

Online Activism in Pinoy Battle Rap: A Qualitative Analysis of FlipTop Emcee Verses

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ABSTRACT. Online activism has grown significantly with technological advancements, using tools like petitions, micro-blogging, and social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. This qualitative study explores an unconventional form of online activism found in the rap verses of FlipTop artist BLKD, a prominent figure in the Philippine battle rap scene. The research identifies categories of online activism in these verses, analyzes the thought processes behind the messages conveyed by the battle rappers, and uncovers common themes. By establishing the characteristics that define this unique form of online activism, the study assesses its potential for lasting impact, effective audience engagement, and significant social change. Additionally, it highlights how traditional activism adapts to digital platforms, providing insight into the evolving nature of advocacy in contemporary society. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader understanding of online activism while emphasizing the role of hip-hop culture in shaping political discourse and mobilizing communities.

1.0. Introduction

The Internet has dramatically transformed communication since its inception in the early 1990s. Around 2008-2009, people began to increasingly migrate online for information as the web experienced an explosion of new content (Dean, 2018). Dean noted that users shifted from in-depth content to "at a glance" information. One monumental contribution of the Internet is the unprecedented level of public accessibility it provides to various forms of communication, including intra-organizational and inter-organizational email, data storage, social websites like Facebook, and text messaging platforms like Twitter (Wanajak, 2011).

Today, the Internet is a global platform for individuals, companies, and organizations to reach their target audiences. Blogging and vlogging have become integral parts of internet pop culture, enabling content creators to share their work widely. The Internet also allows different cultures and countercultures to gain exposure to diverse audiences, with platforms like

YouTube playing a crucial role. Users can upload and share videos, interact with the community, and access vast content (Varga, 2011).

One such counterculture is FlipTop, a prominent phenomenon in the music industry related to battle rap and local hip-hop (Solitario, 2018). FlipTop has garnered a significant online following, with its YouTube channel boasting nearly four million subscribers and its Facebook page exceeding 2.6 million likes. FlipTop Battle League is known for producing popular rap battles in the modern Filipino hip-hop scene.

Rap battling, one element of hip-hop culture, involves two rappers competing by delivering verses aimed at each other, often filled with insults and showcasing their lyrical skills (Yap, 2012). This format, which originated in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, has been adapted in the Philippines, where it gained popularity due to the rappers' diverse styles and skills. Notable rappers like Dello and Zaito are celebrated for their freestyle abilities, while Abra and Loonie are known for their technicality and complex lyrics.

"Firing shots," a technique where rappers direct verses at others to voice grievances or challenge future

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opponents, extends beyond personal feuds. Rappers like BLKD use their battle verses as a platform for activism, addressing societal issues through their art (Solitario, 2018). Incorporating activism into battle rap is rare and has captivated the hip-hop community.

Activism in rap is not new; American rapper Tupac used his music to protest police violence and government policies in the 1990s (Travis, 2012). In the Philippines, rappers Francis M and Gloc 9 have similarly embedded activism in their music. However, integrating activism into battle rap, a genre typically focused on lyrical prowess and style, is unusual. BLKD's approach has thus garnered significant attention.

Despite the growing body of research on online activism and FlipTop's linguistic and cultural significance, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the intersection of these two areas. Specifically, there has been little exploration of how online activism manifests within FlipTop battle rap. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing online activism within FlipTop battle rap, focusing on BLKD's verses. The study seeks to identify the characteristics of this form of online activism, examining the thought processes behind BLKD's messages through Barbara O'Keefe's message-design logic and uncovering common themes in his categorized verses.

Yang (2016) states that online activism is a broad and ambiguous term. Joyce (2010) defined it as activities using internet-enabled devices for advocacy, while Gerbaudo (2017) described it as using digital media for political purposes. This study will contribute to understanding online activism by presenting a unique phenomenon: activism through FlipTop battle rap.

Previous studies about the FlipTop phenomenon focused mainly on language aspects and incorporated discourse analyses. One is Lumabao's (2018) investigation of the FlipTop language's morphology and semantics. His research showed that the personal attack (physical characteristics), the attack on the bars (rapping abilities), the extension—family and friends—the antithesis—profane words, figurative language, sexual undertones, anime characters, homosexuality, and the involvement of well-known celebrities—are the main focuses of the FlipTop language structure.

Another discourse analysis by Fernandez (2018) found that FlipTop battles contained morpho-semantic features such as acronyms, affixation, borrowing, compound, and reduplication. Like Lumabao's study (2018), Fernandez also found that FlipTop has sub-moves such as attacks on physical attributes, attacks on rapping skills, attacks on family and friends, attacks on social status, and the use of trash talks, among others.

In contrast, this study will focus on one style in the many styles evident in the battles of FlipTop, which is activism. This is referred to in this study as online

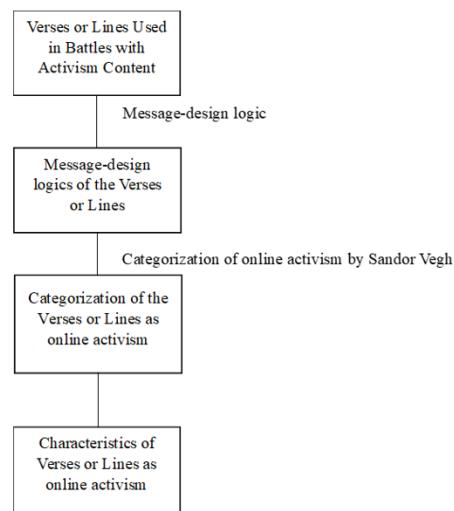
activism, as the platform through which it is channeled is the Internet, specifically through the video-sharing site YouTube. Also, unlike the two studies, this will focus on finding the characteristics of the verses or lines with online activism content rather than the whole structure. Specifically, this qualitative study will examine an unorthodox form of online activism - activism through rap verses used by a FlipTop rap artist (also called emcee) during his previous battles, to find out what categories of online activism are manifested in some of the battle rapper's verses. Also, to describe the thought processes behind the messages of the battle rapper through the message-design logic of Barbara O'Keefe, as well as to uncover the common themes formed in these categorized verses to ultimately establish or list a set of characteristics for this form of online activism.

This qualitative study examines the unconventional online activism in FlipTop artist BLKD's rap verses, identifying categories of activism, analyzing underlying thought processes, and defining its characteristics. It specifically explores the thought processes behind activism-themed lyrics and the categories of online activism reflected in his verses.

2.0. Methodology

The study seeks to elucidate the unique attributes of online activism as exemplified in the verses delivered by FlipTop emcee BLKD during his prior battles featured on YouTube. To achieve this goal, the researcher primarily employs Barbara O'Keefe's message-design logic alongside Sandor Vegh's classification of online activism. O'Keefe's framework posits that individuals employ distinct thought processes when crafting messages, categorized into three logics: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical (O'Keefe, 1988; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Expressive logic emphasizes self-expression, often neglecting others' needs or desires, while conventional logic views communication as rule-bound self-expression within accepted norms. Conversely, rhetorical logic perceives communication as a means of negotiation, promoting flexibility and person-centeredness.

Vegh's categorization delineates online activism into awareness/advocacy, organization/mobilization, and action/reaction (Vegh, 2003). These frameworks are amalgamated to analyze BLKD's verses, undergoing a dual-phase examination involving categorizing and identifying message-design logic. Ultimately, this process aims to ascertain the characteristics of online activism that are evident in the selected verses. Figure 1 illustrates the integration of these concepts, showcasing how BLKD's verses are scrutinized through message-design logic and categorization to reveal the characteristics of this form of online activism.

Figure 1*Conceptual Framework of the Study*

This research employed a descriptive qualitative. This method was chosen because it can set up detailed textual descriptions and explain how individuals feel about a particular study topic. It offers details regarding the human aspect of a problem, i.e., people's sometimes contradictory actions, attitudes, relationships, and beliefs (Pope & Mays, 2000). Qualitative content analysis research emphasizes the qualities of language as a means of communication while paying close attention to the text's content or context (McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990).

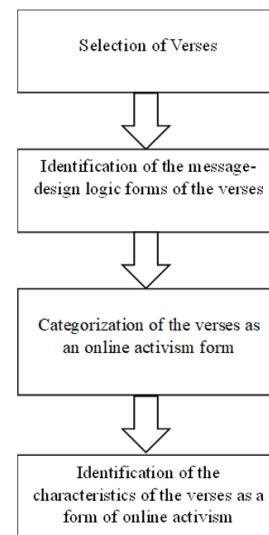
The analysis made in this study employed Barbara O'Keefe's message-design logic, which revealed the thought processes used in creating the verses or lines with activism content selected. Eventually, they were categorized and found to have common themes. By doing so, the characteristics of these selected verses or lines with online activism content were ultimately identified.

The selection criteria for the three battles were based on a thorough review of all available battles of BLKD uploaded on YouTube, totaling over 20. Each battle was meticulously watched and re-watched to identify verses containing activism content. The battles against Shehyee, Apekz, and 2khelle were selected for their notable inclusion of activism themes, representing some of BLKD's early work in the Battle Rap scene. Additionally, these battles were among the most watched during selection, ensuring a broad audience engagement and reflecting the significant impact of his messages. This approach ensures the chosen battles provide a representative and impactful analysis of BLKD's use of online activism in FlipTop battle rap.

The study employed the following steps in gathering and analyzing the data: 1) identification and selection of

BLKD's verses or lines with activism content, 2) Identification of BLKD's thought processes before writing and uttering these verses/lines, 3) Categorization of the verses or lines as a form of online activism using Sandor Vegh's categorization, and 4) Ultimately, identifying the characteristics of the verses or lines as online activism. The flow chart shows the procedure that has been used in the analysis of the verses.

In identifying the message-design logics of the verses, all three logics of O'Keefe will be used to classify the verses. As for the categorization stage, the verses will be identified as a) Awareness, b) Organization, and c) Reaction. In this study, awareness means that the verses with online activism content merely want to spread awareness and inform other people who might yet know the issue about a societal problem. As for the organization, the verses are intended to call for an organization or committee that

Figure 2*Flowchart of Data Gathering and Analysis Procedure***Table 1**

<i>Conditions in Deciding what Message-Design Logics the Verses are</i>	
Message-Design Logics	Conditions/Questions
Expressive Logic	Is the message open and reactive in nature? Does it put little attention given to the needs or desires of others?
Conventional Logic	Is the message a means of self-expression that proceeds according to accepted rules and norms? Does it give attention to the rights and responsibilities of each person involved?
Rhetoric Logic	Is the message flexible, insightful, and person-centered? Does it reframe the situation so that various goals are integrated into a seamless whole?

Table 2

<i>Categorizations Used in the Verses as a Form of Online Activism</i>	
Categorization	Conditions/Questions
Awareness	Is the message used to convey information about a societal issue?
Organization	Is the message used in an effort to persuade other people to join him in the battle about a societal issue?
Reaction	Is the message used to express feelings and emotion about a societal issue?

will battle an ongoing oppressing situation. Lastly, the reaction is the verses, which are regular outbursts of emotion and sentiments about an ongoing issue.

Tables 1 and 2 present the questions or conditions the researcher asked and considered in deciding what design logic and categorization each verse falls under. These classifications and categorizations helped the researcher to ultimately find out the characteristics of this form of online activism.

3.0. Results and Discussion

This section analyzes the creative process behind BLKD's activist verses and categorizes them as a form of online activism. Figures 3 to 5 show video thumbnails of his battles against *Shehyee*, *Apekz*, and *2khelle*, where these themes were integrated. Table 3 evaluates the message-design logic used in the composition and performance of these activist lines.

Message-design logics and categorizations of the verses or lines with activism content used by BLKD on his battles against *Shehyee*, *Apekz* and *2khelle*

The study first examines BLKD's battle against *Shehyee*, uploaded by FlipTop on May 20, 2011. In his round, BLKD compares the academic rigor of the University of the Philippines (UP) to *Shehyee*'s school, San Beda, highlighting the superior difficulty of UP's examinations. He concludes the verse by shifting his critique toward the university administration.

Ito'y labang mental 'di pisikal
'Di ito NCAA o UAAP
At sa lahat ng hiphop elements, talo ang Beda ng UP
Just to rub it in, Finals niyo quiz lang namin

At tawagin mo na ang ilan mong Bedan friends para
meron kang shoulder to cry on
sa talim ng tula ko, duguan ka,literal na red lion

At sa bagong UP admin, tanggalin nyo na ang tuition
fee namin
Dahil ang edukasyon ay karapatian
at upang magpatuloy ang pagmutaw ni mga dukhang
matatalino at hindi ang mga tulad nitong conyong
mangmang

This verse by BLKD is self-expression but uttered according to accepted rules and norms and has given attention to the rights and responsibilities of the persons involved. Thus, it is a conventional logic. As for its categorization, this verse is a reaction type of online activism. BLKD uttered the lines to express his feelings about the tuition fee issue in his school and did not persuade his co-students in UP to join him in this fight.

In his second battle against *2khelle* (uploaded April 15, 2011), BLKD used his performance to critique

Figure 3

Official video thumbnail of BLKD vs *Shehyee*'s battle uploaded on YouTube



neocolonialism. He targeted *2khelle*'s hometown, Olongapo, describing it as a stronghold for American influence. BLKD sharpened this social commentary by comparing "Gapo" residents to then-President Noynoy Aquino (PNOY), arguing that both exhibited a subservient, "god-like" worship of Americans.

Kilala ang bayan mo bilang maunlad na bayan sa may
kalayuan
Pero 'yung katulad mo kumikita sa pagpapa-alila sa
dayuhan
Basta puti at may pera, dinodiyos mo?
Pareho kayo ni Noynoy, kasi kano ang boss mo

This verse was a clever technique of hitting two birds in one stone. Wittingly, BLKD fired shots at his opponent and the former president, all on the same lines and time. The message-design logic employed here by BLKD was Expressive Logic, as it was very reactive and paid little attention to the needs or desires of others involved, especially the former president. At the same, even though the logic was reactive, the categorization of these lines as online activism is Awareness. This is because, aside from this expressive thought process, this was designed to inform the people of an ongoing phenomenon rampant in Olongapo – people think, especially women, that the way to a successful life is to get associated with the Americans.

Figure 4

Official video thumbnail of BLKD vs *2khelle*'s battle uploaded on YouTube



The final battle analyzed is BLKD vs. Apekz (October 5, 2012). In this match, BLKD highlights the vital role of activism in society while critiquing various social "cancers."

Alam kong titirahin nya ang aktibismo ko, syempre! As If ito'y kapintasan
Pagtatawanan ang pagrarily, sabik naman sa pakinabang
Pwes pasensya ka na ha kung di ako tulad mo na ang buhay eh umiikot lang sa laughter at pikunan
Ang pangunahin ko kasing kabattle ay ang 'Kanser ng Lipunan'

BLKD's verse, with activism, is a Rhetoric Logic designed to be flexible, insightful, and person-centered. His attack was not harmful and hard to the opposing opponent and to the "cancers" that he is about. Instead, he focused more on how this cancer can be tamed through the activism he is pushing. Moreover, because of this, the category of this example of online activism is an organization, as it promotes his activism to other people so that they can join him in his battle against cancer in society.

Figure 5

Official video thumbnail of BLKD vs Apekz's battle uploaded on YouTube



Table 3 illustrates the message-design logic and categorization of BLKD's three battles in which he used activism in his verses.

It is very clear that the verses that he used with activism content varied for the three battles selected. As Table 3 shows, there could be a potential pattern or partnership between the thought process and the actual categorization of these verses or lines as online activism forms.

Table 3

Message-design Logics and Categorizations of the Verses or Lines as Online Activism Form		
Battles with verses or lines with activism contents	Message-design Logic	Categorization
BLKD vs Shehyee	Conventional Logic	Reaction
BLKD vs 2khelle	Expressive Logic	Awareness
BLKD vs Apekz	Rhetoric Logic	Organization

Characteristics of the verses or lines used by BLKD on his battles against Shehyee, 2khelle and Apekz as a form on online activism

The results of identifying the thought process and categorizing this form of activism on the selected verses or lines vary.

Table 4 indicates that BLKD's activist verses are highly subject-dependent, methodically structured, and indirect. These findings align with literature on online activism, hip-hop, and social movements. While the internet has revolutionized global communication (Dean, 2018), it has specifically transformed countercultures like FlipTop into platforms for social commentary (Solitario, 2018). This intersection of digital media and battle rap echoes hip-hop's historical role as a voice for marginalized communities (Yap, 2012).

Table 4
Characteristics of the Verses or Lines as Online Activism Form

Characteristics	Justification
Highly Subject Dependent	The thought process (or the motivation) and categorization of this form of online activism depends on the subject. The more dynamic the issue is the more its message-design logic to be flexible.
Designed Methodically	Like what has been demonstrated above, each verse where designed to fit specific target outcome. Thus, the creation of them was done with extensive thought-processing.
Not Direct - The Point of the Verse is not Directly Communicated. Instead, it is being paired with a prior concept.	For all selected verses, this was demonstrated. Example for the UP and San Beda comparison, the comparison used as a primer for the ultimate point whereas the call for tuition fee removal.

Traditional hip-hop artists, such as Tupac Shakur and Gloc-9, have long used music for socio-political commentary (Travis, 2012). BLKD continues this tradition by addressing contemporary issues through a modern medium, integrating activism into a genre often prioritized for lyrical style (Solitario, 2018). This rare inclusion of activism in battle rap provides a unique dimension to the study of digital resistance.

4.0. Conclusion

This study examines BLKD's FlipTop battle rap verses as a medium for online activism, identifying how he employs diverse message-design logics—expressive, conventional, and rhetorical—to address social issues. The findings reveal that his activism is strategically crafted and highly adaptable, often subtly embedded within broader narratives rather than being overtly stated. This indirect approach allows activist themes to emerge organically, enabling BLKD to tailor his message to specific audiences while maintaining the cultural authenticity of the battle rap format.

Broadly, the research demonstrates how countercultural movements and digital platforms like YouTube serve as potent arenas for social commentary. By blending hip-hop culture with digital media, BLKD expands the traditional boundaries of advocacy, using creative and unconventional methods to engage with political issues. Ultimately, this study highlights the evolving landscape of digital activism, illustrating how cultural expressions can effectively house sophisticated social critiques and providing a foundation for future exploration into the intersection of media and movements.

5.0. Limitations of the Findings

This study offers significant insights into the dynamics of online activism through BLKD's FlipTop verses, yet several limitations exist. The scope is restricted to a single artist and a limited selection of texts, which prevents broader generalizations about digital activism across different platforms. By focusing primarily on textual content, the research may also overlook the influential role of audio-visual elements. Furthermore, the analysis does not account for audience reception or the societal impact of these activist verses, leaving the actual effectiveness of this medium unexplored.

Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research introduces potential researcher bias in the selection and interpretation of data. Future studies should address these constraints by expanding sample sizes, incorporating multimedia dimensions, and utilizing more diverse platforms to provide a holistic view of digital activism. Integrating reflexivity in the methodology and exploring audience perceptions will be essential to mitigating subjectivity and deepening the understanding of how online activism operates within and beyond the rap battle circuit.

6.0. Practical Value of the Findings

This paper offers practical insights for enhancing activism, communication, and digital literacy. Activists and advocacy organizations can improve campaign resonance by adopting the diverse, adaptive messaging styles exemplified by BLKD, strategically embedding activist content within broader digital discourse to reach wider audiences. Furthermore, educators can utilize these findings to teach digital literacy, using platforms like YouTube to illustrate the intersection of media and social movements. Finally, the study informs policymakers on the cultural nuances of online activism, supporting the development of frameworks that protect digital advocacy while mitigating risks. Ultimately, these insights provide a strategic roadmap for leveraging digital platforms to drive effective social change.

7.0. Directions for Future Research

Future research should expand on these findings by conducting comparative analyses across digital platforms and longitudinal studies to track how activism within the FlipTop community evolves over time. Investigating audience perceptions across diverse demographics and performing cross-cultural assessments would further clarify how cultural contexts and multimodal elements—such as audio and visual components—shape the reception of activist messaging. Finally, rigorous impact assessments are needed to evaluate the tangible social changes driven by battle rap performances.

Key questions for subsequent studies include how platform-specific strategies influence activist outcomes and how emotional responses vary among different listener groups. Researchers should also examine the decade-long evolution of FlipTop activism and the role of cultural nuances in international battle rap scenes. By addressing these dimensions, future scholarship can provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and broader implications of digital activism within and beyond the hip-hop community.

8.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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