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CONSTRUCTION OF DRUGS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: REVISITING THE 'TECHNOLOGICAL PERFORMANCE OF POPULISM' IN RODRIGO DUTERTE'S EARLY PRESIDENCY IN THE PHILIPPINES

Aaron Abel T. MALLARI[1]
    1 Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines; atmallari@up.edu.ph

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Abstract
It has been two years since Rodrigo Duterte's tenure as president of the Philippines ended. His presidency, however, left an indelible mark in the country's political history especially his violent war on drugs. This paper revisits his campaign and early presidency, joining the conversations that present the 2016 elections as the first social media election in the Philippines premised on changing the landscape of political communication not just in the Philippines but all over the world. By conducting an analysis of the posts of the Mocha Uson Blog (MUB), one of the many social media pages that supported Duterte, this paper presents the ways in which drugs and drug use had been constructed in social media. Analyzing posts from the late 2015 (the period when Duterte began figuring as a viable presidential candidate) to 2016 (the campaign period and his early presidency to December 2016 which marks the end of the first six months of his term and his promise of ridding the Philippines of illegal drugs), this article makes a case for the importance of looking at populist influencers in social media to further nuance our understanding of the interplay of technology and populist politics in the Philippines. Using Baldwin-Philippi's notion of the technological performance of populism, the posts in MUB are seen to have remained consistent with Duterte's rhetoric of constructing and securitizing drugs as a threat to Philippine society, a moral issue, and a pervasive and lingering problem for the Filipino people.
Keywords: Drugs, Rodrigo Duterte, Penal Populism, Social Media, Influencers

Introduction

In 2022, Rodrigo Duterte's tenure as president of the Philippines ended. However, his term is etched in the nation's political history. Duterte's victory in his 2016 presidential race was, in many ways, considered a landmark moment in Philippine political history. The 2016 presidential elections have been dubbed 'groundbreaking' in several ways. Arguelles (2019b) underscores three observations, noting that the 2016 elections (1) demonstrated the success of a local city mayor from the periphery in taking the presidency; (2) it was an election illustrative of the immense power of social media in harnessing support and communicating campaigns and policy promises; and (3) it placed the Philippines within the perceptible global democratic backslide and growing number of populist regimes across the world. Duterte's massive popular support rested on his populist appeal and the ways he presented himself as the leader that could rid the Philippines of the menace of illegal drugs and criminality.

Furthermore, what made the 2016 presidential elections in the Philippines noteworthy was the important role that the social media played during the political cycle. In fact, scholars have pointed out that it was the first "social media election" in the country (Sinpeng et al., 2020). While Duterte figured to be immensely popular, it was also apparent that he himself was not particularly active in social media platforms such as Facebook. This then brings the attention to the ways that his supporters were active in campaigning for his election both online and offline (Sinpeng et al., 2020), notwithstanding the allegations of troll farms and fake accounts. Thus, amid the proven relevance of social media amid the rise of populist leaders in the last decade brings the important point of considering not only the populist leader, but also the populist publics and perhaps, the "populist influencers."

With the general aim of joining the conversations in the broad fields that tackle populism, deliberative democracy, digital technology and society, this research will use the case of the Facebook Page of Mocha Uson, the Mocha Uson Blog (MUB). Mocha Uson is a celebrity turned ardent supporter of Duterte during the presidential campaign and remains to be one of the more prominent "populist influencers" (with over 5 million followers) that mediate the conversations within the DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporters). For this research, the posts that appeared in late 2015 to 2016 (the period of the campaign to the first six months of the Duterte presidency) were be analyzed. In particular, the paper focuses the discussion on the ways the MUB constructed drugs and drug use as these are part and parcel of the penal populist rhetoric that catapulted Duterte to immense popularity. The paper reflects on the following questions: (1) how can we meaningfully complicate the discussion on populist publics and to further understand populism, by considering the case of populist influencers?; (2) how was drugs constructed in the posts of the MUB in relation to Duterte's war on drugs?; (3) how does the MUB exhibit the technological performance of populism?

The next sections of the paper will proceed to provide a brief literature review on populism and a discussion on the conceptual framework and the method used in this project. The next spart then presents the posts about drugs that were found in the MUB. The paper then closes with insights and reflections for future research.

Literature Review

Populism and Duterte

Describing Duterte's early presidency, Curato (2016) remarked that Duterte had been changing the landscape of Philippine politics with his brand of populism that "has already transformed the tenor of the political conversation [as he] broadened the scope of what can and cannot be said during an electoral race. Beyond the swearing are meaningful transgressions in the conservative vocabulary of Philippine politics." Understanding Duterte's presidency had prompted many scholars to revisit the rich scholarly conversation on populism. Populism as a concept and topic of research in political and social sciences is not entirely new. One of the

early efforts to strike a conversation about populism is a conference in the 1960s that gave birth to the compendium *Populism: its meanings and national characteristics* (Ionescu & Gellner 1969). Since this landmark publication, the relatively long history of the academic discussions about populism had been woven with debates that tackle, on the one hand, coming to terms with defining it (e.g. Worsley, 1969; Canovan 1981; Laclau, 2005) and on the other hand, to operationalizing how to appraise the aspects of governments and governance that could be considered populist (e.g. Pappas, 2016, 2019; Hawkins, 2009). In trying to understand how populism had been studied, Gidron & Bonikowski (2013) have noted that we can appreciate how it has been characterized as an ideology, discourse, and strategy. The most recent developments have intervened and nuance populism as a political style (Moffitt, 2016; Knight, 1998; Canovan, 1999). In this approach, the focus of the analysis considers visual, auditory, emotional, or basically the performative aspects of populism (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt, 2016). By underscoring the performativity of populism, this approach highlights the importance of how the people relate to the populist and does not look at the populist policies or rhetoric as top-down, but also highlights the need to have an understanding of a symbiosis between the populist and the public.

Populism as Political Style and Duterte's Penal Populism

This research on populist influencers draws from the perspective that characterize *populism as a political style*. In this light, populism's performative dimension is emphasized and locates it in the contemporary 'stylized' political landscape and "brings representation to the forefront of discussions" (Moffit & Tormey, 2013; Moffitt, 2016). In this frame, the populist leader's appeal to the 'people' is scrutinized as we try to understand the ways in which the populist creates an image of a people, a crisis, and perceived "others." In this context of the construction of the people, crisis, and the others, the ways the populist weaves the narratives are crucial.

In the case of Rodrigo Duterte, we can further complicate our understanding by underscoring his populist rhetoric to having the sharper type of *penal populism*. In a nutshell, penal populism pertains to the mode in which a populist taps into the people's latent or overt punitive stance as a way to bolster appeal and amass support (Pratt, 2007). In the case of the Philippines, how notions about drugs and criminality have been tactically harnessed by Duterte enabled him to create an image of a strongman ready to save the people from the menace and dangers that drugs and crime represent. From the campaign up to his early presidency, Duterte brought forth strategic engagements with social problems and framing of drugs and crime as the paramount concerns that ought to be dealt with in order to usher in a better Philippines.

Populist Publics

While many have attempted to understand Duterte's populist rhetoric and scrutinized his populist characteristics, recent scholarship on the Philippines have also shifted the focus to look into the public(s) that receive(d) the messages from the populist leader. Rather than dismissing the vote of the people as uninformed, scholars have called for a more thorough understanding of populist publics as important element in discussing populism. As Arguelles pointed out, we also need to "let the populist public speak" in order to better appreciate their positions (Arguelles, 2019b). Listening to their narratives, it is notable that "what accounts for Rodrigo Duterte's enduring popularity among them is the varied ways in which his war on drugs narrative and policy effectively gave voice and responded to their conditions of everyday misery" (Arguelles, 2019a).

Thus, as Duterte successfully utilized a populist rhetoric to catapult himself to the presidency, the ways he did so have been a topic of scrutiny. On the one hand, it is important to understand the populist leader—to consider Duterte and his remarks and official pronouncements. On the other hand, it is also important to look at the populist publics (Arguelles, 2019b)—to consider the views of the people and how they themselves receive and make sense of these pronouncements.

The Technological Performance of Populism

With considerable attention given to both the populist leader and the populist publics, this paper posits the need to further nuance the understanding of populism (or more precisely penal populism) in contemporary Philippines by looking into the ways the narratives and discourses are transmitted and shaped. Herein lies the complexity that social media and the internet have brought in the last elections and current political and social landscape in the country. Not unique to the Philippines, social media platforms have been noted to significantly influence the ways politicians engaged with the electorate. In relation to populism, Baldwin-Philippi (2019) has noted that there is a *technological performance of populism.* Looking into the context of the United States and the campaign of Donald Trump, Baldwin-Philippi demonstrated that there is a need to look into how the internet and social media have been harnessed to forward campaigns and engage the people. In her study, she noted the strategies involved having 'controlled interactivity' wherein the campaign centers on engaging with the people and moves to highlight the voice of the people; the deployment of seemingly amateur and anti-professional content (to style oneself as one with the people); and having 'participatory and playful politics' to further underscore the sentiments of the public. As it has become an industry in itself (Ong & Cabanes, 2016), the ways social media has been playing a role in Philippine politics and society are undeniable. It thus merits that we pay closer attention to the "populist influencers" as intermediaries that facilitated the connection between the populist leader and the populist publics.

Politics, Social Media, And Populist Influencers in the Case of the MUB

In order to further ground the paper, it is important to reflect on the impact of social media in Philippine politics and society which also undergirds why Facebook as a social media platform and the MUB as social media influencer had been chosen as the case study in this paper. Studies on the impact of technology—such as social media platforms like Facebook—to politics had pointed out how this could be further mark continuous mediatization (Ragragio, 2022) and the changing landscape of political communication. Furthermore, the internet and social media had many affordances that make it unique compared to mainstream and traditional media (newspapers, television, radio). To wit, online forums in social has several traits:

First, they attract many more people than traditional media (see statistics above). Second, social networks allow more interactivity and many-to-many communication on a global scale, rather than one-to-many as it is the case with broadcast media. Third, the rapid uptake of the global distribution platforms dramatically lowers the costs of reaching international audiences, and makes all content potentially accessible worldwide, for instance through reposting and retweeting by online user communities. Thus, online activity facilitates the creation of communities by dropping the costs of cooperation and the creation of new publics (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020).

In the case of the Philippines, the impact of social media as a conduit and infrastructure of information exchange has been noted to have been capitalized by politicians and as Ong & Cabanes (2016), there had been a systematic network at play that brought out disinformation through troll farms. Kusaka (2022), even argues that the fake news networks and conversations in Facebook afforded the possibility for Duterte and his supporters to hijack the elections and Philippine democracy. The massive disinformation abounding social media and the internet echo chambers had been well documented and it relates to issues not only about drugs but even about historical distortion (Talamayan, 2021) and challenges against mainstream media (Divinagracia, 2023) and even anti-intellectualism (Tatcho, 2024). When we square populism with social media and the internet we need to understand that "in the specific case of socially mediated populist communication, the network media logic means that populist leaders' linkage with their constituencies or sympathisers is entirely disin- termediated: that is, the

production of contents is free from being filtered by journalists or other types of gatekeepers" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018).

As social media platforms allow user-generated content to thrive and user-engagement is virtually unfiltered, it becomes a potent ground for political conversations. Among the many social media platforms available, Facebook still remains to be the most dominant in the Philippines (Ragragio, 2022). This is true in the period covered in the study when during the period of the 2016 elections, Facebook had 94% penetration rate among Filipinos. As such, as Sinpeng et al. (2020) noted, "if presidential candidates wanted to broadcast their political messages to as many people and as easily as possible, there was no superior platform than Facebook."

With social media affording the wide reach and the facilitation of communication and connections among its users, we have seen the rise of influencers or those users that have had a significant following and, to say the least, influence. Thus, when we are talking about the phenomenon of the rise of populism as it interfaced with the rise of the internet and social media, we see many populist leaders becoming personalities in social media as well. However, for the case of Duterte in the Philippines, he himself did not have his own strong presence in social media such as Facebook through an account that he himself manages and posts on. Here then, we see the proliferation of other users that allowed the communication to continue owing to their clout. In many ways, therefore, we can simply define a "populist influencer" to be the in-between or those that identify themselves to be of the people, not part of the government, but they themselves hold considerable social and political clout and have expressed support for the populist leader. As an important arsenal of the Duterte campaign, these social media personalities have in many ways served as intermediary between the populist leader and the populist publics.

Among the many Facebook pages that emerged in support of Duterte during the 2016 elections, the case of Mocha Uson Blog presents an interesting case. Mocha Uson, the original person behind the page hailed from a celebrity girl group, Mocha Girls, before here foray into the political landscape in the Philippines (Tatcho, 2024). Branding herself as one of the people, her page, especially during the height of her campaigns for Duterte, she maintained the position that she was giving voice to the ordinary people. With this, she had a strong anti-intellectual and anti-establishment rhetoric and an ardent disdain for traditional media which she consistently framed to be biased. Having over five million followers, her page definitely had considerable clout. Figuring to be one of the more prominent bloggers (or populist influencers) during the campaign and presidency of Duterte, the MUB is a viable account to look into when we are attempting to nuance socially mediated populism in the Philippines. Aside from this, the career of Uson after the 2016 elections is also interesting. A litter over a year after the win of Duterte, Uson was appointed assistant secretary in the Presidential Communications Operations Office (Sabillo & Gonzales, 2017). After a series of controversies in this post, she tried to run for a congress seat in the 2019 midterm elections but failed. After this attempt she was reappointed by Duterte as deputy administrator at the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration in 2019 (Romero, 2019). Thus, we see here Uson's transition from being one of the people to being one in the government. Her attempt at securing public office also lends additional element in considering her a populist influencer as she tried to use her gained clout to secure public office.

Research Methodology
Exploring and Analyzing the Posts of MUB about Drugs
As a case study exploring the notion of populist influencer, this research will make use of data gathered by Bilon (2019) that aimed to perform an exploratory data analysis of the posts of the Mocha Uson Blog. Mining data and collecting all the posts of the MUB from 2015-2016, Bilon

compiled a list of the posts with the necessary links that direct to the posts. By using keywords related to drugs, we can filter the gamut of posts to see the posts related to drugs and consequently, the drug war. In his study of the MUB, Bilon (2019), had noted that the first mention of Duterte in the MUB page—and thus signaling the beginning of the support for Duterte's presidential bid—appeared in a post on 22 November 2015. This was during the time when there was sizeable clamor for Duterte to consider running for president. Bilon's work collected all the posts in the Mocha Uson Blog from late 2015 to 2016. The posts related to drugs were collected for this current research.

In this research, Bilon's temporal marker of November 2015 is also used to delineate the transition of the MUB page to becoming one of the ardent supporters of Duterte. The second marker for the data collected is pegged at December 30, 2016. This is in congruence with Duterte's own deadline of six months which he announced to be the time when he would have rid the Philippines of the problem of illegal drugs. It also coincides with the period before conversations about the offer of an appointive political position to Mocha Uson began circulating which actually came to fruition. This allowed Uson to be absorbed within the "formal" structures of the government.

This research maintains the view that the data extraction technique carried out with awareness of the ethical concerns in dealing with data from the internet. Facebook's API had made strides in considering data-privacy protection in line with the latitude it provides several software to mine data from the website. MUB is a public page which makes it open for data mining and there are safeguards in place should research is carried out intending to look into user engagement and comments on posts. This particular research plans to make use of the public posts of the MUB page and reserves the invitation to future expansion into looking further at user engagement such as comments and exchanges within posts.

In order to analyze how the MUB expressed support for the campaign and the early months of the presidency, three primary themes will be culled from the data set. The research considered posts that speak about illegal drugs, since this is the cornerstone of Duterte's penal populist rhetoric. The following keywords would be used to sift through the data set: (1) Drugs (in the Philippines, this commonly referred to as methamphetamine of locally known as "shabu"); (2) Droga (Tagalog word for drugs); (3) Adik (i.e. Filipino slang for drug user); and (4) Pusher (i.e. pertaining to people who peddle illegal drugs)

The posts were primarily filtered using these keywords and the sample selected for analysis were chosen owing to their direct discussion about drugs and drug users based on the attendant annotation or post of the MUB. Some posts merely reshared posts from other bloggers and other news pages. These were not included in the sample to also limit the analysis to those posts in which the MUB had a direct hand not only selecting to post but in sharing their own view. The posts were analyzed informed by the approach of discourse analysis, particularly the discourse historical approach. This approach "perceives both written and spoken language as a form of social practice" and highlights the "dialectical relationship between particular discursive practices and the specific fields of action (including situations, institutional frames and social structures), in which they are embedded" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001)

With this approach, the primary aim is to point to the discourses about populism across the period in consideration and seek to empirically demonstrate how particular contexts - conditions of possibility - allowed the political actors, i.e. the populist influencer, to construct drugs and drug users, the notion of discipline, and the political opposition. It is also viewed that populist influencers are "both shapers of specific public opinions and interests and seismographs, that reflect and react to the atmospheric anticipation of changes in public opinion and to the articulation of changing interests of specific social groups and affected parties" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

In order to unpack the discourses surrounding the three axes of analyses, the following probing questions will inform the reflections: (1) How were illegal drugs presented in the post? (2) Was it used in relation to a person, policy, or event? (3) How did the post about drugs relate to Duterte's presidency

To further nuance the analyses of the posts and reveal the technological performance of populism exhibited in the MUB, the paper will look at the three dimensions: First, the nature of the post, related to the type of the post whether it utilizes secondary reporting or reposting other posts with annotations, the audience they intend to converse with, and the purpose of the post whether it is about sending information or calling for support. Second, the attachments in the post, meaning whether the post had a photo, video, or link to the post. And third, the general context of when the post emerged. These elements would correspond to the aspects of the technological performance of populism, namely the engagement in participatory and playful politics, the intent to forego data-driven campaigning, and the utilization of amateur and anti-professional content.

Findings and Discussion
Construction of Drugs as Threat to Society, Moral Issue, And Pervasive Challenge

The phenomenon of drug use and the attendant policies that aimed at it has a long and complex history in the Philippines. When we situate Duterte's war on drugs in a broader historical perspective, we see that the penal populist rhetoric he espoused about drugs have already been articulated in the past. For example, during the presidency and dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., he also used drugs as an axial issue through which his calls for a more disciplined society rested. The punitive stance against drug use have given way to spectacular displays of punishment against drug offenders such as the incident involving the death via firing squad of drug peddler Lim Seng. In their account of the period of the 1970s as an important juncture in understanding the historical accretion of discourses related to drugs, Lasco & Yu (2023) have noted how the discourses that painted drugs and drug use as a menace to society emanated from the executive branch of the government but have also seen reverberations in different sectors of the civil society including the Catholic Church and the academe. The ways in which drugs have been framed and constructed throughout history have ranged from concern to moral panic (Tan, 1995) owing to circulating urban myths, misinformation, and outright paranoia.

The problem of drug use has been framed and linked to criminality in many ways even through there are accounts that point to people using drugs out of necessity owing to the demands of their job (Lasco, 2014) or even though there are people that use drugs in a controlled conscious manner. The political construction of drug users has, as Lasco (2024) noted, been an amalgam of seeing them as victims, criminals, and deviants. Even during the presidency of Duterte and his war on drugs, we see the continuous construction of drugs and drug users in complex ways. In their study of the ways media coverage of the war on drugs co-constructed drugs and drug users, Soriano et al. (2021) made a point about how the news coverage and media framings also contributed to the crystallization of the government rhetoric about drugs being a security threat even hinting at the necessity of the violent war on drugs to solve the problem. The spectacle of the war on drugs have seen the complicated construction of drugs from media outlets here and abroad, framing it as violent, yet the discourse of discipline still finds its way in the narrative along with many internet posts inserting humor into the conversation (Cabbuag, 2017).

While news media have their own coverage of the war on drugs and consequently contributed to the constructions of drugs and drug users, the complexity of the internet have placed the people at the conversation giving them the space and opportunity to also add to the conversation. Herein lies the place of populist influencers in mediating the conversations. From observations of the posts related to drugs, it could be pointed that MUB deployed the strategies

enumerated by Baldwin-Philippi (2019) in relation to the technological performance of populism. For example, whenever the MUB utilizes secondary reporting, they would presage the post with a remark that they are not part of the mainstream media, and they intend to provide voice to the people to give an 'authentic' take on social issues. They also use secondary reporting more than producing own content since it could be noted that it is easier to 'hijack' an issue rather than create one ground up.

To organize and analyze the 45 posts used in this study, we can cursorily cluster them into a typological schema grouping them based on the context in which they post. In doing so we can also see the evolution of the types of posts that appeared in the MUB related to drugs. We can then also surface the themes about drugs that we can cull from posts, revealing the discursive constructions about drugs. Linking these, then to the aspects of technological performance of populism, would show the dimensions of the populist influencers and how they mediated between the populist leader and the larger populist publics.

In terms of the first step related to looking at the context, we can identify three broad overarching contexts in which we can categorize the posts: First, the posts that appeared during the campaign period (late 2015 to first quarter of 2016). These posts relate the building of the discursive construction of drugs as a securitized threat in Philippine society, which also became a major campaign slogan of Duterte. These posts also start to drum up support for Duterte as a viable presidential candidate. The second context related to Duterte's ascension to the presidency and the beginning of the implementation of the war on drugs. These posts then continue to build on the constructions of drugs in order to justify the violent policy response. Third, the last months of 2016 relates to the nearing deadline of six months that Duterte set to rid the Philippines of drugs. This context relates to further arguing for the legitimacy of the policy owing to the constructed nature of drugs, drug use, and drug users. Coinciding with mounting criticisms from opposition politicians and civil society groups, the posts also present the supposed successes of the war on drugs. The following table summarizes the description of the typologies of posts:

Table 1 Clusters of posts on MUB about drugs

Context	Types of Posts and Content	Themes regarding the Construction of Drugs	Aspects of Technological Performance of Populism
Campaign Period (late 2015 to early 2016)\n\n11 posts analyzed	These posts mainly utilized secondary reporting by reposting videos from other news agencies and then adding commentary. Mainly calling for support for Duterte and contributing to the construction of drugs as a problem that needs immediate attention.	Major themes/construction of drugs\n• Drugs as pervasive challenge to Philippine society\n• Drugs as threat to society	Amateur and anti-professional content.\n\nForegoing data-driven campaigning

Context	Types of Posts and Content	Themes regarding the Construction of Drugs	Aspects of Technological Performance of Populism
Beginning of the War on Drugs (Presidential victory and implementation of operation Tokhang, mid-2016) 12 posts analyzed	These posts mainly utilized secondary reporting by reposting videos from other news agencies and then adding commentary. Main aspect of the posts relates to lending legitimacy to the policy.	Major themes/construction of drugs • Drugs as threat to society	Amateur and anti-professional content. Foregoing data-driven campaigning Participatory and playful politics
Continuation of the War on Drugs and the (late 2016) 22 posts analyzed	Similarly, these posts still utilized secondary reporting. In the face of criticism, the posts were about defending the policy and calling for support.	Major themes/construction of drugs • Drugs as threat to society • Drugs as a moral issue	Amateur and anti-professional content. Foregoing data-driven campaigning Participatory and playful politics

In terms of the deployment of drugs in the posts, several themes emerge, we can further anchor the discussion on the ways drugs figure as a populist trope. As articulated by Lasco (2020), drugs and drug wars have become a populist trope in Asian regimes in recent years. In a way bridging the theoretical inclinations of scholarly work that engage in drugs and drug wars in the Philippines revolving around discourses of penal populism and moral politics (Lamchek & Jopson, 2024).

Lasco (2020) had noted the particular ways in which drugs and drug wars have been framed in the context of hyping moral panics as a way to amplify populist support. In this sense, we can identify three means by which a populist leader frames drug wars to bolster populist rhetoric (Lasco, 2020): First, there is a performance of national crisis, meaning the threat of drugs is impending, real, and pervasive. The use of the marker of being a "war" ramps up the concern in relation to drugs. Second, drug wars are used to sow further divisions between a righteous "we" and a dangerous "them." This dichotomy between a people and the others draws a line on which drugs divide the groups. Third, knowledge claims about drugs and the drug situation are always invoked in order to lend credibility to the claims.

Drugs as Threat to Society

One major theme in the MUB has the characterization illegal drugs as a threat to the safety of the Filipino society as it has been so pervasive and has been an critical node where corruption flows. The posts of the MUB related to this them would use speeches and proclamations of Duterte and repost them with further annotations underscoring how drugs are a a threat to the safety of the people. MUB's own posts are consistent with the statements coming from Duterte and his official channels of government. For example, in the early speeches of Duterte, he mentioned that drugs are a threat to the nation evoking a securitized view of drugs (Utama, 2021) and continues the trope of penal populism (Muhs, 2022). It could thus be inferred that the MUB played to reinforce the notions about drugs and aided in shaping the social construction of the drug situation to bolster the penal populist legitimacy where the Duterte campaign and presidency heavily relied on.

Drugs as a Moral Issue

With regard to the bifurcation between righteous people vs the errant and dangerous drug users, drugs are also presented and seen as a threat to the moral fabric of society and inciting, therefore, a sense of moral panic. In the first State of the Nation Address of Duterte, he clearly articulated this rhetoric when he mentioned that "the fight against criminality and illegal drugs and corruption will be relentless and sustained" (Rappler, 2016). Thus, when we see the posts of MUB in relation to the moral dimension, we can cite a major trope in the late 2015 to 2016 posts also underscoring and calling for support in the persecution of opposition senator Leila de Lima (Lagman, 2023). Within these set of posts, drugs are presented as a major source of corruption in government as the Duterte administration painted the opposition senator to be. As the MUB utized secondary reporting to repost news clips related to the investigation on the supposed involvement of De Lima to drugs and corruption, the MUB would annotate the posts with moral judgments and calls to the people to side with the righteous government.

Drugs as a Pervasive Challenge in the Philippines: Knowledge Claims

When the posts of the MUB relates to the ways knowledge claims about drugs and drug wars are invoked, we would see how the MUB would again reiterate Duterte's claims of how pervasive drugs in Philippine society is and how dangerous it is in altering the minds of users leading to crimes. The MUB would repost news clips about incident reports of crimes related to drug users in order to continue painting the dangers of illegal drug use. Related to this, another set of posts that could be explored are those related to discipline. As almost a companion rhetoric to drugs as threat to society, the Duterte administration and hence the MUB as a major influencer-supporter also doubled down on emphasizing the importance of discipline among the people. The posts regarding discipline would constantly hark back to the need for a stringent policy to curb the drug problem and that this discipline is something needed to be upheld in order to aid in solving the problems of society. Taken together, the construction of drugs and discipline frame the issue of illegal drugs in a penal populist trope and negates any indictment of extra-judicial killings and calls for upholding human rights.

From the preceding discussion, we can infer the ways in which the MUB conducted a technological performance of (penal) populism. Done through the social media platform Facebook, the MUB could be characterized as a 'populist influencer' that aimed to amass support for Duterte. When appreciated in light of the ways the Duterte administration also discredited and attacked mainstream media being biased (Chua, 2020), the portrayal of MUB as a blog and concomitantly, a populist influencer, could also be interpreted as a way to present itself as an alternative and thus "more authentic" source of information for the public. If we focus on the ways the MUB lent support and credence to the war on drugs wage by Duterte, we also see the ways drugs and drug wars become a populist trope by securitizing the issue, presenting a moral dimension, and forwarding knowledge claims. Reaching millions through their followers—some may indeed be fake or troll accounts—the MUB became a major platform of support for Duterte especially during the campaign period and the early presidency.

Conclusion

The advent and widespread use of social media platforms had complicated and animated political dynamics and political participation all over the world. The recent trend observed in relation to democratic backsliding and rise of populist regimes have benefited from social media owing to the ways information had spread at a much faster pace. The emergence of content creation and citizen driven journalism had also complicated access and consumption of news and information. With this in mind, it is important to consider the ways in which social media platforms, and the internet in general, had become a key player in the ways policies and discourses are shaped and communicated. Amid the firestorm of controversy leveled against the violent war on drugs of Duterte, his administration remained popular. Especially in the

early stages of the war on drugs and his presidency, the proliferation of many bloggers and influencers that amplified the government messaging through social media undeniably contributed to the populist appeal of Duterte. Among the blogs at the forefront of this armada was the MUB.

As this study aims to nuance the modes of communicating drug policy in the Philippines under the Duterte administration, it also hopes to contribute to the growing conversation about populism (more precisely, penal populism) and its various facets—the populist leader, the populist publics, and in particular, the 'populist influencer.' As the War on Drugs brewed from the period of campaign to its full-blown implementation in the early presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, this piece notes the importance of looking into the ways illegal drugs have been framed not only through the official channels of government, but also through social media—an arena that became an embattled terrain for competing voices and perspectives on the drug policy. In this realm of democratic deliberation, the role of populist influencers is worthy of close scrutiny since it could be noted that these social media pages, in many ways, serve to mediate between the populist leader and the government on the one hand, and the public, both the supporters and opposition, on the other.

While this paper focuses on the ways the war on drugs and the construction of drugs and drug users unfolded in cyberspace, we need to always be reminded of the impact of these constructions to the lives of the people in the "real world." There have been numerous accounts that have shed light on the impact of the violent war on drugs to the communities involved (Evangelista, 2023) and the lives of the people and families affected by the killings (Franco, 2024; Pangilinan et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to bear in mind that such constructions about drugs and drug users have real consequences.

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