. The sample data extract supporting the position of a tired, but well-meaning father figure is found in Table 5.

Table 5 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as a Tired, but well-meaning daddy:

Dear Daddy D,
I know that you are getting tires, but your rape comment went overboard sir. Kindly clarify or retract on your next speech. Lovingly yours,...

Cluster 5: President Duterte as the Better Alternative.

Of all the unofficial social media supporters, it is the second who articulates this defense by positioning the President against one who won through “electoral fraud” and who has the support of an “elitist hypocritical crowd.” With this positioning, the President acquires the characteristics which the opponents do not have: legitimacy, authenticity, and the mandate of the people. In this storyline, the President, despite having made a rape joke, is still the better alternative to a “rapacious kind of politics.” The President is then given the right to make the mistake of the rape joke since it does not take away from his legitimate mandate from the citizens. Incidentally, these citizens still have the duty to accept his rape joke and accept him as their leader. In

this storyline, the President is positioned as a good leader who knows what needs to be done and knows what matters most. Social media supporter # 2 makes mention of another issue that the supporter feels is more important than the rape joke: the threat of the Maute terrorists who also use child soldiers. The social media supporter points out that the President is the leader who knows that those issues are more important than the rape joke and so gives the President the right to make the joke since, in the supporter's opinion, the President is the only one working on solving the more urgent problem of terrorism. The citizen is then given the duty to accept the joke since the threat to peace and order is more urgent than the rape joke. Examples of data extracts supporting the position of being a better alternative to other Philippine politicians are found in Table 6.

Table 6 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as a Better Alternative:

How I wish the President would stop his rape jokes. I find them unacceptable. It is a sore point that tests my support. He is giving me a tough choice. Because everytime I imagine the alternative, and the electoral fraud that made her sit in the office that she doesn't deserve, and the party she represents, and the elitist hypocritical crowd that is for her and against the President, that I am forced to choose between a rape joke and a rapacious kind of politics. I really don't like this.

Cluster 6: President Duterte as one who made a mistake, but still deserves support.

This positioning is unique to the unofficial social media supporters; any acknowledgment of fault or impropriety never appears in any statement from official Presidential Spokespersons. However, though the social media supporters acknowledge that President Duterte made a mistake, each one still emphasize that he is deserving of support by tying this position with another position, thus gaining for President Duterte an additional set of rights enabling him to make the rape joke while imposing and then reinforcing the duties on citizens to accept the rape joke.

Social media supporter # 3 ties this position with the position of a tired and overworked father figure. Social media supporter #s 4 and 5 tie this position with the leader who is a better alternative whose political agenda and message are valuable. As Social media supporter # 4 wrote, "You are better than that, and that joke was completely unnecessary," but a mistake was made which resulted in a rape joke that was for Social media supporter # 5, "unnecessary, inappropriate, and sends the wrong message." Social media supporter # 2 is the one who makes full use of this storyline in one post by positioning President Duterte as who made a mistake using a joke that could be acceptable in certain appropriate

contexts where telling a rape joke would be normative or "napapalampas kasi angkop sa konteksto," but who made a mistake and used it at the "inappropriate" time or "panahong di angkop." Here the President is again given the right to make the rape joke since the joke is acceptable in certain contexts. As a result, the citizens should understand that the President made a mistake, but that this does not represent who the president really is since he is "better than that" and so citizens can forgive and accept the rape joke. Examples of data extracts illustrating the position of one who made a mistake yet is still going to be supported are found in Table 7.

Table 7 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as One Who Made a Mistake But Still Deserves Support:

<i>Mr. President I support you. But please Sir, can you stop making rape jokes. They do not add up anything to your message.</i>
<i>Where is your outrage here? Is the President's rape joke (which I have to agree with you is wrong) worse than this? (cites article link to GMANETWORK.COM about the Maute terrorist group using 10-year-old child warriors in Marawi City)</i>
<i>I hope our officials would refrain from making that rape remark worse by using terms such as "heightened bravado" and "hyperbole."</i>
<i>It is wrong for the President to joke about rape in an appropriate situation.The President is still wrong</i>
<i>Mr President, Help us help you. We want you to succeed. However, locker room jokes are only funny and appropriate when uttered within that room. There's a time and place for everything. Ecclesiastes. Remember? March on...</i>

Cluster 7: President Duterte as a Victim.

One of the most salient positions in defending President Duterte's use of a rape joke that was employed by unofficial social media supporters is that the President is actually the victim. President Duterte positioned as being unfairly attacked by critics who misinterpret or blow out of proportion his rape joke. Statements made by Pro-Duterte social media supporters explain the rape joke in the context of how critics such as biased media, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the Liberal Party (LP), the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), and other hypocritical detractors are framing the President negatively. The President, under this storyline is positioned as aggrieved, because he is misunderstood and maligned by different actors. This positioning explains that all the negativity about the rape joke is from the attackers. Because of this positioning, people are expected to accept the rape joke

as unimportant, and to see the critics as those who are unfairly trying to vilify the President. Examples of data extracts supporting the position of a victim of rival politicians and biased media are found in Table 8.

Table 8 Sample Data Extract Positioning President Duterte as a Victim:

<i>There goes our great vice-president. The great one just wants an opportunity to say something (mema or memasabi). Criticizing and criticizing (the president) just for tv exposure.</i>
<i>The CBCP and the moral guardians of the yellow universe excoriated the President for his rape jokes. But for a priest who technically committed statutory rape against a 13-year old, all we get is either a plea for restraint in making comments, or utter silence. Hypocrisy to the uber-level!</i>
<i>If you seriously think that what he said, which has been twisted by his opponents, couldn't</i>

Regardless of who it was who defended President Duterte, each one positioned the president in such a way as to have the right to speak in a certain way and then ultimately to make the rape joke. Presidential Spokesperson A was at the forefront in defending President Duterte on the two occasions of rape jokes uttered by the President, namely the *Martial Law* and the *Miss Universe* rape jokes. Presidential Spokesperson B defended President Duterte when the third rape joke was made, that of *Maggie dela Riva*, while also defending President Duterte for his history of making rape jokes. The presidential spokespersons tended to position the president in terms of his leadership attributes such as being responsible and supportive as well as possessing the gift of effectively communicating in language of the masses. For the unofficial Pro-Duterte social media supporters, the patterns of positioning ranged from a nuanced position against the rape joke but still being supportive of President Duterte, to ignoring or downplaying the rape joke while defending Duterte as a victim or positioning him as a better alternative to other kinds of politicians. It was also observed that it was only among the unofficial social media supporters that a greater variety of storylines behind the positions emerged ranging from gently critiquing to justifying to mostly being silent on the matter.

The silence of the social media supporters can be interpreted to mean that even they are personally finding it hard to accept the rape joke which they can share with other people publicly given that the social media supporters were very public about their continued support. One of the unofficial social media supporters, social media supporter #2, for example, posted this exact sentiment when he wrote:

"How I wish the President would stop his rape jokes. I find them unacceptable. It is a sore point that tests my support."

Another apologist, social media supporter #4, a woman, wrote about her personal conflict yet chose to also be clear about her public stance of support for the President.

"I support Duterte and what he does for the government, but I think he needs to be reminded by people close to him that his alpha male jokes with the military regarding rape are not acceptable. He should be called out for that, because he is the President and he needs to understand that rape jokes are very offensive. The Australian woman's "Dapat ako ang nauna" was horrifying enough--although I understood the careless remark and what it meant during the time. Him telling the military however that if they rape women and "ako ang bahala" is something I find inexcusable. Dear President Duterte, I love you, but please stop with the rape jokes. You are offending even some of your own women supporters. You are better than that, and that joke was completely unnecessary."

Among the points of interest in the above post are what words the social media supporter uses to show her support for the president with terms of endearment like "Dear President Duterte" and "I love you," positioning the President as someone who is worth supporting even after repeating a mistake she considered "inexcusable." At the end, the social media supporter positioned the President as one to be forgiven for a mistake because he is "better than that."

It is also interesting to note that the social media supporters' posts for the rape jokes occurring in the latter dates do not have a direct reference to the rape joke, rather, these tended to focus on how selfless and effective a president Duterte is, thus trivializing the act of uttering the joke.

Discussion

The presidential spokespersons and pro-Duterte bloggers share two common storylines, namely PRRD being the Commander-in-Chief and a responsible leader. Thus, to defend PRRD, one would simply have to invoke that he is the supreme leader of the land. Thus, being President alone gives him the right to utter rape jokes.

Another tactic to defend PRRD is to itemize his previous accomplishments. Pro-women programs carried out in Davao City in the past were enumerated to create the position that President Duterte is pro-women and to counteract constructs Duterte as anti-women. A storyline that claims actions speak louder than words gives PRRD the right to deploy rape jokes in his speech.

A comparison between the patterns of positioning employed by official presidential spokespersons versus unofficial Pro-Duterte social media

supporters suggests that the pattern utilized by presidential spokespersons is unidirectional (i.e., to defend PRRD and assign him the right to utter rape jokes at all times), whereas the patterns taken up by pro-Duterte social media supporters leave a small space for ambiguity and dissent (i.e., rape jokes are not necessary, stop making rape jokes). We surmised that presidential spokespersons have no choice but to take up a single position as they have a sworn duty as Malacañang officials to defend President Duterte. In contrast, pro-Duterte social media supporters are bereft of any official duty to defend the President. In their case, supporting PRRD is a very personal yet also very public decision. It is possible that this combination of personal and public choice to support is the reason why it was only in the unofficial social media supporters of President Duterte that all of the more nuanced patterns of positioning could be found. These more nuanced positions found fault in President Duterte's use of the rape joke, yet all still supported him and positioned him in such a way as to have the right to make the rape joke. It can be argued that these were the more successful apologists since there was no official duty to defend the President and yet each one still did despite any misgiving due to the use of the rape joke.

Limitations

This is a small scale study that focuses on only five of a number of pro-Duterte social media supporters and two Presidential spokespersons. This consciously focused only on Pro-Duterte groups. While there have been other sexist utterances made by the President, this study focused on only rape jokes and only the three uttered by President Duterte in 2017.

Conclusion

Using positioning theory as a lens, the President is given the right to speak how he wants and not to change his behavior by the Presidential Spokespersons. Bloggers and Social Media Supporters, however, initially had a more nuanced positioning of President Duterte, in that the President's joke was recognized as wrong, yet, citizens are still given the duty to accept the joke as being trivial which then: (a) limits what citizens can say against the President about the joke; (b) limits what citizens can expect in President Duterte's present and future behavior; and (c) lowers citizens' expectations for future presidents. In effect, President Duterte bypassed all accountability by the affirmation of Presidential spokespersons, Pro-Duterte bloggers and social media supporters that the remarks of the president was only meant as a joke. This allows for citizens to tolerate these sexually violent messages as those who try to condemn it are pushed aside.

"If we understand how we construct social reality, we can construct more consciously to sustain norms that promote the ends we profess to desire." (Slocum-Bradley, 2009)

Finally, if we profess that respect for women, sensitive and polite speech, and accountable political leaders are important, then knowing how PRRD and citizens are positioned to accept rape jokes will enable us to challenge these positions and construct counter-positioning discourses.

Implications

Given the results of the study, the following are the implications: (a) normalization of rape jokes in Philippine culture and the implicit encouragement of rape and sexual abuse since it is something to laugh about; (b) implicit support for a culture of rape especially since the Martial Law rape joke excused the rapist in the context of an abuse of (military) authority and the Miss Universe rape joke elevated the rapist as being worth respecting for being brave (macho); (c) creation of a false dilemma that one cannot have BOTH a president who accomplishes things and who speaks respectfully and better to be rude but effective than politely ineffective; (d) justification of rudeness and insensitivity in this president, and maybe in future presidents, for as long as that president is effective – a kind of machismo; and (e) silencing of legitimate criticism of the president on the basis that he is effective anyway.

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