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# Signs of Conflict and Authority: A Peircean and Social Semiotic Analysis of Mediated Family Dispute in *Raffy Tulfo in Action*, an Online Public Mediation Program

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**Abstract:** In the Philippines, *Raffy Tulfo in Action* commands a mass viewership not simply because it resolves disputes but because it performs justice as a culturally saturated, semiotically dense public spectacle. This study examines how conflict and authority are constructed through signs in a single, theoretically purposive episode of this online public mediation program involving a mother allegedly expelled and despised by her own child, through the lens of an integrated Peircean and social semiotic framework. Drawing on Peirce's triadic model of sign-object signification and the multimodal grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, the analysis maps how spatial, verbal, paralinguistic, kinesic, and camera-mediated sign systems converge to produce authority, credibility, and moral resolution within this mediated encounter. Three thematic findings emerge. First, the mediator's authority is a multimodal achievement assembled through elevated studio positioning, directive prosody, strategic code-switching, and a kinesic repertoire of gaze and gesture rather than a property inherent to the individual. Second, filial conflict is expressed through layered iconic and indexical signs of emotional distress, while symbolic invocations of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), kinship terms, and the trope of maternal sacrifice activate a Filipino moral framework that frames the dispute as a sacred bond that is violated rather than a practical disagreement requiring negotiation. Third, the resolution sequence orchestrates verbal, kinesic, proxemic, and camera signs in multimodal convergence, naturalising the mediated outcome as morally authentic and culturally legitimate. Critically,



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the study reveals how *Raffy Tulfo in Action's* semiotic economy sensationalises private family conflict into public moral spectacle, foreclosing more equitable, dialogic models of dispute resolution in the process.

*Keywords:* Peircean semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, media-based dispute resolution, mediator authority, Filipino family conflict

### Introduction

Media-based dispute resolution programs have become a significant communicative space where conflicts are publicly shared, narrated, interpreted, and mediated. Public programs utilising social media technology, such as YouTube, resembling a courtroom, function as alternative platforms for dispute resolution by employing mechanisms similar to alternative dispute resolution (ADR), such as mediation and conciliation (Condlin, 2017). Beyond their entertainment value, these programs shape public perceptions of justice by presenting dramatised yet socially recognisable forms of legal and moral reasoning (Podlas, 2005). As mediated encounters, these programs are not merely legal forums but also communicative environments where meanings about authority, accountability, family, and social order are produced and circulated.

In the Philippines, *Raffy Tulfo in Action* has emerged as one of the most influential media-based dispute resolution programs. Through television broadcasts linked to “live” online platforms such as YouTube, the program provides a venue where individuals bring personal conflicts, often involving family and relationship disputes, consumer complaints, and community disagreements, for public viewing and mediation. With hundreds of uploaded videos and millions of viewers, *Raffy Tulfo in Action* has become a widely recognised public mediation platform where grievances are articulated, resolved, yet at times, exacerbated before a mass audience. Its popularity reflects not only public interest but also broader frustrations with the formal justice system in the Philippines, including concerns about bureaucratic procedural delays, financial costs, and perceived institutional inefficiencies. In this mediated setting, disputes are transformed into communicative performances in which participants narrate experiences, defend positions, and negotiate legitimacy before their opposing party, the host of the program, and the viewing public.

Despite its widespread influence, the program has also attracted criticism, particularly regarding the host’s authority, style of mediation, and the performative nature of televised dispute resolution. Scholars have noted that the host’s persuasive communication style and authoritative persona play a crucial role in shaping how disputes are interpreted and resolved (Hawes & Kong, 2024). The program’s catchphrases and communicative patterns have even entered everyday language, reinforcing its cultural presence and communicative influence on public perceptions of fairness and justice (Fulmaran & Evangelista, 2022; Redulla et al., 2022). Legal scholars and practitioners have expressed concerns that such programs may oversimplify legal processes or bypass formal legal institutions, such as local courts, suggesting that disputes should ideally be addressed by appropriate authorities and agencies instead of a publicly available dispute resolution by people with no or little legal knowledge and expertise with resolving disputes, and in which personal opinions might gain more traction and bearing to the public, rather than the rule of law (Redulla et al., 2022). Others have called for greater transparency, procedural fairness, and active collaboration with legal experts and government institutions (Costillas, 2020). These debates highlight the importance of examining the communicative dynamics through which disputes are publicly mediated.

While previous studies have explored the legal and institutional implications of media-based dispute resolution programs, there is a dearth of studies that have examined how meaning is constructed through the communicative signs and multimodal interactions

that occur during these mediated encounters. This study, therefore, approaches the public conflict mediation program through the lens of semiotics. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, which conceptualises meaning as emerging from the triadic relationship between the sign, the object, and interpretant (Peirce, 1958), and social semiotics, which emphasises how meaning-making is shaped by social context, power relations, and multimodal communication (Halliday, 1978; Kress, 2010), the study examines how disputes are communicated, interpreted, and negotiated within the program. From this perspective, spoken language, gestures, tone of voice, emotional or facial expressions, and institutional authority function as signs that contribute to the construction of meaning during mediation.

Using one video episode from the program as the primary data source titled “*Nanay, pinalayas at pinandirihan daw ng sarili niyang anak*” (Mother, allegedly expelled and despised by her own child), this study analyses how communicative signs operate within the dispute-resolution interaction and how these signs reveal underlying social meanings about authority, family relationships, responsibility, accountability, fairness, and justice. By examining the semiotic processes embedded in the interaction between the host and participants, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how media-based dispute resolution programs construct meanings about conflict and authority in contemporary Philippine society.

## Review of Literature

### Media-Based Dispute Resolution Programs

Media-based dispute resolution programs have become an influential communicative space where personal conflicts are publicly narrated, interpreted, and mediated before a mass audience. In the Philippine context, programs such as *Raffy Tulfo in Action* function not only as entertainment but also as an alternative avenue through which individuals seek immediate mediation of their personal or familial conflicts outside formal legal institutions. These programs blend elements of journalism, mediation, and public spectacle (Gamson, 1998; Turner, 2010), transforming private disputes, particularly family conflicts, into publicly negotiated and contested narratives. As a result, they have become a significant site where Filipinos interpret issues of fairness, justice, accountability, and social responsibility.

Empirical studies show that the popularity of *Raffy Tulfo in Action* is closely linked to the increasing public dissatisfaction with the slow, bureaucratic, and costly processes of the formal justice system in the Philippines. Many Filipinos view the program as a practical and accessible alternative where grievances can be addressed quickly, albeit publicly. One study analysing the program’s YouTube channel found that a large proportion of episodes involve family conflicts and romantic disputes, reflecting common social tensions within Filipino households (Costillas, 2020). The program’s wide reach and rapid or quick conflict resolution have contributed to its reputation as a venue where ordinary citizens can seek assistance and public validation of their grievances.

Research on viewer perceptions further suggests that Filipino audiences actively interpret and negotiate the meanings presented in these dispute-resolution episodes. Many viewers perceive *Raffy Tulfo in Action* as both educational and socially useful because it exposes them to legalese language and legal issues, and presents practical, fast-moving models of how disputes may be handled outside formal court processes. Some viewers also

report that watching the program improves their understanding of conflict negotiation, conflict management, and the role of public authority figures in resolving interpersonal disputes (Redulla et al., 2022). At the same time, audiences are not passive consumers of these narratives; they assess the fairness of the host's interventions, question the credibility of the disputing parties, and express concern about sensationalism, public humiliation, and "trial by publicity" (Redulla et al., 2022).

Despite its perceived usefulness, the program also generates contestation and debate among viewers and observers. Critics argue that the show's confrontational style and public exposure of private disputes or private lives may lead to humiliation or social stigma for the individuals involved (Podlas, 2005; Redulla et al., 2022). In some cases, participants portrayed as the offending party may become targets of public criticism, hate or online harassment, especially when the full context of the dispute is withheld. Scholars note that while the program can provide immediate assistance and public recognition of grievances, it also raises ethical questions about media spectacle, power dynamics, and the public adjudication of private, deeply personal conflicts (Costillas, 2020; Podlas, 2005). Another important dimension of audience reception involves the social context of viewership. Research indicates that many heavy viewers are from lower-income groups who face barriers to accessing formal legal assistance and have limited legal literacy (Redulla et al., 2022; Costillas, 2020). For these audiences, media-based dispute resolution programs function as a form of informal justice that combines public mediation with emotional storytelling, offering narratives that resonate with them because they reflect familiar social problems such as family disputes, financial obligations, and interpersonal betrayal.

### Peircean Semiotics

Peircean semiotics provides a foundational framework for understanding how meaning emerges through signs within communicative interactions. Developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotics conceptualises meaning-making as a triadic relationship among the sign (or representamen), the object, and the interpretant (Peirce, 1958). In this model, a sign represents something (the object) to someone, producing an interpretive understanding (the interpretant) in the mind of the interpreter. Peirce (1958) further classified signs into three main categories: icons, indices, and symbols, depending on how they relate to their objects. Icons signify through resemblance, indices through causal or contextual association, and symbols through socially learned conventions (Chandler, 2017). This framework emphasises that meaning is not fixed but emerges through processes of interpretation shaped by context, experience, and cultural knowledge. Crucially, the interpretant is itself a sign capable of generating further interpretants, establishing what Peirce called *unlimited semiosis*, an open-ended chain of meaning production that extends from the immediate encounter between participants to the broader viewing public (Noth, 1990).

When applied to *Raffy Tulfo in Action*, Peircean semiotics helps illuminate how mediated disputes are constructed and interpreted through multiple layers of signification. Verbal statements, emotional expressions, gestures, and moments of silence all function as signs that point to underlying social meanings about authority, responsibility, and moral judgment. For example, a complainant's emotional testimony may operate as an indexical sign of suffering or injustice, while the host's authoritative tone and directive language may

function symbolically to signal institutional power and legitimacy. The interpretants generated by these signs are not limited to the immediate participants but extend to the viewing public, who actively interpret the interaction and evaluate the credibility of the disputing parties as well as the host. Through this semiotic process, the program transforms deeply personal family conflicts into publicly interpretable narratives through which viewers construct meanings about fairness, accountability, and justice (Chandler, 2017).

### **Social Semiotics and Multimodal Communication**

Social semiotics extends the study of signs beyond formal linguistic structures to examine how semiotic resources that are the tools available for meaning-making in each social and cultural context are deployed, combined, and transformed in concrete social practices. Rooted in Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics, social semiotics conceptualises language and other sign systems as simultaneously fulfilling three metafunctions: the *ideational* (representing experience and the world), the *interpersonal* (enacting social roles and relationships), and the *textual* (organising information into coherent messages). Crucially, Halliday (1978) treated these metafunctions as properties of any semiotic system, not language alone, thereby opening the door to the analysis of visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory modes of communication.

Building on this foundation, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) developed a "grammar of visual design" that systematically describes how images and visual texts make meaning. Their framework identifies representational structures (what is depicted and how), interactive structures (the relationship between image and viewer), and compositional structures (how elements are arranged for emphasis and coherence). Of particular relevance to the present study is the interactive dimension, which encompasses gaze, whether a depicted participant looks directly at the viewer (a *demand* image, soliciting identification) or looks away (an *offer* image, positioning the viewer as observer), as well as social distance (encoded in shot size: close-up implies intimacy; long shot implies detachment) and perspective (high angle encodes the viewer as powerful relative to the subject; low angle encodes the subject as powerful). These visual grammar categories translate directly into the televised and streamed format of *Raffy Tulfo in Action*, where camera placement, editing rhythm, and shot selection constitute a systematic set of interpersonal semiotic choices that construct the relative power and legitimacy of the host, the complainant, and the respondent.

Kress (2010) further elaborates the concept of *multimodality*, which holds that contemporary communication is inherently plural, that is, meaning in any given communicative event is produced not by a single mode (such as language) in isolation but through the simultaneous and co-ordinated deployment of multiple modes constituting speech, image, gesture, music, layout, and colour, each contributing its own meaning potential to the whole. This insight is directly applicable to *Raffy Tulfo in Action*, where meanings about conflict and authority are produced not by verbal language alone but through its interaction with bodily conduct, spatial arrangement, camera work, and on-screen text. Jewitt (2014) defines multimodal discourse analysis as "the study of how people make meaning through the orchestrated use of multiple modes of communication" (p. 1),

and this study applies multimodality as a key methodological tool for capturing the full semiotic complexity of the program's mediated interactions.

### **Authority, Power, and Mediated Discourse**

The construction of authority in media discourse has been extensively theorised within the tradition of critical discourse analysis. Fairclough (1995) argues that media discourse is a site in which social identities, power relations, and systems of knowledge are produced, reproduced, and transformed. Authority in media, on this account, is not a pre-given attribute of an individual but an effect of discursive and semiotic practices. The television or online mediator acquires authority not merely through credentials or legal standing but through the strategic orchestration of the program format: seating arrangement, management of speaking turns, camera framing, and the conventions of the genre all contribute to positioning the host as a morally credible and institutionally empowered figure of adjudication.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective offers a complementary account of how authority and identity are performed in mediated interaction. Social encounters, for Goffman (1959), are performances in which individuals manage impressions through the strategic deployment of appearance, setting, and manner on a "front stage" presented to an audience. In the context of a public mediation program, all participants, including the host, complainant, and respondent, are simultaneously performing for each other and for the viewing public. The host performs impartial but morally engaged adjudication; the complainant performs aggrieved suffering; the respondent performs (or contests) accountability. Goffman's (1967) concept of "face", viewed as the positive social value a person claims in interaction, is also central to the dynamics of dispute: the dispute episode necessarily involves acts of face threat and face repair, and the semiotic resources through which these are accomplished, such as tone, gaze, body posture, and proximity, are the empirical material of the present analysis.

### **The Cultural Semiotic Context: Filipino Family, Filial Piety, and *Utang na Loob***

Any semiotic analysis of family disputes in the Philippine context must be situated within the culturally specific value system that governs the meaning of family relationships in Filipino society. Three concepts are particularly salient. The first is *utang na loob* (the debt of inner self or debt of gratitude), which holds that a child who has been raised and cared for by a parent incurs an unpayable moral debt that creates lifelong obligations of deference, care, and loyalty (Church & Katigbak, 2000; Enriquez, 1992). The second is *hiya* (roughly translated as propriety-based shame or social sensitivity), which regulates conduct in public and familial contexts and underpins the social pressure to conform to family role obligations (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). The third is *kapwa* (shared identity or the recognition of the other as a fellow being), which grounds Filipino interpersonal ethics in a relational or dialogic rather than individualistic framework (Enriquez, 1992).

These cultural values are not merely background context; they are active semiotic resources in dispute episodes involving parent-child conflict. When a complainant invokes the sacrifices she made as a mother, or when the host references the child's *utang na loob*, these are not merely emotional appeals but culturally-induced symbolic signs that activate a

moral framework shared by host, participants, and audience alike. The episode under analysis, in which a mother alleges that her own child expelled and despised her, is particularly saturated with these cultural values, because it involves what Philippine society regards as one of the most grievous moral violations possible: the betrayal and abandonment of a parent by a child. Understanding the semiotic operation of conflict and authority in this episode, therefore, requires close attention to the cultural sign systems within which individual acts of language, gesture, and image are interpreted.

### Research Questions

In this study, we attempted to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do spatial, verbal, paralinguistic, and kinesic sign systems converge multimodally to construct the mediator's authority within the mediated dispute encounter or episode in *Raffy Tulfo in Action*?
- (2) What iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs emerge in the expression of filial conflict between the complainant-mother and the respondent-child, and how do these signs activate culturally specific Filipino moral frameworks, particularly *utang na loob*, *hiya*, and filial obligation, in the construction of credibility and moral legitimacy?
- (3) How does the multimodal orchestration of verbal, kinesic, proxemic, and camera-mediated signs in the resolution sequence naturalise the mediated outcome as morally authentic, and what ideological implications does this semiotic convergence carry for public understandings of justice, authority, and family dispute resolution in the Philippine context?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in multimodal discourse analysis (Jewitt, 2014; Machin & Mayr, 2012). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the aim of the study is not to measure the frequency of discrete linguistic or visual features but to understand how those features work together to construct social meanings, specifically, meanings of authority and conflict, within a particular cultural and institutional context. Qualitative inquiry, as Creswell (2014) observes, is especially suited to the examination of processes, meanings, and social dynamics in natural or naturalistic settings. The program episode under analysis constitutes precisely such a setting: a naturalistic mediation encounter whose communicative dynamics are shaped by the genre conventions, power relations, and cultural values described in the preceding review.

An interpretive epistemological orientation acknowledges that meanings are not transparently available in communicative texts but are produced through the analytical engagement of a researcher equipped with relevant theoretical and cultural knowledge (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The present analyst's interpretive work is accordingly understood as a constitutive element of the research process. To enhance the reliability and transparency of interpretation, the analysis proceeds from an explicit and systematic theoretical framework that is detailed below and applied consistently across all semiotic dimensions of the data.

### Theoretical Framework

The study integrates two complementary analytical traditions. First, Peircean sign analysis (Peirce, 1958; Chandler, 2017) provides a vocabulary for classifying individual signs according to the nature of the relationship between the representamen and its object (iconic, indexical, symbolic, or hybrid), and for tracing the interpretive chains that signs initiate through the concept of the interpretant. Second, the social semiotic multimodality framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Kress (2010) situates those signs within larger systems of semiotic resources, attending to the interpersonal, ideational, and textual meanings realised through the simultaneous deployment of multiple communicative modes. Halliday's (1978) metafunctional framework provides the overarching conceptual architecture connecting the two traditions. The integration of these frameworks yields a "bifocal" analytical optic: a close-range lens for the individual sign and a wide-angle lens for the multimodal system and its ideological dimensions.

### Corpus of Data and Purposive Sampling

The corpus consists of a single episode of *Raffy Tulfo in Action* retrieved from the program's official YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gdffKTfS6g>), titled "Nanay, pinalayas at pinandirihan daw ng sarili niyang anak" (Mother, allegedly expelled and despised by her own child). Purposive sampling, the deliberate selection of a case on the basis of its theoretical relevance rather than its statistical representativeness (Patton, 2002), governed the choice of this episode. The episode was selected because it exemplifies the full range of semiotic resources, including verbal argumentation, emotional display, kinesic conduct, spatial arrangement, and camera mediation, that characterise *Raffy Tulfo in Action's* genre, and because it centres on a parent-child family dispute that directly activates the culturally specific sign systems of filial piety, *utang na loob*, and *hiya* described in the literature review.

While the use of a single episode limits statistical generalisation, this limitation is consistent with the study's interpretive aims. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, the single case is not inherently inferior to large studies; its analytical strength lies in the depth of contextual understanding it enables and offers, and its capacity for theoretical development. The richness of the selected episode, which includes sustained verbal dispute between the complainant-mother and the respondent-child, pronounced emotional display, multiple interventions by the host, and a complex resolution sequence, provides ample material for the multimodal semiotic analysis the study undertakes.

### Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Data collection and analysis proceeded through five iterative stages informed by the established procedures of multimodal discourse analysis (Jewitt, 2014; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In the first stage, the episode was viewed in its entirety to develop a holistic understanding of its narrative arc, the identities and positions of the participants, and the general dynamics of the dispute. Field notes were taken on the episode's structural segments: the opening framing of the case, the complainant's testimony, the respondent's reply, the host's interventions, the escalation sequences, and the resolution. Key scenes

identified as analytically significant based on notable semiotic density, emotional intensity, or structural importance within the episode's narrative were flagged for close analysis in subsequent stages.

In the second stage, a full verbatim transcript of the episode's Filipino/Tagalog and English dialogue was produced. Non-verbal vocalisations (crying, raised voice, sighs, laughter) and significant pauses were notated in brackets. English translations were provided for all Filipino utterances cited in the analysis, with the original Filipino retained parenthetically to preserve the sociolinguistic specificity of the data.

In the third stage, multimodal annotation was performed on the key scenes identified in Stage 1. For each scene, five semiotic dimensions were systematically described: (a) verbal signs including lexical choice, sentence type, address forms, and code-switching between Filipino and English; (b) paralinguistic signs consisting of prosody, voice quality, pace, and volume; (c) kinesic signs pertaining to facial expression, gesture, posture, and gaze direction; (d) proxemic signs such as spatial arrangement and distance between participants; and (e) camera-mediated signs consisting of shot type, camera angle, and editing rhythm. Screenshots were captured at key semiotic moments to document the visual dimension of the data.

In the fourth stage, the annotated data were analysed through the integrated theoretical framework. For each identified semiotic feature, three analytical questions were posed: (1) What type of sign is this in Peirce's typology, consisting of iconic, indexical, symbolic, or hybrid dimensions? (2) What semiotic resource does it mobilise, and what interpersonal, ideational, or textual meaning does it realise (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Halliday, 1978)? (3) What social meanings does it construct with respect to authority, conflict/dispute, and the power relations among participants?

In the fifth stage, findings were synthesised thematically. Three overarching themes emerged from the data through iterative engagement with the analytical framework: (1) the semiotic construction of mediator authority, (2) the semiotic expression of filial or familial conflict, and (3) the multimodal convergence of authority and conflict in the resolution sequence. These themes organise the presentation of findings in the following section.

## Results

The following analysis presents findings from the selected episode of *Raffy Tulfo in Action* organised around three thematic clusters. Each cluster is illustrated with specific sign occurrences drawn from the data, analysed through the integrated Peircean-social semiotic framework. Verbatim utterances cited in Filipino/Tagalog are provided with English translations in parentheses.

### Theme 1: The Semiotic Construction of Mediator Authority

#### *Spatial and Visual Signs of Authority*

The studio layout of *Raffy Tulfo in Action* constitutes a complex symbolic sign system that encodes authority prior to any verbal exchange. Tulfo is consistently positioned at the apex of a triangular spatial arrangement: occupying a centrally placed desk elevated above the level of the complainant and respondent, who are seated facing him at a lower level on

opposite sides. This spatial configuration is a symbolic sign: its meaning rests not on resemblance or causal connection, but on the cultural convention, embedded in institutional life across Philippine society, that elevated positioning signifies superior standing. The arrangement reproduces the spatial semiotics of courtrooms, classrooms, and religious spaces, in each of which authority is literally and figuratively “above” those it governs.

In Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) terms, the high-angle camera shot frequently trained on the disputants encodes the interpersonal meaning of diminished power: it positions the viewer as looking down on the participants, coding them as relatively powerless within the institutional space of the program. The occasional low-angle or eye-level shot of Tulfo, by contrast, encodes equivalence or elevation, reinforcing his positional authority visually. The frontal engagement angle, that is, Tulfo facing the camera and the disputants directly, codes involvement and interactional control, while the slight oblique angle sometimes used when filming the complainant or respondent codes their status as objects of scrutiny rather than equal interactional partners. The program’s background signage and the *Raffy Tulfo in Action* logo function as symbolic signs of institutional legitimacy, anchoring the interpersonal dynamics of the exchange within a branded institutional frame that lends them authority beyond the individuals involved (Barthes, 1977).

#### *Verbal and Paralinguistic Signs of Authority*

Tulfo’s verbal conduct across the episode is marked by a consistent repertoire of authority signs. At the level of sentence type, he deploys imperatives and rhetorical interrogatives when addressing the parties. Directives such as “Sabihin mo sa kanya ang totoo” (Tell him/her the truth) and “Sagutin mo ang tanong ko” (Answer my question) position him as the interactional authority who both allocates speaking turns and defines the terms of the encounter. These are symbolic signs: their authorising force derives not from any natural property of the utterances themselves but from the genre conventions of public mediation and the broader cultural discourse of moral adjudication within which the program operates, and for which Tulfo himself facilitates, and therefore, legitimises.

At the paralinguistic level, Tulfo’s prosodic management is equally significant. His baseline delivery is measured and relatively slow, projecting composure and control, illustrated in indexical signs of emotional regulation that contrast with the heightened affect of the disputants. When underscoring a moral judgment, however, he dramatically raises the volume of his voice and slows his pace further, producing a prosodic amplification that functions both indexically (as a sign of intensified seriousness) and symbolically (as a genre-coded marker indicating that a verdict or moral assessment is imminent). The audience, familiar with this prosodic template, reads the amplification as a cue to moral climax. Strategic code-switching between Filipino and English also functions as a verbal authority sign. Tulfo’s use of English in formal or legally inflected statements deploys English as a symbolic sign of institutional knowledge and social capital, reinforcing his alignment with legitimate authority structures even in a format that ostensibly privileges the vernacular voice of ordinary Filipinos.

*Kinesic Signs of Authority*

Among the kinesic signs most consistently associated with authority in the episode is the host's use and management of gaze. Tulfo's direct and sustained gaze at the party being addressed is simultaneously an indexical sign of attentive focus and a symbolic sign of moral scrutiny within the adjudication genre and the dispute mediation space. When he turns his gaze away from a party whose account is deemed unsatisfactory, a gesture of what might be called "gaze withdrawal", the averted gaze functions as a powerful indexical sign of disapproval, communicating disbelief or moral rejection, more economically than verbal negotiation alone. This technique of gaze withdrawal is a recurrent feature of the host's authority-constructing conduct or disposition in the episode.

The raised or open-palm gesture, deployed at several junctures to halt a disputant's speech, is a hybrid sign combining iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions. It is iconic in resembling a universally recognisable "stop" gesture; it is indexical in that it causally terminates the other's ongoing speech act; and it is symbolic in that it mobilises the culturally established convention of the palm-halt as an instrument of interactional control exercised by persons in authority. Together, these three sign dimensions make the gesture one of the most economical and forceful authority signs in the host's kinesic repertoire.

**Theme 2: The Semiotic Expression of Filial Conflict***Iconic and Indexical Signs of Emotional Distress*

The emotional dimension of the mother-child conflict is communicated primarily through iconic and indexical signs. The complainant-mother's facial expression, illustrated by contorted brows, wet eyes, trembling lower lip, and contorted mouth, iconically resembles the universally recognisable expression of pain, grief and distress. These iconic signs are simultaneously indexical: the tears that accompany weeping are a physiological effect of emotional arousal and therefore a causal index of inner suffering. This double sign function, that is, iconic resemblance to sorrow and indexical connection to felt experience, is precisely what renders the mother's emotional display so persuasive within the episode's semiotic economy. The audience reads the tears not merely as a conventional signal of sadness but as evidence of authentic suffering, because indexical signs are culturally perceived as less susceptible to fabrication than symbolic ones (Peirce, 1958; Chandler, 2017).

Her broken, halting speech further reinforces this semiotic construction: interrupted prosody, such as pauses, sighs, voice cracks, is indexical of the physiological effects of crying and emotional overwhelm on the vocal apparatus. Phrases delivered in a raised or trembling voice carry an added indexical charge, as vocal intensity is physically produced by heightened arousal. These multimodal indexical signs operate in concert to construct the complainant as a person whose suffering is genuine, immediate, and embodied, a construction that positions her as the morally legitimate party in the dispute.

The respondent-child's emotional repertoire stands in marked contrast. In the early portions of the episode, the respondent's facial signs tend toward controlled tension rather than overt distress: a tightened jaw, slightly elevated chin, and restrained or guarded expression. These are iconic signs of defensiveness and controlled anger, simultaneously indexical of the physiological effort required to regulate emotion under conditions of an accusation made public. The contrast between the two emotional repertoires is heightened

by the program's editing pattern, which frequently alternates between the mother's grief-coded expressions and the child's more guarded display in a shot-reverse-shot sequence, constructing the conflict as a visual and moral opposition between vulnerable suffering and defensive resistance.

### *Indexical Signs of Relational Rupture*

Beyond emotional expression, the conflict is registered in a set of indexical signs that mark the rupture of normal relational intimacy. The seating arrangement positions the complainant and respondent at a deliberate distance, facing the mediator rather than each other, making it a proxemic configuration that indexes relational estrangement. In normal conditions of familial intimacy, a mother and child would be seated in close proximity and mutual orientation; the mediation staging inversely marks the abnormal condition of their relationship, being worked through its spatial form. The avoidance of eye contact between the parties during the dispute phase similarly functions as an indexical sign of relational breakdown, where intimacy is indexed by mutual gaze, its withholding indexes disconnection and refusal of relational recognition (Goffman, 1967).

Interrupted and overlapping speech, which turned out to be a salient feature of the verbal data in the episode's conflict sequences, provides further indexical evidence of relational rupture. Each interruption indexes the collapse of the cooperative turn-taking norms that sustain civil interaction and signals that the affective pressure of the dispute has exceeded the participants' capacity for mutually regulated exchange. The host's intervention to restore order through the raised palm gesture and directives such as "*Hayaan mo siyang magsalita*" (Let him/her speak), thus performs the program's central social function: the symbolic re-imposition of communicative order upon relational disorder.

### *Symbolic Signs of Contested Filial Identity*

The verbal argumentation of the episode is saturated with symbolic signs through which the parties contest each other's social identities and relational obligations. The invocation of kinship terms, consisting of *nanay* (mother), *anak* (child), and *pamilya* (family), in the context of accusation and counter-accusation deploys culturally embedded symbolic signs that activate a specific moral framework. To accuse an *anak* of having expelled and despised his or her *nanay* is not merely to describe a course of events; it is to invoke the entire symbolic system of Filipino filial ideology centred on *utang na loob*, the sacred obligations of the child-to-parent bond, and the social taboo against parental abandonment, as well as to frame the respondent as having perpetrated one of the gravest moral violations within that system (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). The symbolic power of these kinship terms derives precisely from their embeddedness in deeply held cultural values that are shared by the host, participants, and audience alike.

When the host invokes these cultural signs in his adjudication, for instance, reminding the respondent of the *sakripisyo ng isang ina* (sacrifice of a mother) or the concept of *utang na loob*, he is not introducing new moral content but rather amplifying and officiating the symbolic system already activated by the complainant's testimony. The host thus functions as a semiotic broker: he translates the private, emotionally expressed grievances of the complainant into the public moral language of the program's genre and, in

doing so, produces an authoritative interpretation of the signs of conflict that forecloses alternative readings.

### **Theme 3: Multimodal Convergence in the Resolution Sequence**

#### *The Anatomy of the Resolution Moment*

The resolution sequence of the episode constitutes the semiotic climax of the mediation, i.e., the moment at which the program's central social function is most visibly performed and its ideological framework most explicitly enacted. This sequence is constructed through the convergence of multiple semiotic modes operating simultaneously and in mutual reinforcement, producing what Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) describe as "multimodal orchestration."

Verbally, the resolution is marked by a distinctive shift in the host's sentence-type repertoire: from interrogative and imperative modes, which characterise the dispute phase, to declarative statements that carry the force of institutional pronouncements and authority. Having extracted testimony, assessed credibility, and delivered moral judgment, the host summarises the terms of settlement in declarative utterances that are grammatically unmarked for contestation. This shift in sentence type is a symbolic sign of the transition from dispute to resolution, or from competing claims to settled outcomes. The resolution statement is delivered in a markedly slower pace and lower, more measured register than the confrontational sequences, a paralinguistic shift that iconically resembles the calm that follows a storm and indexically signals the de-escalation of emotional arousal.

#### *Multimodal Signs of Reconciliation and Compliance*

The gestural and proxemic signs that accompany the verbal resolution, including the child's shift from averted to direct gaze, the forward lean toward the mother, and any physical gesture of apology such as a bow of the head, constitute a cluster of simultaneously iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. They are iconic in resembling culturally recognised gestures of deference and contrition; they are indexical in being causally produced by the changed emotional and motivational state of the respondent following the host's intervention; and they are symbolic in enacting the culturally specific conventions of filial apology and restored relational hierarchy (Goffman, 1967; Enriquez, 1992). The camera's deployment of a close-up at this moment is an additional interpersonal semiotic choice as it frames the reconciliation intimately, inviting the viewer to share in its emotional significance and, by extension, to endorse the resolution the host has produced.

The respondent's postural shift from a defensive, upright or backwards-leaning posture during the dispute phase to a more open, forward-leaning orientation during the resolution phase is an indexical sign of a changed affect and relational re-orientation. The multimodal convergence of verbal compliance, kinesic openness, and proxemic approach, all occurring simultaneously within the resolution sequence, produces a richly layered cluster of mutually reinforcing signs that naturalises the mediation outcome as genuine, heartfelt, and sustainable rather than merely coerced or "performed".

*The Online Audience as Extended Semiotic Participant*

A distinctive feature of *Raffy Tulfo in Action's* multimodal semiotic economy is the construction of the online audience as an active participant in the sign process. The live viewer count, displayed prominently during the stream, is itself an indexical sign of the program's social reach, indexing the size of the witnessing community and thus the degree of public accountability it creates for the respondent. The YouTube comment section constitutes a paratext in which audience members produce their own interpretants of the signs presented in the episode, extending the semiotic chain beyond the studio into the virtual public sphere that the public seems to share. In Peircean terms, the program's semiosis is never complete at the moment of broadcast; it is perpetually extended and transformed by the dynamical interpretants produced by millions of individual audience members in the diverse contexts of their reception (Peirce, 1958; Chandler, 2017), making meaning. deriving their own interpretations.

Table 1 summarises the principal sign occurrences identified in the episode, classified by Peircean type and social semiotic function.

**Table 1.** Summary of Principal Sign Occurrences in the Analysed Episode of *Raffy Tulfo in Action*

Sign Occurrence	Peircean Type	Object/Reference	Social Semiotic Function	Ideological/Cultural Effect
Elevated host desk/central seating	Symbol	Institutional authority	Interpersonal (power)	Naturalises the mediator's adjudicative role
High-angle camera shot of the disputants	Index	Diminished social status	Interpersonal (power)	Constructs disputants as subordinate
Mother's tears and broken speech	Icon/ Index	Authentic filial grief	Interpersonal (affect)	Produces viewer empathy; legitimises claim
Child's tightened jaw and guarded expression	Icon/ Index	Defensiveness/guilt	Interpersonal (affect)	Codes moral position as suspect
Host's raised-palm halt gesture	Icon/ Index/ Symbol	Interactional control	Interpersonal (power)	Physically enacts mediator authority
Kinship terms nanay/ anak in accusation	Symbol	Filial role violation; <i>utang na loob</i>	Ideational	Activates the Filipino family moral framework
Prosodic amplification by the host	Index/ Symbol	Moral climax; judgment is imminent	Interpersonal (affect + power)	Cues a genre-literate audience to the resolution
Child's forward lean and downward gaze	Icon/ Index/ Symbol	Contrition; restored deference	Interpersonal (affect)	Naturalises resolution as genuine

Sign Occurrence	Peircean Type	Object/Reference	Social Semiotic Function	Ideological/Cultural Effect
Live viewer count display	Index	Scale of public witnessing	Textual (saliency)	Amplifies accountability that puts pressure on the respondent

### Discussion

#### The Multimodal Achievement of Populist Authority

The analysis reveals that authority in *Raffy Tulfo in Action* is not a pre-given attribute of the host but a multimodal achievement. It is an effect produced through the sustained and simultaneous deployment of spatial, visual, verbal, paralinguistic, and kinesic sign systems. This finding aligns with and extends Fairclough's (1995) argument that media authority is a discursive construction, by demonstrating that, in a multimodal format such as *Raffy Tulfo in Action*, the visual and kinesic dimensions of authority construction may be at least as significant as the verbal. The mediator's raised palm, the camera's low-angle framing, and the elevated studio desk where mediation and adjudication happen collectively accomplish authorising work that operates below the threshold of explicit verbal assertion, and for that reason is more difficult to contest or refuse.

The specific form of authority constructed in *Raffy Tulfo in Action* may be characterised as a populist moral authority, which is an authority that derives not from legal office or professional credentials alone but from the semiotic performance of alignment with the values and grievances of a mass public. The semiotic resources through which this alignment is performed are crucial to adjudication and the viewing public, namely the use of Filipino vernacular rather than formal legal language when addressing complainants, the deliberate lowering of pace and volume of voice when expressing compassion, and the strategic invocation of cultural moral concepts such as *utang na loob* and filial obligation. These choices construct the host not as a detached legal arbiter but as a morally engaged community elder, some kind of a figure continuous with Filipino cultural imaginaries of the patron, *ninong*, or *padrino* as a figure of benevolent yet asymmetric power. This construction has ideological implications: the naturalisation of the single mediator's judgment as the appropriate and sufficient mechanism of dispute resolution forecloses alternative models, including collective negotiation, formal legal process, or community-based peaceful restorative practices.

#### Emotional Legibility and the Semiotic Economy of Credibility

The analysis of filial conflict signs reveals a semiotic economy in which emotional display functions as the primary currency of credibility. Within *Raffy Tulfo in Action's* sign system, the party who weeps more copiously, speaks with greater emotional intensity, and most overtly manifests physiological signs of distress is semiotically coded as the more aggrieved, and therefore the more credible party. In the episode under analysis, the complainant-mother's tears, trembling voice, and broken speech position her as the authentic sufferer, while the respondent-child's more controlled emotional display is susceptible to being read within the program's semiotic logic as indifference or guilt rather than as culturally or temperamentally distinct conduct.

This finding resonates with Ahmed's (2014) observation that emotions are not merely private states but publicly circulating signs that adhere to certain bodies and social positions more readily than others. The program's semiotic economy may therefore risk producing systematic bias against parties whose cultural or personal norms of emotional display incline toward restraint, irrespective of the substantive merits of their position. This is an ethically significant consequence of the sign system that *Raffy Tulfo in Action* deploys: the mapping of emotional expressiveness onto moral legitimacy is not a neutral analytical procedure but a culturally specific and potentially exclusionary convention.

Furthermore, the symbolic invocation of Filipino family ideology through kinship terms, explicit references to *utang na loob*, and the morally charged trope of the self-sacrificing mother, frames the dispute not as a practical disagreement requiring negotiated resolution but as a moral drama in which one party has violated a sacred social bond. This moralization of conflict, as a semiotic effect of the program's genre conventions and cultural embeddedness, transforms the mediator's role from facilitator to moral adjudicator and the audience's role from neutral observer to a community of moral witnesses creating their own meanings and interpretations as they watch the public mediation live.

### **The Complementarity of Peircean and Social Semiotic Analysis**

The integrated framework employed in this study proves analytically meaningful and productive because the two traditions illuminate different yet mutually reinforcing dimensions of the semiotic data. Peircean typology enables the analyst to ask: What kind of sign is this? What is its relationship to its object? What interpretive chain does it initiate? These questions are particularly valuable for the microanalysis of individual sign occurrences, such as the raised palm, the tearful face, and the elevated desk, and for unpacking the layered, sometimes contradictory meanings that hybrid signs simultaneously carry across iconic, indexical, and symbolic registers.

Social semiotic multimodality analysis, by contrast, enables the analyst to ask: How do multiple sign systems work together to produce coherent social meanings? What ideological orientations do these systems naturalise? How do the meaning potentials of semiotic resources reflect and reproduce social power relations? These are macroanalytic questions that the Peircean framework, with its focus on the individual sign relation, is less well-equipped to address on its own. The integration of the two frameworks thus yields a genuinely bifocal analytical optic: fine-grained enough to identify the sign type of a kinesic gesture, yet wide enough to situate that gesture within the ideological economy of the mediation program as a whole.

### **"Mediatisation" of Filipino Family Dispute**

The findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of the "mediatisation" of social institutions (Hjarvard, 2013), which is the process by which social domains previously governed by their own internal logics are increasingly organised according to the logic of media. *Raffy Tulfo in Action* exemplifies this mediatisation in particularly striking form: the private institution of the Filipino family, with its culturally elaborated norms of conflict or dispute, reconciliation, and intergenerational obligation, is brought into conformity with the logic of a public entertainment-journalism hybridisation, a format that requires drama,

spectacle, and narrative resolution within a defined running time and before an audience of millions.

The semiotic analysis reveals the specific mechanisms through which this mediatisation is accomplished: the staging of private conflict within a publicly legible sign system, the camera mediation of intimate emotional expression, the production of resolution as a visually satisfying narrative climax, and the construction of a virtual audience as moral community. These mechanisms transform the meaning of family dispute by subjecting it to the imperatives of media production and public consumption. The families who appear on *Raffy Tulfo in Action* are not simply having their disputes resolved; they are producing a public semiotic text whose meaning exceeds, and may conflict with, the private resolution they seek.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Findings

This study has examined the semiotic construction of authority and conflict in a family dispute episode of *Raffy Tulfo in Action* through an integrated framework combining Peircean sign analysis and social semiotic multimodality analysis. Three thematic clusters of findings were identified. First, mediator authority in *Raffy Tulfo in Action* is a multimodal achievement constructed through the convergence of symbolic spatial signs (the elevated studio desk, the institutional backdrop), indexical and symbolic verbal signs (directive sentence types, prosodic amplification, strategic code-switching), and kinesic signs (sustained and withdrawn gaze, raised-palm gesture, controlled posture). None of these sign systems operates in isolation; their authority-constructing effect depends on their simultaneous and mutually reinforcing deployment across semiotic modes.

Second, the mother-child family conflict is expressed through a layered sign system in which iconic and indexical emotional signs (tears, facial contortion, broken speech) serve as the primary currency of credibility, while symbolic signs (kinship terms, proxemic estrangement, turn-taking violations, and the invocation of *utang na loob*) frame the conflict in moral and cultural terms specific to Filipino society. Third, the resolution sequence is semiotically constructed through the multimodal convergence of verbal settlement, kinesic compliance gestures, and camera close-up, producing a richly layered sign event that naturalises the mediated outcome as genuine and morally endorsed. The online audience is simultaneously constituted as a community of moral witnesses through the visible presence of the live viewer count and the paratext of the comment section.

### Contributions to Knowledge on Managing Conflicts Viewed Through Semiotics

This study contributes to the fields of semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, and Philippine media studies in three ways. Theoretically, it demonstrates the productive complementarity of Peircean and social semiotic frameworks for the analysis of complex multimodal texts, proposing a “bifocal” analytical optic that operates simultaneously at the level of the individual sign and the level of the complex semiotic system. Empirically, it provides a detailed multimodal account of how authority and conflict are semiotically constructed in the genre of online public mediation, a genre that has received little sustained scholarly attention despite its enormous cultural reach and social significance in the

Philippine context. Critically, it foregrounds the ideological dimensions of *Raffy Tulfo in Action*'s semiotic economy, revealing how the mediation program naturalises a model of conflict resolution premised on the moral authority of a single charismatic mediator, the public spectacularisation of private suffering, and the selective mobilisation of Filipino cultural values to adjudicate family disputes.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study is subject to several limitations that future research should address. The single-episode corpus, while theoretically appropriate for the study's interpretive aims, limits the generalisability of the findings. The semiotic patterns identified here may be specific to the selected episode's conflict type, participants, or production context. The study does not include empirical data on audience reception; the dynamical interpretants actually produced by *Raffy Tulfo in Action*'s diverse viewership remain, for now, beyond the scope of the analysis.

Future research might productively extend this study in several directions. A comparative corpus analysis across multiple *Raffy Tulfo in Action* episodes and conflict types, such as marital disputes, employer-employee conflicts, sibling conflicts, and elder-care disputes, would enable a more systematic account of the program's semiotic conventions and their variation across contexts. Reception studies employing audience interviews or focus groups would bring the dynamical interpretant into the analysis, providing a richer account of the program's sociocultural effects on diverse Filipino audiences. Comparative analysis with analogous programs from other Southeast Asian or global contexts would illuminate the degree to which *Raffy Tulfo in Action*'s semiotic economy reflects specifically Philippine cultural and institutional conditions as opposed to broader global tendencies in the mediatisation of conflict resolution through a live and online public mediation program. Finally, a longitudinal diachronic analysis tracking changes in *Raffy Tulfo in Action*'s semiotic conventions across the program's history, that is, from radio origins through television broadcast to online streaming, would illuminate how the genre has adapted its sign systems to evolving media platforms and audience formations. Taken together, these directions represent a substantial agenda for the semiotic study of media-based dispute resolution, a genre whose communicative significance in Philippine society and beyond warrants far greater scholarly attention than it has thus far received.

**Declaration of Conflict of Interests**

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Bionotes**

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