

Original Research

Ambivalent Governance and Journalistic Authority: An Exploratory Study of Scandal News Engagement in Three Philippine Cities

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ABSTRACT

Scandals are often imagined as moments when journalism reasserts its watchdog authority by exposing wrongdoing and mobilizing accountability. However, this expectation becomes unstable in fragile democratic contexts, where scandal visibility does not consistently translate into institutional resolution. This exploratory study examines how publics engage scandal news and what these engagements reveal about journalism's authority through what is conceptualized here as *ambivalent governance*. Focusing on the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator (POGO) controversy, the study combines semi-structured interviews conducted in Pasay, Tagbilaran, and Davao with qualitative content analysis of Facebook and YouTube discussions. The analysis shows that publics engaged scandal news through repertoires of ambivalence—pragmatic balancing, mediated fatigue, and distant condemnation—which in digital circulation appeared as satire, cynicism, and nationalist moralizing. Rather than signaling disengagement, these practices reflect sustained orientation to scandal as an ongoing and familiar mode of public knowledge. These practices reveal attentiveness without closure: journalism remains a key source of visibility even as its capacity to produce accountability is questioned. The study advances ambivalent governance as an analytical framework for understanding how journalistic authority is negotiated under conditions of recurrent exposure without closure in fragile democracies.

KEYWORDS

ambivalent governance, journalistic authority, scandal news, audience engagement, POGO scandal, fragile democracies

Scandals are often imagined as moments when journalism demonstrates its democratic force. By exposing wrongdoing, mobilizing public outrage, and compelling institutional response, scandals appear to reaffirm the watchdog role of the press and restore legitimacy. Classic studies portray scandal as mediated visibility

(Thompson, 2013), ritualized publicity (Adut, 2008), or cultural drama (Alexander, 2011)—public episodes through which wrongdoing is dramatized and authority is held to account. Within journalism studies, this perspective aligns with a long-standing view of scandal reporting as one of the press's most powerful democratic functions: the exposure of misconduct that enables publics to monitor power (Entman, 2012; Esser & Hartung, 2004; Kepplinger, 2000; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004).

Yet journalism's authority has never been self-evident. Scholars increasingly emphasize that it is continually negotiated through interaction with publics rather than secured through professional norms alone. Schudson (2003, 2008) conceptualizes journalism as democracy's monitorial institution, while Zelizer (2004, 2017) and Carlson (2017) demonstrate that journalistic authority is discursively co-constructed and contested in public communication. Studies of digital media further highlight how this authority is renegotiated within platformized environments where journalists compete with alternative voices, influencers, and partisan actors for credibility and recognition (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). These perspectives suggest that journalism's democratic role depends not only on exposing wrongdoing but also on how publics interpret and engage with scandal coverage itself.

This assumption becomes more uncertain in fragile democratic contexts, where exposure does not consistently lead to accountability. In such settings, scandal reporting often produces visibility without closure, as investigative revelations and public hearings fail to translate into sustained institutional reform (Coronel, 2010; George & Venkiteswaran, 2019). This issue becomes particularly visible in fragile democracies, where scandals frequently generate intense media visibility but limited institutional accountability. Investigative reporting and public hearings may expose wrongdoing without producing reform, often resulting in cycles

of outrage, fatigue, and resignation (Harmer & Stanyer, 2015; Neckel, 2005). In such contexts, publics do not simply disengage from scandal coverage. Instead, they often engage it ambivalently—condemning corruption while doubting the possibility of reform, distrusting institutions while continuing to rely on journalism as a source of visibility and orientation. These responses reflect broader transformations in democratic communication, where uncertainty, polarization, and communicative inequality complicate how legitimacy is negotiated in public life (Dahlgren, 2018).

The Philippines provides a revealing context for examining these dynamics. The controversy surrounding Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs)—Chinese-run gambling hubs legalized during the Duterte administration—quickly became one of the country's most visible political scandals. Investigative reports and Senate hearings linked POGOs to money laundering, trafficking, and police collusion, while subsequent raids on POGO compounds intensified debates about sovereignty, corruption, and state authority. Despite extensive media coverage and national political attention, the controversy produced little clear institutional resolution. This combination of sustained visibility and uncertain outcomes reflects the broader problem of exposure without closure and raises questions about how publics interpret journalism's role under such conditions.

Public responses to the controversy reflected this ambiguity. In Pasay City, where POGO offices were concentrated, residents weighed economic benefits against moral unease, oscillating between condemnation and pragmatic acceptance. In Tagbilaran, the scandal was encountered largely through mediated accounts, producing cycles of attention and fatigue that framed the controversy as another distant "Manila problem." In Davao, condemnation of POGOs often appeared alongside spatial and political distance, expressed through nationalist critiques of foreign influence

rather than local grievances. On social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, these orientations were further amplified through satire, cynicism, and moralizing commentary. Journalism remained central to these dynamics, but its authority was neither fully reaffirmed nor rejected; instead, it was mocked, contested, and relied upon simultaneously.

This article conceptualizes these patterns as ambivalent governance. The term “governance” is used here not in a policy or administrative sense, but to describe the communicative ordering of authority, responsibility, and legitimacy in mediated public life. Through interpretation, commentary, and digital circulation, publics participate in shaping how corruption is publicly recognized and morally evaluated. In this sense, governance refers to the *symbolic coordination* of meaning through which scandal narratives are interpreted and debated in the public sphere. In fragile democratic contexts where institutional accountability mechanisms are weak, these communicative engagements become an important arena through which legitimacy is negotiated. *Ambivalent governance* therefore refers to a patterned mode of participation in which journalism’s authority is simultaneously affirmed and contested through everyday talk and mediated circulation.

Existing research on scandal and journalism has tended to focus on exposure, framing struggles among elites, or the institutional consequences of media coverage. Less attention has been paid to how publics interpret and negotiate scandal narratives in contexts where exposure generates visibility without producing clear accountability (Mendoza, 2025b). By examining the POGO controversy in the Philippines, this study contributes to journalism’s audience and emotional turns by conceptualizing ambivalence as a patterned mode of engagement rather than a deficit of trust or participation.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted in Pasay, Tagbilaran, and Davao

alongside qualitative content analysis of Facebook and YouTube narratives, the study explores how publics interpret scandal news and how these interpretations circulate within digital environments. Rather than advancing hypothesis-driven propositions, the analysis is guided by the following exploratory questions:

1. How do audiences engage with scandal news as a way of negotiating trust in journalism?
2. What repertoires of ambivalence emerge in response to the POGO scandal?
3. How are these repertoires rewritten and amplified in digital circulation?

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews scholarship on journalism, trust, audiences, and the emotional turn in journalism studies, situating scandal engagement within broader debates about journalistic authority and democratic legitimacy. The methodology section outlines the multi-method qualitative design combining interviews and social media analysis. The findings trace how ambivalence appeared in everyday interpretations of scandal news and how these orientations were amplified in mediated circulation. The discussion then develops the concept of ambivalent governance as an exploratory framework for understanding scandal engagement in fragile democracies. The conclusion reflects on the implications for journalism’s authority and democratic legitimacy in contexts marked by persistent institutional fragility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on journalism’s authority has increasingly moved beyond normative and institutional models toward cultural, relational, and affective perspectives. Early research often conceptualized trust in journalism primarily in terms of professional performance, emphasizing

procedural standards such as accuracy, transparency, and independence. Subsequent scholarship, however, demonstrates that these criteria cannot fully explain how publics evaluate journalism in practice. Instead, trust emerges through socially situated processes of interpretation shaped by everyday experiences, political identities, and communicative environments. Another paragraph from here. First, the “audience turn” reframed trust as a negotiated and culturally embedded relationship between journalism and its publics. Second, the “emotional turn” highlighted how affective orientations—including outrage, irony, fatigue, and resignation—structure news engagement in contemporary media environments. Parallel work in scandal studies and democratic theory further shows that mediated controversies frequently reveal tensions between public visibility and institutional accountability. Together, these strands of scholarship provide the foundation for examining how publics interpret scandal news and negotiate journalism’s authority in contexts marked by political uncertainty and institutional fragility.

Journalism, Trust, and Audiences

Performance-based and procedural models have long been the foundation of research on trust in journalism. Performance perspectives emphasize that trust depends on journalistic accuracy, balance, and professionalism, often measured through indicators such as factual correctness, fairness, and timeliness (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Knudsen et al., 2022; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2018). Procedural models emphasize the significance of transparency, editorial autonomy, and equitable sourcing as essential mechanisms for fostering credibility (Karlsson, 2010; Karlsson et al., 2017; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Cross-national evidence indicates that trust in news varies systematically according to political culture and media system (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfat

& Ariely, 2014). Concurrently, longitudinal surveys in the United States and Europe reveal substantial declines in trust in mainstream journalism (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Ladd, 2012). Taken together, these studies clarified the institutional and professional benchmarks through which journalism has historically sought legitimacy.

Yet these models have been criticized for privileging normative ideals over the lived contexts in which publics actually negotiate trust. Audience-centered research demonstrates that credibility judgments are shaped by political identities, social affiliations, and everyday experiences of recognition or neglect (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Mont’Alverne et al., 2022; Poindexter, 2012; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). Comparative studies from the Trust in News Project reinforce this point, showing that many people evaluate journalism based on partisan loyalties, interpersonal conversations, and community norms rather than procedural standards of accuracy or transparency (Toff et al., 2020, 2021).

This shift has given rise to cultural and relational models of journalistic authority. Zelizer (2004, 2017) argues that journalism’s authority must be discursively performed and recognized, while Carlson (2017) emphasizes how authority is continually co-constructed in contested communicative environments. Craft et al. (2016) show how legitimacy is tied to symbolic recognition, and Nelson (2021) highlights news avoidance as a relational stance toward journalism. Scholars of digital media further stress how legitimacy is negotiated in platformized settings where journalistic authority competes with influencers and alternative voices (Eberl et al., 2017; Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

Building on insights from contemporary trust research, recent work has introduced the idea of trust cultures to account for the culturally embedded and historically specific repertoires through which publics interpret journalism.

Whereas Frederiksen (2014) and Six (2014) emphasize trust as a relational practice grounded in everyday norms of recognition and reciprocity, Mendoza (2025a) advances the concept of ‘trust culture,’ developed from a study of Dengvaxia vaccine scandal, to analyze the Philippine context. Trust culture illustrates how publics evaluate journalism through vernacular grammars such as *malasakit* (care) and *loob* (moral intent). Comparative scholarship reveals parallel idioms in other regions—Latin America (Mellado et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2013) and Africa (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019)—pointing to the significance of culturally specific trust repertoires. Altogether, these perspectives underscore that journalism’s authority cannot be reduced to universal standards of accuracy or transparency but must be understood as a cultural practice embedded within unequal and historically contingent communicative environments.

In sum, scholarship on journalism, trust, and audiences has moved from treating trust as a fixed attribute of professional performance to recognizing it as a negotiated, relational practice shaped by cultural context. This reorientation provides the foundation for analyzing scandal engagement not as a simple test of journalism’s watchdog role but as a site where publics negotiate legitimacy through ambivalent repertoires of trust and skepticism.

The Emotional Turn

While performance and cultural models have emphasized institutional standards and relational practices, a growing body of research highlights the affective dimensions of how journalism is consumed, circulated, and valued. This emotional turn in journalism studies reframes emotion not as a distortion of rational news consumption but as a constitutive part of how publics make sense of journalism (Richards, 2007; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2019).

Early scholarship already noted the centrality of

affect in news reporting. Eide and Knight (1999) identified how emotions shape both journalistic routines and public reception, while Peters (2011) emphasized the role of affect in sustaining public connection with news. Wahl-Jørgensen (2019) synthesizes this tradition, arguing that journalism’s authority depends not only on informational value but also on its affective resonance: whether it feels proximate, attentive, and responsive to publics.

Digital media has further accelerated this affective turn. Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of affective publics shows how networked communication mobilizes shared moods—outrage, irony, grief, or hope—that sustain political discourse. Drawing from Ahmed’s (2013) work, Wahl-Jørgensen (2020) describes how journalism participates in “affective economies,” where emotions are circulated, intensified, and rearticulated across platforms. Beckett and Deuze (2016) similarly argue that journalism must be considered an affective practice, where recognition and belonging are as central to authority as accuracy or independence.

This perspective has been crucial for understanding populism and polarization. Scholars show how anger, resentment, and betrayal are mobilized both by political actors and by publics in their evaluations of journalism (Krämer, 2014; Moe, 2020; Moffitt, 2016). Harsin (2015) suggests that the so-called “post-truth condition” is less about factual decline than about affective regimes where authenticity and performance carry more weight than evidence. Ahva and Steensen (2019) extend this to journalism, arguing that authority itself is increasingly constructed through affective legitimacy.

Within this trajectory, ambivalence has emerged as a particularly salient stance. Zelizer and Ribeiro (2025) propose that ambivalence should not be dismissed as apathy or deficit but understood as constitutive of media life. It reflects publics’ capacity to live with contradiction: to

distrust journalism while relying on it, to ridicule institutions while acknowledging their endurance. Similar insights appear in research on humor and cynicism in political engagement, where irony and satire are shown to sustain rather than erode democratic participation (Baym, 2005; Coleman, 2013).

Taken together, the emotional turn demonstrates that journalism's authority is grounded as much in its affective recognition as in its informational function. For the study of scandals, this means that repertoires of outrage, fatigue, irony, and resignation are not peripheral but central to how publics negotiate journalism's authority. Ambivalence, in particular, emerges as a patterned affective practice through which democratic legitimacy is sustained, not by consensus, but by the endurance of contradiction.

Scandal, Journalism, and Democratic Legitimacy

Scandal has traditionally been framed as journalism's paradigmatic moment of democratic strength. Liberal-democratic accounts emphasize its corrective function: wrongdoing is exposed, publics are mobilized, and institutions are compelled to respond, thereby reaffirming legitimacy (Adut, 2008; Markovits & Silverstein, 1988; Thompson, 2013). In this perspective, scandal dramatizes journalism's watchdog role, confirming its capacity to act as a check on power (Esser & Hartung, 2004; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). Media scholars have long described scandals as cyclical phenomena in which revelations, dramatization, and resolution unfold in patterned stages (Kepplinger, 2000; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). In the U.S. context, Sabato (1991) famously characterized scandals as "feeding frenzies" that reinforce the press's adversarial identity while shaping political legitimacy.

Yet even in stable democracies, scandals often fall short of producing substantive reform.

Entman (2012) observes that scandals are as much about framing struggles among elites as they are about exposure of wrongdoing. In fragmented or fragile democracies, their limitations become even more pronounced. Harmer and Stanyer (2015) show that scandals may deepen polarization or fatigue rather than accountability, while Neckel (2005) argues that scandals in weak institutional contexts frequently generate cynicism rather than reform. Voltmer (2013) emphasizes that in transitional democracies, patronage networks and clientelist political structures often absorb scandal revelations without producing institutional change. Similarly, Mancini (2019) suggests that scandals in media systems under democratic stress often expose structural weaknesses rather than resolve them.

These limitations have prompted a shift toward performative and cultural approaches to scandal. Alexander (2011) conceptualizes scandals as cultural dramas in which authenticity and moral authority are staged and contested. Wedeen (2009, 2022) illustrates how irony, ambiguity, and even absurdity can sustain authority in authoritarian and hybrid political contexts, complicating normative assumptions that scandal necessarily produces rupture. Papacharissi (2015) extends this perspective to digital communication environments, showing how scandals circulate through affective publics in which outrage, satire, and cynicism become key modes of participation. From this perspective, scandal is less a discrete event of exposure than an ongoing communicative performance through which legitimacy is enacted, challenged, and endured.

The stakes of these dynamics extend beyond journalism itself to the broader conditions of democratic legitimacy. Dahlgren (2018) argues that contemporary democracies face an epistemic crisis in which declining trust in media institutions destabilizes shared understandings of political reality. In such conditions, knowledge becomes legitimated less through rational deliberation than through affective resonance and partisan

alignment. Journalism thus carries a heightened responsibility—not only to inform but also to sustain civic cultures where recognition, belonging, and shared frames of reality remain possible conditions for democratic participation.

This concern echoes Habermas's (2006) account of mediated public spheres, where legitimacy emerges from communicative processes through which elites and publics justify political authority to one another. Yet these processes have become increasingly fragile in fragmented and commercialized media systems. Habermas (2001) warned that mediatization risks hollowing out deliberation by turning publicity into staged performance rather than rational-critical debate. More recent scholarship similarly highlights how platformization, economic pressures, and information disorder challenge journalism's ability to function as a trusted intermediary in democratic communication (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; McNair, 2009).

Media theorists have therefore emphasized journalism's constitutive role in legitimizing political authority. Schudson (1998) characterized journalism as a monitoring force that enables publics to observe power and hold institutions accountable. Curran (2011) emphasized the press as a counterweight to concentrated authority, while Couldry and Hepp (2018) conceptualize media as infrastructures through which social realities—including democratic legitimacy—are communicatively constructed. Waisbord (2018) further suggests that journalism now operates within a "post-truth" environment where authority depends less on factual verification alone than on trust, authenticity, and affective resonance.

Scandals sharply illuminate these tensions. In theory, they dramatize journalism's watchdog role and reaffirm democracy's corrective mechanisms. In practice—particularly in fragile democracies—scandals often generate cycles of cynicism, polarization, or resignation rather than accountability (Harmer & Stanyer, 2015; Voltmer,

2013). In such contexts, the relationship between publics and journalism is not simply one of trust or distrust but one marked by ambivalence. Publics may ridicule scandal coverage, question institutional motives, and express skepticism toward reform while continuing to rely on journalism to make corruption visible. Ambivalence thus emerges as a democratic practice through which legitimacy is negotiated under conditions of uncertainty. Journalism sustains democratic life not by resolving crises of trust, but by providing the communicative stage on which contradiction, critique, and recognition remain publicly visible.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To understand how publics navigate these tensions between exposure and accountability, it is necessary to examine how journalism's authority is negotiated within mediated public life. One strand of scholarship often treat trust as a function of institutional credibility, emphasizing professional norms such as accuracy, transparency, and objectivity (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Another strand, however, shows that journalistic authority is continually constructed through interaction with publics rather than secured solely through professional standards (Carlson, 2017; Zelizer, 2017). From this perspective, trust becomes a communicative relationship that emerges from public interpretation and interaction rather than a stable institutional attribute.

Two developments in journalism studies are particularly relevant here. First, the audience turn highlights how publics actively interpret journalistic content rather than passively receiving it, negotiating trust through everyday interpretive practices (Toff et al., 2020, 2021). Second, the emotional turn emphasizes that engagement with journalism is shaped not only by rational evaluation but also by affective responses such

as anger, cynicism, irony, or fatigue (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2019). Together, these perspectives shift attention from whether journalism successfully performs its democratic role to how publics interpret, negotiate, and respond to journalistic authority.

Scandal reporting provides a particularly revealing context for examining these dynamics. Classic studies portray scandals as moments of mediated visibility in which wrongdoing is publicly exposed and moral boundaries are reaffirmed (Thompson, 2013). In journalism studies, scandals have often been interpreted as demonstrations of the press's watchdog role, revealing misconduct and mobilizing public accountability (Entman, 2012; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). Yet exposure does not always translate into institutional reform, particularly in contexts where political accountability mechanisms remain fragile or incomplete.

Understanding these responses requires attention to the concept of ambivalence. Media scholars note that contemporary communication environments frequently generate competing interpretations and conflicting narratives, making ambivalence a recurring feature of mediated meaning (Zelizer & Ribeiro, 2025). Rather than indicating confusion or indecision, ambivalence reflects the coexistence of contradictory evaluations that audiences must navigate in complex communication environments.

Political sociology and democratic theory similarly conceptualize ambivalence as the coexistence of simultaneous positive and negative orientations toward the same political object or institution (Webb, 2018). Citizens may therefore express both support for and dissatisfaction with democratic institutions at the same time. Importantly, ambivalence does not imply apathy or disengagement; rather, it reflects the persistence of competing evaluations that shape political judgment and participation (Webb, 2017). Ambivalence therefore captures the capacity to say both "yes" and "no" to political authority

simultaneously, reflecting the contradictory ways citizens experience democratic governance.

These dynamics become particularly visible in contemporary communication environments characterized by the circulation of conflicting information and interpretations. Exposure to competing narratives can produce mixed evaluations toward political institutions, increasing the likelihood that individuals hold ambivalent attitudes toward public issues (Webb, 2025). Digital media environments intensify this condition by circulating multiple interpretations of events and responsibility, requiring audiences to navigate competing narratives of legitimacy and accountability.

This perspective helps explain why public engagement with scandal news in fragile democratic contexts often appears contradictory. Investigative reporting may expose wrongdoing while institutional responses remain limited or ambiguous. In such situations, publics may simultaneously recognize journalism's role in making corruption visible while expressing skepticism about its capacity to produce meaningful reform. Rather than expressing simple trust or distrust, audiences may condemn corruption while doubting reform, mock political spectacle while still relying on journalism for information, or question journalistic motives while treating media coverage as an important source of public visibility.

Building on these insights, this article conceptualizes these dynamics as *ambivalent governance*. The concept refers to the communicative processes through which authority, responsibility, and legitimacy are negotiated in mediated public life. Journalism contributes to these processes by shaping the visibility of wrongdoing and organizing public attention around narratives of corruption and accountability.

Publics, however, do not merely receive these narratives. Through interpretation, commentary, and digital circulation, audiences actively

participate in shaping how scandal coverage is understood. In this formulation, “governance” refers specifically to *how publics* collectively negotiate journalistic authority through scandal discourse, shaping how wrongdoing is interpreted, circulated, and evaluated within mediated communication environments.

The qualifier ambivalent highlights the contradictory nature of these engagements. Public responses to scandal news frequently combine recognition and skepticism toward journalism. Audiences may rely on journalistic reporting to expose wrongdoing while simultaneously questioning its effectiveness or motives. Authority in this context is therefore neither simply affirmed nor rejected but continually recalibrated through public interpretation and debate.

Ambivalent governance therefore refers to a patterned mode of communicative engagement in which journalism’s authority is simultaneously relied upon and questioned through everyday interpretation and mediated circulation. Rather than interpreting ambivalence as a deficit of trust, the concept highlights how publics navigate the tension between exposure and accountability in contexts where institutional outcomes remain uncertain.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a *multi-method exploratory qualitative design* to examine how citizens engaged the POGO scandal as a way of negotiating journalism’s authority. The design combined semi-structured interviews with qualitative content analysis of social media discourse, allowing us to examine ambivalence both as an everyday interpretive orientation embedded in lived experience and as a circulating repertoire articulated in digital environments. Rather than seeking representativeness or population-level inference, the study aimed to identify recurring interpretive patterns and

repertoires across contrasting contexts, consistent with qualitative approaches that prioritize analytic depth, contextual sensitivity, and theoretical development over statistical generalization (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2014; Sandelowski, 1995).

Research Sites

The study was conducted across three Philippine cities selected to capture contrasting relationships to the POGO controversy. Pasay City was chosen because of its concentration of POGO offices and residential hubs, making the scandal a visible and proximate feature of everyday life. Tagbilaran City (Bohol) offered a provincial setting in which the issue was encountered largely through mediated accounts rather than direct exposure. Davao City was included because discussions of POGOs there frequently intersected with nationalist political discourse associated with the Duterte administration. Together, these sites enabled analytic comparison across proximity to the industry, political context, and media dependence, consistent with comparative case-oriented qualitative designs (Stake, 2005; Ragin, 2014).

Interviews

A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the three sites (Pasay = 5; Tagbilaran = 3; Davao = 3). Participants were recruited purposively to reflect variation in gender, occupation, and media consumption patterns. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and explored how participants encountered POGO-related news, how they evaluated journalistic coverage, and how they expressed trust, skepticism, fatigue, or resignation toward both journalism and politics.

The interview protocol followed a vignette-responsive semi-structured format designed to elicit affective responses, trust judgments, and place-based interpretations of scandal coverage. As

summarized in Table 1, the guide progressed from participants' media practices and initial emotional reactions to the POGO scandal, to comparative evaluations of contrasting media representations, and finally to reflections on journalistic expectations and community relevance. The use of vignettes enabled participants to articulate both emotional and interpretive responses to different forms of mediated content.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Coding proceeded iteratively, combining inductive attention to participants' language with theoretical sensitization from scholarship on trust, scandal, and audience engagement. The analysis prioritized identifying recurring interpretive repertoires rather than extracting variables or producing codebook reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Data collection continued until interpretive repetition was observed at the level of repertoires, such that later interviews no longer produced substantively new modes of engagement (Guest et al., 2006; Sandelowski, 1995).

Social Media Data

To complement the interview analysis, the study also examined 56 purposively selected social media items related to key moments in the POGO controversy between 2019 and 2025, including Senate hearings, major police raids, and debates surrounding the national ban on POGOs. The dataset consisted of 29 YouTube video comments and 27 Facebook posts or discussion threads. The corpus was intentionally limited to enable close qualitative interpretation of discourse and affective repertoires rather than large-scale sentiment measurement, consistent with interpretive approaches to digital media analysis.

Facebook and YouTube were selected because they are dominant platforms for news circulation and commentary in the Philippines, particularly for scandal-related content, and because they facilitate vernacular engagement with journalism through comment threads, memes, and affective expression (Burgess & Green, 2018; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Posts were identified using keywords such as "POGO," "Chinese gambling," and "Alice Guo." Sampling focused on moments

Table 1. Summary of Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Vignette-Responsive Format)

Section	Focus	Illustrative Question
Opening & Rapport	Media practices and background	How do you usually get your news?
Emotional Response	Initial affective reactions to scandal	How did you feel when you first heard about the POGO scandal?
Vignette Engagement	Interpretation of contrasting media forms	How do these two pieces make you feel? Which feels more real?
Trust Evaluation	Judgments of credibility and tone	Which do you trust more, and why?
Community Resonance	Perceived relevance and representation	Do these reflect your community's situation?
Place-Based Framing	Local interpretation of the issue	How would you explain the issue from your location?
Expectations of Journalism	Normative expectations and standards	What do you expect journalists to do in situations like this?
Closing	Participant reflection	Is there anything else you would like to add?

of heightened visibility and included posts associated with mainstream news outlets as well as independent media pages. Consistent with qualitative social media research, the aim was not representativeness but analytic insight into communicative practices surrounding scandal discourse (Hine, 2020; Marwick, 2018).

Analytic Procedure

Analysis of the social media dataset proceeded in two stages. First, posts and comments were coded for affective and interpretive repertoires, including ambivalence, outrage, satire, cynicism, and nationalist moralizing. Second, these repertoires were analyzed in relation to how users positioned journalistic authority—for example, whether journalism was treated as a credible watchdog, a necessary but ineffective institution, or a participant in political spectacle. The goal was not frequency measurement but *interpretive patterning* across texts, consistent with qualitative content analysis traditions in media research (Altheide & Schneider, 2012; Schreier, 2012).

Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethics clearance was secured prior to fieldwork. All interview participants provided informed consent and are anonymized in reporting. Social media data were restricted to publicly accessible posts and comments, with no private groups included. Reflexivity formed part of the analytic process: as Filipino communication researchers embedded in the political and media contexts under study, we maintained analytic memos to reflect on positionality, interpretive decisions, and the risk of over-stabilizing ambivalence as a coherent stance rather than a situational practice (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002).

Methodological Integration

By combining interviews with qualitative analysis

of social media discourse, the study captures ambivalence in two analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions: first, as an everyday interpretive orientation through which individuals make sense of scandal news; and second, as a circulating repertoire that becomes publicly visible through platform-specific forms of affective engagement. This approach reflects emerging methodological work on digital publics that situates online discourse within broader cultural and political contexts rather than treating social media texts as decontextualized data points (Poell et al., 2019; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2022).

FINDINGS

The POGO scandal generated extensive national media coverage in the Philippines, yet interviews across Pasay, Tagbilaran, and Davao reveal that public engagement with the issue was neither uniform nor straightforward. Rather than expressing consistent outrage or disengagement, participants articulated situated and often contradictory responses shaped by proximity to POGO operations, everyday experiences, and mediated exposure to scandal news. Residents in Pasay, where POGO hubs were visible in the urban landscape, interpreted the issue through encounters with the industry and its economic effects. In contrast, participants in Tagbilaran and Davao encountered the controversy primarily through media coverage, often treating it as a political issue unfolding elsewhere.

Across these contexts, engagement with scandal news was characterized by recurring forms of ambivalence. Participants frequently acknowledged corruption while also recognizing economic benefits, condemned wrongdoing while distancing themselves from its consequences, or followed the news while describing the scandal as another familiar episode in Philippine politics. The findings therefore examine ambivalence across two interconnected

domains: first, everyday interpretations of the scandal revealed through interviews across the three field sites; and second, mediated repertoires of engagement visible in the circulation and commentary surrounding scandal news on social media. Together, these analyses show how publics navigate corruption controversies through ambivalent engagements that simultaneously recognize journalism's visibility while questioning its capacity to produce accountability.

Everyday Ambivalence

Interviews across Pasay, Tagbilaran, and Davao reveal that participants rarely interpreted the POGO scandal through clear-cut positions of approval or rejection. Instead, their responses were characterized by ambivalence shaped by local experiences, perceived proximity to the issue, and everyday reasoning about corruption, livelihoods, and governance. Participants acknowledged the seriousness of allegations surrounding POGO operations, yet their reactions were often tempered by economic considerations, geographic distance, or familiarity with recurring political scandals in the Philippines. Rather than resolving these tensions, respondents articulated ways of living with them—balancing recognition of wrongdoing with pragmatic acceptance, emotional distancing, or cautious skepticism toward institutions. These patterns suggest that ambivalence functioned not as apathy but as a recurring mode of sense-making through which publics interpreted scandal news in relation to their own social and political contexts.

Pragmatic Ambivalence in Pasay

Participants in Pasay—where POGO operations were visible in the surrounding urban environment—interpreted the scandal through everyday encounters with the industry and its economic implications. Rather than expressing purely moral condemnation, respondents frequently articulated mixed evaluations that

balanced suspicion toward the industry with recognition of the opportunities it created for workers and businesses. Ambivalence in this context often emerged from the tension between widely reported allegations of corruption and the tangible economic benefits associated with POGO employment.

Several respondents acknowledged that the industry provided livelihoods even while questioning its legitimacy. One participant explained that their opinion about POGOs remained divided because of the experiences of friends who worked in the sector, noting that “my opinion about it was divided... there were victims and scams, but my friends also said POGO helped them, especially during the pandemic” (P-1). For this respondent, the industry appeared simultaneously as a site of exploitation and as an economic opportunity, particularly for workers who were able to earn higher wages than in other sectors.

Other participants framed their reactions through personal experiences with the industry's risks. One respondent described feeling deeply unsettled after encountering online gaming scams linked to POGO operations, explaining that “I was bothered by that... because there's already a threat to the security of our country” and that the experience reinforced their support for eliminating POGOs from the Philippines (P-2). In this account, suspicion toward the industry was shaped not only by media coverage but also by personal exposure to perceived fraudulent practices.

At the same time, some participants emphasized the financial attractiveness of POGO employment despite its controversial reputation. A former worker in a POGO-related company noted that the salaries and benefits were significantly higher than those available in many local industries, remarking that “what's good about POGO is that they give everything—benefits, food, and allowances... that's why many Filipinos wanted to work there” (P-3). Such accounts illustrate how economic considerations could complicate moral

judgments about the industry.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that ambivalence in Pasay was shaped by proximity to the material realities of the POGO economy. Participants encountered the scandal not only as a political controversy reported in the news but also as a phenomenon embedded in everyday life—through friends' employment, neighborhood changes, and personal experiences with online gaming platforms. As a result, their interpretations often involved pragmatic balancing between economic livelihood and moral concern, producing a form of ambivalence grounded in lived experience rather than abstract political judgment.

Mediated Distance in Tagbilaran

In Tagbilaran, the POGO controversy was encountered primarily through media coverage rather than everyday proximity, shaping a distinct form of ambivalent engagement. Unlike respondents in Pasay who described direct encounters with the industry, participants in Bohol frequently framed the scandal as a political issue unfolding elsewhere. As a result, reactions often combined recognition of wrongdoing with a sense of distance from its practical consequences.

Several respondents described learning about the issue mainly through social media and online news platforms, particularly Facebook. One participant explained that after the shutdown of ABS-CBN, their household largely abandoned television and began relying on online sources, noting that “everyone in the house preferred the internet... so Facebook followed, and that’s where we mostly got our news” (T-1). While this shift increased exposure to national political controversies, it also meant that many encounters with the POGO issue occurred through mediated narratives rather than direct experience.

This distance often shaped how participants interpreted the scandal’s relevance. One respondent remarked that the controversy did not feel particularly consequential in Bohol

because there were no visible POGO hubs in the area, explaining that “with POGO, I’d say it doesn’t concern us... nearly all Boholanos aren’t concerned with POGO because it doesn’t affect prices here” (T-1). In this account, the issue was acknowledged as part of national politics but remained largely detached from everyday life.

Other participants expressed a similar sense of familiarity with political scandals, describing the POGO controversy as another recurring episode in Philippine politics. One interviewee explained that hearing about the issue was “not really a shocker... more like how it would affect that politician’s career,” suggesting that the controversy was interpreted primarily through the lens of political maneuvering rather than personal impact (T-1). Such responses reveal a form of engagement shaped less by outrage than by recognition of a familiar political pattern.

Viewed collectively, these accounts suggest that ambivalence in Tagbilaran often took the form of acknowledgment without urgency. Participants remained aware of the issue and followed developments through news and social media, yet they frequently described the controversy as geographically and socially distant. As a result, engagement with scandal news tended to fluctuate with media visibility rather than sustained local concern, producing a pattern of attention characterized by mediated awareness coupled with emotional detachment.

Condemnation and Indifference in Davao

Interviews conducted in Davao revealed a different configuration of ambivalence shaped by moral judgment combined with spatial and experiential distance from the POGO industry. Participants were generally aware of the scandal and the allegations surrounding it, particularly those involving exploitation, corruption, and links to foreign syndicates. However, these evaluations were often accompanied by a sense that the issue remained largely external to everyday life in Mindanao.

Some respondents expressed strong moral condemnation when discussing reports of abuse connected to POGO operations. One participant recalled feeling anger upon hearing that workers were being beaten or coerced when they failed to meet quotas, explaining that “when I heard they were beaten if they didn’t meet their quota ... I imagined myself in their shoes and it made me angry” (D-2). Yet even in such cases, the emotional intensity of the reaction tended to fade over time as the issue appeared geographically distant from the respondent’s own environment.

Other participants articulated a more detached stance from the outset. One interviewee described the controversy primarily in structural terms, characterizing POGO operations as “a syndicate ... a money-laundering scheme involving cartels” and suggesting that such arrangements were part of broader political realities rather than exceptional events (D-3). Despite this recognition, the same respondent emphasized that the issue did not provoke strong emotional engagement, noting simply that “I was indifferent ... and even now it’s still the same” (D-3).

This sense of distance was frequently reinforced by the perception that POGO operations were concentrated in Luzon rather than Mindanao. As another participant explained, “POGO has nothing to do with Davao ... I’m indifferent. It’s just a reality of the world” (D-3). In such accounts, the scandal was acknowledged as part of national political discourse but remained only loosely connected to local experience.

Together, these narratives suggest that ambivalence in Davao often took the form of condemnation without proximity. Participants recognized the seriousness of the allegations reported in the media and were willing to express moral judgment about them, yet they also maintained emotional distance from the issue because it appeared geographically remote and institutionally familiar. This combination of awareness and detachment illustrates how publics can remain attentive to scandal news

while simultaneously limiting its relevance to their everyday lives.

Mediated Repertoires of Scandal Engagement

While interviews reveal how participants interpreted the POGO scandal through everyday experiences and local contexts, social media analysis shows how these interpretations were rearticulated in more public and performative forms of engagement. Across the sampled Facebook and YouTube materials, scandal discourse was characterized less by deliberative debate than by affective commentary, satire, and moral evaluation. Rather than simply reproducing journalistic narratives, users selectively reinterpreted news content through emotionally charged responses that reframed the scandal in relation to everyday concerns about corruption, national politics, and economic insecurity.

The content analysis shows that user responses to the POGO controversy clustered around several recurring emotional orientations and narrative framings. Posts expressing optimism or pragmatic evaluation appeared most frequently (26 items), followed by outrage (14) and sarcasm (12). Smaller numbers of posts conveyed fear, empathy, and resignation, indicating that reactions were affectively varied rather than uniformly negative. In terms of narrative framing, most posts interpreted the issue through its local impact (30 items) or as part of a broader political scandal (23 items), while relatively few emphasized economic hardship (4 items). These patterns suggest that users did not treat the controversy merely as an abstract governance issue but interpreted it through its perceived implications for everyday life and national politics.

Sarcasm emerged as one of the most visible forms of engagement, particularly in posts responding to corruption allegations and Senate investigations. Users frequently framed the controversy as another predictable episode in

Philippine political theater. For example, one comment responding to a news story about the scandal mockingly remarked, “FACT CHECK LANG... free meals and free service lang pala ang kapalit” (“Just fact checking... apparently all it takes is free meals and free services”), using irony to highlight perceived political hypocrisy. Such comments did not necessarily dispute the facts reported in the news; instead, they reframed the scandal as evidence of a broader pattern of political manipulation and patronage.

Other posts expressed outrage or moral condemnation, particularly when the scandal was linked to labor exploitation or national sovereignty concerns. In several comments, users described the issue as symptomatic of systemic corruption and foreign influence, emphasizing how POGO operations appeared to benefit political elites rather than ordinary citizens. One widely circulated comment asked rhetorically, “Gusto nyo malaman kung gaano kawalang hiya ang sistemang ito?” (“Do you want to know how shameless this system is?”), framing the scandal as proof of entrenched political corruption. In these cases, social media engagement functioned as a space for moral denunciation and collective frustration.

At the same time, some posts adopted a more pragmatic tone by focusing on local economic implications. These comments often acknowledged the controversies surrounding POGO operations while also noting that the industry had generated employment and business opportunities in certain areas. This orientation echoes the pragmatic balancing observed in Pasay interviews, where respondents recognized both the economic benefits and social risks associated with the industry.

In summary, these mediated responses illustrate how social media platforms amplified and dramatized the ambivalence observed in everyday interviews. Humor, outrage, and pragmatic reasoning coexisted within the same discursive space, allowing users to acknowledge corruption

while simultaneously normalizing its recurrence in Philippine politics. Rather than resolving contradictions, these mediated repertoires made them publicly visible and emotionally shareable. In doing so, social media transformed scandal engagement into an ongoing process of interpretation, commentary, and affective circulation.

DISCUSSION

Across everyday talk and mediated circulation, engagement with the POGO scandal emerged less as a straightforward demand for accountability than as a communicative practice of *ambivalent governance*—a patterned negotiation of journalistic authority through everyday interpretation and mediated circulation. As an exploratory qualitative analysis, the findings suggest that publics neither rejected journalism outright nor fully embraced its watchdog claims. Instead, they sustained a relationship of simultaneous affirmation and contestation, engaging journalism as necessary yet inadequate: indispensable for making corruption visible, yet insufficient for producing institutional accountability. In fragile democratic contexts where political reform remains uncertain, scandal thus becomes not only a moment of exposure but also a communicative process through which legitimacy is continually negotiated.

The empirical patterns across the three field sites show how this ambivalence unfolded in distinct contexts. In Pasay, where POGO operations were embedded in everyday urban life, engagement reflected pragmatic balancing between moral suspicion and livelihood considerations. Participants acknowledged corruption while recognizing the industry’s economic role. In Tagbilaran, engagement oscillated between recognition of wrongdoing and fatigue toward a distant “Manila problem.” In Davao, participants expressed moral condemnation alongside

geographic and emotional distance. Across sites, publics relied on journalism for orientation while limiting expectations that exposure would produce meaningful reform.

Social media circulation amplified these patterns into more visible repertoires of engagement. Satirical commentary mocked repetitive scandal coverage while drawing on journalism as material for critique. Cynical commentary reframed fatigue into broader narratives of institutional distrust, while nationalist moralizing translated distant condemnation into claims about sovereignty and foreign influence. Rather than resolving contradiction, these repertoires made ambivalence publicly visible and shareable. Journalism thus remained central to scandal discourse—not as an uncontested arbiter of truth, but as the infrastructure through which ambivalence was expressed and circulated.

Contrary to prior accounts that position scandal as a mechanism through which journalism reasserts watchdog authority by exposing wrongdoing and compelling institutional reform (Adut, 2008; Thompson, 2013), our findings indicate that, in the Philippine context, scandal coverage instead gives rise to ambivalent governance. This divergence can be traced to conditions of institutional fragility, uneven enforcement, and recurrent cycles of exposure without closure, as noted in studies of Southeast Asian journalism (Coronel, 2010; George & Venkiteswaran, 2019). In the Philippine case, sustained coverage and highly visible hearings generated attention without clear resolution. What our findings add is an account of how publics interpret and inhabit this condition—not as disengagement, but as a patterned orientation that combines recognition, skepticism, and continued attention. This dynamic can be further understood through ‘scandal as constructivation’ (Mendoza, 2025b), where scandal is not a singular moment of exposure but an ongoing process through which visibility, blame, and legitimacy are produced and circulated over time. From this

perspective, the recurrence of exposure without closure reflects not only institutional constraints but the iterative stabilization of scandal as a familiar and expected form of public knowledge, within which ambivalent orientations are sustained.

Understanding these responses as ambivalence rather than disengagement aligns with scholarship that conceptualizes journalistic authority as relational and discursively negotiated (Carlson, 2017; Zelizer, 2017). Trust here is less grounded in procedural ideals such as objectivity or transparency (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kohring & Matthes, 2007) than in journalism’s capacity to provide orientation within uncertainty. Publics continue to follow, discuss, and circulate scandal coverage even while doubting its efficacy.

These dynamics can be situated within broader comparative perspectives on media and politics. McCargo’s (2012) notion of ‘partisan polyvalence’ and Hallin and Mancini’s (2017) extension of media systems beyond Western contexts both point to how political parallelism, clientelism, and uneven institutionalization shape journalistic authority. In such settings, exposure does not straightforwardly translate into accountability, helping explain why publics may come to anticipate repetition rather than resolution.

From this perspective, scandal engagement can be understood as a limited but consequential form of governance operating through mediated communication rather than formal authority. Journalism provides the stage on which outrage, irony, and critique unfold, yet these rarely culminate in structural reform. Instead, they renegotiate legitimacy by keeping journalism central to public discourse while continually qualifying its authority. Ambivalence therefore appears not as democratic failure but as a mode of political orientation through which publics remain attentive without expecting closure.

Conceptualizing these dynamics as ambivalent governance offers an exploratory contribution to journalism and democratic theory. The concept

highlights how publics navigate the tension between exposure and accountability in fragile democratic contexts where outcomes remain uncertain. It extends journalism's audience and emotional turns by identifying ambivalence as a patterned mode of engagement rather than a deficit of trust or participation. In this sense, journalism's authority endures not because it consistently produces reform, but because it provides the communicative infrastructure through which publics navigate visibility, contradiction, and legitimacy in uncertain political environments. Ambivalent governance thus emerges as both a limit and a resource.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study examined how publics in the Philippines engaged scandal news surrounding the POGO controversy and how these engagements shaped the negotiation of journalistic authority. Rather than producing clear trajectories of trust or rejection, the scandal generated patterned forms of ambivalent engagement. Across the three field sites, publics combined recognition of corruption with skepticism toward institutional accountability, while digital circulation amplified these orientations into repertoires of satire, cynicism, and nationalist critique.

These patterns suggest that, in fragile democratic contexts, scandal news may function less as a corrective mechanism than as a communicative arena through which publics negotiate legitimacy under conditions of persistent uncertainty. Conceptualized as *ambivalent governance*, this process captures how journalism's authority is neither fully reaffirmed nor simply eroded but continually recalibrated through everyday interpretation and mediated circulation. Ambivalence in this sense should not be understood as democratic apathy or disengagement, but as a mode of

political orientation that sustains attention while recognizing the limits of institutional reform.

The study contributes to journalism studies by extending the audience and emotional turns, showing that trust is negotiated not only through procedural standards but also through affective repertoires of irony, resignation, and critique. It also contributes to democratic theory by illustrating how legitimacy in fragile contexts may be sustained through ambivalent engagement rather than consensus or institutional resolution.

While grounded in the Philippine case, the analysis identifies conditions under which similar dynamics may emerge, particularly in contexts characterized by uneven institutional enforcement and recurring cycles of exposure without closure. Future research can extend this framework comparatively across media systems and political contexts to examine how ambivalence shapes public engagement where accountability remains uncertain. By foregrounding ambivalence as a patterned mode of engagement, this study highlights how journalism remains a key infrastructure of visibility even when its capacity to produce accountability is in question.

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