Image Building in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates:
The Case of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte

Debates are an interesting platform for image building given that they are only partially controlled by the candidates. The rules, format, and features of televised debates also shape and influence attempts of the candidates to build an image using the platform. This study looks into how President-elect Rodrigo Duterte harnessed the potential of the 2016 Philippine presidential debates for image building. The objectives of the study were to explain how Duterte appropriated the verbal and nonverbal demands of the debates, critically analyze the continuity and discontinuity of Duterte's image building across the debates, and explain how Duterte's self-presentation relates to the high-context culture and key political narratives in the Philippines. In this study, Duterte's verbal responses and nonverbal cues were coded and transcribed. The analysis was carried out according to the layers of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This study argues that Duterte's rhetoric in the debates was characterized by his resort to shortcuts and appeals to expediency. Duterte's rhetoric also targets a frustrated, vulnerable public in the context of a weak Philippine state. The presidential candidates had converging solutions and indistinguishable policy positions to the same problems of poverty, livelihood, healthcare, and national security. This gave currency to Duterte's proposal to "copy" the plans of his opponents and offer a "brand" of leadership. Overall, Duterte's use of the populist narrative against the backdrop of a weak Philippine state and its high-context culture made debating a platform for peddling image rather than issues or policy positions.