SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

Credit: AFP/Philippe Lopez

The world does not speak to us in plain language. It speaks in signs, in the red of a traffic light, in the howl of a wind before a storm, in the raised voice of a mediator on a television screen, and in the silence of a teacher standing alone at the edge of an island classroom. To live is, in the most fundamental sense, to interpret and make meaning.

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Editor's Note

The world does not speak to us in plain language. It speaks in signs, in the red of a traffic light, in the howl of a wind before a storm, in the raised voice of a mediator on a television screen, and in the silence of a teacher standing alone at the edge of an island classroom. To live is, in the most fundamental sense, to interpret and make meaning. And yet, the act of interpretation is never innocent, never neutral, never free from the weight of history, culture, power, and identity. It is precisely this very understanding (that signs are not merely communicative but constitutive, and that they do not simply reflect reality but actively construct it) that undergirds the four studies gathered in this issue of *Simbolismo: Signs, Identities, Meanings*. This journal was founded on the conviction that semiotic inquiry, pursued with rigour and critical imagination, has the capacity to illuminate the deepest structures of human experience. The scholarship presented here affirms that conviction with remarkable force and commitment to knowledge sharing.

The first two contributions situate semiotic analysis in the spaces where Filipino life is most visibly organised and most brutally tested. In *Meaning in Motion: A Semiotic Study of Traffic Signs in Davao City as the Language of Road Communication,* the authors turn their attention to the traffic signs of a massive city in Southern Philippines, considered to be infrastructural objects so familiar as to have become invisible, and reveal within them an interwoven system of civic governance, spatial authority, and communicative negotiation. That a road sign can bear the imprint of institutional power, cultural assumption, and the unspoken rules of urban belonging is not self-evident; rather, it requires the precision of a semiotic method to make legible what the eye has learned to overlook. *When the Wind Whispers: A Semiotic Reading of Resilience in the Filipino Experience of Typhoons* operates on an altogether different register of urgency. Here, the typhoon, that defining meteorological reality of the Philippine archipelago, is read not merely as a natural event but as a semiotic occasion. Typhoons are moments in which Filipino communities circulate, reproduce and transform signs of suffering, endurance, courage, resilience, and collective meaning. Together, these two studies establish the terrain on which *Simbolismo* intends to operate, one where the ordinary and the catastrophic are equally worthy of interpretive attention and sensemaking.

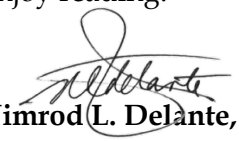
The third and fourth studies move inward into the intimate architectures of family, authority, pedagogy, and marginality. The analysis of *Raffy Tulfo in Action* in *Signs of Conflict and Authority: A Peircean and Social Semiotic Analysis of Mediated Family Dispute in Raffy Tulfo in Action, an Online Public Mediation Program,* as a site of mediated dispute resolution is among the timeliest contributions this journal could publish. In subjecting a massively popular online public mediation programme to Peircean and social semiotic scrutiny, the authors expose the complex choreography of power that unfolds when conflict is made into spectacle: who speaks, who is silenced, whose version of the truth is granted the authority of

a sign, and whose is consigned to noise. This is semiotics in the service of social critique, most attentive to the ways in which mediated platforms do not simply transmit meaning but adjudicate it. The fourth study, *Teaching at the Margins: Semiotics, Power, and Meaning in the Lived Experience of an Island Teacher,* completes the issue with a contribution of unusual emotional and intellectual depth. It asks what it means to teach, to make meaning, to build knowledge, and to exercise professional identity from the geographic and institutional periphery of an island province in the central Philippines. In doing so, it insists that the margins are not merely absences of the centre but spaces of their own semiotic richness, sites where power is felt most acutely, precisely because it arrives from elsewhere.

Read together, these four studies advance a coherent and urgent argument about the nature of signs in Filipino life: that meaning is always made under conditions, that those conditions are always unequal, and that the act of reading signs carefully is itself a form of resistance to the forces that would prefer they remain unread. From the civic geometry of a road intersection to the threshold of an island school, from the eye of a typhoon to the mediated theatrical drama of a family in conflict, the contributors to this issue demonstrate that semiotics is not an abstract intellectual exercise but a discipline with profound moral gravity. Signs, as these scholars remind us, do not merely mean; rather, they govern, they wound, they sustain, and occasionally, they liberate.

It is with deep gratitude and genuine intellectual excitement that I present Volume 2, Issue 2 of *Simbolismo* to its readers. A journal is, at its core, a community of inquiry, a shared commitment to asking better questions about the world we inhabit and the signs through which we inhabit it. The scholars whose work appears here have honoured that commitment with sincerity, creativity, and care. To our contributors, our reviewers, and our readers, the conversation continues, and we cannot seem to stop. May this issue be one that endures, deepens, and disturbs in all the ways that good scholarship must.

Enjoy reading!



Nimrod L. Delante, PhD
Editor-in-Chief
Simbolismo: Signs, Identities, Meanings

Volume 2, issue 2

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Meaning in Motion: A Semiotic Study of Traffic Signs in Davao City as the Language of Road Communication

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Abstract: This study investigates how drivers who have completed the Theoretical Driving Course (TDC) and Practical Driving Course (PDC), and those who have not, interpret traffic signs, pavement markings, and other road symbols within the road context of Davao City, Philippines. It explores how meaning is constructed and translated into driver compliance, viewing the road as a communicative field shaped by signs, culture, and interpretation. Guided by the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Yuri Lotman's (1990) concept of the semiosphere, this qualitative study analyses how drivers and motorcyclists engage with both the mechanical and the semiotic language of the road. Data were generated through two complementary methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) with 12 purposively selected participants comprising TDC-PDC-trained and non-TDC-PDC drivers and motorcyclists, and live roadside interviews conducted with drivers navigating the actual roads of Davao City. The roadside interviews were essential in capturing how material traffic signs embedded in their physical environments, encountered under real driving conditions, and shaped by their visibility, placement, and spatial context, carry semiotic weight that abstract depictions cannot fully replicate. Findings reveal that formally trained drivers exhibit higher levels of semiotic awareness, interpreting colours, shapes, and symbols not merely as functional cues but as signifiers within a shared system of meaning. In contrast, untrained drivers relied more heavily on habit, intuition, and experiential knowledge, which emerged as a mode of engagement termed as folk semiosis. Crucially, however, folk semiosis is not the exclusive domain of the untrained drivers; even formally trained drivers negotiate this intuitive, experience-driven mode of sign-reading when navigating unfamiliar roads and terrain, where it functions additively to discipline and interpretation, sharpening alertness, deepening caution, and enriching their already-established semiotic competence. This study concludes that the road is not merely a space of

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transit but a living semiotic ecosystem where meaning, disciplined behaviour, and safety continuously intersect. Nonetheless, while untrained drivers who exercise genuine caution and self-taught discipline through folk semiosis can contribute meaningfully to orderly and smooth traffic flow, they must ultimately recognise that formal TDC and PDC training remains indispensable, not only for a deeper, legally grounded understanding of road and traffic signs, but for the fuller, more conscious participation in road safety that semiotic education can reliably produce.

Keywords: semiotics, traffic signs, road communication, driving culture, folk semiosis, Davao City

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2026) reports that road traffic incidents claim over 1.35 million lives each year, painting a grim portrait of the global struggle for road safety. While mechanical failures or technical errors account for only a small portion of these tragedies, it is the human factor, consisting of habits, behaviour, and miscommunication, that too often turns movement into danger (Risser et al., 1991; Chaloupka & Risser, 2020). When driving on roads anywhere in the world, misunderstanding is not merely semantic; it is a matter of life and death.

Traffic signs function as key instruments of order on the road, constituting silent yet eloquent and direct forms of communication designed to guide drivers and pedestrians through the intricate choreography and rhythm of traffic (Aguilar, 2015). However, as Dudek (2018) cautions, to frame traffic devices simply as neutral guardians of order risks naturalising the institutional power they embody. Traffic signs do not merely reflect a universal conception of order; they enforce a particular, institutionally defined version of it, one that is produced by regulatory bodies, engineering conventions, and state authority. In this sense, the road sign is simultaneously a communicative act and a technology of power. Yet, as Shinar and Vogelzang (2012) suggest, their meanings are not always comprehensively understood. Between the symbol and its interpreter lies a fragile space where comprehension can falter, and from that gap of understanding, danger and deadly accidents can emerge.

Situated in the southern Philippines on the island of Mindanao, Davao City is the largest city in the country by land area and serves as the economic and cultural hub of the Davao Region. It is home to a diverse population of over 1.7 million people and is characterised by a complex urban road network that accommodates a wide range of vehicles, from private cars and motorcycles to jeepneys and public utility vehicles. In this context, the issue of road sign comprehension takes on a distinctly local resonance. The persistence of undisciplined driving behaviour, inadequate enforcement of traffic laws, and limited formal training among drivers all contribute to growing risks on the roads (Fernandez et al., 2020). The result is not merely congestion but a breakdown in communication, an erosion of shared understanding that should ideally unite road users in the pursuit of collective safety. Data from the City Transport and Traffic Management Office (CTTMO, 2018) revealed 13,291 apprehensions for disobeying traffic signs within a single year, reflecting both a systemic problem and the sociocultural patterns through which Filipinos interpret and respond to traffic signs.

To address these issues, the Land Transportation Office (LTO) implemented a more structured approach to driver education. The Theoretical Driving Course (TDC) and Practical Driving Course (PDC) were introduced to instil a deeper understanding of traffic rules and symbolic awareness of road signs, especially among new drivers. These programmes, reinforced by the Comprehensive Driver Education (CDE) scheme for licence renewal (Autodeal, 2024; LTO Portal PH, 2023), aim to move beyond technical skill toward semiotic communicative competence, a literacy in the language and symbols of traffic and road signs.

Still, questions linger. Do these educational interventions genuinely shape how drivers read the semiotic landscape of the road? Does formal training alter not just

knowledge but perception or the subtle act of seeing, sensing, and interpreting meaning amid motion? Within this space of inquiry, Davao's roadways become a semiotic field, a cultural text where the visual and behavioural dimensions intertwine.

Hence, this study seeks to understand how drivers, both TDC/PDC-trained and untrained, interpret and respond to traffic signs. Through the lens of semiotic theory, particularly the frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Yuri Lotman (1990), this study explores the ways meaning is produced, exchanged, and sometimes lost within the local semiosphere of road communication in Davao City. This study does not merely treat the road as infrastructure but as a living language, in which drivers and motorcyclists must learn to read, and for which they should continuously re-negotiate through their interpretive responses, everyday habits, and lived experience on the roads.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the language of the road requires more than recognising symbols; it involves entering a living system of meanings that circulate among drivers, traffic signs, and the broader culture of speed, transit, and movement. This study is grounded primarily in the semiotic frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Yuri Lotman (1990) and is enriched by recent scholarship in road semiotics and movement communication.

For de Saussure (1916), every act of communication involves a *signifier*, the perceptible form that meaning takes, and a *signified*, the concept it evokes. Within this relational system, meaning is never isolated; it arises from difference and opposition. Applied to the road, a red light gains its meaning as "stop" not by itself alone but through its contrast to other symbols: the green light that permits movement and the yellow sign that warns of transition, informing drivers to prepare to continue movement. Road communication thus forms a network of signifiers continuously interpreted by drivers navigating the road environment. Crucially, in de Saussure's system, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, that is, there is no natural or inevitable link between the visual form of a sign and its meaning. Rather, meanings are established by social convention and maintained through collective agreement. This is why driver training is so consequential: without exposure to the code, the sign remains mute or misinterpreted, and this can lead to harmful accidents and social disorder.

Yet, these signs do not exist in a vacuum. As Lotman (1990) proposes, all signs inhabit a semiosphere, a cultural and communicative space where meanings are born, exchanged, and transformed. The concept of the semiosphere is crucial to understanding how road communication functions: it situates individual sign interpretation within a larger cultural and social ecology. The roads of Davao City form their own semiosphere, a dynamic system where global standards of traffic signage meet local interpretations, habitual behaviours, and the rhythms of Filipino driving culture. Within this cultural semiotic sphere, even the smallest sign, e.g., a pedestrian crossing or a flashing hazard light, carries traces of shared cultural knowledge and collective habit. The semiosphere is not homogeneous. Lotman (1990) describes a tension between the centre, where meanings are institutionalised and standardised, and the periphery, where meanings are improvised, transformed, and sometimes contested. As this study demonstrates, formally trained and untrained drivers occupy different positions within this semiosphere.

Recent scholarships have further enriched this semiotic foundation. Wagner (2006) argues that road signs constitute a universal visual semiotics, i.e., a cross-cultural system in which geometric forms, colours, and pictograms are designed to communicate across linguistic boundaries. Yet as Wagner (2006) demonstrates, universality is always in tension with local interpretation: the same sign may evoke different responses depending on cultural context, individual experience, and degree of formal training. Jensen (2014), working within a framework of mobile semiotics, extends this insight by attending to the moving body as a semiotic actor. For Jensen (2014), the driving subject is not a passive reader of signs but an embodied participant in a semiotic encounter shaped by speed, attention, and spatial context, a perspective that resonates with the lived driving experiences described by participants in this study. Similarly, Dudek (2018) analyses traffic signals as technologies of normalisation, arguing that they function as norm-enforcing devices that translate institutional authority into everyday behavioural commands. This framing acknowledges that driver compliance is not simply a matter of cognitive decoding but of internalised social discipline.

It is worth acknowledging that the study of road signs has also been productively approached through the framework of linguistic landscapes (see Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2008; Shohamy & Gorter, 2008), which examines the visibility, power, and ideological dimensions of written language in public space. While linguistic landscape studies offer a valuable lens for understanding the spatial politics of signage, the present study's primary focus on the cognitive and cultural processes through which drivers produce and negotiate meaning from traffic signs, rather than on the ideological dimensions of language-in-space, renders the Saussurean-Lotmanian framework the more appropriate analytical tool for its purposes.

By combining de Saussure's (1916) structural semiotics with Lotman's (1990) cultural semiotics, and drawing on the contributions of Wagner (2006), Jensen (2014), and Dudek (2018), this study views road communication not merely as a technical system of signals but as a living text in which drivers and motorcyclists read, interpret, and sometimes misread. Their comprehension of traffic signs, shaped by education, training, habitual behaviour, intuition, and cultural context, reveals how meaning travels within the semiosphere of the road.

Literature Review

Traffic signs are among the most universal tools of road communication. They provide drivers with directions, warnings, and guidance through visual messages designed to ensure the safe and orderly flow of traffic. As Sigua (2008) and Fernandez et al. (2020) explained, traffic signs are typically positioned at intersections and critical points in cities and towns across the Philippines to communicate safety information and appropriate behaviour to road users. According to DriveSafely.Net (2021), these signs serve not only as warnings but also as instruments of discipline, directing both drivers and pedestrians toward predictable, orderly, and safe conduct.

However, studies show that comprehension of traffic signs varies significantly across contexts and cultures. In Turkey, Kirmizioglu and Tuydes-Yaman (2011) found that among 1,478 Turkish drivers, only 12 of 30 common traffic signs were recognised by at least 70% of

respondents, suggesting that familiarity and exposure play a vital role in interpretation. In Israel, Shinar and Vogelzang (2012) reported that traffic signs combining symbolic and textual information were better understood, especially among drivers who were less familiar with abstract symbols.

In the Philippines, Fernandez et al. (2020) observed that many Filipino drivers lack discipline and adequate training, resulting in poor comprehension and disregard for road signs. Commonly ignored signs, such as No Loading/Unloading or No Parking Anytime, reflect how everyday driving practices often drift away from standardised semiotic codes. This gap in understanding reveals a deeper problem: a disconnection between the intended meaning of traffic signs and the interpreted meaning within the local road semiosphere.

Regulatory, Warning, and Informative Signs

Regulatory signs articulate the laws and boundaries of road behaviour, ensuring that drivers recognise actions that are either mandatory or prohibited (Dewar et al., 2023; LTO Portal PH, 2023). These include speed limits, directional rules, and parking restrictions, which are semiotic structures that express institutional authority through form, text, and colour.

Warning signs use symbols and colour to evoke alertness and anticipation. Typically triangular or diamond-shaped, they serve as pre-emptive measures against potential hazards or road changes (Kim, 2020). Yellow, for instance, functions as both an attention signal and a cultural cue for caution, a visual code that transcends spoken language.

Informative signs emphasise guidance rather than control. They indicate destinations, distances, and facilities, forming what Lotman (1990) would call the informational layer of the semiosphere, a framework that keeps movement intelligible and culturally patterned.

Pavement markings and hand signals also extend the semiotic landscape of the road. Pavement lines, arrows, and colours supplement other signs by directing vehicular flow, while hand signals function as non-verbal, embodied communication between drivers (Szafranski, 2024; Zutobi, 2023). These diverse semiotic forms coexist to sustain the complex order of traffic, each dependent on a shared understanding among road users.

Driver Compliance

Driver compliance reflects how individuals respond to the signs and symbols that structure life and conduct on the roads. Gargoum et al. (2016) found that environmental factors such as road width, parking density, and number of lanes significantly influence adherence to speed limits. Likewise, Vignali et al. (2019) observed that drivers' attention to signage, particularly in work zones and busy intersections, varies depending on perceived safety and familiarity.

Theoretically, driver compliance intersects with what Dudek (2018) calls the norm-enforcing function of traffic devices in that compliance is not simply the outcome of correct interpretation but the product of normalised, institutionally encoded behaviour that has been internalised as social habit. From a Lotmanian perspective, drivers who comply with road signs do so not merely because they have decoded the signifier correctly, but because they have assimilated the sign's meaning as part of a shared cultural semiosphere. Compliance, in this sense, is as much a cultural act as it is a cognitive one. This distinction is

central to the present study's interest in comparing formally trained and untrained drivers: what differs between them is not only knowledge but the degree to which semiotic conventions have been internalised through structured exposure.

In the Philippines, the Metro Manila Accident Recording and Analysis System (MMARAS, as cited in Sy, 2017) identified that disregard for traffic signs was the most commonly violated rule, accounting for nearly 55,000 apprehensions in 2016 alone. Such violations often stem from human error, distraction, and limited training, which are factors that collectively disrupt the semiotic and social order of the road.

Road Communication

Communication on the road extends beyond physical signs; it involves a social, cultural, and semiotic dialogue among road users. Asuncion et al. (2014) found that in Davao City, awareness and compliance with road regulations correlated strongly with drivers' education level and employment status, with poor driving education identified as the leading contributor to major accidents since 2010. Similarly, in Poland, Wontorczyk and Gaca (2021) discovered that comprehension of non-standard signs was significantly influenced by personal traits such as age, gender, and experience.

These findings resonate with Lotman's (1990) idea that every community develops its own semiotic boundary, which is a space where meanings are negotiated through shared experience. As Ferreira (2022) suggests, when drivers become aware of one another's communicative intentions through signals, gestures, and lights, they participate in a form of cultural dialogue that transforms the road into a living language that warrants careful reading. Hazard lights, horns, and brake lights thus serve as extensions of human expression within this semiotic system (Thomas Law Offices, 2022).

Driving Outcomes and Road Safety Education

Studies have consistently linked driving education to safer road behaviour. Topolšek et al. (2019) found that structured driver training programmes significantly reduce accident rates and encourage defensive driving. Conversely, inadequate training contributes to adverse outcomes such as road rage, traffic violations, and accidents (American Psychological Association, 2014; Yazdi et al., 2024).

In the Philippines, the LTO requires a 15-hour TDC and an 8-hour PDC for licence applicants (Motodeal, 2020). These programmes aim to cultivate both technical and communicative competence, thereby developing a capacity to interpret and respond correctly to traffic signs and symbols. As Al-Rousan and Umar (2021) emphasised, comprehension of traffic signs is not only a matter of safety but also of literacy within a semiotic system.

In summary, the existing literature on traffic signs highlights the importance of driver training and awareness in fostering compliance and reducing accidents. However, most studies focus on cognitive recognition, and relatively little attention has been given to the semiotic process of meaning-making, that is, how meaning is formed, interpreted, and acted upon within specific cultural contexts of road safety and communication. Few studies have examined how de Saussure's (1916) micro-semiotic structures (signifier and signified) interact with Lotman's (1990) macro-semiotic semiosphere, especially within the

communicative environment of Philippine roads. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap, interpreting the road as both a text and a cultural dialogue where drivers, signs, and symbols participate in continuous meaning-making.

Research Questions

Guided by Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) structural semiotics and Yuri Lotman's (1990) concept of the semiosphere, this study explored how drivers interpret and respond to the semiotic systems that shape road communication within the cultural context of Davao City. Specifically, it addressed the following research questions:

(1) What semiotic elements are embedded in traffic signs, such as symbols, colours, shapes, and textual information, that influence drivers' interpretation and comprehension?
(2) How do drivers' interpretations of traffic signs, pavement markings, and other traffic symbols translate into compliance or non-compliance on the road?
(3) In what ways do formal driving education and experiential learning shape drivers' participation in the cultural semiosphere of road communication?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative-interpretive research design to explore how drivers interpret and respond to traffic signs within the cultural and communicative landscape of Davao City. As Patton (2002) explains, qualitative-interpretive inquiry allows researchers to understand human experiences in context and to illuminate the meanings people assign to their actions. In this study, meaning is examined not merely as cognition but as semiosis or the dynamic process of producing, interpreting, and comprehending traffic signs.

Guided by de Saussure's (1916) structural semiotics and Lotman's (1990) theory of the semiosphere, this research interprets road communication as a cultural semiotic system. De Saussure's (1916) micro-level approach to signs provides the structural foundation for analysing semiotic components such as colour, shape, text, and imagery, while Lotman's (1990) macro-level concept of the semiosphere situates these signs within the broader communicative and cultural context of Filipino driving behaviour.

Participants and Methods

Researchers conducted two methods in gathering drivers' opinions on driving and road signs in Davao City: (2) a focus group discussion (FGD) and (2) brief roadside interviews with drivers.

A total of 12 participants were purposively selected from Ateneo de Davao University (ADDU) to participate in FGD. These participants were assigned pseudonyms and represented four groups:

- Three (3) TDC-PDC private vehicle drivers (FGD-07, FGD-08, FGD-09)
- Three (3) non-TDC-PDC private vehicle drivers (FGD-01, FGD-02, FGD-03)
- Three (3) TDC-PDC motorcyclists (FGD-10, FGD-11, FGD-12)
- Three (3) non-TDC-PDC motorcyclists (FGD-04, FGD-05, FGD-06)

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants possessed firsthand knowledge and varied experiences related to driving, traffic sign interpretation, and compliance. This diversity of experience allowed the researchers to examine how meaning is

constructed across different training backgrounds and driving practices. Participation in the FGD was entirely voluntary, with no coercion or incentive involved in the selection or retention of participants, ensuring that those who engaged did so out of genuine willingness to share their experiences and perspectives on road sign interpretation and driving in Davao City. Openness was likewise observed throughout the discussions, as participants, both those who had undergone formal Theoretical Driving Course and Practical Driving Course training and those who had not, were encouraged to speak freely and candidly about their theoretical knowledge of traffic signs and their practical, lived experiences on the roads, without fear of judgment or correction.

However, to capture candid and realistic responses to road signs as they are encountered in practice, brief roadside interviews were also conducted with at least five (5) drivers actively driving in Davao City. Unlike the FGD's use of abstract sign images, these interviews engaged drivers within their actual driving environment, allowing the researchers to examine how the material presence of signs on the road, including their placement, physical condition, and spatial context, shapes interpretation in real time. All drivers interviewed showed their driving licenses with consent, indicating that they completed both TDC and PDC with LTO Davao.

Data Collection Procedures

As mentioned above, the study utilised an FGD as the primary method of data collection (Appendix A). FGDs encourage participants to express their perceptions in a socially interactive setting, allowing meanings to emerge through dialogue while maintaining openness, tolerance, and respect for differing views (Hennink, 2014). Two separate FGDs were conducted: one for TDC-PDC drivers and one for non-TDC-PDC drivers. Each discussion revolved around participants' interpretations of fifteen (15) selected traffic signs culled from the website of the Land Transportation Office (LTO) of the Philippines, their sources of driving knowledge, and their behaviours in real-world driving scenarios. All discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Non-English responses were translated with care to preserve local expressions and contextual nuances.

The authors acknowledge that presenting traffic signs as graphical images, rather than as material objects encountered in situ on the roads of Davao City, carries methodological implications. As the reviewer rightly notes, material traffic signs, those that are embedded in their physical environments, carry semiotic weight that abstract depictions cannot fully replicate; their visibility, placement, physical condition, and spatial context all mediate how drivers encounter and interpret them (Jensen, 2014). The present study addresses this limitation partially through the open-ended discussion questions that accompanied each sign, which encouraged participants to situate their interpretations within lived driving experiences on actual roads. These discussions elicited rich situational accounts, including descriptions of specific incidents on Davao's streets, that contextualise participants' sign interpretations within real driving environments.

Nonetheless, the researchers did not confine their inquiry to the FGD room. Live roadside interviews (Appendix B) were conducted with drivers in motion on the actual roads of Davao City, a methodological decision that proved decisive in capturing the nuanced, realistic interpretations that only real-time, on-the-ground driving engagement can

yield. Unlike abstract sign images, material traffic signs carry irreducible semiotic weight: their physical visibility, precise placement, condition, and spatial embeddedness all shape how drivers encounter and interpret them. These interviews brought the study into direct contact with the living semiosphere of Davao's roads, grounding the analysis in the material realities of everyday driving.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using semiotic analysis and thematic analysis. Some data (utterances spoken in Cebuano) were transcribed to English using OtterAI and TurboScribe and had been manually reviewed and corrected for accuracy. Semiotic analysis involved identifying how the signifier (e.g., visual form, colour, text) and signified (intended meaning) interact to produce a driver's interpretive response. By framing signs as relational constructs, this method highlighted how meaning shifts across different interpretive contexts, which is an essential feature of the Lotmanian semiosphere.

The transcripts from the FGD and the brief roadside interviews were coded and examined for recurring themes using the framework proposed by Gibbs, Lewins, and Taylor (2005). Themes emerged around participants' interpretation and understanding of signs, their compliance (or non-compliance) behaviours, and their perceptions of road communication. These themes were interpreted through the dual lenses of de Saussure's (1916) semiotic structure and Lotman's (1990) cultural semiotics, revealing how individuals negotiate meaning within a shared yet complex road environment. Through this methodological approach, the study bridges the technical and the cultural: the sign as both structure and story, the road as both text and territory.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of their involvement, and were informed that they could withdraw from the FGD at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts and analyses. The study followed the ethical standards set forth by the International Statistical Institute (ISI, 2023) and adhered to the guidelines of responsible research conduct established by Ateneo de Davao University (ADDU). Furthermore, throughout these roadside interview encounters, the confidentiality and anonymity of all participating drivers were strictly observed. No identifying information was recorded, and all responses were treated with the utmost discretion. Equally, participants were given full freedom to respond openly and honestly, without any form of coercion, pressure, or evaluative judgment, ensuring that the accounts they offered reflected their genuine, unguarded experiences of navigating road signs on the streets of Davao City.

Results and Discussion

Communication on the road transcends spoken language. It unfolds through signs, colours, symbols, texts, and shapes that together construct a visual lexicon or an intricate grammar of speed and movement on the roads. Within this communicative ecosystem, the driver becomes both reader and interpreter, constantly negotiating meaning amid motion. Guided

by de Saussure's (1916) structural semiotics and Lotman's (1990) cultural semiotics, the findings of this study reveal how traffic signs operate as living sign systems that are expressions of a shared yet fluid system of meaning.

The Semiotic Elements of Traffic Signs

The analysis of participants' responses in relation to the 15 selected traffic signs and pavement markings revealed four dominant semiotic elements: colour, shape, text, and symbol. These elements function as the primary signifiers (the perceptible forms through which the road communicates to drivers), and each carries its own semiotic weight, evoking cognitive, emotional, cultural, and behavioural responses.

In Saussurean terms, these elements form part of the langue of road communication, which is the structured system that organises how meaning is generated and understood. For instance, colour serves as an immediate semiotic cue. Red universally signals prohibition or danger; yellow evokes anticipation or caution; and green offers permission to move. Yet, as Lotman (1990) reminds us, meanings never exist in isolation; they are always mediated by cultural habits and human behaviour. Within the semiosphere of Davao City's roads, these colours acquire subtle layers of local resonance: red may suggest not only warning but also the authority of a governing institution, while yellow may carry cultural associations of vigilance or alertness rooted in Filipino everyday experience.

For most non-TDC participants, when asked what the colour red means on the road, the responses suggested a basic but sometimes imprecise understanding. In the following exchange, the participants' responses illustrate varying degrees of semiotic competence:

> *"So, for red, you strictly follow, or in some instances, stop." (FGD-03)*
> *"If it's red, you really have to follow it." (FGD-01)*
> *"For the warning signs, red means to stop." (FGD-03)*

Yellow was interpreted in different ways. One participant conflated yellow with pavement markings, while others acknowledged its caution-signalling function but introduced a troubling flexibility:

> *"For warning, I notice it's red. For pavement [markings], it's yellow." (FGD-02)*
> *"Yellow is the same. You can still bend it, or be cautious, or be on high alert, or be ready anytime, so you can be sure to go or to stop." (FGD-03)*
> *"Yellow is to yield, or like a warning, or like a reminder to drivers to prepare at any time." (FGD-04)*

The word "still" in the phrase "you can still bend it" (FGD-03) is pragmatically significant: it presupposes that bending the rule has been established as possible in prior experience, revealing an intuitive logic that allows for rule-bending under certain conditions. This is precisely the kind of folk semiosis that operates outside the institutionalised code, and which, as the TDC/PDC-trained participants later contested, can prove dangerous.

The challenge of nighttime visibility, where the material condition of signs intersects with semiotic intelligibility, was raised by one TDC/PDC participant in Cebuano:

> *"Pag gabie lisud gud siya labi na ug ngitngit ang mga dalan. Labi nag wala mga lamp lights so dili ma klaro ang road signs. So, isip usa ka driver, mag-amping gud." (Respondent 02)*
> *("At night it is really difficult, especially when the roads are dark. Especially where there are no streetlights, road signs are not clearly visible. So, as a driver, care and caution are important.")*

This observation, i.e., that darkness erodes the visibility of the signifier itself, aligns with Jensen's (2014) point that the driving body is an embodied semiotic actor whose interpretive capacity is conditioned by environmental context. The sign's meaning is not simply encoded in its visual form; it depends on the material conditions of its encounter.

Surprisingly, most non-TDC/PDC participants did not know what the colour blue above or near traffic lights means. One interpreted blue as signalling a temporarily altered road:

> *"When it's blue, it can still be moved. For example, the 'One Way' sign. Maybe the road is being fixed, so it may be two-way in the future." (FGD-02)*

This is a skewed understanding. Blue lights above traffic signals are not directed at drivers but at traffic enforcers and CCTV operators, indicating from a distance that the light is red. When the blue light is on, passing through constitutes a red-light violation. The participant's interpretation represents a creative but incorrect improvisation within the semiotic periphery.

All TDC-trained drivers and motorcyclists, in contrast, demonstrated clarity in understanding traffic lights:

> *"Honestly, colour matters to me more than shape, because colour gives me the signal to take precautions all the time. I know that shapes do serve a purpose, particularly for rotundas or roundabouts, but I pay so much attention to the traffic lights, especially red and yellow." (FGD-09)*
> *"I am very careful with the yellow light. Even if I don't see running vehicles or motorcycles, or even if I see that things are clear in all directions, I stop. I always do this for safety. I don't agree that the principle behind the yellow light can be bent." (FGD-11)*
> *"I am with them in terms of how to respond to a yellow light. Accidents happen in seconds. It is always good to have precaution." (FGD-12)*

These responses illustrate that for formally and theoretically trained drivers, semiotic competence has been internalised as a safety disposition. It is a cultural attitude rather than merely a rule to be followed. This reflects what Dudek (2018) calls the norm-enforcing function of traffic signs: compliance is the expression of an internalised social discipline.

> *"Dili man lisud sabton ang mga road signs diri sa Davao. Ang importante lang kabalo ka sa left turn, right turn, ug kanang do not enter. Mao ra man an ang basic, ug kanang U-turn, or No U-turn, sayun ra man na sila sabton ug sundon ug driver ka diri. Pero ug bag-o kang driver unya wala kay lisensiya unya taman kag drive, delikado na. Maka disgrasya gud ka." (Respondent 01)*
>
> *("Road signs here in Davao are not difficult to understand. What matters is that you know the left turn, right turn, and do not enter signs. Those are really the basics. And the U-turn and No U-turn signs are also easy enough to understand and follow, as long as you are a driver here. But if you are a new driver, you have no license, and you just keep on driving anyway, that is already dangerous. You will really get into an accident.")*

For Dudek (2018), traffic signs and licensing requirements are not merely practical instruments of road management but technologies of institutional discipline that are mechanisms through which the state defines, enforces, and delimits legitimate participation in road culture. The speaker's warning that driving without a license is not only illegal but inherently dangerous reflects an internalised understanding of this disciplinary logic: the license is not simply a document but a semiotic marker of certified competence, signaling that the bearer has been formally inducted into the institutionalised code of road communication. To drive without it, in this reading, is to operate outside the boundaries of the semiosphere's normative centre, untethered from the structured system of meanings that makes road behaviour legible, predictable, and safe.

Shape

Shape plays a fundamental role in the visual syntax of road communication. Triangular forms warn of hazards, rectangles suggest regulation, and circles often indicate command or prohibition. These geometric conventions reflect the structural regularities of de Saussure's (1916) system of differences: a triangle means "caution" because it is not a circle, nor a rectangle. The contrast itself creates meaning. The Lotmanian perspective expands this by situating the symbol within the larger communicative field, in that meaning arises not only from contrast but from cultural assimilation. In the Davao road semiosphere, familiarity with shapes becomes a form of cultural learning, transmitted through social experience as much as through formal instruction.

One non-TDC participant, who acknowledged having learned the meaning of the Give Way sign only after months of driving, and only because a fellow driver honked at him, reflected on the experience:

> *"It's noticeable that the 'Give Way' sign cannot be changed. It will always remain a triangle. So, even if you can only see the triangular shape because the text is not clear, you can understand what it means. But I only knew this after a few months of driving because my friend, who taught me how to drive, did not tell me what it meant. So, I was a bit errant one time to a driver because I didn't know that this triangle meant I had to slow down and yield to traffic on the main road. He honked at*

> *me nonstop. I know it affects driving compliance, so I try to remember it to the point that I would not need to read it anymore." (FGD-02)*

This account illustrates a process of folk learning, in which the gradual acquisition of semiotic knowledge occurs through social interaction and experience rather than formal instruction. Another non-TDC participant elaborated further:

> *"To be honest, I did not notice the shapes along the roads during the first two years of driving because I did not have to drive far from the office and from home. When I noticed them more closely, I got used to them, but I was not sure what they meant. For example, I only knew today that the diamond shape cautions us that the road ahead can be slippery when it rains, or it's a sharp curve, with a sign that looks like a snake, warning drivers to slow down." (FGD-03)*

Although these participants did not experience accidents as a direct result of their unfamiliarity with shapes, a single misreading could prove fatal. Notably, one TDC/PDC participant, who has been driving for about 30 years of his life, and who regularly drives to unfamiliar destinations, described a more heightened awareness, expressed in Cebuano:

> *"Ug pakyawon kog laing lugar, mutan-aw ko sa mga road signs kay ug layong dapit na unya pakyawon ka, mag prepara ka ba sa mga road signs kay di ta kabalo sa danger… Pareha anang mga danger signs. Kanang for example dili makita nga kurbada. Ikmat ta ana." (Respondent 1)*
> *("When I take cargo deliveries to unfamiliar places, or transport people to faraway places, I always pay close attention to road signs, because when the destination is far, you need to read the signs carefully, because you never know what dangers lie ahead. For example, the danger signs for hidden curves. We should be cautious about it.")*

Beyond driver training, this statement reveals an intuitive, context-driven mode of sign-reading: the driver attends to signs not through a codified understanding of the semiotic system but through an experiential sense of danger that activates situational awareness. This is a form of folk semiosis that is functionally adaptive but structurally incomplete, in that the driver responds to the sign without necessarily understanding the full conventional code it belongs to, particularly because driving beyond his habitual routes exposes him to unfamiliar semiotic terrain, probably offering signs, markings, and road conditions he has not yet learned to read.

Generally speaking, TDC/PDC-trained participants showed systematic knowledge of shapes:

> *"Only when I enrolled in a TDC did I learn that shapes actually have meaning. I thought it was just for aesthetics. I can read textual signs and follow the traffic lights, but I sort of ignored the shapes before. But after the TDC training, I now know the meanings of a triangle [to give way], a circle [no U-turn], and a vertical rectangle [one way and keep right]." (FGD-08)*

> *"For starters, like me, the textual signs in big sizes are readable. However, for some shapes, such as the crossing sign or pentagon, people might get confused, but new drivers like me, who learned it through formal training with Davao LTO, now understand what they mean." (FGD-10)*

Lotmanian semiosis suggests that knowledge of local driving culture and knowledge from formal training complement each other in sustaining effective driving behaviour and road safety. Thus, it is valid to say that folk semiosis need not be the exclusive domain of the untrained drivers. When formally trained drivers encounter unfamiliar roads or terrains, this same intuitive, folk semiotic, experience-driven mode of sign-reading can sharpen their discipline and caution, reinforcing rather than undermining their semiotic competence to read road and traffic signs.

Text

Text acts as an explicit clarifier. It anchors the sign's visual message in linguistic form, transforming abstract semiotic cues into direct instruction (e.g., No Parking, Slow Down, No U-Turn). The inclusion of text in traffic signs bridges symbolic abstraction and practical comprehension, especially for drivers who are still developing their visual literacy in road communication.

> *"It's easier to comprehend if there's text that complements an image because it aids common sense. But for most signs or shapes with no text, I wonder what they mean. For textual signs, I can actually understand." (FGD-03, non-TDC/PDC)*

A TDC/PDC-trained participant offered a more confident response:

> *"The combination of the text and symbols is indeed helpful for drivers like us. All of these play a big part in trying to communicate what is supposed to be communicated on the road. But for me, after undergoing the training with LTO, I can now read signs and shapes even without a textual complement. The reality on the road is that some signs and shapes do not have accompanying texts at all, so a driver must interpret and understand them." (FGD-11)*

While FGD-03 illustrates obliviousness (a dependency on text as a crutch for understanding), FGD-11 demonstrates the confidence and self-sufficiency that formal training produces. However, one TDC/PDC participant interviewed on the road supported the value of textual clarity, noting in Cebuano that road signs in Davao are generally manageable for practised drivers:

> *"Wala man, dili man lisud sabton ang mga road signs diri sa Davao. Ang importante lang kabalo ka sa left turn, right turn, ug kanang do not enter. Mao ra man ang basic, ug kanang U-turn, or No U-turn, sayun ra man na sila sabton ug sundon ug dugay na kang driver diri. Dali lang basahon ug sabton." (Respondent 1)*

> *("No, road signs in Davao are not difficult to understand. What matters is knowing the left turn, right turn, and do not enter signs. Those are the basics, and even U-turn and No U-turn signs are also easy to read, understand and follow as a veteran driver here.")*

This response, while reassuring in its confidence, reveals the limited semiotic vocabulary of the non-trained driver: mastery of a small set of basic, heavily textual signs is mistaken for comprehensive semiotic literacy. The unfamiliar shapes and abstract symbols that fall outside this basic set remain unread. Nevertheless, among trained drivers, textual and symbolic elements function as mutually reinforcing semiotic codes, each amplifying the interpretive value of the other. For untrained drivers, however, the capacity to decode symbols in the absence of textual support is not merely desirable but essential, for traffic signs do not always carry explanatory text, and an inability to read the symbol alone exposes both the driver and other road users to preventable and potentially fatal risks. If folk semiosis (intuition, gut feeling) can be helpful, so, too, is formal driver's training that exposes one to understanding both the fundamental and complex signs and texts on the road.

Symbol

Symbols distil complex meanings into compact, universally recognisable images, such as a pedestrian crossing, a cyclist sign on the road, or a merging arrow. These icons quicken recognition and response. Yet, as Lotman (1990) argues, even universal symbols acquire local inflections within different cultural semiospheres. A pedestrian symbol in Davao, for instance, might signify more than the act of crossing; it reflects collective behaviour, social habits, and even respect (or lack thereof) for pedestrian spaces and pedestrians themselves.

A TDC/PDC-trained driver described their understanding of the pedestrian crossing sign in Cebuano:

> *"Ang pinaka importante sa akoa ang pedestrian crossing, so ug makakita ko ana nga sign, mag slow down gud ko kay possible naa gud mga tawo nga manabok sa crossing, so slow down gyud, hinay hinay lang gud kay naay uban nga manabok nga kanang magsalig nga pedestrian crossing siya unya manabok lang deretso dili mag tan-aw sa agianan, unya delikado man na ug laksi o kusog imong padagan sa imong sakyanan." (Respondent 2)*

> *("The most important sign for me is the pedestrian crossing. When I see that sign, I really slow down, because there might be people about to cross the road. I drive slowly because some pedestrians trust the pedestrian crossing sign and cross directly without looking, and that is dangerous if you are driving fast.")*

This response is notably nuanced in that the driver does not merely follow the pedestrian crossing sign but understands the social interaction it mediates, i.e., the relationship between the sign, the driver, and the pedestrian. This illustrates a culturally

embedded form of semiotic awareness that goes beyond the sign's literal instruction. Yet the pedestrian symbol is among the most routinely disregarded signs on Philippine roads. That many Filipino drivers accelerate rather than slow down at pedestrian crossings reveals more than a traffic violation; it exposes a cultural pattern of a lack of road discipline in which the pedestrian symbol has been stripped of its moral and semiotic authority.

A PDC-trained participant elaborated further:

> *"I always follow the intersection line to avoid accidents. For pedestrian crossings, I would always slow down. There is nothing wrong with following the rules on the road, so we need to slow down when pedestrians are crossing. Why can't all drivers follow that basic rule?" (FGD-08)*

In the Lotmanian semiosphere, shared cultural habits around pedestrian crossings can deepen understanding of traffic signs. However, a crucial distinction emerges: non-TDC/PDC drivers who follow traffic signs often do so out of fear of penalties, while those who were formally trained tend to follow them out of a sense of responsibility, safety, and social order.

> *"You really have to slow down when you see a pedestrian crossing, because it is bad enough to hit a person, and on top of that, you will get fined for it. (FGD-05 & FGD-06).*

This statement suggests an unsettling moral dilemma in which monetary penalty functions as the primary deterrent rather than the far graver consequence of causing physical harm to another person. That some drivers appear more preoccupied with the cost of a fine than with the gravity of hitting a human being is itself a troubling cultural indicator. Striking a pedestrian is not a manageable inconvenience; it is a life-altering event, legally, morally, and humanly, one that places the driver in an entirely precarious and potentially irreversible situation.

Drivers' Interpretations and Compliance

Both TDC-PDC and non-TDC-PDC groups recognised the semiotic elements of traffic signs, but their interpretations differed in depth and precision. Formally trained drivers demonstrated stronger semiotic competence, which is the ability to decode the relational system of traffic signs rather than perceiving each symbol in isolation. In Saussurean terms, these drivers exhibited awareness of the code that structures road communication. They understood that a yellow diamond means "caution ahead" not merely because of colour or shape alone, but because of its position within a system of relational oppositions.

Conversely, non-TDC-PDC drivers and motorcyclists relied heavily on habit, intuition, and informal learning (e.g., "I remember my father told me this when we were driving one time."). Their interpretations often emerged from experience rather than from learned traffic sign systems, which is a semiotic process operating outside formal structures. This is a kind of folk semiosis that operates on the peripheries of Lotman's semiosphere: meanings are improvised, sometimes effective but often inconsistent, and when misunderstandings occur, the consequences can be fatal.

The concept of folk semiosis merits more sustained examination. Within Lotman's (1990) model of the semiosphere, the centre represents the domain of institutionalised, codified meaning, while the periphery is the space of creative, informal, and often unpredictable semiotic activity. The non-TDC/PDC drivers in this study consistently inhabited this periphery, producing sign interpretations that were functional yet culturally improvised, shaped by observation, imitation, and informal instruction rather than formal curricula. This folk semiosis is not merely a deficit condition; it represents an active, creative engagement with the semiotic landscape of the road, in which even trained drivers and motorcyclists seem to embody this. However, its incompleteness, e.g., as evidenced by partial understandings of yellow lights, blue signals, and lane markings, demonstrates that when folk semiosis diverges too far from the institutionalised semiotic centre, the consequences can be immediate and dangerous. A more thoroughgoing investigation of how folk semiosis operates on the actual roads of Davao, perhaps through ethnographic observation of authentic driving practices, would constitute a productive direction for future research.

One TDC/PDC-trained participant articulated the transformative impact of formal training:

> *"I think it really makes a difference because there are a lot of signs that I had no idea what they meant, but when I took the TDC/PDC training with LTO, I realised a lot of things, and I realised how dangerous it is to drive on the road if you don't have formal training and fundamental knowledge. TDC and PDC are eye-openers. You would know the meaning of even small details like pavement markings or a junction; therefore, to me, undertaking the theoretical and practical driving courses is a must." (FGD-09)*

> *"The things I took for granted before my TDC and PDC training? I now take them very seriously. Every single detail. You will assume that this sign means this, but in reality, it has a different meaning. In driving on the complex roads of Davao and even Manila, you do not assume the role of a driver. You have to learn the basics of driving through formal training." (FGD-11)*

In Lotman's semiosphere, this illustrates that the central cultural knowledge produced by formal training is given precedence over the peripheral understanding driven by folk beliefs and intuition, and for good reason. Formal training also appears to shift the motivational basis for compliance.

One participant highlighted that road signs are part of the licensing examination:

> *"Siyempre kay nagtuon man tag drive so sayun ra gud ang mga road signs. Kay di man ka makakuha ug lisensiya ug dili ka kapasar anang mga tests kay naa man ang mga road signs. Kay part man na sa examination so dapat ang driver familiar gud siya sa road signs." (Respondent 02)*

> *("Of course, since we studied how to drive, road signs are easy [to understand]. You would not get a licence if you did not pass the tests, and road signs are part of the examination, so every driver should be familiar with them.")*

This response reveals a productive dimension of the formal certification system, in that the examination functions as an institutional mechanism for internalising semiotic conventions, aligning with Dudek's (2018) observation that traffic devices operate as norm-enforcing technologies embedded within state-sanctioned structures.

In summary, when folk semiosis is exercised with genuine caution, disciplined intuition, and an earnest commitment to avoiding harm, it can serve as a meaningful, if not provisional, foundation for road navigation among untrained drivers. Yet it remains, at best, an incomplete substitute because the full, confident, and legally grounded command of road semiotics that protects not only the individual driver, but every other user of the road can only be achieved through the structured knowledge that formal theoretical and practical driving course training provides. One without the other is insufficient, and on the roads of Davao City, insufficiency can be fatal.

External and Internal Factors in Compliance

Participants across both groups identified several external and internal factors influencing their compliance. Among TDC-PDC drivers, the visibility of signs, especially at night, was a critical concern. Poor lighting, faded paint, and obstructed signage often disrupted the communicative relationship between the sign and the interpreter, aligning with Lotman's (1990) notion of boundary turbulence within the semiosphere, that is, communication falters when the material conditions of the sign deteriorate.

> *"Number one is visibility. I'd like to point out an example at Abreeza, coming from the basement car park. At night, the sign they put up doesn't reflect our headlights. The paint used was so bad that the visibility of the sign was poor. So, if you turn left [where the sign says 'No Left Turn'], then you might crash into a vehicle or worse, hit people. It's so dangerous that I had to tell the management to change the sign." (FGD-08)*

> *"Merging road signs placed on an elevated highway with blind spots is a really huge challenge for me and is highly dangerous. This one is an LTO problem, not us. If you are not alert, and all of a sudden two lanes merge due to a poorly positioned road sign, you will definitely put your life and other people's lives at risk." (FGD-07)*

The interplay between the material condition of road signs and driver interpretation is vividly illustrated in the account of one participant (Respondent 3), whose experience on Diversion Road in Buhangin, Davao City, captures the real-world consequences of semiotic ambiguity:

> *"I was driving along Diversion Road in Buhangin heading toward Bacaca Road. When I reached the intersection, I took a left turn because everyone else in front of me*

> *was doing the same. What we did not realise at the time was that the lane we were in was actually meant for going straight only. The road markings had already faded from constant use, so it was not clear to us. Because of that, several of us made the same mistake and ended up getting stopped. We tried explaining the situation to the LTO officers, but unfortunately, it did not change anything, and we were all penalised for reckless driving. It was really frustrating, but at the same time, I learned a valuable lesson." (Respondent 03)*

This account captures precisely the semiotic breakdown that occurs when the material signifier, i.e., the road marking, has been physically degraded to the point of illegibility. The lane marking's intended meaning ("Go straight only") ceased to function as a sign when its material form became unreadable. Moreover, the participant's reliance on the behaviour of other drivers as a semiotic cue ("Everyone else in front of me was doing the same") illustrates what Lotman (1990) describes as the mimetic dimension of semiosis within a shared cultural space, i.e., meaning is not only encoded in signs but co-produced through social behaviour. This account also illustrates a limitation of using abstract sign images in this study's methodology: such material experiences of degraded, misread, or contested signage are precisely the data that spatially situated, ethnographic approaches to traffic semiosis would yield most richly.

Among non-TDC-PDC drivers, external factors such as traffic congestion, time pressure, and weather conditions frequently led to unintentional violations. Internal factors, including low confidence, overreliance on intuition, and informal mythmaking about driving, also contributed to lapses. These findings suggest that compliance is not merely a matter of cognitive recognition but of situational and cultural negotiation. The sign's meaning, as de Saussure (1916) would note, is stable in structure but variable in use, and this variability, as perceived by non-TDC-PDC drivers, can be fatal when understanding fails.

The Road as a Cultural Semiosphere

Synthesising these insights, the study reimagines Davao City's road system as a cultural semiosphere, a dynamic ecosystem in which drivers, motorists, signs, and institutions co-create meaning. Each road user participates in this cultural dialogue differently, depending on their exposure, training, education, and local sensibilities.

For TDC/PDC-trained drivers, formal education acts as an entry point into the centre of the semiosphere, where meanings are stabilised and standardised through institutional teaching. Non-TDC/PDC drivers, meanwhile, operate closer to the periphery, where interpretations are shaped by community practice, imitation, intuition, and experience (termed "folk semiosis") rather than by structured learning. Yet both groups contribute to the collective meaning-making that sustains road communication. In this view, road compliance becomes a form of cultural literacy, i.e., a shared language that demands caution, safety, and social order.

The findings of this study reveal that the relationship between traffic signs and drivers is not only mechanical and technical but also interpretive, semiotic, and cultural. The Saussurean system of differences explains how signs function structurally, while Lotman's (1990) semiosphere situates these processes within the social and cultural lifeworld of

drivers operating in the road and traffic ecosystem of Davao City. Together, they reveal that the road is not merely physical infrastructure but a living text that is constantly read, interpreted, and re-negotiated by those who traverse it.

This study thus underscores the need for continuous driver education, not only as technical training but as a cultural communication process. This study is, therefore, an invitation to participate more consciously in the shared language, syntax, semantics, and semiotics of the road.

Conclusion

The road, often seen as a space of transit and movement, reveals itself in this study as a living system of meaning. On this vast and dynamic semiosphere, signs, symbols, and human behaviour continuously interact. Through the combined lenses of Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) structural semiotics and Yuri Lotman's (1990) theory of the semiosphere, enriched by the contributions of Wagner (2006), Jensen (2014), and Dudek (2018), this study uncovered how drivers, trained or untrained, engage in symbolic exchange, transforming ordinary acts of driving into acts of interpretation.

Drivers who underwent the TDC and PDC displayed a higher degree of semiotic competence, consciously interpreting the relational meanings of traffic signs through the structural lens of colour, shape, text, and road symbols. In contrast, those without formal training operated more instinctively within the peripheries of the semiosphere, relying on habit, intuition, experience, and what this study terms as folk semiosis: informal, creative, but structurally incomplete engagements with the semiotic landscape of the road. Yet both groups contributed to the evolving cultural dialogue of the road, each in their own method and register. Nevertheless, those without formal driver training must be encouraged to cross the boundary into the semiotic centre in order to recognise that they have an important obligation to maintain order and safety on the road.

The findings highlight that compliance with traffic rules is not merely a technical obligation but a semiotic and cultural practice. When drivers correctly interpret signs, they participate in what Lotman (1990) calls cultural communication, which is the shared generation of meaning that sustains social order and safety. When misinterpretations occur, they expose the fragility of this shared language, where misunderstanding manifests not in words but in violations, accidents, and moments of danger.

Road communication should thus be understood as more than instruction; it is a language of coexistence, demanding literacy, sensitivity, and competence not only in rules but in empathy, attention, and awareness. The signs we encounter are more than regulatory objects; they are reminders of our interdependence as human beings using roads and highways for movement, and of how individual motion shapes collective safety.

In essence, this study affirms that the road, much like language itself, is a cultural text that is authored by institutions, interpreted by individuals, and re-negotiated through exposure, experience, and education. To drive well is to read well: to understand the symbols that guide us, to recognise the meanings that enable movement, and to participate consciously in the shared dialogue of road communication. As traffic signs constitute the language of the road, to drive is to understand the meaning in motion.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests
We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionotes

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Appendix A

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. Can you share an experience where understanding (or misunderstanding) a traffic sign affected your decision or safety on the road?
2. Describe your experience in driving around Davao City. What road signs do you see, and how do they influence your driving? How do you understand and apply them?
3. Are the road signs in Davao City easy or hard to understand? Can you describe a specific situation?
4. Are there any circumstances in which the meaning of road signs differs from your understanding? If yes, can you describe the situation and the factors that shaped your interpretation (e.g., how the road sign looks, its condition, or its location)?
5. Have you ever encountered a road sign that confused you or that you found difficult to interpret? What was your reaction, and how did you respond?
6. In what ways has formal driving training (TDC/PDC), or the absence of it, shaped how you interpret and respond to road signs?

Appendix B

Interview (Roadside) Questions for Random Drivers in Davao City

1. Pwede ba nimo isaysay o ihulagway ang usa ka sitwasyon dinhi sa Davao nga diin nakaimpluwensya kanimo ang usa ka road sign sa imong desisyon samtang nagmaneho ka? Unsa ang imong nakita, ug giunsa nimo paghubad o pagsabot diani nga sitwasyon niadto mismong higayona?
("Could you describe or recount a specific situation here in Davao where a road sign influenced your decision while you were driving? What exactly did you see, and how did you interpret or make sense of it in that particular moment?")

2. Kung makasugat ka ug mga road sign sa nagkalain-laing bahin o dalan sa Davao (pananglitan, sa busy mga interseksyon, sa highway, o sa residential areas), sayon ba sila sabton o lisod? Unsa ang mga rason nga sayon o lisod kini sabton?
("When you encounter road signs in different parts of the roads of Davao City, for example, at busy intersections, on highways, or in residential areas, do you find them easy or difficult to understand? What are the reasons why you find them easy or difficult?")

3. Aduna bay mga higayon nga ang meaning o kahulogan sa usa ka road sign lahi sa imong pagsabot kumpara sa tinuod nga meaning o kahulogan niini base sa common nga pagsabot sa komunidad sa mga drivers? Unsa nga bahin sa hitsura, lokasyon, kahimtang o kondisyon sa road sign ang nakaimpluwensya sa imong pagsabot o pag intindi?
("Are there instances when the meaning of a road sign differs from your own understanding compared to its actual, commonly accepted meaning within the driving community? What aspects of the road sign's appearance, location, condition, or state influenced your interpretation or understanding of it?")

SIMBOLISMO: SIGNS, IDENTITIES, MEANINGS

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When the Wind Whispers: A Semiotic Reading of Resilience in the Filipino Experience of Typhoons

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Abstract: In a country where tempests and typhoons shape both landscape and lore, resilience has long been the emblem of Filipino survival. Yet beyond the rhetoric of strength lies a deeper layer of meaning, or a cultural semiotic of endurance worthy of sustained critical and interpretative reading. This study reinterprets resilience not as a psychological trait nor a social mechanism but as a semiotic process, a living system of signs and symbols through which communities read, perform, and embody survival and hope. Anchored in Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of sign–object–interpretant and Yuri Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, this study explores how residents of typhoon-prone Camarines Norte in the central Philippines transform disaster into discourse. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, casual interviews with ten purposively selected community members reveal how gestures of *bayanihan* (solidarity or cooperation), *pananampalataya* (faith), and *pagiging matatag* (steadfastness, strength or resilience) operate as cultural signs that mediate between material devastation and moral continuity. Within this semiosphere of survival, prayer becomes an instrument of faith, rebuilding becomes a narration of hope, and endurance itself becomes a living language for the Filipino people, frequently confronted with natural disasters. The findings illustrate that Filipino resilience is not a passive acceptance of suffering but an active process of meaning-making, in which calamity is continually rewritten into hope and courage through ritual, memory, and community. By reframing resilience as an act of semiosis, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how cultures signify recovery and rehabilitation, illustrating that in the Philippines, every storm is both a catastrophe and a communicative act; every storm is a message through which the nation continually reaffirms its identity, faith, and the will to carry on.

Keywords: semiotics, typhoons, hope, resilience, Camarines Norte

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Introduction

During the typhoon season in the Philippines, the thick and strong winds from the Pacific Ocean serve as a reminder for the people of Camarines Norte to prepare and act. They already know what the skies are saying. When the air thickens with fear, clouds darkening on the horizon, and roofs rattling against the strong winds, people perform the familiar ritual of binding their windows and roofs with rope, as if fastening the house itself to endurance. They also make quick, last-minute visits to nearby stores for rice, noodles, and canned goods. To live in this province, and many other island provinces in the Philippines, is to speak the language of storms and typhoons. To the people of Camarines Norte, each typhoon is both a warning and a teacher, some kind of an annual dialogue between human strength, mental fortitude, and nature's restless temperament.

In the Philippines, where an average of twenty tropical cyclones enter its atmospheric perimeter each year (PAGASA, 2024), survival is not only a matter of meteorology, climatology, and geography but also a symbolic and cultural phenomenon. Typhoons do not simply destroy houses and take lives; they also *signify.* They call forth gestures, prayers, communal habits and actions that compose what the world calls Filipino *resilience*, that complex and often romanticised capacity of the Filipino people to stand again after the storm and to rebuild houses and lives amid the ruins. Yet this resilience, long celebrated in headlines, hashtags, and media narratives, deserves deeper interpretation beyond sentiment or truism. Indeed, it has at times been imposed on Filipinos as an expectation, a label used to justify inadequate state response to recurring natural disasters (Laborte, 2022; Ordoñez & Borja, 2021). What truly happens in the cultural imagination when the deadly winds tear through a roof but not the Filipino spirit beneath it?

This study, therefore, reimagines Filipino resilience as a semiotic phenomenon, i.e., a living system of signs and symbols through which Filipino communities interpret natural catastrophe, continuity, courage, and hope. Here, the acts of *pagiging matatag* (steadfastness, strength or resilience), *bayanihan* (cooperation or solidarity), and *pananampalataya* (faith) are not simply responses to calamity but are signs in the Peircean sense, mediating between the horrific lived experience of disaster (*object*) and the shared interpretations that give it meaning, that is, the will to endure no matter what happens (*interpretant*). Each prayer uttered in the dark, each shared bowl of porridge in the evacuation centre, each reassuring tap on an anxious family member's shoulder, and each story told to children to deflect panic becomes part of a vastly rich cultural text, which constitutes a sincere expression that transforms loss into signification, chaos into coherence, and fear into the belief that things will pass and that life goes on.

Drawing from Charles Sanders Peirce's (1955) triadic model of the sign (sign–object–interpretant) and Yuri Lotman's (1990) concept of the semiosphere, this study locates resilience not only in the individual Filipino psyche but, more importantly, in the collective symbolic system of a people who continuously decode and recreate meaning from adversity. In Peirce's (1955) schema, meaning arises through interpretation. In Lotman's (1990) semiosis, meaning operates within the cultural space that holds both memory and human intuition or invention. Within the Filipino semiosphere of resilience, typhoons become readable texts, which means that they are events that communities read, narrate, and ritualise so that they can create meaning and make sense of their lived experiences.

To situate resilience as a process of semiosis is to see disaster not only as a devastation of property and lives but also as an ongoing dialogue of signs between the Filipino people and the tropical climate in which they live. When Filipino families light candles inside their homes as the winds howl outside, or when neighbours quickly replace a galvanised roof taken away by the strong winds, they are engaged in an act of sociocultural communication, in which they are translating suffering into solidarity and uncertainty into continuity. These gestures constitute what Lotman (1990) calls the auto-communication of culture: the way societies speak to themselves to reaffirm identity and safety when confronted with a difficult and alarming crisis.

The province of Camarines Norte in the central Philippines, with its coastal vulnerabilities and deep tradition of *bayanihan*, provides the semiotic landscape for this qualitative inquiry. Driven by phenomenology, casual interviews were conducted with ten residents of five typhoon-vulnerable barangays who have endured successive typhoons in the past decade. Their responses allowed us to explore how resilience is imagined, expressed, interpreted, and transmitted across generations as a language of identity, belonging, and survival.

By bringing together semiotics and qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to uncover how signs of endurance, such as rituals, prayers, gestures, habits, and narratives, operate within the Filipino semiosphere of natural disaster, survival, and hope. In this study, we argue that Filipino resilience is a cultural text, an ever-evolving discourse of signs that communities read, rewrite, and pass on to one another. To understand it is to listen to the voices embedded in both silence and storm, and to recognise that every act of confronting typhoons and recovering from them is not only an act of survival but also an act of reflection, interpretation, and meaning-making.

Theoretical Frameworks

At the centre of this study lies the conviction that resilience is not merely a psychological and behavioural response to disaster but a semiotic language through which people communicate endurance, survival, faith, hope, and belonging. To understand this language, the study draws on the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce (1955) and Yuri Lotman (1990), whose works together illuminate how meaning arises from experience and is reproduced within a Filipino culture in which typhoons form part of their collective behaviour, habit, and social consciousness.

Peirce's Triadic Model of the Sign

For Peirce (1955), the process of meaning-making, or semiosis, occurs through a triadic relation among the *sign* (or representamen), the *object* it refers to, and the *interpretant*: the meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter. No meaning exists in isolation; it is always mediated through interpretation. In the context of natural disasters, the typhoon (*object*) is apprehended not only as a meteorological event but as a sign interpreted through the collective understanding of the Filipino people, an understanding that is constituted in fear, prayer, preparation, and cooperation. These interpretations (*interpretants*) are deeply cultural, shaped by shared symbols and inherited social habits.

Filipino families who pray amid the storm or rebuild their homes afterwards perform actions that function as signs of continuity, translating loss and pain into solidarity and hope. As one informant expressed:

> *"Kailangan talagang matatag ang isipan at diwa natin" (We really need to be strong in mind and spirit.)*

Each such gesture is an interpretive act, affirming that the Filipino self does not end with destruction that collapses into depression but is continually redefined through response, recovery, rehabilitation, and the courage to carry on no matter what happens. Peirce's (1955) triadic relation thus reveals that resilience is a semiosis of survival; it is some kind of a recursive chain of signs and symbols through which disaster is transformed into coherence and meaning.

Lotman's Concept of the Semiosphere

While Peirce (1955) illuminates the microstructure of meaning, Yuri Lotman (1990) expands it to the macro level of sensemaking: the cultural space where all sign systems coexist. Lotman's (1990) semiosphere constitutes the symbolic environment in which a community generates, transmits, and negotiates meanings. It is both a boundary and a bridge. Within it, languages, rituals, and traditions interact to preserve cultural identity while adapting to change.

In the Filipino context, the semiosphere of resilience and survival includes rituals of solidarity and cooperation (*bayanihan*), invocations of faith and divine protection (*pananampalataya*), and narratives of strength and resilience (*pagiging matatag*). These signs permeate through stories told after each typhoon, through radio broadcasts, community prayers, and acts of rebuilding. Within this symbolic system, the storm is not only a destructive force but also a symbolic text in itself, a recurring narrative through which the community reaffirms who they are and what they are capable of after every deadly storm. Lotman (1990) calls this process auto-communication, in that culture speaks to itself to restore order and continuity after rupture.

One participant's words capture this auto-communicative process with particular clarity:

> *"Wala kaming ibang pinanghahawakan kundi si Lord lang eh. Taimtim lang na pagdarasal." (We had nothing else to hold on to but God. We had to pray wholeheartedly.)*

In this utterance, prayer functions simultaneously as Peirce's (1955) interpretant, the cultural code through which calamity acquires meaning, and as Lotman's (1990) auto-communicative act, through which the culture reaffirms its moral centre and reminds itself what truly matters in times of disaster.

Together, Peirce (1955) and Lotman (1990) allow us to view Filipino resilience not only as a behavioural or sociocultural phenomenon but as an interpretive and semiotic one. Peirce (1955) shows how individuals generate meaning from immediate experience, while

Lotman (1990) reveals how those meanings permeate within the wider cultural environment, forming what might be called a semiosphere of hope, courage, and survival. Each act of preparation, prayer, or rebuilding is both a sign in Peirce's (1955) semiotic sense and a message within Lotman's (1990) cultural system, reaffirming deeply rooted values that transcend material recovery. In this intertwined framing, the people of Camarines Norte are not only survivors of natural disasters but interpreters of lived experience, constantly translating natural calamity and devastation into a collective understanding of what life means in the midst of storms.

Literature Review

In the Philippine context and its history, resilience has been both a mirror and a mask. It reflects the enduring capacity of Filipinos to rebuild lives and property amid recurring devastation, and yet it sometimes conceals the deeper cultural systems that sustain that endurance. Across centuries of colonisation, and natural calamities such as earthquakes and typhoons, the Filipino people have created not only infrastructures of survival but also languages of meaning composed of rituals, symbols, gestures, and stories that help them make sense of suffering, pain and loss. These expressions, though often described through sociological or psychological frameworks, can be more profoundly understood through the semiotic structures that organise how a culture reads itself in the face of danger and devastation. The sections that follow survey the key empirical and conceptual literature on which this study builds, with particular attention to the intersection of semiotics, cultural practice, and disaster resilience, before identifying the gap that this study addresses.

Semiotics, Resilience, and Disaster Communication

Recent scholarship has begun to treat resilience not as a fixed sociocultural mechanism but as a dynamic communicative process. Urquiza et al. (2021) demonstrate that resilience depends on how people interpret hazards and respond through shared cultural logics. Their study shows that communities form meaning through talk, stories, and daily practices, and that terms such as risk, vulnerability, and adaptation acquire significance through collective interpretation. This places resilience squarely in the field of communication, where symbols and shared cues guide action during and after crises. Rigby and Zemanek (2026) extend this insight by arguing that resilience works as a narrative practice, one in which communities build stories connecting loss, survival, and renewal, and that symbols, rituals, and repeated acts form a shared text expressing strength, courage, hope and purpose.

These positions align productively with the present study's Peircean and Lotmanian framing. Both Urquiza et al. (2021) and Rigby and Zemanek (2026) treat resilience as a process of meaning-making, which is precisely what a semiotic reading of Filipino responses to typhoons addresses. Shared values and practices provide cues that guide action and shape community identity, functioning in the Peircean sense as interpretants, i.e., cultural understandings produced from the sign–object relation of disaster and response.

Scholars of disaster anthropology have similarly observed that communities which experience natural calamities interpret those calamities through symbolic frameworks (see Bankoff, 2003; Gaillard & Texier, 2010). Bankoff (2003) notes that such interpretations often frame natural disasters as tests of faith, divine punishment, or opportunities for communal

renewal. It seems to be a worldview in which nature, society, and the divine are closely interconnected. Gaillard and Texier (2010) found that many Filipinos perceive natural disasters as expressions of divine will, integrating these interpretations into communal practices, rituals, and narratives that help people cope, find lessons, strengthen morality, and enhance social cohesion. These findings corroborate the present study's observation that faith functions as an interpretant within the Filipino semiosphere of disaster and survival.

Cultural Semiotics in the Filipino Context

Semiotic thinkers such as Roland Barthes (1972) and Umberto Eco (1979) have long argued that culture is a system of signs in which everyday actions and objects are infused with symbolic significance. Barthes (1972) proposed that everyday cultural objects and practices function as signs that construct and communicate ideological "myths" within society. Eco (1979), meanwhile, argued that all forms of communication, verbal or nonverbal, operate through systems of signs that humans use to produce and interpret meaning.

The Filipino practices of *bayanihan* (neighbours lifting a house together) and *bahala na* (surrender to divine will) operate as mythologies in Barthes's (1972) sense, i.e., culturally saturated narratives that transform the ordinary into the emblematic while providing communities with a basic framework for making sense of lived experience. *Bayanihan*, in particular, has evolved from a literal act of moving houses to a symbolic code of collective survival, solidarity and belonging. It communicates unity, reciprocity, and shared identity, which are themes that Peirce (1955) might describe as interpretants emerging from a recurrent cultural object (the typhoon as a natural disaster). Similarly, *bahala na* and *pananampalataya* signify the interpretive link between uncertainty and faith, functioning as semiotic anchors in moments when rationality and a sense of control collapse.

Contemporary Filipino scholars have begun to critique the myth of resilience (see Laborte, 2022; Ordoñez & Borja, 2021), warning against its use as a political anaesthetic that normalises Filipino suffering. Yet from a semiotic viewpoint, even this myth is meaningful to the Filipino people as it reflects how societies codify pain into the coherent narrative of survival. To romanticise resilience may be limiting, but to decode it through signs is to understand the deeper layers of pain, courage, and endurance that shape Filipino identity. Eco's (1979) notion of the "open work" resonates here, in that resilience as a text is continually rewritten by its interpreters. Every typhoon adds a new layer of meaning to the local and national narrative of courage and survival.

Empirical cultural semiotic studies in the Philippines lend further support to this framing. Moldez and Gomez (2022) demonstrate through their analysis of online news photographs that Filipino students read denotation, connotation, and cultural links in images, such as visual cues that link daily experience to shared memory, including scenes of disaster, repair, and collective loss. Gorospe and Rabago (2025) examine sumra, a protective ritual among Ilocanos, using semiotic theory and Lotman's semiosphere to show how gestures and repeated acts express protection, identity, and continuity. Together, these studies affirm that cultural semiotics in the Philippines emerges from lived experience: people form meaning through images, rituals, and shared practices that link memory, emotion, and action. The present study extends this body of work by reading resilience as a

semiotic process in a typhoon-prone coastal community, focusing on *bayanihan*, faith, and steadfastness as cultural markers that guide interpretation and response during disaster.

Lotman's Semiosphere and the Reproduction of Hope

For Lotman (1990), the semiosphere functions like an ecosystem where new meanings are born through the tension between the centre (shared cultural codes) and the periphery (emerging, innovative expressions). Disasters seem to rupture this balance, but they also provoke creativity, producing new signs that renew cultural identity and vitality. In times of crisis, the Filipino semiosphere expands as new stories, songs, gestures, and rituals appear, blending faith and practicality, and sorrow and humour, to sustain a coherent narrative of courage, hope, and survival.

Lorusso and Sedda (2022) demonstrate that the semiosphere shapes values, guides interpretation, and supports cultural continuity. They contend that meaning grows in a wider cultural space rather than in isolated signs. This aligns closely with the present study's focus on typhoon-prone communities, where symbols of survival operate inside an active cultural system, creating a shared space in which people read events and produce meaning during crisis. Taratukhin (2023) extends Lotman's framework by showing how new meanings emerge at the edges of the semiosphere and gradually move inward once they are accepted by the community. Applied to the Filipino context, this helps explain how acts of *bayanihan*, prayer, and rebuilding, which were perceived to initially direct practical responses, spread across the community and become shared markers of resilience, reproducing hope within the cultural space.

From Social Capital to Semiotic Capital

Where earlier frameworks such as social capital theory (Putnam et al., 1994; Claridge, 2018) emphasised the networked bonds and mutual trust among individuals and groups, semiotics deepens this understanding by revealing the cultural logics and symbolisms behind those social networks. It asks not only how people connect, but also what meanings those connections carry and convey.

Under this perspective, *bayanihan* is more than a social mechanism; it is a sign that encodes cultural memory and moral obligation to help one another and to leave no one behind in times of disaster. The resilience of the community thus becomes a form of semiotic capital transcending social capital, which is viewed as an accumulation of shared meanings that sustains cohesion during catastrophe. In this way, Peirce's (1955) and Lotman's (1990) theories converge: one traces the microscopic movement of meaning within the mind; the other maps its macroscopic circulation within Filipino culture. Together, they reveal how Filipino resilience operates as a recursive system of interpretation, in which each storm reactivates old signs while generating new ones.

In summary, in the Philippine setting, typhoons become a "text of the nation", some kind of a recurring narrative that tests moral and spiritual conviction. These interpretations are not merely responses to trauma but creative acts of meaning-making that transform suffering into continuity and wisdom. The existing literature on disaster communication, Filipino cultural practice, and semiotics collectively affirms that resilience is a deeply semiotic and communicative process, yet little empirical work has examined how Peircean

and Lotmanian semiotic frameworks interact within a specific typhoon-prone Philippine community. This study addresses that gap by situating the lived voices of the residents of Camarines Norte within a rigorous semiotic interpretive framework.

Research Questions

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

(1) How do Filipino communities, particularly in typhoon-prone areas such as Camarines Norte, express and interpret resilience through culturally embedded signs, symbols, and practices?

(2) In what ways do these semiotic expressions permeate within the cultural semiosphere of the Filipino community to sustain meaning, courage, solidarity, and hope after a disaster?

(3) How does the interpretation of these signs reveal the deeper cultural logic of Filipino resilience, encompassing its moral, emotional, spiritual, and communicative dimensions?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach framed within the interpretive lens of Peirce's (1955) and Lotman's (1990) semiotics. Phenomenology provided the path for uncovering lived experience, i.e., how individuals feel, remember, and make sense of typhoons, while semiotics deepened the inquiry into how those experiences are translated into signs and meanings within the Filipino cultural context. Rather than measuring resilience as a fixed social mechanism through a survey questionnaire that invites a statistical analysis of data, this study viewed resilience as an act of a semiotic interpretation, a process by which communities continuously produce meaning from disasters and adversity.

Guided by de Saussure's structural semiotics and Lotman's (1990) theory of the semiosphere, this research examined how cultural symbols such as *bayanihan* (collective cooperation or solidarity), *pananampalataya* (faith), and *pagiging matatag* (steadfastness, strength or resilience) functioned as semiotic codes within the lived experiences and narratives of typhoon survivors in Camarines Norte.

Setting and Participants

The fieldwork and casual conversations were conducted in five typhoon-vulnerable barangays in the province of Camarines Norte, namely: Alayao (Capalonga), Santa Milagrosa (Jose Panganiban), Tulay na Lupa (Labo), Awitan (Paracale), and Napilihan (Vinzons). These areas form part of what Lotman (1990) might describe as the peripheries of the cultural semiosphere, or those dynamic zones where new meanings emerge as communities negotiate survival within recurring natural threats such as typhoons and tropical storms.

A total of ten key informants, ranging in age from 21 to 70 years, were selected through purposive sampling, each having first-hand experience of severe typhoons. The group comprised seven women and three men, representing a range of livelihoods including farming, fishing, small-scale vending, and domestic caregiving; these are occupations that render them particularly exposed to the material and economic consequences of typhoons

and the enormous damage they inflict. All participants had experienced multiple severe typhoons in the preceding decade, including Typhoon Nina (2016), Typhoon Tisoy (2019), and Typhoon Quinta (2020), among others. Socio-demographic diversity was deliberately sought to ensure that the semiotic analysis reflected a range of gendered, generational, and class-inflected perspectives on resilience.

The selection of participants was guided by Creswell's (2013) criteria for purposive sampling in qualitative phenomenological research, which emphasises the selection of individuals who have experienced strong typhoons in their lifetime. Data saturation was assessed in accordance with principles outlined in Hennink et al. (2020). Local barangay offices and the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (PDRRMO) facilitated the coordination and identification of participants. Institutional ethical clearance for the study was obtained prior to the commencement of fieldwork, and all procedures adhered to established protocols for research involving human participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews using open-ended questions in a casual conversational style (Appendix A) designed to elicit both lived experiences and symbolic interpretations. The interview guide was developed around the study's theoretical framework, specifically, the semiotic triad of sign, object, and interpretant, allowing participants to express how they read and communicated meaning before, during, and after typhoons. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the local language (Filipino and Bikolano), with an average duration of forty-five to sixty minutes per session. Question prompts included:

- Rituals, gestures, habits, or actions performed before, during, and after the typhoon
- Symbols of protection or faith that offered comfort and sustained solidarity
- Stories, narratives, phrases, sentiments, or shared practices that signified hope, courage or solidarity

Each interview was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participant, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English with care to preserve local expressions and contextual nuances. Field notes and researcher observations capturing tone, emotion, nuances of local culture, and environmental context supplemented the transcripts, as these elements are essential for semiotic interpretation. The goal was not only to document what participants said but also how their language, speech utterances, imagery, and metaphors revealed underlying cultural codes and symbolic meanings. All audio-recorded data were stored securely, and all participant identifiers were anonymised prior to analysis.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis as Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), guided by the semiotic interpretive framework of Peirce (1955) and Lotman (1990). The process unfolded in six interrelated stages:

- Familiarisation with the data: Transcripts were read repeatedly to grasp both the surface content and the underlying symbolic structures or signs that participants used to construct meaning.

- Coding: Segments of text were coded not only for themes (e.g., faith, family, hope) but for their semiotic form, such as metaphors, recurring words, gestures, symbolisms, and cultural references that signified resilience.
- Theme construction: Codes were clustered into broader semiotic patterns, such as "Resilience as Ritual", "Faith as Interpretant", and "Bayanihan as Cultural Text", emerging from the data and corresponding to the study's theoretical categories. Specifically, codes were grouped into interpretive categories corresponding to signs of *bayanihan, pananampalataya,* and *pagiging matatag*, following the semiotic logic of the Peircean triadic model.
- Reviewing themes: Patterns were examined in relation to Peirce's (1955) triadic model and Lotman's (1990) semiosphere to ensure that interpretations reflected both individual and shared cultural meanings.
- Defining and naming themes: Each theme was articulated as a semiotic system, or a network of signs mediating between experience and interpretation.
- Producing the analytical narrative: Findings were woven into an interpretive narrative connecting personal accounts to collective cultural and semiotic meanings.

The analysis also employed interpretive memos to trace the researchers' evolving understanding, or what Peirce (1955) described as the "unlimited semiosis" of inquiry, where meaning is never fixed but continuously generated through interpretation.

Researchers' Positionality and Reflexivity

As researchers interpreting the lived experiences of others, we entered the field as both observers and participants in meaning-making. In qualitative phenomenology, understanding emerges not from distance but from meaningful dialogue. This study recognised that the researchers' cultural identity, language, and emotional resonance with the participants inevitably shaped the interpretive process. Reflexivity became instrumental in arriving at honest, sincere, and trustworthy interpretations by acknowledging one's own interpretant position, which was integral to ensuring authenticity and depth of analysis. As researchers, we had also experienced the same typhoons that our participants described, and this shared experience rendered resonance and interpretation more intimate, reliable, honest, and meaningful. We saw what they saw. We heard what they heard. We felt what they felt. Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework for reflexive thematic analysis, we maintained reflective journals throughout the fieldwork and followed a shared analytical process to document and interrogate our own assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to ethical protocols in accordance with institutional ethical clearance obtained prior to the commencement of fieldwork. Participants were provided with an Informed Consent Form detailing the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any point without any consequence. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Informant 1), and all audio-recorded data were stored securely in an encrypted digital OneDrive. Participants were reminded that their insights would be used for research purposes only and that their stories would be

interpreted with cultural sensitivity, factuality, fairness, and respect. Beyond procedural compliance, ethical practice was treated as a dialogic responsibility, a phenomenon that Lotman (1990) might call communication across boundaries. The researchers' role was to interpret, not to impose, and to listen for meaning rather than to direct or solicit particular responses. Openness and respect characterised every interaction with participants.

Results and Discussion

Resilience as a Sign

In Camarines Norte, *pagiging matatag* (steadfastness, being strong, or resilience) is not a mere personality trait; it is a cultural sign that embodies the Filipino dialogue with nature's volatility, power, and danger. When asked about how they faced those typhoons, one informant smiled and said simply:

> *"Ah, ay oo naman matatag, syempre at nandiyan na rin ang bagyo eh di hindi na rin maiiwasan ang maging ganon. Kailangan talagang matatag ang isipan at diwa natin." (Of course we are resilient. Once the typhoon is there, it is unavoidable. We need to be strong in mind and spirit.)*

In Peirce's (1955) terms, the typhoon is the object; the act of calm acceptance and preparation is the representamen; and the shared cultural meaning of mental fortitude is the interpretant. The sign of resilience thus emerges not from theory but from repetition. Each storm becomes a teacher that challenges and renews the ongoing semiosis of survival. Another informant, a single mother, deepened this meaning with maternal gravity:

> *"Kailangan po talaga. Ako lang mag-isa. Wala na ang asawa ko. Sa mga anak ko, kailangan kong maging matatag para sa kanila kasi wala silang aasahan, ako lang po lalo na sa ganyang may mga kalamidad." (I really need to be strong. I am a single mother. For my children, I have to be resilient because they have no one else to rely on but me, especially during typhoons.)*

Her statement reveals resilience as an indexical sign of responsibility. Resilience points beyond the self toward kinship, care for children, obligation, and familial duty. Lotman (1990) would describe this as a centripetal force within the semiosphere, drawing private struggle into the shared meaning of motherhood, sacrifice, and continuity. Single mothers, or single parents, for that matter, seem to cultivate this private, unseen struggle just so they will be able to live by their obligations more for their families, and less for themselves.

In the aftermath of a catastrophe, resilience takes a tactile form through repair, rehabilitation, and renewal. One participant narrated:

> *"Ay, 'yung pag may nasira, inaayos din. Naglilinis ng mga dumi. Tulong-tulong lang talaga. Yung pagkatapos ng sakuna, kailangang tumayo uli." (When something is damaged, we just fix it. We clean up the mess. We help each other. We need to stand again after the catastrophe.)*

Such actions signify more than maintenance; they are meaningful rituals of restoration, repair, and rehabilitation. Every nail hammered, every floor swept of mud, and every roof repaired becomes a symbolic translation of despair into order, illustrating courage, hope, and the resolve that life must always move on after the storm. *"Sinu-sino pa ba ang maglilinis kundi tayo-tayo din lang? Sinu-sino pa ba ang magtutulungan kundi tayo-tayo lang?"* (Who else cleans the mess brought by the typhoon but us? Who else should help one another but us?), he added. Such utterance was inclusive as it not only invoked themselves about the importance of camaraderie and collective action, but also ourselves, as researchers, and as one with them in experience, that, like them, we were not spared from such strong typhoons.

Faith as an Interpretant

If resilience is the sign, faith is its interpretant. The interpretant, according to Peirce (1955), is the understanding we have of the sign–object relation, or the cultural code through which calamity acquires meaning. During typhoons, residents interpret thunder, rain, and wind as both natural and divine messages. One woman recounted how she prayed ceaselessly while in an evacuation centre looking after her children:

> *"Kumbaga parang nagdadasal kami dun na sana 'yung mga bahay namin okay pa… wala kaming ibang pinanghahawakan kundi si Lord lang eh. Taimtim lang na pagdarasal." (We prayed that our houses would stand firm against the howling winds. We had nothing else to hold on to but God. We had to pray wholeheartedly and believe in Him that He would protect us.)*

Here, the sign (prayer) mediates between the object (disaster) and the interpretant (trust in divine providence, an entity perceived as a man illustrated by the use of the pronoun "he"). Through this triadic movement, fear is transformed into faith, considered as a classic Peircean (1955) conversion of chaos into intelligibility.

Another informant captured the immediacy of that dialogue with divine providence:

> *"Ay, Diyos ko, sana 'wag Mo nang palakasin 'yung hangin… 'wag nang bumaba sa kalupaan kasi kawawa 'yung mga kabahayan namin. Maawain ang Diyos." (Oh my God, please do not make the wind stronger. Do not let it reach the ground because our homes will suffer. The Lord has pity on us. He blesses us.)*

This plea is both linguistic and symbolic. It is a performative sign that converts anxiety into an articulation of faith. Lotman (1990) would call this auto-communication: the culture speaking to itself through prayer to reaffirm its moral centre and to remind the people what truly matters in times of disaster. The act of praying together in small chapels, homes, or evacuation centres during a night of blackout against the nonstop howling of winds and torrential pouring of rain, extends the semiosphere of courage and hope, linking heaven and household into a single interpretive space constituted by faith. *"Taimtim lang*

talaga na pagdarasal ang pinanghahawakan namin. Saan pa ba kami kakapit at kukuha ng lakas?" (We hold on to faith. This is where we take strength and hope.).

Family as the Core of the Semiosphere of Disaster and Survival

Within the Filipino semiosphere of disaster, the family operates as the nucleus where meanings of care, empathy, strength, and continuity converge. As one informant expressed with quiet conviction:

> *"Kailangang sama-sama lagi ang pamilya para maging matatag tayo… sama-sama tayong magdasal at mag-tulungan para malagpasan ang trahedya." (We must always stay together as a family so that we remain strong. We pray and help one another to overcome the crisis.)*

The repeated injunction *sama-sama* (being together) functions as both a linguistic sign and an ethical command. In Peirce's (1955) triad, it is a symbolic sign whose meaning is derived from convention and repetition, renewed with each utterance. It is in this togetherness that a family is tested. It is in this togetherness that a family gains courage and strength in their resolve to survive every natural calamity.

For Lotman (1990), the family is the core of the semiosphere, where inherited codes of *pagpapasa ng tradisyon* (transmission of tradition) are maintained. An elderly participant reflected on this continuity:

> *"Nung unang panahon pa, 'yung mga matatanda talagang safe sila… Ultimong gaas, langis, lahat 'yan prepared na 'yan. Natututo ang kabataan na kapag may paparating na sakuna, kailangang maging handa." (Even before, the elders in the families were always ready. Everything, even oil and firewood, was prepared. The children and young people learned from the elders. Preparation was the key.)*

This memory acts as a cultural script for many of the typhoon survivors, a code transmitted across generations, reinforcing preparedness as a valued communal habit. The semiosphere of resilience thus thrives on mimicry in that children observe, internalise, and later perform the same rituals that their ancestors had shown them, sustaining what Peirce (1955) would call the infinite chain of interpretants. A middle-aged mother affirmed this process:

> *"Nakikita naman nila 'yung ginagawa namin… kung ano 'yung nakikita sa matatanda, 'yun na rin 'yung ginagaya ng mga bata lalo na sa panahon ng sakuna. Magandang ehemplo para sa kapakanan nila. Kung wala na kami, kaya na nilang mabuhay ng matatag." (They see what we do; what they see in the elders, they imitate, especially during times of natural calamities. It is a good way to instil such habits for their own good and for their own survival. If we are gone, they can manage on their own.)*

Here, imitation is a form of interpretation in that the child's act of copying the elders' habits, rituals and actions, especially about surviving natural calamities, and living with these calamities, is the birth of meaning, ensuring that resilience remains a living knowledge within the Filipino spirit. Resilience is symbolically entrenched in the minds and hearts of the young.

Bayanihan as a Cultural Text

Beyond the household, the Filipino semiosphere of survival expands into the collective field of *bayanihan*, considered to be the age-old ethic of mutual understanding, togetherness, and solidarity among Filipinos. When typhoons strike, this cultural text is reenacted spontaneously, translating communal solidarity into embodied meaning. One participant narrated her experience of evacuation:

> *"Parang naguusap-usap kami dun… magdasal lang tayo, magkaisa, at lilipas din 'yung bagyo… sana 'wag masira 'yung iniwan naming mga tirahan." (We talked to each other there, reminding ourselves to pray, to be together; the storm will pass, and hopefully our homes will be spared.)*

In Lotman's (1990) schema, the evacuation centre becomes a secondary micro-semiosphere, a temporary cultural space where people from different barangays form new, stronger symbolic ties. Through conversations, shared meals in evacuation centres, and a unified prayer, people co-create a language of mutual reassurance, believing that life will be okay. Another participant recalled cooking in the evacuation centre:

> *"Kung ano 'yung ginagawa mo sa pamamahay mo, gano'n din dun. Magtutulong-tulong sa pagluluto at inuuna talaga ang mga bata. Mainit na lugaw at daing na isda, okay na, basta magkaisa at ligtas sa sakuna." (What you do at home, you also do there in the evacuation centre. You help each other cook and ensure that all children can eat. A hot porridge and dried fish are enough, as long as we are together and safe.)*

Cooking and shared meals have become a sign of *bayanihan* and normalcy, some sort of an interpretant that transforms temporary physical displacement into belonging, thereby illustrating Peirce's (1955) iconic sign, in which form and meaning mirror each other, in that the warmth of porridge on a cold, windy night at the evacuation centre symbolises the warmth of solidarity and belonging. After the storm, *bayanihan* resurfaces as a form of reconstruction, both physical and psychological. As one woman shared with gratitude:

> *"Oo, bayanihan. Tulong-tulong sa lahat ng kailangang hingin… lalakas naman ng loob mo dahil sa kapitbahay mo. Lahat may pusong handang tumulong." (Yes, bayanihan. Everyone helps when you ask. They give you courage. You gain strength from your neighbours. They have a heart to help.)*

Her words illuminate the moral economy of *utang na loob* (inner debt of gratitude) that keeps the *bayanihan* semiosphere in motion. Each act of help generates interpretants of reciprocity; each shared burden renews the communal spirit of empathy and compassion. For Lotman (1990), such exchanges represent the dialectic-dialogic nature of culture, where meaning is sustained not by isolation but by the constant translation between the self and the Other. In Camarines Norte, *bayanihan* is both narrative and norm, and performance and code, symbolising the collective authorship of resilience, that is, the storm writes destruction, and the people answer with restoration, renewed courage, and the will to carry on.

Across these themes, the participants' voices form an intricate system of signs that together compose the Filipino semiosphere of resilience, courage, hope and survival. Peirce (1955) reveals how each gesture, prayer, habit, or action operates as a sign mediating between the catastrophe and the interpreted meaning that the community shares. Lotman (1990) situates those signs within a living cultural ecosystem where meanings circulate, reproduce, permeate, and renew the Filipino identity and spirit.

Thus, Filipino resilience is not a fixed trait. It is not only a behavioural aspect nor a social mechanism, but a semiotic choreography of meanings embedded in the Filipino psyche. Resilience endures through the constant translation of loss into discovery, chaos into coherence, and survival into a living narrative of what it means to move on after every storm. Every storm, in this sense, is a text re-read by each generation of typhoon survivors, reminding them that to live in the Philippine archipelago is to listen to the whispers of the strong winds brought by typhoons, and respond with courage, hope, and the will to endure.

Conclusion

Every storm that passes through the Philippines leaves behind more than fallen trees and broken roofs. Every storm leaves signs carved in memory and action, read, interpreted, and rewritten by communities who refuse to be silenced by the Pacific winds. This study set out to explore those signs: to listen to how Filipinos in Camarines Norte give meaning to devastation, and to understand resilience not as simple endurance but as an act of symbolic communication. Resilience is a semiotic exchange within the realm of typhoons and other natural calamities, which the Filipino people desire to interpret as their way of survival.

Through the lens of Peirce's (1955) triadic semiotics and Lotman's (1990) semiosphere, resilience emerges as a living knowledge and language; it is a recursive dialogue between nature and culture, and between loss and renewal. Peirce (1955) helps us see how every gesture of recovery functions as a sign mediating between the physical reality of the typhoon (object) and the shared understanding that life must go on (interpretant). Lotman (1990), meanwhile, situates these signs within a cultural semiosphere where meaning circulates and is reproduced within the collective Filipino spirit, whereby families, neighbours, and faith communities continually translate trauma into trust, belonging, and the will to carry on.

The voices of the participants illuminated this process with clarity and warmth. When a mother whispered, "*Kailangan kong maging matatag para sa mga anak ko*" (I have to be strong for my children), her words were not merely personal; rather, these words were profound cultural inscriptions in the underlying system of Filipino resilience. When

neighbours cooked meals together in evacuation centres or prayed together as roofs trembled above them, these acts were not only survival strategies but semiotic performances that reasserted belonging and mental strength within chaos and fear.

In this sense, *bayanihan*, *pananampalataya*, and *pagiging matatag* are not only virtues deeply ingrained in the Filipino psyche but also texts within the Filipino semiosphere that are constantly rewritten and re-read by each generation to reaffirm identity in the face of uncertainty. Every typhoon becomes a chapter in this collective narrative, and every act of rebuilding is a word inscribed in the language of endurance.

In this study, we conclude that Filipino resilience is a deeply illuminating interpretive process, not a fixed behavioural or psychological trait. It is a cultural conversation that binds the personal to the communal and the material to the spiritual. Within Peirce's (1955) framework, each experience of suffering becomes a sign that points toward hope; within Lotman's (1990), the community's response becomes a cultural system that keeps meaning alive. Together, these theories reveal how resilience is continuously encoded, decoded, and re-encoded in the daily life of the Filipino who will keep experiencing typhoons as part of their way of life. Resilience will continue to be a code interpreted and reproduced in their language and humanity as a whole, from prayer to preparation, and from ruin to repair and renewal.

Implications

This study carries several implications across three intersecting domains. First, in terms of disaster communication and community education, the findings suggest that preparedness messaging and disaster risk reduction campaigns are most effective when they resonate with the existing semiotic practices of the communities they target. In Camarines Norte and similarly, in typhoon-prone regions of the Philippines, communication strategies that incorporate the cultural signs of bayanihan, faith, and steadfastness, rather than imposing technical or bureaucratic language, are more likely to be internalised and acted upon by the people. Disaster education programmes might productively draw on locally embedded symbols, narratives, and rituals to strengthen community preparedness, readiness and cohesion.

Second, in terms of policy, this study calls on local and national disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) planners to recognise the sociocultural narratives that communities rely upon during a crisis. Rather than treating resilience as a natural and inexhaustible resource that absolves the state of responsibility, policymakers should acknowledge these semiotic practices as resources that require institutional support, resourcing, and recognition, not exploitation. Resilience, in other words, should not serve as a political anaesthetic that normalises recurring loss, trauma and pain (Laborte, 2022; Ordoñez & Borja, 2021), but as a cultural asset that informs more equitable and contextually sensitive disaster governance.

Third, for future research, this study opens productive directions for comparative semiotic inquiry into resilience across different Philippine regions, hazard types (e.g., flooding, earthquakes) and cultural communities. Extending this framework to other provinces or to different forms of disaster, such as earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions, would deepen understanding of how the Filipino semiosphere of hope, courage

and survival varies and adapts across contexts. Longitudinal studies that trace how signs of resilience evolve across successive disasters, and ethnographic work that situates these semiotic practices in the material conditions of vulnerable communities, would further enrich the emerging field of disaster semiotics in the Philippines, viewed as a sociocultural and semiotic phenomenon.

To the outsider, resilience may appear as stoic acceptance. To the insider, it is a semiotic ritual, or an ongoing act of interpretation that turns disaster into dialogue, forgetting into remembering, and memory into meaning. Within this conversation lies the very soul of the Philippines as an archipelago frequently visited by tempests: a culture that speaks through storms and rebuilds itself through the language of love and compassion. The people of Camarines Norte remind us that resilience is not about resisting the winds, but about learning to speak with them. In every prayer, every nail hammered on a roof, and every act of helping another to rise after the storm, the community continues the dialogue between destruction and hope. This is proof that meaning, like faith, survives every storm.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests
We have no conflict of interests to declare.

Bionotes

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Baron Roy R. Longaza served as a writer for Breakthrough CNSC, demonstrating leadership in campus journalism. As a committed campus journalist, he has participated in the 3rd National Campus Journalism Convention and presented a program pitch at the PACSL-Midyear National Convention. Passionate about risk, disaster, and humanitarian communication, he explored the cultural dimensions of Filipino resilience in the wake of typhoons in his undergraduate thesis. Baron completed his B.S. in Development Communication undergraduate degree at Camarines Norte State College in June 2025.

Dominic B. Merciales served as the Vice President for Financial Affairs of the College of Arts and Sciences Student Government of Camarines Norte State College during the Academic Year 2024 - 2025, demonstrating discipline and leadership among students and peers within the organisation and the college. Possessing a keen interest in the lived experiences of residents during calamities and emergencies within Camarines Norte, he investigates the cultural dimensions of Filipino resilience in the wake of typhoons, encapsulating the experiences of the people of Camarines Norte in times of emergency. Dominic completed his undergraduate degree in June 2025.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

Question 1: Kapag papalapit na ang bagyo at nagsisimula ka nang maghanda maging sa pag-iipon ng pagkain, pagpapatibay ng bubong, o pagdarasal, ano ang kahulugan para sa iyo ng bawat isa sa mga gawaing iyon? Itinuturing mo ba silang basta praktikal na hakbang lamang, o mayroon ba silang mas malalim na kahulugan para sa iyo at sa iyong pamilya?
(When a typhoon is approaching, and you begin to prepare, whether you are gathering food, securing your roof, or praying, what does each of those actions mean to you personally? Do you see them as simply practical, or do they carry a deeper significance for you and your family?)

Question 2: Maaari mo bang ilarawan ang isang tiyak na sandali sa panahon ng o pagkatapos ng bagyo (ito'y maaraing isang kilos, isang larawan, isang tunog, o isang gawain na isinagawa mo kasama ang iyong mga kapitbahay) na nanatili sa iyong isipan nang matagal pagkatapos ng bagyo? Bakit sa tingin mo nagkaroon ng ganoon kalakas na impresyon sa iyo ang partikular na sandaling iyon?
(Can you describe a specific moment during or after a typhoon, e.g., a gesture, an image, a sound, or a shared act with your neighbours, that stayed with you long after the storm had passed? Why do you think that particular moment left such a strong impression on you?)

Question 3: Ang salitang bayanihan ay madalas na ginagamit upang ilarawan kung paano nagtutulungan ang mga Pilipino sa panahon ng kalamidad. Nang personal mong maranasan ang bayanihan sa panahon ng isang bagyo, maging sa pagbibigay o pagtanggap ng tulong, ano ang naramdaman mo? Ano ang sinabi nito sa iyo tungkol sa inyong pagkakakilanlan bilang isang komunidad?
(The word bayanihan is often used to describe how Filipinos help one another during disasters. When you personally experienced bayanihan during a typhoon, whether giving or receiving help, what did it feel like? What did it communicate to you about who you are as a community?)

Question 4: Maraming Pilipino ang lumalapit sa panalangin at pananampalataya sa panahon ng mga bagyo. Nang ikaw ay magdasal sa panahon ng o pagkatapos ng isang bagyo, ano talaga ang iyong hiniling, at higit pa sa mismong mga salita ng panalangin, ano sa tingin mo ang kahulugan ng gawaing iyon ng pagdarasal, para sa iyo mismo at para sa mga taong nasa paligid mo?
(Many Filipinos turn to prayer and faith during typhoons. When you prayed during or after a storm, what were you really asking for, and beyond the words of the prayer itself, what do you think that act of praying meant, both for you personally and for the people around you?)

Question 5: Pagkatapos ng isang bagyo at nagsisimula ka nang muling tumayo, maging ang iyong bahay, ang iyong pang-araw-araw na gawain, o ang iyong pakiramdam ng kaayusan, paano mo ilalarawan ang kahulugan ng pagtatayong muli para sa iyo? Ito ba ay basta pag-

aayos lamang ng mga nasira, o pakiramdam mo bang may higit pang kahulugan ito katulad ng isang pagpapahayag sa iyong sarili at sa iba na magpapatuloy ang buhay?
(After a typhoon has passed and you begin to rebuild, whether it is your house, your daily routine, or your sense of normalcy, how would you describe what that rebuilding means to you? Is it simply about fixing what was broken, or does it feel like something more, such as an act of declaring to yourself and to others that life will go on?)

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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 pinandidirihan 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 pinandidirihan 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 negation 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; *utang na loob*	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 (salience)	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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Teaching at the Margins: Semiotics, Power, and Meaning in the Lived Experience of an Island Teacher

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Abstract: Teaching on a remote island is rarely understood as a site of intellectual rigour, civic commitment, and quiet transformation. This study challenges that assumption by exploring the lived experience of one teacher navigating the entangled forces of semiotics, power, and marginality within an island setting in the central Philippines. Drawing on phenomenological, interpretivist, and critical paradigms and employing a casual interview alongside document analysis of teaching artefacts, this study examines how pedagogical signs, symbols, and practices reveal an island teacher's deeper values about care, identity, civic-mindedness, and becoming. Theoretically anchored in semiotics, critical pedagogy, and postcolonial and island studies perspectives, the analysis surfaces three interconnected findings: that marginality is lived as adaptability, initiative, and resourcefulness in response to chronic scarcity; that teaching artefacts function as coherent sign systems illustrating civic responsibility, ethical formation, and community embeddedness; and that professional identity is continuously negotiated through the competing demands of institutional power, local culture, and environmental precarity. Crucially speaking, this study does not frame island teaching as deficit-driven. Instead, it foregrounds how a teacher at geographical, peripheral and epistemic margins converts structural constraints into meaningful, context-responsive pedagogy, thus repositioning the classroom as a critical space where local knowledge is legitimised, student voice is cultivated, human agency is pursued, and dominant educational hierarchies are quietly but persistently contested. The island, in this sense, is not merely a backdrop but an active semiotic landscape that shapes what teaching can mean, and what it can become.

Keywords: island teaching, semiotics, marginality, critical pedagogy, teacher identity

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Introduction

Biliran Island faces the strong winds and turbulent waters of the Pacific Ocean. It is located north of Leyte in the central Philippines. It occupies a distinctive geographical position in Eastern Visayas, separated from mainland Leyte by a narrow strait, making it relatively remote and distant, and lately is confronted with socioeconomic challenges due to recent engineering or structural constraints of its lone bridge (Biliran Bridge) that is a vital conduit connecting nearby regions of Tacloban, Ormoc, Samar and Southern Leyte for socio-economic activity. This has led to limited access and transport to and from the island, amplifying the island's struggling economic flow (GMA Integrated News, 2024), along with poor infrastructure and seemingly laissez-faire local governance.

However, as an island province, it prides itself on having primary schools and high schools even in remote areas of the island, as well as a lone university, all of which are situated within layered forms of peripherality, physically removed from major urban financial centres, distanced from mainstream schools and universities of the country, exposed to seasonal yet destructive weather patterns, and dependent on ferry crossings, fragile road networks, power outages, and unstable and uneven internet connectivity (Meniano, 2025; Philippine News Agency, [PNA], 2024).

This spatio-geographical condition of the island shapes the academic life of the island teacher in unique and challenging ways, where access to resources, professional networks, and scholarly exchange is mediated by a slow and seemingly idiosyncratic way of life, disruptive weather conditions, and other contingencies and unforeseen circumstances of island living and mobility. The students on the island confront torrential rains that interrupt schooling as they navigate turbulent seas, thick mountains and complex terrains that cradle their communities not only in abundance of natural resources but also in isolation. Coconut groves, rice paddies, geothermal springs, falls, and rivers, along with tropical oceans, coexist with intermittent internet signals and fragile roads and highways that easily yield to mudslides, landslides, and flash floods, affecting local business operations, schooling, and the day-to-day life of the people. On this island, distance is not merely physical or geographical, but also pedagogical and symbolic to both the students' and the teachers' existence with the world, reflecting how geography, infrastructure, and vulnerability shape educational access and lived experience in remote, archipelagic contexts (Bankoff, 2003; David, 2017).

The island prides itself on a single university that serves as the local educational backbone and a symbolic gateway to global systems of knowledge and to employment opportunities beyond the island. The university is instrumental in producing teacher education graduates who help embolden the education system of the island, as well as making a difference in the lives of children through teaching. The university also situates itself at the intersection of cultural rootedness and unique aspiration, deeply embedded in rural, agricultural, and coastal communities, yet tasked with aligning itself to national and international higher education standards due to the pressure of becoming a globalised higher education institution, a common ideal that peripheral universities aspire for (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2016). This tension renders the lone university a liminal space, where global academic discourses are revised or reinterpreted through island realities, and where teaching and learning are inseparable from the local geography, culture, and

everyday vulnerabilities of island life, reflecting how peripheral institutions negotiate global flows of knowledge while remaining grounded in their unique local contexts and needs (Shore & Wright, 2015; Tikly, 2004). This tension also draws attention to how a teacher lives their personal and professional lives operating in such a space where the struggles of island life are intertwined with their silent dreams, aspirations, and what-ifs.

To teach in remote schools on an island is to understand that one inhabits an important paradox of life. For example, the island's higher education institution constantly carries the aspirations of how to become "globalised", represented by their desire to meet the benchmarks of outcomes-based education, international accreditation standards, internationally-acclaimed research outputs, higher passing rates of graduates that meet international employment schemes, and state-of-the-art digital learning management systems, while being firmly rooted in locally bounded meanings, habits, practices, constraints, inadequacies, and struggles (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, et al., 2015). The typical life of a teacher navigating his day-to-day existence on the island unfolds between ferry schedules or mountain treks and classroom teaching (considering that some teachers live in some islets surrounding Biliran island, or far away in the mountains), between *habal-habal* or *sikad-sikad* transport and faculty meetings, between torrential rains and massive flooding and field work, or between printed handouts and online learning portals that may or may not load due to poor internet connectivity. Such conditions reflect the realities of a teacher's life in geographically fragmented and infrastructurally vulnerable island settings, where mobility, weather, and unstable access to resources directly shape teaching and learning (Akmad & Abatayo, 2024; Pinca, 2015). In classrooms where students speak Waray-Waray, Cebuano, Filipino, or English in fluid code-switching finesse, teaching becomes an act of translation and a space for interpretation and sensemaking because it emerges not only linguistic and instructional, but also deeply cultural, social, political, critical, ideological, and semiotic.

Within an island province, semiotics, power, and marginality converge in the everyday practices of teaching, rendering teaching, which is viewed as a noble craft, a deeply political and symbolic act. The teacher confronts the forces of power as something intimate and unavoidable, embedded in their everyday pedagogical choices in relation to top-down institutional rules, policies and ideologies (Foucault, 1977, 1980; Shore & Wright, 2015). Politics and power surface through centralised curricula and assessment, uneven resource allocation, and bureaucratic mandates that often fail to account for the island's material limitations and local cultures and knowledges, and the unique circumstances of both the teacher and student who are living another day, trying to survive a difficult island life (Giroux, 2014; Tikly, 2004). Authority also subtly permeates institutional practices, such as who gets to define established, legitimate knowledge, who gets to assess, and at times, undermine emerging or evolving knowledge, which languages are accepted in classroom teaching, and whose experiences, methods and teaching strategies are rendered central and peripheral. Teaching thus constantly becomes a negotiated and contested act of survival, where compliance and resistance to disabling institutional power coexist in the effort to make learning meaningful for both teachers and students living at the margins.

The lesson materials a teacher uses, the languages privileged or disadvantaged in the classroom, and the pacing of lessons amid different disruptions all function as signs that

negotiate authority, care, civic duty, and moral grounding. Institutional symbols such as curricula, syllabi and lesson plans aligned with national benchmarks, digital learning platforms signalling global legitimacy, and the apparent strong mandate to use English as the language of academic discourse carry forms and forces of power that often originate from colonial history (Phillipson, 1992). Yet these factors are continuously reconstructed and contested in practice within the unique spaces of learning and teaching on the island, as teachers feel the need to adapt, translate, and humanise them, and at times submit to subservience just to fit their local conditions and ensure that systems and structures are in place for the students amid the material and structural challenges of life such as those conditions of precarity and vulnerability (de Certeau, 1984; Shore & Wright, 2015; Spivak, 1988). In short, marginality here is not merely spatial but epistemic, i.e., island knowledge, student lifeworlds, and the teacher's emotional labour sit at the edges of formal academic discourse, scholarly pursuits, and institutional systems of power, regardless of the unique struggles and sacrifices a teacher faces day by day. Teaching thus becomes an act of semiotic mediation, in which power is exercised through the pitted tension between rigid enforcement of institutional and external standards and moral and ethical responsiveness that an island teacher needs to respond to (Kress, 2010; Peirce, 1931–1958), because of an important goal that they must heed: to enable local, island-based pedagogies to assert meaning, dignity, voice, legitimacy, and autonomy within, and sometimes against, global educational systems and structures as dominant forces of power.

This study, therefore, explores the lived experience of an island teacher through the theoretical lenses of semiotics, critical theory, critical pedagogy, and marginality. This study does not view or frame island teaching as deficit-driven; rather, it attempts to foreground the meaning-making practices and ideological and epistemological frames of a teacher teaching on a remote island, i.e., how signs, symbols, artefacts, and pedagogical rituals reveal an island teacher's deeper values about care, commitment, identity, sense of self, and becoming in a remote space and place filled with aspirations and voices, as well as struggles, fears and anxieties. This study also attempts to explore the deeply intertwined relationship of politics or forms of institutional power and local rituals, constraints, and culture that shape the island teacher's professional identity, sense of self, and becoming. The island, in this sense, is not simply a geographical backdrop or a physical space where teaching occurs. The island itself is viewed as an active semiotic landscape that shapes what teaching can mean, how authority and power are exercised in spaces of learning, and how global and national educational discourses and standardised frameworks are reconstructed and reworked at the margins.

Literature Review

In this section, we present a review of studies that discuss the entangled relationship between semiotics and island teaching, power, authority, critical ideologies, and institutional discourses, and marginality and islandness that construct an island teacher's identity, sense of belonging, and becoming.

Semiotics and Island Teaching

Semiotics and island teaching intersect in illuminating ways, as the study of signs and meaning-making provides a powerful framework for understanding how teaching practices, material and environmental conditions, sense of space and place, linguistic choices, and assessment parameters within an island's education landscape construct and communicate narratives of authority, marginality, care, civic-mindedness and sense of belonging.

Semiotics is the intersubjective mediation by signs for which meanings and meaning-making are central to arriving at a deeper understanding of phenomena (Craig, 1999; Saussure, 2011; Peirce, 1958). Semiotics positions teaching as a dynamic system of signs in which language choices, classroom artefacts, gestures, technologies, assessment tools, and feedback practices all function as signifiers that communicate implicit pedagogical values. Within educational contexts, scholars have shown that teaching materials, including PowerPoint slides, modules or course guides, syllabi, assessment rubrics, and learning management systems, do more than deliver content; they encode and represent assumptions about authority, temporality, participation, and what counts as legitimate knowledge (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017). The classroom itself operates as a semiotic space in which spatial arrangements (e.g., how chairs are arranged against the classroom podium or stage where teachers mostly position themselves), modes of address, linguistic or communicative nuances, classroom practices, and even silence participate in meaning-making.

In multilingual environments, code-switching and translanguaging further complicate this terrain, exposing the tension between institutional language policies and the lived communicative practices of students coming from the different parts of the island. Meaning in teaching, therefore, is not neutral; rather, it is structured, layered, and embedded in systems of signification that reflect broader cultural and ideological formations. When this semiotic lens is brought into island pedagogy, the landscape itself becomes a powerful signifier. Island studies scholars argue that islands are frequently constructed within dominant pedagogical discourses as peripheral, small, dependent, deficient or lacking, emerging as categories that are not merely descriptive but semiotically loaded (Baldacchino, 2007; Connell, 2013). These representations shape expectations of institutional capacity and academic legitimacy. Within the education contexts in an island setting, the modest scale of campuses, the proximity between faculty and students, and the visibility of resource constraints can be read as signs of marginality through a mainland-focused, mainstream, or canonical viewpoint. Yet semiotically, these same features may also signify intimacy, attachment, accountability, and relational pedagogy. Relations and culture, in general, in island teaching are close-knit. Therefore, semiotically speaking, the island teacher and students engage in more intimate relational dynamics driven by warmth, care, and a strong sense of belonging and community. Thus, island teaching operates within a contested symbolic space as it is seemingly interpreted simultaneously as deficit and as distinctiveness, or as limitation and as groundedness.

Material conditions in island and rural education further shape the semiotic character of pedagogy. In contexts where internet connectivity is unstable and institutional funding is limited, printed modules, photocopied readings, and handwritten annotations often remain central and are "prized" possessions in instructional practice. Rather than being merely compensatory tools, these material artefacts acquire heightened symbolic

weight, close enough to the mind and soul of the island teacher. A carefully prepared printed module may signal reliability, care, and pedagogical commitment, and detailed handwritten feedback may function as a sign of presence, attentiveness, commitment, and compassion in environments where digital immediacy is not guaranteed. From a semiotic perspective, scarcity reshapes the hierarchy of signs in that what might be considered outdated elsewhere (e.g., printed modules are no longer the practice in mainstream universities in big cities) remains meaningful, valuable, and emotionally charged within the island context (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005). These practices construct a pedagogy of relationality, where teaching is not only the transmission of information but also the visible enactment of care, commitment, and dedication to the craft (Noddings, 2013).

Moreover, semiotics illuminates how island teachers navigate the interplay between global academic discourses and local knowledge systems. Curricula, citation practices, and research agendas often reflect metropolitan, canonical epistemologies, signalling alignment with international standards and the legitimacy of scholarly publications. However, island educators may embed local histories, vernacular narratives, and unique cultural habits, rituals, and community issues into their teaching, producing seemingly hybrid pedagogical texts that negotiate between where the centre is and where the periphery is. At times, these locally grounded knowledges may also come into tension with dominant international scholarly frameworks. In this sense, island pedagogy becomes a site of semiotic translation and re-interpretation, where global symbols of academic authority intersect with locally grounded meanings and significations (Hall, 1997). By reading teaching as a layered system of signs (textual, spatial, material, or affective), semiotics provides a rigorous framework for understanding how island educators construct authority, express care and compassion, and contest power and marginality within the everyday practices of island educators operating in peripheral margins.

Power, Authority, and Institutional Discourse

Power in higher education does not reside solely in formal leadership or policy documents; it permeates discourses that define what counts as legitimate knowledge, credible scholarship, and acceptable pedagogy (Foucault, 1977, 1980), and what counts as "good" or "effective" teaching. Institutional authority is exercised through curriculum frameworks, accreditation mechanisms, quality assurance systems, and audit cultures that promote particular standards of excellence while seemingly marginalising others (Ball, 2012). In island institutions, these aspects that define accountability are rarely locally generated; rather, they are frequently shaped by national agencies or ministries that create educational policies, establish international ranking systems, and uphold global education benchmarks that position peripheral institutions within hierarchies of comparison, at times viewed as deficient, marginalised or inferior (Shore & Wright, 2015; Baldacchino, 2010). As a result, pedagogical practice becomes entangled with broader governmental frameworks, where teaching is evaluated not for its relational, situational, cultural and intellectual value and unique positioning, but for its measurable outputs, documentation, and compliance with external, national or international norms.

These dynamics are intensified by neoliberal transformations in higher education, which recast universities as competitive, globalised, and performance-driven enterprises

(Giroux, 2014; Shore & Wright, 2015). Discourses of internationalisation, digitisation, efficiency, and productivity are viewed in peripheral contexts as seemingly universal imperatives, yet they often carry assumptions rooted in mainstream perspectives and resource abundance, putting island universities in relatively difficult marginal situations. For instance, for island educators, such discourses may create a dissonance between policy rhetoric and lived realities. The demand to integrate sophisticated digital platforms, produce internationally indexed research, or align teaching with global competencies can obscure the infrastructural fragilities and sociocultural specificities of island settings, such as intermittent and unstable internet connectivity, power outages, limited transportation routes dependent on weather conditions, and restricted access to libraries and laboratories for the production of knowledge, not to mention the strong kinship networks that shape institutional decision-making, multilingual classroom dynamics, unique cultural habits and rituals, and deeply embedded community expectations that pervade the local culture of island teaching. Thus, power in island teaching operates discursively: it frames what is desirable, modern, or progressive as core to teaching, while subtly positioning local adaptations and unique processes as deficiencies rather than contextually intelligent, agentive, and impactful responses. Unfortunately, the very people holding institutional power, who resonate with the uniqueness and the challenges of island teaching, are contributing to these unfair power dynamics that keep pushing the island teacher to the periphery, depriving them of the capacity for enhanced agency, autonomy, and voice.

At the level of everyday practice, however, power and authority are negotiated in more intimate and contingent ways. Research informed by critical pedagogy demonstrates that teachers are not passive recipients of institutional power; rather, they interpret, resist, and reconfigure it through the decisions they make in the classroom (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988). Choices about how strictly to adhere to standardised syllabi, whether to modify assessment timelines in response to typhoons or transportation disruptions, or how to balance formal grading criteria that are deeply influenced by standard deviation with constructive, compassionate feedback, reveal the moral and relational dimensions of power and authority. Feedback practices, in particular, become sites where evaluative judgment intersects with care and compassion, which are emotions emerging from the strong kinship in localised island settings, e.g., the island teacher following a context-sensitive assessment grounded in student precarity in response to socio-economic hardships (e.g., students would rather sail out to sea for food instead of going to campus because the need for survival is a more important priority than schooling and a university degree). In marginal settings, the authority to grade may be tempered by a recognition of shared vulnerability, thereby constructing what might be described as the moral compass of teaching, one that privileges relational accountability and communal spirit and survival over bureaucratic rigidity constituted by national and international curriculum standards that, at times, dehumanise the learner.

Institutional discourses also shape teacher identity, positioning island educators within narratives of legitimacy and marginality. Through performance appraisals, research expectations, and promotion criteria, institutions codify particular models of the "ideal academic", one that is often aligned with research-intensive norms (Ball, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015). Island teachers may therefore experience a tension between institutionalised

ideals of efficiency, effectiveness, and research productivity and their lived commitments to intensive teaching, community or civic engagement, and cultural relations. Yet this tension is not merely restrictive and limiting the island teacher's capacities; it can also generate critical awareness. By recognising how authority is structured through discourse, island educators may carve out spaces of pedagogical autonomy, asserting locally grounded knowledge and relational forms of expertise as valid, legitimate, and necessary. Discourse here, in its Foucauldian sense, affirms that it is a system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge and meaning. In this sense, if island teachers strengthen the resolve to carve out spaces of pedagogical autonomy, asserting locally grounded knowledge and relational forms of expertise produced and reproduced through shared island practices, then power is not constraining but productive as it affords possibilities within which island teachers negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes subtly transform institutional expectations to fit their unique needs, and the needs of students.

Marginality, Islandness, and Teacher Identity

The concepts of marginality and islandness are central to understanding teacher identity in peripheral contexts, as educators working within island institutions continuously negotiate between externally imposed representations of "smallness" or limitations, and internally cultivated narratives of resilience, relationality, and sense of belonging.

Marginality has been theorised not only as exclusion but as a productive space where alternative epistemologies and pedagogies emerge. Island studies emphasise "islandness" as a condition marked by boundedness, interdependence, and heightened awareness of limitations. For island teachers, this can foster a strong identification with students' struggles, dreams, and aspirations. For instance, empirical studies of teachers in remote contexts in the Philippines describe a deep, intertwined relationship between professional and personal identities. Teaching diaries, reflective journals, and informal logs often reveal a philosophy of teaching grounded in *serbisyo* (service), *malasakit* (care or compassion), *tiyaga* (perseverance), and *lakas ng loob* (inner will or courage), values that resonate strongly with broader Filipino cultural, psychological, and ethical frameworks (Enriquez, 1992; Mercado, 1974). These dispositions are enacted through everyday pedagogical choices illustrated in extended deadlines of assignments due to ferry/boat cancellations and illness, modified assessments after typhoons and flooding, or blending Western theories of civic education with locally grounded examples drawn from fishing, farming or agriculture, healthcare provision for people in the mountains and islets, and poverty or labour narratives.

Marginality has long been used to describe how teachers working in "peripheral" sites considered as rural, minority, or politically and economically de-centred systems experience their professional selves as shaped through unequal relations of recognition, resources, autonomy and voice. Across teacher-identity scholarship, identity is understood as dynamic, relational, and continuously negotiated and contested within power-laden contexts rather than a stable attribute of individuals (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Day & Kington, 2008). Policy and accountability regimes can intensify marginality by positioning island teachers as implementers of externally defined "quality" and "standards," often narrowing professional agency and redefining professionalism through managerial logics (Sachs, 2005). In peripheral settings, these pressures can be felt more sharply because

teachers frequently work closer to the edge of the systems, where staffing, specialist knowledge provisions, and professional learning or development opportunities are thinner or scarcer, making identity work inseparable from questions of access, status, and legitimacy (Crossley, 2014; Varghese et al., 2005).

Islandness adds a distinctive spatial-cultural layer to marginality because it suggests not only geographic separation but also an experiential condition produced through mobility constraints, strong social bonds, and a constant comparison to mainland, national, and mainstream norms. Contemporary islandness literature emphasises that islandness is contested and politically charged in that islands are routinely represented from the outside as "small," "limited," or "isolated," even if island scholarship cautions against essentialising or reducing islands to vulnerability or deficiency narratives (Foley, 2023; Nimführ, 2020). Relational and connectivity-oriented accounts further show that islandness is co-constituted through networks, flows, and infrastructural ties, complicating the seemingly simplistic centre–periphery binaries (Grydehøj & Casagrande, 2020). For example, in postcolonial and Indigenous Pacific thought, the reframing of Oceania as a "sea of islands" directly challenges deficit imaginaries by foregrounding mobility, interdependence, and expansive place-based identity, which is an intellectual move that is highly generative for thinking about education and teacher identity beyond "smallness" and "deficiency-driven" framing (Hauʻofa, 1994).

When these strands meet, teacher identity in island institutions can be read as a space of an ongoing negotiation between externally imposed representations of limitation and internally cultivated narratives of resilience, relationality, and belonging. Teachers' professional selves or identities are formed in interaction with community expectations and the "intimacy" of island social life, where visibility is high and professional, and personal and civic roles are often overlapping conditions that can intensify both support and surveillance. Empirical work on remote island teachers' professional learning, for example, highlights how island educators develop identity through place-based practice and collegial networks that counter isolation while also reflecting the realities of small, and at times, vulnerable professional communities (Dick & Burns, 2022). In Indonesia, for example, island-context teacher-identity studies point to identity formations grounded in moral service to community alongside tensions produced by changing policy, technology, and generational shifts (Taopan et al., 2026). Here, marginality is not only experienced as a disadvantage but is also reworked through locally meaningful commitments to place-making, social responsibility, and collegial professionalism.

A useful synthesis is to conceptualise island teacher identity as dialogic and place-oriented in that teachers position themselves across multiple "voices" (e.g., policy, community, nation, profession, and islandness), sometimes aligning with deficit discourses and sometimes actively resisting them through narratives of competence, care, and local or indigenous expertise (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Foley, 2023). This lens also clarifies why island teachers may simultaneously seek outward mobility (e.g., pursuing credentials, networks, excellence, and outsider recognition) and deepen inward belonging (e.g., community embeddedness, linguistic/cultural continuity, and stewardship of place). This suggests moving beyond treating islands as merely "remote sites" and instead analysing how islandness is produced through everyday educational relations that drive conversations

as to who defines quality, whose knowledge counts, and how teachers convert structural constraints into situated forms of autonomy, agency and resilience (Crossley, 2014; Nimführ, 2020). In conclusion, marginality and islandness are central to the creation of teacher identity, not because they predetermine teacher identity, but because they structure the representational and material conditions through which teachers in peripheral island contexts must continually rewrite or re-author who they are, how they think about the world, and what teaching means to them.

Research Questions

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

1. What do pedagogical signs, symbols, artefacts, and practices of an island teacher reveal about underlying values, beliefs and assumptions of teaching in a remote island context?
2. How does a teacher, teaching on a remote island, experience and view teaching or the life of a teacher through the lens of semiotics, power, and marginality?
3. How does the intertwined relationship of institutional power and local practices, constraints, and culture shape the island teacher's professional identity, sense of self, belonging, and becoming?

Methodology

This study adopts a phenomenological, interpretivist, and critical approach that focuses on describing and analysing the lived experience of one island teacher who is confronted with the entangled forces of power and politics of an institution and is faced with the reality about how he finds meaning in his teaching craft while living at the margins.

Research Paradigms

This study is a deeply qualitative inquiry situated within phenomenological, interpretivist, and critical paradigms. The study foregrounds lived experience, meaning-making, and power dynamics that an island teacher deals with in his institutional context. For an island teacher, this means treating place, isolation, and marginality not as background variables but as constitutive of grounded experience. Phenomenology (to understand lived experience, and the dialogue of the self with the world), critical pedagogy (to examine power dynamics), semiotics (to read meaning in practices, spaces, and language), and postcolonial or island studies perspectives (to situate and problematise marginality) constitute the study's entangled frames of reference, explaining how power, lived experience, discourse, and meaning are understood, and why these lenses are appropriate for studying teaching at the margins.

Phenomenology centres on the framework of lived experience, i.e., how reality is perceived, felt, and made meaningful from the first-person point of view (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; van Manen, 1990). In studying the life of a teacher on an island, phenomenology seeks to bracket abstract assumptions and instead attend closely to the rhythms and struggles of daily life: the embodied experience of crossing rough seas to reach the school campus, the emotional weight of teaching big cohorts of students, the solitude of academic work in geographically isolated spaces, and the intimate relationships formed

within close-knit communities (Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1990). Rather than reducing island teaching to institutional metrics, policy categories or statistics, this framework privileges voice, memory, temporality, and affect, illuminating how meaning is constituted through everyday encounters with students, colleagues, communities and geographical landscape (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). It allows the study to capture not just what the teacher does, but how teaching at the margins is experienced as both vocation and belonging, as well as burden and resistance.

Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, interrogates how education is shaped by power relations, ideology, and structural inequalities (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2015). Applied to an island teaching context, it examines how global academic hierarchies, top-down international standards, funding disparities, teaching methodologies, and linguistic norms may marginalise peripheral institutions and their educators (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988). It asks whose knowledge counts, whose voices are amplified or silenced, and how teachers navigate or challenge systems that position them as "less than" their mainland or mainstream counterparts (McLaren, 2015). Through this lens, the island teacher is not merely an instructor but a critical agent negotiating authority, scarcity, civic or community expectations, and institutional constraints. Critical pedagogy reveals how teaching at the margins can become a site of conscientization where educators and students alike develop critical awareness of their socio-economic, sociocultural and geopolitical positioning, and potentially transform silence or discomfort into agency (Freire, 1970).

Furthermore, the employment of semiotics will help examine how meaning is produced and communicated through signs, symbols, rituals, habits, and spaces of interactions (Chandler, 2017; Peirce, 1958; Saussure, 2011). In the context of island teaching, this framework moves beyond spoken discourse to interpret the symbolic dimensions of academic life illustrated through the modest campus buildings facing the oceans or the mountains, the multilingual codes used in the classrooms, the teacher's syllabi, lesson plans and other teaching materials, ceremonial practices and rituals of the institution, the layout of offices, even the weather-worn textbooks passed from cohort to cohort (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017). Each of these elements functions as a sign within a broader system of social, cultural and institutional meaning-making (Saussure, 2011). Semiotics allows the study to uncover how marginality, resilience, power, authority, and aspirations are encoded in everyday practices of the teacher and in their material environments. It reveals how the island itself becomes a powerful signifier shaping identity, shaping pedagogy, and shaping reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) (Barthes, 1972).

Lastly, postcolonial and island studies perspectives situate the island university within histories of colonialism, economic dependency, geographic isolation, and centre–periphery relations (Bhabha, 1994; Baldacchino, 2007; Said, 1978). These frameworks challenge the notion that islands are merely remote or deficient spaces; instead, they examine how marginality is historically constructed through political, cultural, and epistemic discourses of domination (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). For a teacher teaching on an island, this lens illuminates how curricula, language policies, research agendas, and academic standards may still reflect colonial inheritances or innuendos, or top-down, mainland-centred paradigms (Bhabha, 1994). At the same time, island studies foreground the distinctiveness of island ecologies, relationality, and community interdependence,

reframing insularity not as a limitation but as a unique site of knowledge creation and knowledge production (Baldacchino, 2007; Connell, 2013). Together, these perspectives explain why teaching at the margins must be understood within broader global power structures while recognising the island as a dynamic, meaning-making space in its own right, with the scholars persistently reminding themselves to avoid looking at marginality as a deficiency.

Research Participant

Teacher "Ron" grew up in a coastal town east of Maripipi, an islet municipality within the territorial map of the island of Biliran. The Pacific Ocean that surrounds his town shaped both his livelihood and his imagination, and this unique geography and space continue to help him frame his life as an island educator. Graduating from college in the early 2000s, his entry into the world of teaching was driven by a belief that his success through education could disrupt the vicious cycle of marginality similar to those he once inhabited and experienced as a college student. He believed that his life and the life of his family would eventually move away from the margins through his job at one of the prominent educational institutions in mainland Naval, the capital of Biliran, an island province. Yet, similar to his life as an undergraduate student, his everyday life as a teacher is continually marked by persistent struggle represented in transient living, intermittent electricity and water supply, unstable internet, limited access to books and research materials, minimum wage for entry-level teachers, heavy teaching workload, epistemic injustice, and the geographical isolation that makes professional development opportunities seemingly feel distant and difficult to achieve. "It's hard to leave teaching and pursue a graduate scholarship elsewhere. I will lose my bread and butter, which is teaching. It's a gamble to make, and I am not prepared to do it when my parents and siblings depend on me for survival," he expressed during a casual interview. These material and professional constraints are compounded by the painful realities of island life itself, i.e., those boats that do not arrive on time, unpredictable weather that dictates ferry schedules, instant storms that disrupt sea and land travel, typhoons that destroy shelters, roads, and livelihood, and a constant negotiation between personal survival, professional growth, and institutional demands. Teaching, for Teacher Ron, is not only a pedagogical or rhetorical act driven by the intent to influence minds; it is an exercise in endurance, improvisation, initiative, resourcefulness, and a quiet dedication and commitment within those challenging conditions that rarely recognise his emotional and physical labour just so he could show up in his classroom to teach his students. "So much sacrifice is made, yet one remains unseen", he expressed.

Within the school in which he works, Teacher Ron navigates disabling power relations and entrenched politics that often silence new teachers like himself. Decisions are centralised, voices are unevenly heard, and academic worth is frequently measured by standards imported from national benchmarks created by the central agencies of education (e.g., the Department of Education or DepEd), rendering his context, work, and professional identity peripheral. He learns to speak with caution, to comply without question, and to carry dissent in silent colloquy because he is aware that resistance can jeopardise his stability and tenure in a place where employment options are not only scarce but deeply political.

Still, Teacher Ron holds tightly to his aspirations: to become a scholar whose work speaks from, rather than about, the margins; to teach students that their being "islanders" or their "island" experiences are sources of legitimate knowledge grounded in the realities of life, not deficits or disadvantages. These hopes are sustained quietly in his language and embodied morals, in his lesson plans shaped with care and nuanced attention to island life, in his moments of shared recognition of excellence with students, and in his deliberate silence, which does not suggest emptiness but is a strategy to speak one's worth and truth. In this silence, Teacher Ron preserves meaning, dignity, and the belief that teaching, even at the margins, can be an act of slow and patient transformation. "Out here, teaching is learning how to speak because we have an important thing to say, or to remain silent and face our own battles head on, still believing that the craft of teaching matters, that even in silence, and at times, being unseen, something valuable is worth fighting for, and that is to teach students how to navigate the world around them, and the world beyond, so that they become productive and useful citizens of the communities in which they will soon serve," he shared. "But when I have the chance to speak, either in the classroom or outside, or whether speaking as an educator or as a member of an administrative team, I will speak so that my students and other people can hear my views. I have learned to use my voice", he added.

Researcher Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Research reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher is never a neutral instrument but an active participant in the interpretation of data and the production of knowledge. It requires sustained critical self-examination of how personal history, values, assumptions, emotional responses, and even silences shape the framing of research questions, the interpretation of participants' narratives, and the representation of participants' voices. In studies of marginality or islandness, reflexivity becomes methodological rather than merely reflective; it is woven into the research process itself. As researchers, we continually interrogate how moments of empathy, discomfort, identification, or distance influence what is emphasised, what is softened, and what remains unspoken in the lived experience of our participant, the island teacher, Teacher "Ron". Reflexivity demands attentiveness to the ethical, social, and political dimensions of interpretation by recognising the possibility that how stories are told can either reproduce dominant hierarchies or create a space for counter-narratives to emerge.

Researcher positionality extends this reflexive stance by situating ourselves, as researchers, within specific social, cultural, institutional, and geopolitical situations that shape the island teacher's views and perspectives of teaching and of life in general. In this study, our long-term residence on the island, where both of us lived for most of our lives and spent a significant time of our professional careers, places us in a position of deep familiarity with the teaching context, enabling us to understand the views and sentiments of the research participant, Teacher Ron. We understand not only the geography and conditions of island life, but also the subtle cultural codes, educational constraints, and unspoken struggles and expectations that shape the work of a remote teacher in this unique setting. This insider experience allows us to interpret narratives with nuance and sensitivity, while also recognising the taken-for-granted realities that an external (or outsider)

researcher might overlook. At the same time, we remain critically aware that familiarity does not eliminate bias; rather, it requires heightened reflexivity to ensure that shared history and narratives with the participant enhance our intimacy with the study and strengthen our analysis and depth of interpretation. Articulating this positionality clarifies the relational dynamics through which knowledge is co-constructed and makes transparent the interpretive lens in which marginal lives or islandness, as a core concept and phenomenon in this study, is understood, represented, and interpreted with care driven by trustworthiness, reliability, and credibility.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in this study were grounded in care, reflexivity, and the protection of a participant situated within a small and rural institutional context. The research involved a single adult participant imbued with maturity, agency and intelligence; nonetheless, ethical rigour was strictly observed throughout the data gathering process. Informed consent was obtained from Teacher Ron through an ongoing process of conversation rather than a one-time procedure, ensuring that he had full agency over his participation, his narratives, his stories, his ideas, and his representations through the pedagogical materials he shared during our interactions with him, and through the casual interview we conducted with him. The interview was informal and relaxed, mimicking the naturalness and spontaneity of how people talk in natural settings. Attention was given to confidentiality and anonymity, recognising the heightened risk of identification in an island education system where communities are close-knit and institutional power is concentrated at the top. A pseudonym was used, hence Teacher "Ron", and careful narrative selection from the casual interview was employed to prevent potential harm or professional repercussions. Beyond procedural ethics, this study prioritised relationality and respect to human dignity by honouring silence in conversations, sharing the written manuscript with Teacher Ron to seek his thoughts and feedback, and allowing revision of it at any stage with his knowledge, agreement, and consent. In this way, Teacher Ron's dignity as a participant and a human being was fully respected, illustrating that ethics functioned not merely as compliance but as a sustained commitment to fairness, openness, and honesty in studying a teacher's lived experience at the margins, and in capturing his worldviews about teaching and the world.

Data Gathering Procedures and Analysis Frameworks

The data analysed for this study were generated through a casual interview and a deck of teaching artefacts (1 course guide or syllabi of a course that Teacher Ron is teaching, and 2 lesson plans with his notes and annotations). A thematic analysis was conducted for his narratives from the casual interview, and a document analysis was conducted for his teaching artefacts.

Casual Interviews

Casual interviews are conversational exchanges that allow researchers to explore participants' meanings and interpretations in ways that remain open, flexible, respectful, and responsive to context, particularly within qualitative and hermeneutic inquiry (Anderson, 2014). Rather than following a rigid structure, such interviews encourage

dialogue in which experiences, reflections, and interpretations emerge through natural conversations. In this study, the interview (Appendix A) was conducted on Zoom, considering the different geographical locations between the researchers and Teacher Ron.

In a relaxed discussion with Teacher Ron, we asked how he experiences life as a teacher on an island. He described island teaching as both demanding and deeply meaningful, shaped by geographical isolation, limited resources, unpredictable weather conditions, and the close-knit relationships within the community, but he was appreciative of the beauty of the natural scenery of the island, away from polluted cities and the chaos of the world. According to him, teaching in this context requires patience and adaptability because students' lives are closely tied to the unique problems and challenges of island life, embodied in fishing, farming, family responsibilities, and hard labour due to poverty that interrupts regular schooling. Yet he emphasised that these same conditions cultivate a strong sense of connection among teachers, students, and the community, allowing learning to draw directly from what the island life offers. "My students are warm and hospitable… Very accommodating when you visit them at their homes to know how they are doing and coping with life. Despite the dearth in life, they will do their best to show you genuine hospitality through a decent meal," Teacher Ron shared during the interview.

The interview with Teacher Ron offers a nuanced, reflexive account of teaching within the constraints of an island context, foregrounding tensions between institutional mandates and pedagogical autonomy. He describes how top-down curricular shifts, such as the abrupt introduction of hybrid teaching modalities (online, distance e-learning), required him to compress and reconfigure his lessons within limited on-site and online timeframes, often without sufficient institutional readiness or clarity. This reveals a teaching practice shaped not only by pedagogical intentions but also by structural uncertainties and policy-driven demands. At the same time, Teacher Ron reflects on students' varied learning differences and conditions, including difficulties with reading, critical analysis, and writing, which he must continually navigate and address in his classroom instruction. His emphasis on maintaining the relevance of legitimate, ethical journalism, especially in contrast to unregulated social media, further highlights his commitment to critical literacy and disciplinary integrity. Taken together, the interview serves as a crucial conversation that exposes the lived realities of Teacher Ron and his students beyond the syllabus and lesson plans, illustrating how teacher agency is exercised through negotiation, adaptation, and principled decision-making in a context marked by institutional pressures and learning challenges.

Thematic Analysis and Coding

Our sensemaking of textual data, i.e., narrative data from the casual interview, was guided by the principles of thematic analysis. As a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), thematic analysis requires qualitative researchers to code, a process of assigning value to a foundational text of words, an interaction, description, speech, narration, or conversation (Anderson, 2014). Coding invites researchers to engage in a tedious process of reading, rereading, and explicating narrative texts so that concepts, patterns, themes, and even anomalies will come to the fore. Such concepts and themes can be broken down into subthemes, or they can be brought to a higher level of categorisation by

coalescing them and creating overarching thematic concerns or splitting them up to see how subthemes can emerge. Anderson (2014) and Lindlof and Taylor (2011) called this process axial coding, in which researchers dig deep into textual data, make further categorizations of subthemes emerging from the narrative data, build connections, break down core themes into more specific and interconnected categories, find revealing patterns of thought, capture illuminating insights, and decide which major themes warrant a space in the analysis. Before the coding began, transcription of the interview was conducted with the help of free software called Otter AI and TurboScribe.

Thematic analysis of Teacher Ron's narrative data from the casual interview involved a careful, iterative reading of transcripts to identify recurring meanings embedded in his descriptions of teaching, his views and beliefs of teaching, and his everyday classroom interactions. We first conducted close readings of the interview responses, marking phrases that captured concrete moments such as Teacher Ron describing students arriving late or being absent in class after a strong typhoon, or his use of authentic day-to-day public conversations or field interviews as valuable conversations to explain public communication and journalism concepts. For instance, from Teacher Ron's narrative accounts, initial codes such as weather-induced disruption, precarity of attendance, students' socioeconomic scarcity, place-based pedagogy, everyday communicative practices, and contextualised meaning-making emerged, reflecting how teaching is continuously shaped by environmental contingencies and the integration of lived experiences into disciplinary learning.

One recurring pattern emerged from the interview narratives: students' prolonged absence after severe weather disruptions. In the interview, Teacher Ron explained that after a strong typhoon, several students from poorer coastal households or mountainous areas of the island were absent for weeks because their families needed them to help repair damaged homes, rebuild fishing boats, or recover crops and vegetation destroyed by flooding. This observation was coded as post-disaster absence and family livelihood responsibility, which were later grouped under the broader theme "Teaching within the Vulnerabilities of Island Life". A sub-theme, "Livelihood and Labour Before Schooling", became particularly visible when Teacher Ron recounted how one student returned to class nearly two weeks after a typhoon and quietly explained that he had been helping his father repair nets and salvage materials from their damaged house, although he was developing an awareness that some students were somehow "sensationalising" the struggles after a natural calamity to explain their absence. However, these absences were not simply matters of disengagement but were deeply tied to the socioeconomic fragility of island households, illustrating how natural calamities that are detrimental to human life and livelihood reshape educational participation and classroom engagement.

Teaching Artefacts

Part of Teacher Ron's weekly activities is to carefully assemble a body of teaching artefacts that have so much bearing on his sense of place as well as his pedagogical aims. Teacher Ron's syllabus functions as a highly structured yet contextually responsive pedagogical blueprint that foregrounds both disciplinary rigour and situated learning. The course explicitly aligns institutional, program, and course outcomes with broader civic and ethical

objectives, requiring students to "critically analyse school, local, and global social issues" and to produce journalistic outputs that meet "global standards of excellence" while remaining anchored in community realities, e.g., Biliran not having a legitimate media agency, such that the people rely on Facebook (e.g., Facebook pages about Biliran) with dubious and suspicious identification and intent. This dual emphasis reveals that the artefact is not merely a content guide but a curricular articulation of epistemic and epistemological priorities, namely: the cultivation of critical literacy, ethical reasoning, and socially conscious or civic-driven communication. The weekly breakdown of intended learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment tasks demonstrates a deliberate scaffolding of competencies, moving from foundational knowledge (e.g., journalism history, RA 7079, communication ethics) to applied knowledge production (e.g., news writing or feature articles about the way of life of the people of Biliran, about heritage sites, about public communication strategies, or about eco-tourism businesses and local industries). Importantly, the integration of AI ethics, local journalism cases, and local contexts (e.g., analysis of campus issues, field observations, and interviews with people of Biliran) signals a pedagogical commitment to bridging global discourses with local idiosyncrasies and realities. As such, the syllabus becomes a key artefact for addressing the study's research questions, particularly in illuminating how teacher cognition and expertise translate into curricular design that mediates between institutional mandates and the socio-cultural demands of teaching on an island.

Complementing the syllabus, Teacher Ron's lesson structures operationalise these curricular intentions through highly interactive, practice-oriented, and multimodal learning experiences. The artefacts reveal a consistent pattern of experiential pedagogy in that students engage in mock editorial board meetings, guided debates, storyboarding workshops, and field visits and interviews, all of which simulate authentic journalistic practices. Assessment is likewise embedded within these activities, with outputs such as draft and final articles, peer critiques, and oral presentations reflecting a performance-based orientation rather than reliance on traditional written examinations alone. Notably, the lesson design accommodates hybrid modalities (onsite and online/offline tasks), including LMS-based drafting and reflective blogging using internet technology, which suggests an adaptive response to institutional and technological constraints. This is further reinforced by the inclusion of self-assessment checklists, iterative writing processes, and reflective journaling, emphasising self-reflexivity and learner autonomy. In relation to the study's aims, these teaching artefacts provide critical insight into how pedagogical practices are enacted under conditions of constraint and transition, revealing the teacher's negotiation between prescribed curriculum structures and the lived realities of students and of himself. Consequently, the lesson artefacts are not only instructional tools but also empirical evidence of how teaching is dynamically shaped by context, thereby directly informing the investigation of teacher agency, pedagogical adaptation, and the material conditions of classroom practice.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting documents to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge about a research

problem (Bowen, 2009). In qualitative research, documents such as journals, reports, artefacts, and written records are carefully examined and coded so that patterns and themes can be identified alongside other sources of data. Document analysis was used to examine Teacher Ron's syllabus and lesson plans as records of his pedagogical life on the island, complementing the thematic analysis by grounding interpretation in concrete written or material evidence. Document analysis treated these artefacts not merely as instructional guides but as texts that encode pedagogical intentions, institutional expectations, contextual adaptations, and self-reflections. Through close reading, attention was given to the organisation of course outcomes, learning activities, assessment structures, and modality choices (e.g., onsite, online, offline), in order to identify recurring patterns, emphasis, critical points and tensions within the documents. The analysis focused on how these artefacts signify broader meanings about teaching in an island context, particularly how global standards, disciplinary norms, and local realities are negotiated within curricular design and students' needs and grounded realities. By examining both explicit elements (such as stated objectives and tasks) and implicit dimensions (such as assumptions about learners, access, and resources), document analysis enabled a deeper understanding of how pedagogy is structured, mediated, interpreted and enacted under conditions of constraint, thereby directly informing the study's inquiry into power, practice, marginality, and meaning in island teaching.

For instance, our document analysis of Teacher Ron's syllabus and lesson plans revealed how marginality is not simply a physical backdrop that allows us to juxtapose with mainland regions of the Philippines, but is something inscribed within the very structure of pedagogical design. The coexistence of global curricular demands and locally adapted practices, such as hybrid modalities, field-based tasks, and flexible assessment, signals how teaching is continually negotiated within conditions of resource constraint, geographic distance or isolation, and the institutional pressure to meet the standards of the mainstream education system in the country. In this sense, marginality emerges as both a limiting condition and a productive space, shaping how teaching is imagined, organised, and enacted on the island that deeply foregrounds the lived realities of both teachers and students.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study by examining how Teacher Ron's lived experiences illuminate the complex interplay between institutional power, local practices, and the realities of teaching in a remote island context. Through a phenomenological and semiotic lens, the analysis reveals how pedagogical practices, constraints, and everyday encounters function as sites where meaning, identity, becoming, authority, and peripherality are continuously embodied, negotiated and contested. The discussion further interprets these findings through critical and postcolonial perspectives, highlighting how teaching at the margins becomes both a constrained and transformative practice.

Marginality Is Adaptability, Initiative and Resourcefulness in Response to Scarcity

Marginality in Teacher Ron's narratives is not reducible to physical remoteness or geographical isolation; rather, it emerges as a relational condition produced through

unequal proximity to institutional power, recognition, and resources. Mallach (2024) argues that peripherality must be understood not as a static geographic fact but as a condition constituted through a person's and a place's relationship to the centre, a relationship marked by uneven investment, and the discursive construction of the periphery perceived as backward, deficient, or lacking. This seems to illuminate Teacher Ron's account of teaching in an island setting, where the institution is simultaneously a source of dignity and a site of structural strain: he experiences his managerial appointment as a privilege, yet that privilege is immediately burdened by academic and administrative overload, administrative spillover, and the expectation that he compensates for resource scarcity through personal adaptability and adjustment. "It's a privilege to teach and at the same time be a part of the administration… in the sense that the administration has trust and confidence in me," Teacher Ron expressed. Yet, this recognition is immediately entangled with the burden of excess responsibilities, where he was "given other assignments… not only teaching," which he describes as "overwhelming", but that he "needs to adapt" because "it is what it is" in his context, and this seems to be the case in many other educational contexts in the Philippines. In this sense, marginality is represented through a condensed responsibility, such that the teacher becomes the mechanism through which the institution manages its own peripheral condition (e.g., the lack of faculty as a human resource; therefore, a faculty member is straddling between several roles and responsibilities), aligning with broader discussions of marginality as structured through unequal access to resources, and limited autonomy and institutional voice (Crossley, 2014; Varghese et al., 2005). The teacher becomes the site at which institutional scarcity is absorbed, negotiated, and rendered functional. The very trust that affirms Teacher Ron's institutional belonging thus becomes the mechanism through which an added labour is assigned, revealing how marginal institutions often rely on the elasticity or flexibility of individual actors to sustain themselves, for the institution.

This is precisely where the insights of Danson and de Souza (2012) become especially useful. Their framing of periphery and marginality emphasises that such peripheral regions are often subordinated not only economically but also epistemically and politically, particularly within policy and research agendas that privilege cities or city-regions over peripheral communities. Teacher Ron's narrative exemplifies this layered marginality. His teaching is shaped by a student population with highly diverse disciplinary and learning needs, by the lack of strong pedagogical scaffolding, and by the requirement that he constantly recalibrates his methods across different programs and contexts. "It was difficult at first… juggling between preparing my lesson materials and teaching different subjects with diverse student groups while acting in the role of a member of the school management team, but I was able to adjust to this reality". What this reveals is that marginality is lived as a form of ongoing pedagogical improvisation: the teacher must supply, through reflexivity, cognitive agility, and emotional labour, what the institutional structure cannot fully guarantee. His repeated insistence that he must first "learn" and "understand" his students and their backgrounds before he can teach them suggests an ethically serious aspect of pedagogy, but it also discloses how teachers in peripheral institutions are compelled to absorb systemic instability into their own bodies, minds, and practices. "You need to live with it, and to follow the mandate from the top", said Teacher Ron, "even if, at times, it's really hard, but you need to adapt and to fill the gap". Indeed, as teachers in peripheral

contexts actively negotiate and reconstruct professional identity within constrained environments, they are placed in a position to receive other institutional or administrative roles (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Day & Kington, 2008) because to them, it is the right thing to do, although at times, this puts teaching at risk.

Teacher Ron's reflections on media education through his teaching of campus journalism make this marginal condition even more visible at the level of symbolic and epistemic dimensions. Mallach (2024) notes that peripheralization is closely tied to social and political inequalities and to the way a place can be rendered less meaningful within dominant societal discourse. That claim resonates with Teacher Ron's description of an island context in which legitimate and established media institutions are weak or absent, leaving his students to be more deeply oriented toward informal and often unverifiable social media sources, the most popular of which is Facebook. The problem here is not merely technological preference; it is that the island's informational environment bears the marks and realities of marginality itself. Teacher Ron's pedagogical strategy, i.e., asking students to compare Facebook pages with "legitimate" or "established" media, with the intent of foregrounding ethics, and repeatedly teaching media literacy, functions as a form of semiotic repair. He attempted to reconstruct distinctions between truth and fabrication in a setting where the signs of institutional legitimacy are fragile and, at times, dubious. "They [his students] cannot be consuming fake news on Facebook, in which plenty of pages created about this island are suspicious. They must be able to discern by using their critical minds to question and interrogate issues and situations locally and nationally", said Teacher Ron. Marginality, then, is epistemological: it shapes what knowledge looks like, how authority is recognised, and what kinds of truths become possible in the first place. "This absence of fundamental and legitimate media institutions on the island somehow shapes how students view Facebook as a trusted platform for news, even if fake news abounds on this platform… and this is scary because when fake news persists on these social media platforms, such fake news can become the reality to many, such fake news becomes their basis for truth, and this is alarming", Teacher Ron argued.

Finally, Teacher Ron's narrative shows that marginality is also affective and temporal. It is affective in the sense that teaching on the island allows him to enjoy the fresh air and fresh food from the farms and the oceans, the beautiful scenery of Biliran mountains, hills, and the seas, and how time can slow down the pace of life, which, to him, is beneficial to mental and physical health. "Geographically speaking, I got the privilege to enjoy the scenery here, and the laidback environment here. I mean, far from pollution, we have the seas, trees, thick forests and mountains, and fresh air, so it's a bonus, you know… working here and teaching on a remote island of the country. To me, it's a blessing to be with nature." This line clearly captures how he frames the island's natural environment, offering him an aesthetic, biophilic, and affective value within his lived experience. "It is also our pride that tourists from different parts of the world are now visiting the island. They speak so highly of our local scenery, mountains, falls, and beaches here", he added with pride.

In terms of temporality, Teacher Ron describes his daily life as routine, from school to home, and from home to school, with moments of excitement occurring mainly when outsiders visit their campus, as though recognition must arrive from elsewhere (or from external visitors) before the ordinary can feel significant. This echoes Mallach's (2024)

broader argument that peripheral places are often stigmatised through their seeming isolation or distance, while Danson and de Souza (2012) remind us that peripheries are too often positioned at the edge of both development discourse and institutional attention.

In Teacher Ron's account, this produces a subtle but powerful phenomenology of the margins: life slows down, but routine becomes flattened, weather disruptions become magnified, and the work of teaching unfolds under conditions where educational continuity is vulnerable to both environmental precarity and collective habits shaped by island realities. For one, a collective habit would emerge among both faculty and students to turn their attention to protecting livelihoods, such as gathering and stocking food and drinking water as storms approach, reflecting a shared anticipation and adaptation in which survival routines temporarily take precedence over academic life. Another habit foregrounds recognition, which is felt as more meaningful when it arrives from external institutions or visitors, revealing how validation in marginal spaces is often oriented outward rather than generated from within. "If there are university events, or other people such as guests from other regions or countries visiting the university, you feel like, oh, other universities got to visit us… Why us? So, on your part, it's something new to you. And you feel proud and happy about it." This captures how recognition becomes most meaningful when it is conferred externally, rather than emerging from everyday internal validation. This orientation toward the "foreign" often stems from living at the margins of dominant economic, social and cultural flows, where external goods, knowledge or ideas, and visitors come to signify prestige, opportunity, and connection to a wider world that feels otherwise distant. Echoing how islandness is co-constructed through relational, temporal, material, and discursive conditions rather than fixed isolation (Grydehøj & Casagrande, 2020; Nimführ, 2020), what emerges from Teacher Ron's testimony seems to illustrate marginality as a multi-layered lived reality—spatial, institutional, epistemic, temporal and emotional—within which the island teacher must continually create coherence, meaning, and pedagogical focus from within structures that remain only partially enabling, because it is viewed as peripheral.

Teaching Artefacts as Signs of Care and Commitment to Community and Civic Society

The teaching artefacts shared by Teacher Ron (one course guide and two lesson plans) construct a pedagogy in which teaching on the island is not merely the delivery of content but the orchestration of signs that connect institutional aspiration, civic responsibility, media literacy, and discernment, consistent with scholarship demonstrating that pedagogical artefacts are themselves sign systems encoding institutional authority and assumptions about legitimate knowledge (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017; Kress, 2010). The campus journalism syllabus functions as a formal pedagogical sign system: its tables, learning outcomes, week-by-week sequencing of lessons, required concepts and readings, assessment tasks, assessment rubrics and institutional branding signify order, legitimacy, and accountability. As a sign, the syllabus presents teaching as structured, standards-based, and ethically regulated; its object is the formation of pre-service teachers who can write, edit, publish, and act responsibly in public discourse; and its interpretant is the understanding that good teaching in this context means aligning classroom work with institutional goals, community realities, civic-mindedness, and professional conduct, e.g., how to be an effective

adviser of a campus paper of a remote school on the island where children are less exposed to critical thinking and journalistic writing. This is especially visible in the way the syllabus links "local/global communities," "civic responsibility," "historical consciousness," and "the common good" to campus journalism outcomes, suggesting that language and media instruction on the island is imagined not as isolated skill-building but as socially oriented work.

A semiotic reading also shows that the artefact encodes power through bureaucratic and institutional symbols. The repeated placement of the school's vision, mission, policies, core values, approval signatures, official address, and logos does more than provide information; it also serves as a sign of educational authority and state-recognised legitimacy. Their object is institutional power itself, i.e., what counts as established knowledge, proper procedures, and acceptable teaching practices, and the likely interpretant for students is that learning is inseparable from compliance with the status quo, the wider academic, administrative, and national frameworks. In a remote island context, this matters because such signs can be read as compensatory: they anchor local teaching with unique needs to address, to broader systems of recognition and excellence, perhaps countering any assumption that island schooling is peripheral, lesser, or deficient, a representational tendency that island studies scholars have persistently critiqued (Baldacchino, 2007; Connell, 2013). At the same time, the syllabus does not present power as purely top-down. Its insistence on "community issues," "field immersion," "mock editorial board meetings," "campus or national education issue[s]," and the final publication of a campus paper suggests that pedagogical authority is also redistributed through participation, student voice, and public meaning-making. In that sense, the artefact reveals an underlying belief that island teaching must negotiate both institutional discipline and civic-mindedness. "So, basically, the activities that I want my students to undertake practically respond to what's really needed, what the society needs, by highlighting what the problems are, and that, of course, is the role of education to somehow give intervention on these social problems through journalism," shared Teacher Ron.

The syllabus further reveals a pragmatic, adaptive pedagogy shaped by material and geographic realities. Repeated references to onsite and online/offline modes, handwritten submission "if offline," field observation or field immersion, topic scouting within school or outside in the community, and print or online publication are all signs of a teaching practice calibrated to variable access, mobility, and infrastructure. Here, the signs are hybrid delivery modes and flexible formats; the object is continuity of learning under conditions that may not always be technologically seamless; and the interpretant is that effective island teaching depends on resilience, improvisation, initiative, and multimodal resourcefulness, resonating with research that documents how geographically fragmented and infrastructurally vulnerable island settings directly shape the conditions of teaching and learning (Akmad & Abatayo, 2024; Pinca, 2015). This suggests a core assumption of remote pedagogy: the teacher cannot rely on one stable channel of instruction, so pedagogy must remain transferable and adaptable across classroom, community, paper-based, and digital spaces. Teacher Ron, an island teacher, therefore, appears as someone who teaches at the intersection of scarcity and possibility, converting logistical limitations into a practical pedagogical design rather than treating them as mere obstacles. "That's why, sometimes, it's

a challenge for us to navigate the one-hour offline-online class… how can you, you know, squeeze your lessons for just 2-hour on-site classes, and then one hour online… But we adapt. We adjust. Sometimes, too, with weather disruptions, we really need to adapt, to be agile, and to understand that students can submit assessment tasks late because of constraints pertaining to technology, the weather, and emotional issues."

The PPT slides on media literacy complement this by translating abstract theory into vivid visual pedagogy. Slides with questions such as "Is media still relevant this time?", the "Traditional Media vs New Media" image, the "Information is Power" poster, and the word cloud centred on "media and information literacy" operate as highly accessible signs meant to arrest attention and frame learning as urgent, consequential, and important. In semiotic terms, these images are the signs; their objects are the contemporary information environment, the struggle over truth, and the social consequences of media use; and their interpretants are likely feelings of alertness, relevance, and personal and broader implications. The slide deck suggests that the island teacher values pedagogy that is not only informative but visually persuasive, such that teaching must compete with, and therefore resemble, the media ecologies students already inhabit. This implies an important underlying belief: that in a remote island setting, where formal schooling may compete with powerful informal digital influences, teaching must itself become semiotically strong, memorable, and publicly meaningful and transformative, an insight aligned with how island pedagogy functions as semiotic translation between global signs of academic authority and locally grounded meaning (Hall, 1997; Kress, 2010). As Teacher Ron shared, "At least they [my students] have a little bit of discernment… distinguishing what's really fake news and inauthentic information… some are literate enough in assessing what's really authentic information that they have to share, that they have to process, and then what's not to share… but there are students who don't seem to scrutinise information. It's scary and shameful when they share fake news on social media if they are actually aspiring educators, so I keep warning them. They must be in the know".

The slides also make power visible by teaching students to read media as constructed, contested, and ideological. The five core concepts illustrated in the slide deck, such as media messages are constructed, use of a unique language, information is interpreted differently, media embeds values and points of view, and media are often driven by profitable motives, are themselves pedagogical signs of suspicion and inquiry. Their object is the hidden architecture of media and power constitutive of authorship, technique, selective representation, manipulation, ideology, and economic motive. The intended interpretant is that students should no longer consume messages innocently but interrogate who created them, for whom, and to what end. This becomes especially significant when the slide deck moves to "issues in media literacy" such as misinformation, scams, racism, violence, cyberbullying, and dehumanising terminology, and when it offers practical prompts like "Press pause," "Check the source," "Think before you click", and "Can you verify?", these signs reveal a pedagogy grounded in vigilance and accountability. Teacher Ron is not simply imparting learning competencies in his campus journalism class; he is provoking learners into pursuing suspicion, critical thinking, and responsible sharing of knowledge, enacting what critical scholars have long identified as the teacher's fundamental

role in cultivating learners' capacity to interrogate dominant discourses (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988).

What is especially striking across both artefacts is how they position students as future mediators between local reality and broader publics. In the syllabus, students interview administrators, student leaders, and faculty advisers, write about campus and community issues, simulate editorial boards, produce photo essays, and publish a campus paper. In the slide deck, students are trained to question representation, bias, stereotype, omission, and emotional and psychological manipulation. As signs, these activities and questions point to journalism and media literacy as civic practices rather than merely academic exercises; their object is the preparation of learners who can speak with and for their communities; and the interpretant is that education in this island context is expected to produce not just graduates, but interpreters and critics of social and political life. This reveals a strong underlying value: teaching in a remote setting carries a representative burden. The classroom is not detached from community life; it is one of the places where the island learns to narrate itself, defend itself from distortion, and enter wider conversations. This is a relational and civic pedagogical orientation that scholars of care ethics and critical pedagogy have consistently championed (Noddings, 2013; Giroux, 2014).

At a deeper level, these pedagogical signs suggest that Teacher Ron's practice is illustrated by a belief in education as an instrument of ethical formation. The syllabus repeatedly foregrounds ethics—journalism ethics, AI ethics, ethics in sports reporting, ethics in photo manipulation, and a classroom policy centred on dignity, human rights, and zero tolerance for harassment. The slide deck similarly warns against harmful content, misinformation, disinformation, malicious intent, hate, and dehumanisation, and concludes with the principle that media education is not about "having the right answers" but "asking the right questions." In semiotic terms, ethics here is not an optional add-on; it is the object to which many signs point, whether rubrics, reflections, captions, debates, or checklists. The likely interpretant for students is that knowledge becomes meaningful only when exercised with care, restraint, and responsibility toward others. This reveals an assumption that may be especially salient in a remote island context, that is, because social worlds are often tightly interconnected, communication has immediate ethical consequences, and teaching must therefore cultivate judgment as much as skill, values deeply resonant with Filipino cultural frameworks of *serbisyo* (service), *malasakit* (compassion), and *tiyaga* (perseverance) embedded in island teaching practice (Enriquez, 1992; Mercado, 1974).

Nevertheless, on the aspect of how students view success concerning how education should shape them, or how they view education in reflection to how they view their lives and their future in retrospect to the academic journey they are treading, a unique but illuminating sign emerged: to go with the flow by living a simple life on the island. "This response came from them [his students] without hesitation or ornament… I was surprised, so I had to pause to really understand what they meant. Yet I realised how profound their response was… To live simply and be content, to speak clearly and with intent and desire to the people in the community, to use basic mathematics to count numbers well enough to sustain a small business, and to earn just enough to stand on their own feet", Teacher Ron narrated his students' honest responses shaped by a sense of place and the necessities of island life. "We don't need a lot. As long as we can sustain our local business, have food on

our tables, and can send our children to school, what is there to ask for more?" one of Teacher Ron's students declared. Success here is not imagined as ascent, but as steadiness, not accumulation, but sufficiency, not abundance in material wealth but being able to say "this is enough", echoing island scholarship that challenges deficit imaginaries by foregrounding place-based identity and the coherence of lives lived meaningfully at the margins (Hau'ofa, 1994; Foley, 2023). And listening to them, one begins to wonder what more success could possibly demand beyond a simple life that works, endures, and remains deeply meaningful and balanced.

Overall, the teaching artefacts reveal that the pedagogical signs, symbols, and practices of Teacher Ron as an island teacher signify a coherent philosophy of teaching: structured but adaptive, institutional yet community-oriented, visually engaging yet critically demanding, and deeply concerned with ethics, voice, and public discourse, as well as resonant of the aspirations of his students. The signs of official templates, modular scheduling, local immersion, print/digital hybridity, critical questioning, and anti-misinformation advocacy all point to an underlying belief that remote education must do more than just transmit curriculum; it must equip learners to navigate unequal flows of information and representation while remaining rooted in local realities, as scholars of peripheral education and locally bounded knowledge production have consistently argued (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Crossley, 2014). In that sense, these artefacts show that teaching at the margins is not marginal in intellectual ambition. Rather, it is a practice of meaning-making under constraint, where the island teacher uses pedagogical signs to assert, through a form of semiotic translation in which global symbols of academic authority intersect with locally grounded meanings (Hall, 1997; Altbach & Knight, 2007), that students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active interpreters, discerning cultural workers, and conscientious participants in civic society. More importantly, the signs also point to how students glimpse a worldview in which meaning is not chased but lived, found in sufficiency, cultural rootedness, and the simple fulfilment of a balanced and a good life on the island.

Power, Community, and Identity Are Constantly Negotiated in an Island Context

The interview with Teacher Ron reveals a professional identity that is not simply shaped by institutional structures but produced through a continuous negotiation of power, knowledge, and lived realities. From a Foucauldian perspective, teaching on the island can be understood as an enactment of disciplinary power, where institutional expectations consisting of curricula, administrative roles, and the mandate to "deliver quality education" function as forces that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and practice (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Yet Teacher Ron does not passively reproduce these structures. Instead, his identity emerges through adaptive practices that respond to diverse learners, limited resources, and shifting priorities. His lack of formal teacher training (as he disclosed during the interview) further complicates this, positioning his sense of becoming not as a linear professional trajectory but as a situated and experiential process in which authority is gradually constructed through reflection, improvisation, initiative, and responsiveness rather than simply inherited from institutional certification. This is a dynamic consistent with scholarship positioning professional identity as relational, contested, and continuously

negotiated within power-laden educational contexts (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Day & Kington, 2008; Sachs, 2005).

At the same time, institutional power is experienced as both enabling and constraining. Teacher Ron's description of teaching as a "privilege" reflects how institutions confer legitimacy, trust, and a sense of belonging, aligning with Shore and Wright's (2015) view of institutions as sites where policies are not merely implemented but lived and embodied. Being assigned multiple administrative roles beyond teaching signifies recognition and inclusion within institutional hierarchies, yet this same recognition produces overload, stress, and fragmentation, as administrative responsibilities encroach upon pedagogical time and obligations, reproducing what scholars identify as the codification of the "ideal academic" through managerial logics that narrow professional agency (Ball, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015). Thus, his professional identity is shaped through what might be called policy entanglement, where institutional expectations are not external impositions but are internalised, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in everyday practice. Belonging, in this sense, is conditional and dynamic, produced through participation in institutional life while simultaneously strained by its demands.

Local practices and cultural contexts further reconfigure the operation of power, aligning with Giroux's (2014) conception of teachers as transformative intellectuals operating in institutions of power. Teacher Ron's emphasis on immersion, community engagement, and socially responsive tasks reflects a pedagogy that seeks to bridge institutional knowledge with realities grounded in island life and local culture. By requiring students to investigate community issues, document heritage sites, or engage with local business industries, he repositions teaching as a critical space and practice that foregrounds the lived experiences of the people on the island. This suggests that his authority as a teacher is not solely derived from institutional position but from his ability to mediate between official or institutional knowledge and knowledge derived from his own observations and the lived experiences of his students. In doing so, he enacts a form of critical pedagogy that challenges the boundaries of formal education, positioning students not merely as recipients of knowledge but as participants in the production of socially and politically relevant understanding, reflecting the long-standing argument that teachers are not passive recipients of institutional power but interpret, resist, and reconfigure it through everyday practice (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988). "So, basically, the activities that I want my students to undertake must practically respond to what's really needed, what the society needs, by highlighting what the problems are… I immerse them in the field… they really have to go to local business establishments, to towns by the sea, by the river or in the mountains… and then assess the challenges being encountered by these establishments, towns or communities located in the island province… even to document heritage sites, as required in a research class I'm facilitating. For instance, one research group was able to document old Spanish houses in the town of Biliran that date back in time that perhaps the Department of Tourism in the province is not aware of. If they can tell the local tourism council about this, then this is what we mean by critical thinking, civic participation, and civic engagement, isn't it? Documenting heritage is a way of telling the public of our history, of colonisation, and how our ancestors had endured," Teacher Ron argued.

However, this mediation also reveals the limits and contestations of authority in a remote island context. The dominance of social media, e.g., Facebook, as a primary source of information among students disrupts traditional sources of knowledge, challenging the teacher's role as the primary authority. In Foucauldian terms, power is diffused and reproduced, no longer concentrated within the classroom but dispersed across digital networks and informal knowledge systems (Foucault, 1980). Teacher Ron's efforts to cultivate media literacy and critical discernment can thus be read as attempts to reassert pedagogical authority, not through control, but through fostering critical awareness through a discerning, questioning mind, operating within conditions where staffing, specialist knowledge, and professional development opportunities are thinner or scarcer than in mainstream institutions (Crossley, 2014; Varghese et al., 2005). This reflects a shift from authoritative teaching to what Giroux (2014) might describe as dialogic and critical engagement, where the teacher's role is to guide students in navigating competing discourses rather than dictating truth. In navigating Facebook as the most popular social media platform on the island, Teacher Ron still believes in some of his students who can distinguish fact from opinion. "At least some of them have that discernment… distinguishing what's really fake news and what's inauthentic information or misinformation, from what is factual information. And I believe this makes a difference."

Environmental and structural constraints further complicate how power is experienced and enacted. The frequent suspension of classes due to weather conditions, the influence of local government decisions on class suspensions, and the reliance on flexible learning modalities illustrate how authority is distributed across multiple actors and forces, mirroring how geographically fragmented and infrastructurally vulnerable island settings directly shape the conditions of teaching (Akmad & Abatayo, 2024; Pinca, 2015). As Shore and Wright (2015) argue, policy and governance are lived through everyday practices, and in this case, decisions about class suspensions, safety, and learning continuity despite weather disruptions reveal how power operates through negotiation rather than unilateral control. Teacher Ron's frustration with the normalisation of disruptions reflects an awareness of how such practices can undermine educational rigour, yet he also acknowledges the necessity of adhering to these decisions. "I could be wrong, but sometimes, class suspensions due to weather disruptions are somehow being romanticised… I feel that students are making use of this as an excuse not to go to school, and this is becoming a habit disrupting the curriculum… and many of them go to social media to post, comment and share, pressuring the local government to adhere to their call." His critical view of how students instrumentalise weather conditions to push for class suspensions, while maintaining his professional identity, is thus shaped by a constant balancing act between compliance with institutional and governmental authority, the severity of weather disruptions, and a commitment to sustaining meaningful learning, a balancing act characteristic of island educators who develop professional identity through place-based practice (Dick & Burns, 2022). "But I am aware of how storms on the island can be strong and dangerous. They really disrupt livelihoods, transport, mobility, and internet connectivity", Teacher Ron added.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, Teacher Ron's practice reflects an emerging orientation toward teaching as a site of social critique and transformation rather

than mere knowledge transmission. His emphasis on immersion, community engagement, and problem-based tasks aligns with the idea that education should be grounded in the learners' lived realities and grounded experiences and directed toward addressing inequities within those contexts. By asking students to investigate local issues, interrogate media practices, and engage with community stakeholders, he positions the classroom as a space where knowledge is co-constructed and socially consequential. This resonates with Giroux's (2014) notion of the teacher as a transformative intellectual who not only imparts skills but also cultivates critical consciousness. However, this critical orientation is not without tension. Teacher Ron must still operate within institutional constraints that prioritise outcomes, compliance, and standardisation, shaped by curriculum frameworks, accreditation mechanisms, and audit cultures (Ball, 2012), which can limit the extent to which critical pedagogy can be fully realised. For instance, the old yet pervasive English-only policy, even in remote islands of the Philippines, somehow stunts student voice and narrows their expression by forcing thought into a linguistic frame that many do not fully speak and inhabit, reproducing what postcolonial scholars identify as a colonial language hierarchy in which English as the medium of instruction carries forms of power originating from colonial history (Phillipson, 1992), preventing nuance, emotion, and cultural specificity from coming to the fore in dialogue. As a result, ideas are not only constrained in clarity and depth, but critical dialogue itself is weakened, as speakers struggle to articulate what they truly mean rather than what they can merely translate. "So, even if this policy permeates our current teaching practices, I don't stop my students from code-switching if this enables them to convey their ideas, sentiments and emotions more accurately and clearly. They need to think and speak in the language that they can fully express themselves if what we are rooting for them is authenticity, sincerity, criticality, and truth", Teacher Ron declared. Thus, his practice reflects a negotiated criticality, one that works within institutional boundaries while subtly expanding them, enabling students to question dominant narratives without entirely escaping the structures that produce those narratives, and by embodying the freedom to speak in the language they are most comfortable with.

Viewed through a postcolonial lens, Teacher Ron's experience also reveals how teaching on the island is shaped by historical and geopolitical marginality. The characterisation of the university as "in the periphery" or "at the edge of the margins" signals not only geographic isolation but also its position within broader hierarchies of knowledge production, where metropolitan or mainstream institutions are often privileged over those in remote regions. In this context, the teacher's work can be read as a form of epistemic mediation, navigating between dominant, often externally derived curricula and the local knowledge, culture, and practices of the island, navigating what postcolonial theorists describe as the conditions of precarity and vulnerability at the margins of knowledge production (Spivak, 1988; de Certeau, 1984). Teacher Ron's efforts to foreground local heritage, community practices, and provincial realities challenge the implicit hierarchy that places "central" knowledge above "peripheral" knowledge, thereby resisting what postcolonial theorists might identify as epistemic marginalisation or silencing, a resistance that is politically charged given how islands are routinely constructed within dominant discourses as "small," "limited," "deficient", or "isolated" (Baldacchino, 2007; Connell, 2013; Foley, 2023; Nimführ, 2020). At the same time, the continued reliance on institutional

standards, formal curricula, and notions of "legitimate" knowledge suggests that these hierarchies are not easily dismantled but are instead negotiated in everyday practice. Teaching, therefore, becomes a site of both reproduction and resistance, where the island teacher inhabits a liminal space, simultaneously shaped by dominant structures of power and actively working to re-centre local voices, experiences, and ways of knowing, in what island scholars describe as a reframing of peripheral identity through relational and place-based practice (Hau'ofa, 1994; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). "The localness and uniqueness of our islands, our eco-tourism sites, the food systems we produce, our livelihood, our sustainable development in a rural island context, and our cultural identity, these are all sources and systems of knowledge that enable us to reclaim local voices, experiences, and ways of knowing, and allow us to really highlight local perspectives, lived realities, and knowledge systems that should not be perceived as peripheral or marginalised", Teacher Ron strongly argued, illustrating a conviction resonant with scholarship insisting that islandness is not a fixed deficit but a co-constituted identity produced through networks, flows, and resilient local knowledge (Grydehøj & Casagrande, 2020; Crossley, 2014; Nimführ, 2020),

Teacher Ron's experience illustrates that teaching on a remote island is a process of becoming that is deeply entangled with power yet not reducible to it. His sense of self, belonging, and professional identity is forged through the interplay of institutional authority, local culture, and material and environmental constraints, resulting in a pedagogy that is both disciplined and transformative. Drawing on Foucault (1977, 1980), we see how power produces the conditions of teaching, while Giroux (2014) highlights the potential for teachers to act critically within those conditions, and Shore and Wright (2015) remind us that institutional policies are lived, negotiated, contested, reinterpreted, and embodied in practice. In this light, Teacher Ron emerges not as a passive agent of institutional power but as a situated practitioner who navigates, reshapes, and at times resists the forces that define his professional world, illuminating how islandness is produced through everyday educational relations that raise vital questions about who defines quality, whose knowledge counts, and how teachers convert structural constraints into situated forms of autonomy, agency, and resilience (Crossley, 2014; Nimführ, 2020; Dick & Burns, 2024).

Theoretical Implications

From a phenomenological perspective, this study suggests that island teaching should be understood not as an abstract professional category but as an embodied, situated, and affective experience shaped by routine, adjustment, recognition, and negotiation. Teacher Ron's narrative shows that professional identity is constituted through everyday encounters with students, administrative demands, weather disruptions, community realities, and institutional expectations, rather than through formal definitions of roles and responsibilities alone. The implication for phenomenology is that the meaning of teaching in a remote island context emerges through how the teacher lives and interprets his world: in Teacher Ron's case, teaching is experienced as privilege, burden, obligation, adaptation, and becoming all at once. This extends lived-experience scholarship by showing that teacher identity in marginal or peripheral settings is not merely personal but existentially shaped by

geography, precarity, and the constant need to make sense of competing demands, needs, and interests that permeate everyday practice.

From a semiotic perspective, the study implies that island teaching is saturated with signs that mediate power, belonging, and meaning. Institutional roles, class suspensions, media platforms, heritage sites, local industries, community immersion, and even the absence of "legitimate" media in the province all function as signs through which the teacher interprets the island, his place, and his rootedness within it. Teacher Ron's teaching practice demonstrates that pedagogy itself becomes semiotic work: students are taught to read not only texts, but the meanings embedded in local realities, community issues, misinformation, cultural assets, and institutional expectations. Theoretically, this means that semiotics in island teaching cannot be confined to symbols inside the classroom; it must include the broader ecology of signs through which teachers and students make sense of marginality, legitimacy, and local life and culture. Island teaching, therefore, expands semiotic inquiry by foregrounding how geographically remote educational contexts produce distinctive sign systems in which local culture, scarcity, and institutional authority are constantly entangled, interpreted and reconfigured.

From the standpoint of critical pedagogy and postcolonial education, the study suggests that island teaching is a deeply political practice because it involves negotiating which knowledges matter, whose realities are represented, and how education responds to life at the margins. Teacher Ron's emphasis on field immersion in different places on the island, local heritage, social media discernment, and community-responsive programs reflects a critical pedagogical orientation in which students are positioned as interrogators and interpreters of social reality rather than passive recipients of knowledge. At the same time, the island context reveals a postcolonial tension: the teacher works within institutional and curricular structures shaped by dominant, centralised notions of legitimacy, while also attempting to foreground local histories, local needs, local habits and rituals, and ways of knowing unique to the island settlers. The theoretical implication is that critical pedagogy in peripheral settings must also be postcolonial, such that it must not only question inequality, marginalisation, and power dynamics in general but also confront epistemic hierarchies that render island communities secondary to metropolitan centres, or mainstream, established sources of knowledge. Confronting epistemic hierarchies and injustices is a way of further examining how the historical legacy of colonialism continues to shape and reshape cultures, identities, knowledge, and power relations in formerly colonised societies so that students of the contemporary era can start thinking, interrogating and questioning the legitimacy of such identities, knowledges, and power relations being constantly recreated. In this sense, the study contributes to theory by showing that teaching on the island is both a critical and a decolonising act: it challenges formal educational boundaries while re-positioning and re-centring the lived realities, voices, and knowledge systems of the local community.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that teaching in remote island contexts must move beyond standardised, content-driven instruction toward a context-responsive and relational model of teaching. Teacher Ron's practice demonstrates that meaningful learning emerges when pedagogy is anchored in the lived realities of students through community

immersion, engagement with local industries, and critical examination of social and political issues in the island province. This implies that teachers working in similar contexts should design learning experiences that are not only cognitively demanding but also socially situated, rooted in local cultures and systems of knowing, allowing students to interrogate their environments and participate in knowledge production, e.g., research studies focused on heritage sites, local eco-tourism projects, and local livelihoods that are waning but are courageously sustained. At the same time, pedagogy must remain flexible and adaptive, capable of responding to infrastructural limitations, shifting modalities of teaching, and environmental disruptions such as weather-related class suspensions due to typhoons. Thus, effective teaching in such contexts requires a pedagogical stance that balances structure with improvisation and initiative, where curriculum is not rigidly delivered but dynamically reconfigured in response to local conditions, student diversity and needs, and emergent challenges.

Furthermore, the study highlights the need for pedagogy that explicitly cultivates critical literacy, ethical discernment, and student agency, particularly in relation to the pervasive influence of social media and informal, at times, suspicious knowledge systems, such as the increased reliance on Facebook for information. Teacher Ron's emphasis on helping students distinguish between authentic or factual information and misleading information points to the importance of integrating media literacy and critical inquiry across disciplines, not as supplementary skills but as core learning outcomes for students to learn how to distinguish facts from opinions, and truths from falsity. Pedagogically, this requires shifting from transmission-oriented teaching toward dialogic and reflective practices where students are encouraged to question sources, evaluate evidence, and consider the broader implications of information in their communities. In addition, the findings call for teacher education programs to better prepare educators for the realities of teaching in marginal or peripheral contexts, equipping them with the skills to navigate institutional demands while remaining responsive to local cultures and constraints. Therefore, teaching on the island must be both critically grounded and ethically oriented, aimed not only at academic achievement but at fostering learners who are capable of engaging thoughtfully and responsibly with the complex social worlds they inhabit by beginning to explore their own locality in an island setting.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations that shape the scope and depth of its findings. Most notably, the absence of direct classroom observations constrained our ability to examine more deeply how Teacher Ron's pedagogical intentions are enacted in real-time interactions with his students, including the nuances of teacher–student dynamics, embodied practices, moments of silence during classroom teaching, and spontaneous decision-making in response to contextual or conditional disruptions, incidents, and challenges in the classroom. In addition, the study relied on a casual interview and document analysis without attempting to access Teacher Ron's reflective logs, diaries or journals, which could have provided richer qualitative data and illuminating insight into his evolving beliefs, principles, dilemmas, emotions, and logic revolving around teaching on an island. As a result, the analysis captures a mediated representation of teaching practice

rather than a fully triangulated account, and future research incorporating real-life classroom observation, home visits and conversations in the teacher's home or residence, and capturing real-life, authentic reflective documentations such as journal logs or diaries, even pictures and videos about their personal lives, would offer a deeper, more substantial, more nuanced, and more comprehensive understanding of teaching in island contexts.

Conclusion

Teacher Ron's narrative reveals that teaching on the island is not merely a professional role but a process of identity forming and becoming shaped through the constant negotiation of institutional power, local realities, and material and environmental constraints. In this space, pedagogy emerges as both a disciplined practice and a creative act, where limitations are not simply endured but reworked into possibilities for meaningful, context-responsive education. This study underscores that the island teacher's identity is forged at the intersection of authority and agency, where institutional expectations, community engagement, and everyday contingencies converge to produce a form of teaching that is simultaneously constrained and transformative, a kind of teaching that repositions the classroom as a critical site for mediating knowledge, interrogating social realities, and cultivating ethical and reflective learners. In illuminating the lived experience of Teacher Ron, this study suggests that teaching at the margins is not peripheral but profoundly transformative and enabling, as it exposes how power is negotiated, how knowledge is localized, and how pedagogy is reimagined, thereby positioning the island teacher as a critical agent who navigates, contests, reshapes, and at times resists dominant structures in order to sustain education that is both socially grounded and intellectually meaningful to him, as an island teacher, to his students, and to the rest of the island community in which he lives.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests
There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionotes

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Appendix A

Interview Questions (in random order)

1. How would you describe the experience of teaching on an island, and what everyday realities or challenges mostly shape your classroom teaching or practice? Could you give an example and elaborate?
2. In what ways do you think teaching on an island places you or your students at the margins of the wider educational system in the Philippines?
3. How do the geographical and social realities of island life shape the opportunities and challenges that your students face compared to those in mainland or mainstream schools of the country?
4. Can you recall a specific classroom moment or incident when your students interpreted a lesson, topic, issue, or phenomenon through their own island experiences? What happened, and what did it reveal to you about how they make meaning? Did you resonate with how they make meaning of that lesson, topic, issue, or phenomenon? Did you have the same interpretation as them?
5. In what ways do local language, gestures, verbal expressions, communication or conversation lingo, or community rituals, habits, or practices influence how you communicate ideas and concepts to your students? Could you give an example and elaborate?
6. Can you describe a moment or incident when you felt the influence of institutional authority, such as school policies, administrators, or curriculum requirements, on your teaching, and how you responded to it in your island context?
7. Have you experienced moments when institutional policies or expectations conflicted with the realities of your own teaching in your island community? How did you navigate those situations of authority and power? Please give an example and elaborate.
8. What signs or cues from students, such as silence, expressions, stories or narratives, or visible behaviour, help you understand their learning and emotional realities and challenges?
9. How has teaching in this island context shaped your identity or sense of self, and belonging as a teacher, and how did it also shape your sense of purpose as an island educator?

SIMBOLISMO

Simbolismo, a Filipino term, refers to the artistic use of a sign, symbol, or icon that has a deeper contextual, social, cultural, political, or personal meaning moving beyond the literal meaning.

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