

A critical discursive psychology study of dehumanization and retributive justice in Duterte's war on drugs

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Abstract

Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022) launched the War on Drugs, a campaign spearheaded by *Oplan Tokhang* and linked to an estimated 12,000 to 30,000 deaths. Despite compelling evidence of human rights violations and violence against people, war on drugs was still supported among the people. Hence, the qualitative study addresses a critical gap on how the Filipino use language to adopt, resist, or negotiate dehumanization to justify or challenge the punitive measures of Duterte's War on Drugs. Drawing from the eight (8) interview data, the analysis identified four (4) dominant interpretative repertoires: (1) the pathologization and criminalization of Psychoactive Substance Use Disorders (PSUDs), (2) the framing of the War on Drugs as protective, ineffective, or unjust, (3) justice as either redemptive or retributive, and (4) media as a key determinant of public perception. The study highlights how discourse not only reflects but also reproduces the political and moral boundaries that define who is worthy of care and who becomes disposable. It underscores the urgent need to reframe substance use as a public health issue rooted in structural conditions, and to humanize PSUDs in both policy and public dialogue.

Keywords: *dehumanization, retributive justice, PSUDs, war on drugs, social justice*

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1. Introduction

In 2011 and 2016, Davao City was recognized as one of the safest cities in the Philippines with the city having a safety index score of 73.3 on Numbeo's Safety Index - eventually placing Davao City as the fourth safest city in Southeast Asia. This placed it behind Singapore, Makati, and Valenzuela, and ahead of cities like Chiang Mai and Bandar Seri Begawan. The rankings were based on factors such as crime rates and residents' perceptions of safety. The year was during Rodrigo Duterte's mayorship in Davao City. His tenure was characterized by a strong anti-crime stance, which he credited for transforming Davao into one of the "safest cities" in the Philippines. However, multiple reports linked his administration to the Davao Death Squad (DDS), a vigilante group allegedly responsible for extrajudicial killings. During the presidential campaign, Rodrigo Duterte advocated for the termination of the drug trade, even going as far as to endorse the killing of those involved in using and selling drugs (Gunawan & Permana, 2024).

Upon taking office in 2016, Duterte launched the deadly campaign called "war on drugs" through *Oplan Tokhang*. This resulted in the deaths of an estimated 12, 000 to 30, 000 victims (Iglesias, 2023). The killings often target low-level drug users and dealers in poor urban areas. The Philippine National Police denied the killings; however, many officers involved in these killings have been promoted rather than prosecuted (Conde, 2018). Therefore, these killings go beyond impunity but a deliberate plan coming from higher levels of authority (Gallagher et al., 2019).

Despite being under arrest by the International Criminal Court on his administration's war against drugs, Duterte's drug war still has staunch supporters. Duterte established a justification for the Filipino people to support the state-initiated violence. This is marked by Duterte's speeches that portray the killings as a moral obligation and a fulfillment of his campaign promises (Ochoa & Ong, 2022). Duterte further reinforces this stance by dehumanizing drug users, describing them as hopeless cases with damaged brains and beyond rehabilitation (Camacho & Montiel, 2021). This securitizes the Psychoactive Substance Use Disorders (PSUDs) (dehumanizing them) thus legitimizes the extrajudicial killings (Vukusic, 2023).

The current study examines the two types of dehumanization and its effect in treating marginalized groups and Duterte's rhetoric during the War on Drugs with the country's way of dealing with PSUDs. Hence, the study analyzes how the participants resist, justify, manage,

and perpetuate punitive measures against PSUDs through: a) how participants talk about substance-dependent individuals in the context of Duterte's War on Drugs; b) use language to justify or resist retributive justice measures, such as extrajudicial killings; c) construction of justice and punishment in relation to substance dependence and criminal behavior; and d) how participants draw on, negotiate, or resist broader political and mainstream media narratives in their discourse about Duterte's War on Drugs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dehumanization

Dehumanization is the denial of one's humanness by likening humans with objects or machines (Haslam, 2006). The mechanical dehumanization was commonly studied in workplaces wherein workers who are exploited are more likely to be attributed qualities indicative of mechanistic dehumanization (Stanley & Kay, 2024). Similarly, people that belong to a group that is perceived to be more of an economic asset (in this study as Asians) than a threat (Black) were subjected to mechanical dehumanization rather than animalistic dehumanization (Bai & Zhao, 2024). On the other hand, animalistic dehumanization is when a person or a group is perceived to be lacking refinement. In mechanistic dehumanization, the dehumanized other is less human but useful while in animalistic dehumanization the dehumanized other may be perceived as deserving to be erased or removed. This is due to the relationship of disgust, animalistic dehumanization, and the role of mentalizing (deciding if something has a mind) (Sherman & Haidt, 2011). Disgust has been defined as a defensive mechanism that evolved to protect itself from harm. As such "disgusting entities" elicit the urgency to be removed from the site of the viewer. Animalistic dehumanization results in exclusion of the disgust-eliciting and dehumanized group from social interactions, in an attempt to reduce the potential contamination (Sumnall et al., 2021). Disgust propensity was related to stigma towards a range of people described as mentally ill including those with 'drug addiction' (Boysen et al., 2020) or substance use disorder, and people from low socioeconomic status (Sainz et al., 2020).

Dehumanization results in several injustices in society because it can also work on "us" and "them" (in-groups being the humans and the out-groups as the dehumanized group). Being an out-group does not mean immediate dehumanization. It has been found that viewing members of marginalized outgroups known to elicit disgust (e.g., the homeless, drug addicts)

does not influence activation in the medial prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that is broadly implicated in social cognition) (Sherman & Haidt, 2011). Non-activation means that the person being perceived as disgusting is perceived as sub-human. The biologized social groups tend to be victims of indirect rather than direct aggression tendencies (i.e., intentions against individuals or groups to cause damage through face-to-face confrontation) (Valtorta et al., 2023). Consequently, this leads to a barrier to positive social interaction. The impaired social relations stemmed from reduced empathy of the perpetrator to the dehumanized group because the decrease of empathy means decrease of guilt (Camassa, 2024).

Moreover, the dehumanization of individuals, specifically PSUDs have resulted in higher desire for social distancing, perceptions of dangerousness, violence and victimization, and higher levels of support for discriminatory and aggressive policies targeting out-groups (Parker et al., 2020). This justifies punitive measures for PSUDs such as extrajudicial killings under retributive justice. Retributive justice is the concept that individuals who commit wrongdoing deserve to be punished in proportion to their actions. This theory is grounded in the principle that justice requires punishing those who are guilty, while ensuring that punishment is fair and not excessive (Sellers & Kirste, 2023). According to Sellers and Kirste, there are three kinds of retributive theories which are the traditional retributive theory that states that wrongdoers should suffer because they deserve it, and this suffering is viewed as a just outcome; the fairness-based theory that argues that wrongdoers take an unfair advantage over others when they break the law, therefore punishment is needed to balance things out; and the communicative theory, on the other hand, views punishment to fault offenders, highlighting their actions are wrong, and upholding societal moral values. These interpretations often assume that individuals possess a degree of moral agency that underpins the idea that people can be held accountable for their actions.

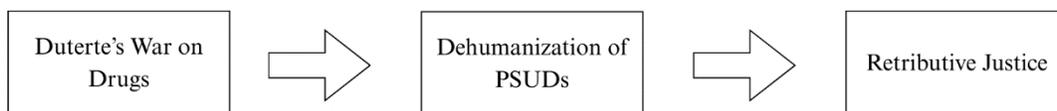
2.2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates how Duterte's War on Drugs (first part from the left) shapes the institutional, political, and media-driven narratives that circulate widely in public discourse. These dominant framings influence the participant's perspective of PSUDs. The second part (Dehumanization of PSUDs) reflects how such discourse may produce or rely on dehumanizing interpretative repertoires which in turn enable certain rhetorical strategies that may be used to justify or resist retributive justice measures. The Retributive Justice part

captures how participants construct meanings around justice, punishment, and accountability in the context of substance dependence. Additionally, the framework also shows how macro-level ideologies are embedded in micro-level interactions regarding PSUDs, punishment, and justice.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework



Source: Author's own compilation

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The study's central lens is the dehumanization theory (Haslam, 2006) which suggests that when humans or a group is perceived as either animals or automata, the dehumanizing group morally disengages and justify harm done against the dehumanized group or person. Within Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP), this dehumanization is a discursive accomplishment, i.e., ideology that is produced, circulated, and normalized through language. This theory provides analysis on how PSUDs are discursively constructed as less than human, framing them as criminals or societal pests who threaten public safety, which then legitimize retributive justice measures i.e., extrajudicial killings, but also sustain public support for punitive state policies. The dehumanization theory allows the study to systematically examine how language and discourse facilitate moral disengagement and the justification of violence against marginalized groups. Through dehumanization theory, this study examines how discourse shapes attitudes toward justice and punishment, illustrating how the denial of humanity underpins the normalization of violence and the marginalization of vulnerable groups. Moreover, it shows how discourses reflect, align, and sustain broader political and media narratives surrounding Duterte's War on Drugs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design with a CDP approach to examine how discourse constructs and reinforces the dehumanized perception of PSUDs and the

justification of retributive justice in the context of Duterte’s War on Drugs. CDP views discourse as both socially constructed and socially constitutive, emphasizing that language is not merely a reflection of thought, but an active force in shaping social realities. It does this through the concepts of ideological dilemmas, interpretative repertoires, and subject positions (Parker, 2015). This approach helps explore how people use language to create meaning, defend punitive actions, and reinforce common beliefs about drug users and justice within the context of Duterte’s War on Drugs.

3.2. *Participants of the Study*

The study used a purposive sampling method to recruit eight (8) participants who are 25 years old and above, a Filipino citizen, and lived in the Philippines during Duterte’s Presidency (2016-2022). The participants were eligible if they are citizens of the Philippines participants have a direct cultural and national connection to the issue, lived in the Philippines during the Drug War to ensure that they have firsthand experience with the socio-political environment and discourse surrounding the war on drugs. This also extends to the age criteria that ensures that the participant is at least 18 years old in 2016 or the start of Duterte’s Presidency. This was to ensure that the participants had the cognitive and emotional maturity to understand and critically reflect on the socio-political environment during the War on Drugs. Those younger than 18 at the time may not have had sufficient exposure or awareness to meaningfully engage with the topic, hence they were excluded from the sample. Participants were recruited through community networks, referrals, and social media outreach. The participants are assigned with pseudonyms to mask their identity and ensure anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality.

Table 1

Demographics of the participants

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Sex	Age	Place of Residence (2016-2022)
Dio	M	44 y.o	REGION IV-A
Belen	F	45 y.o	REGION VIII
Malou	F	26 y.o	REGION IV-A
Dustin	M	25 y.o	NCR
Laila	F	63 y.o	REGION XI
Jane	F	25 y.o	NCR
Rona	F	26 y.o	NCR
Ian	M	26 y.o	NCR

Note: M stands for male, F for female, and y.o for years old

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

After obtaining approval from Philippine Normal University (PNU) Research Ethics Committee, the researchers recruited eight (8) participants for the study through social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, X, and Messenger) and emails (GMail) within the community. Interested individuals had to fill out a first survey form via Google Forms containing informed consent, eligibility check, availability, and interview modality preferences. Participants are asked to fill out an informed consent prior to the interview proper. The researcher reiterates eligibility checks to ensure clear understanding of the criteria of the study and explains the contents of informed consent. Participants are told they have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

With permission from the participants, the sessions were audio recorded using a smartphone. The interview used semi-structured core questions (5) along with 2-4 follow-up questions to encourage deeper discussion. To ensure the privacy of participants, all collected data are kept strictly confidential and accessible only to the researcher. Data is securely encrypted on Google Drive with two-factor authentication to prevent unauthorized access. The collected data will be disposed of one year after the study's publication date. This time frame allows for responsible retention of data for a reasonable period to facilitate potential verification or follow-up inquiries. Findings were shared with participants who were invited to contact the researcher for further information.

3.4. Data Analysis

CDP is a qualitative methodological framework that allows analysts to trace the function of talk; the focus is on language and identifying interpretative repertoires as part of social practices and a consideration of talk as performative (Healy-Cullen et al., 2024). The collected data was transcribed using conventions of Potter and Wetherell. The transcripts went on six (6) stages according to CDP (Parker, 2015). The study used Google Sheets to identify keywords, preliminary themes before using interpretative repertoires i.e., 'a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes. These repertoires are a collective understanding of social reality which is used to take retributive measures against PSUDs and create certain subject positions. Additionally, the study identified discursive tools that the participants used to create subject positions and achieve discursive accomplishments. The critical aspect of the

analysis lies in its concern with how language both reflects and reproduces broader ideological and institutional power. CDP interrogates how discourses are used not only to describe PSUDs but also to legitimate actions and policies that shape their lived reality.

3.5. *Research Ethics*

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Philippine Normal University Research Ethics Committee with the research ethics code REC 2025-077. All participants provided informed consent, took part voluntarily, and were assured of their confidentiality and right to withdraw at any time.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis generated four (4) prominent interpretative repertoires and a series of discursive constructions. The first repertoire consists of the perception of individuals without substance-use disorder towards PSUDs which either pathologize or criminalize PSUDs. The second repertoire dealt with the war on drugs as protection, ineffective, and unjust. The third repertoire constructs justice as redemptive; punishment is carceral and retributive while the fourth repertoire media consumed determined perspectives on PSUDs. Each repertoire is followed by the discursive constructions that appear within it.

Table 2

Summary of results

Repertoire	Discursive Constructions	Subject Positions	Discursive Strategies	Ideological Dilemmas Managed
Pathologizing and criminalizing PSUDs	PSUDs as mentally unstable	Rational and morally upright citizen	Moral binaries	Human vs. less-than-human
	PSUDs as threats	Vulnerable public	Criminality and fear	Protection vs. punishment
War on Drugs as protective, ineffective, and unjust	Protective - justifies killings via hypothetical harm	Defender of order	State rhetoric	Order vs. rights
	Ineffective - highlights failure of campaign	Critical observer	Rights-based discourse	Safety vs. justice

Repertoire	Discursive Constructions	Subject Positions	Discursive Strategies	Ideological Dilemmas Managed
Justice as redemptive vs. retributive	Unjust - critique of lack of due process	Morally responsible citizen	Victim-centered narratives	Support vs. dissent
	Redemptive - rehabilitation as humane	Reformer	Public health framing	Care vs. control
	Retributive - legal punishment as alternative to death	Law-abiding advocate	Legal discourse	Humanity vs. cost
	Hopeless - PSUDs as burdens	Burdened caretaker	Neoliberal resource talk	Reform vs. exclusion
Media as determinant of discourse	Media as source of participant views	Informed citizen (via media)	News reports, viral narratives, and government-aligned framing	Independent thinking vs. mediated opinion
	News and/or social media shape discourse	Echo chamber subject		

Legend: Repertoires represent broad, recurrent themes or systems of meaning, discursive constructions show how talk shapes the world as seen by the speaker, while ideological dilemmas capture how speakers navigate competing or morally complex ideas.

4.1. Pathologizing and Criminalizing PSUDs

PSUDs as mentally unstable and visibly abnormal in behavior and appearance. In the extract, PSUDs are described as “*parang baliw*” when under the influence, which builds a discursive construction of them as mentally unstable and irrational. This creates a contrast between users and non-users, where non-users are positioned as rational, educated, and in control who think clearly and have better decision-making. For instance, Rona (26) states that the difference between her and people who use drugs is she is educated, hence more informed. Through this contrast, the participants take up a subject position of moral superiority and normalcy, while PSUDs are pushed into a dehumanized subject position, individuals who do not have self-control. This shows how dehumanized groups are seen as lacking human traits like rationality (Haslam, 2006). This construct perceives people as lacking mental states or the ability to experience the world like a normal human being (Gradidge et al., 2023), it may lead

to support for harsh, even violent, responses like those seen in punitive drug policies (Mendelsohn et al., 2020).

The description of PSUDs being linked to “madness” echoes long-standing colonial and psychiatric discourses that perceive mental “illness” as something to be cured. This positions PSUDs as irrational individuals that are incapable of rational decision making which results in legitimization of technologies of control, i.e., involuntary rehabilitation, coercive treatment, and extrajudicial violence. Furthermore, it reinforces neoliberal subjectivity thus the exclusion or elimination of “failed” non-self-regulating and unproductive citizens. Pathologizing PSUDs further reinforce blame on the individual and depoliticize the material conditions that brought about the substance use disorder.

PSUDs are constructed as a menace and an unpredictable, violent threat to society.

Within this construction, a "vulnerable law-abiding citizen" position emerges, someone who must remain alert and constantly protect themselves. The narrative creates a clear divide between “us” and “them,” where the in-group (non-users) is seen as fully human and deserving of safety, and the out-group (users) is dehumanized and viewed as dangerous outsiders. For instance, Belen (45) refers to persons who use drugs as “salot sa lipunan,” followed by laughter. Using humor to express such a label, often under the guise of harmlessness, suggests that this dehumanizing view is seen as normal and acceptable in everyday conversation. For instance, Sakki and Castren (2022) note that jokes targeting specific groups can perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to their dehumanization. This kind of discursive construction aligns with what Habib et al. (2023) describes as a dehumanizing framing which emphasizes the threat and violence associated with drug use rather than the social or health factor that led to it. These constructions are not neutral because they actively shape public attitudes and support for aggressive policies, such as war on drugs.

Furthermore, this construction mirrors “moral panic” that is historically used to justify violent state control over marginalized populations such as criminals, communists, and insurgents. Moral panic enables the state to claim the right to distinguish between lives worth saving and lives in need of disposal. Additionally, it normalizes violence against PSUDs in public discourse as shown in Belen’s humor. This can further be explained by Žižek’s ideological enjoyment where cruelty become socially acceptable and politically effective.

PSUDs are framed as victims of systemic and external forces. Within this construction, participants constructed people with substance use disorders as victims of external and systemic conditions. According to Dustin (M, 25), some people turn to drugs to survive or escape challenging situations. This shows that the speaker sees the person behind the drug use, instead of labeling them as hopeless or criminal. The subject position taken by the participants is someone who recognizes the external conditions and understand the struggles that lead individuals to substance use. Simbulan et al. (2019) describe the drug problem in the Philippines as a symptom of deeper social issues such as inequality, injustice, and lack of economic opportunity.

Some participants also acknowledge environmental influences. For instance, Rona (F, 26) explains that some people grow up in places where drug use is normal (*“ito na yung nakagisnan nila”*), so they are more likely to try it. This shows that drug use can be influenced by one’s environment, not just personal choice. This shifts responsibility away from the individual and instead tries to understand their situation.

By framing PSUDs as victims of a flawed system, the construct contests dominant punitive narratives, resists neoliberal individualism, and reframes from substance use because of systemic neglect and not moral failure. Thus, it potentially results in support for public health initiatives and community-based care.

The pathologization and criminalization of PSUDs draw upon dehumanizing logic that justify punitive and often extrajudicial responses which echo both colonial psychiatric discourses and contemporary forms of punitive populism. Such framings legitimate state violence by deflecting attention from structural inequalities and reinforce hegemonic notions of the “ideal citizen” as rational, self-governing, and morally upright. This repertoire aligns with Regilme (2025) who argues that Duterte’s war on drugs is not a mere brutal campaign against illegal drugs, but a class war executed through the language and logic of dehumanization. Additionally, it shifts blame away from oligarchic inequality, dispossession, and transnational financial interests by recoding structural crises as pathologies of “deviant” individuals (Franko & Goyes, 2022). Hence, the PSUDs are pathologized and criminalized. However, the emergence of counter-discourses signals a challenge to dominant narratives. They open alternative subject positions rooted in solidarity rather than stigma, and emphasize the need for transformative, rights-based approaches to drug policy.

4.2. War on Drugs is Protection, Ineffective, and Unjust

The war on drugs is portrayed as protective measures against criminal behaviors of PSUDs. Within this construct, the defender of safety and moral order position emerges, using emotionally charged language to justify retributive justice measures, such as extrajudicial killings. Participants, such as Dio (M, 44), assume the subject position of defenders of order and safety, invoking emotionally charged, hypothetical scenarios to legitimize extrajudicial killings (EJKs). This mirrors the rhetoric employed by former President Rodrigo Duterte. The binary moral framework is used in this extract, where individuals are categorized as either protectors of societal order or as threats. Such binary logic in discourse can reshape the meaning of policies and social norms, often leading to contradictions between stated values and actual practices (Dougherty & Hode, 2016). This can normalize exceptional measures and sustain a culture of impunity.

This mirror's state rhetoric, i.e., Duterte's drug war discourse (2016–2022), was built upon older tropes from Marcos-era authoritarian rule that links criminality to disorder and used to justify militarized law enforcement. The rhetoric of "protection" is aligned with state paternalism where Duterte claims to act in defense of the "masses" while often criminalizing the poor. This corresponds with Ciocchini (2024) wherein Duterte constructs a narrative of a nation under siege by 'criminal' elements' which requires a "strong father figure" (Duterte) to protect the law-abiding 'family'. Dio's emotionally charged scenario exemplifies how subject positions are enabled by a broader ideological field that normalizes retribution. This reflects the operation of power through discourse that constructs PSUDs as "killable subjects". The use of binary moral frameworks (protector vs. criminal) is a discursive strategy that limits the range of subjectivities available to PSUDs that denies them complexity or personhood (dehumanization). It also obscures structural factors like poverty and systemic neglect and frames substance use as purely moral failing.

The war on drugs is portrayed as ineffective in addressing the root causes of substance use. A critical observer who resists the notion that extrajudicial killings are a justifiable solution to drug-related issues emerges within this construction. The war on drugs is framed not as a solution, but as a source of more violence and suffering. Jane (25) uses language to resist EJK, which emphasizes the ineffectiveness of the campaign and its harmful consequences. She demonstrates a critical stance toward the Philippine government's war on

drugs. This construct politicizes the war on drugs and substance use in the Philippines through framing it as a source of violence, rather than a solution. This introduces the ideological dilemma of safety vs justice. The affective register (e.g., "*maraming biktima*") appeals to shared humanity and moral responsibility, thus countering dehumanizing discourses and punitive measures.

Extrajudicial killings are framed as unjust and illegal regardless of the offense committed. In this construct, a morally responsible citizen who opposes both drug abuse and unjust solutions like extrajudicial killings occurs. For instance, Ian (M, 26) expresses resistance to extrajudicial killings (EJKs), emphasizing the lack of due process. He frames these killings as illegal and unjust, regardless of whether the victims used drugs. This construct challenges the narrative that killing those involved in drugs is a necessary solution. Instead, it presents EJKs as violations of basic human rights and legal procedures. Other participants also mentioned this framing, emphasizing its failure to stop the drug problem in the country. Participants point out that killings were mostly directed at ordinary people and not the powerful drug lords. The participant's mention of innocent people and children who were killed, "*nabura yung pangarap nila*" (Dustin, M, 25) demonstrates that war on drugs affects lives beyond those directly accused of drug use.

Their response is similar to Elok and Setiyono (2023) that extrajudicial killings in the Philippines represent a systemic violation of due process and may amount to crimes against humanity. Additionally, Johnson and Fernquest (2018) also argue that the punitive approach of the Duterte administration failed to address the root socio-economic factors that contribute to drug use, such as poverty and lack of access to education and healthcare. The ideological dilemma managed here centers on justice vs. impunity and support vs. dissent, which questions whether state violence can ever be justified in a society that claims to uphold the rule of law.

This view questions Duterte's populist authoritarianism that often delegitimizes the judiciary and glorifies street-level executions. The participant's subject positions reclaim the state's legal obligation to uphold the law and highlight the illegal exceptionality invoked by Duterte's "*nanlaban*" narratives. The discourse reveals the classed nature of drug war, thus emphasizing structural violence and systemic inequality.

Language that justifies retributive justice measures, i.e., extrajudicial killings, serves to perpetuate the state's rhetoric of prioritizing order and safety before the rights of PSUDs.

Humor was used to naturalize or soften punitive measures against PSUDs and language that are rights-based and victim-centered. This provides narratives of resistance against punitive measures.

4.3. Justice is Redemptive, Punishment is Carceral and Retributive

Rehabilitation is redemptive justice. Participants who drew on this repertoire framed substance-use as a health issue such as Rona (F, 26). This positions PSUDs as salvageable individuals which align with public health discourses and a moral framework grounded in redemption and institutional care. Rona's use of "*dapat*" is a prescriptive stance which constructs rehabilitation as the morally appropriate alternative to extrajudicial measures. Her phrase "*hindi tayo aabot ng dapat sa pagpatay*" positions non-users as morally responsible citizens that must not endorse or enact punitive violence. She orients herself as part of a rational, humane public, implicitly resisting the normalized discourse of killing as justice.

Similarly, Jane's (F, 25) usage of "*Mas okay*" in the sentence declares that rehabilitation is better than killing or any other forms of approach towards PSUDs. The sentence is action-oriented with the word "*ipasok sila sa rehabilitation center*" asserting that PSUDs must be rehabilitated. Rehabilitation is perceived as "*tamang paraan*" (right way) for the PSUDs to recover from addiction. PSUDs are positioned as individuals in need of support to recover from addiction while the participant places themselves as a rational person that can determine the optimal choice for the PSUDs.

This construct draws from public health framing that produces the ideological dilemma of care vs control. The redemptive framing contests the dominant punitive measures, i.e., extrajudicial killings during the Duterte administration. However, such discourses may still reproduce neoliberal responsabilization i.e., burden of change is placed on the individual rather than the structural conditions that shape drug use. The construct resists violence but subtly reinforces the idea that PSUDs are broken individuals needing institutionalization. This agrees with Regilme (2020) by means that the idea of peace is a justificatory discourse for increased state repression, intensified criminalization of the drug problem, and the reluctance of the state in considering a public health approach towards the proliferation of narcotics.

PSUDs must be punished just under the law. Dio (M, 44) statement has hedging with "*siguro sakin*" and the trailing (...) which aims to soften his stance on the issue. This also

suggests that the person is uncertain of his opinion on the matter, thus the use of plausibility shields (Leláková & Praženicová, 2024). The participant perceived that lifetime imprisonment is the proper punishment, but the usage of the word “*lang*” indicates that lifetime imprisonment is a softer punishment than death. Dio recognizes that the lives of PSUDs are also lives but thinks that lifetime imprisonment is a better choice. This frames PSUDs as criminals and substance use disorder as criminal behavior that must be punished under the law. Dio draws on carceral discourses, i.e., incarceration is equated with justice, while also managing his self-presentation as a thoughtful and more humane speaker. With PSUDs constructed as legally accountable, they are also constructed as having actions that call for punishment. The function of this discourse asserts public safety and reclaims justice within the bounds of law rather than violence.

The constructs draw from a legal discourse that manages the ideological dilemma between retributive justice and moral civility. It affirms the state's power to punish while it looks to avoid the moral and international condemnation that extrajudicial killings entail. This reinforces condemnation of PSUDs while staying “humane.” However, it depoliticized the root causes of drug use due to the focus on individual accountability. By this, it reinforces neoliberal subjectivity where the law is treated as impartial, which further denies that the law is often applied unevenly across social classes. Ciocchini and Lamchek (2023) show that the legal professionals’ embracement of plea bargaining continues the weaponization of morality against the poor within the criminal justice system. Consequently, the construct still upholds the state's punitive measures not through killings but through exclusions brought by confinement. It is still punitive because imprisonment has been shown to be counter-productive in the rehabilitation and reintegration of PSUDs (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2025).

There are hopeless cases that should be eliminated instead of being a problem. This discursively constructed PSUDs as a drain on family and social resources. PSUDs are positioned as hopeless cases for those whose rehabilitation is futile. This talk relied heavily on neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility and resource scarcity where care is conditional, and economic burden becomes justification for elimination. Laila (F, 63) opens with an emotional buildup. The phrase “*taon ang bibilangin*” has raised volume showing strong emotional intensity brought by the long duration of rehabilitation. The statement unfolds in three clear points. Rehabilitation is framed as time-consuming, cyclical, costly, and ineffective.

The discourse marker “e” adds a tone of resignation which implies that the rehabilitation of PSUDs is another burden. She positions herself as a practical, burdened member of society, drawing on common-sense reasoning to justify exclusionary logic. The discursive construction legitimizes elimination as a rational and compassionate response to protect families and resources from the perceived threat of recurrence. The discursive function is to disqualify PSUDs from social investment; thus, they are framed as irredeemable.

Politically, this construct presents the disposability of PSUDS. By constructing PSUDs as “hopeless cases” who only drain family and state resources, it aligns with a neoliberal, capitalist framework where human worth is judged by productivity and social utility. It legitimizes structural violence in the guise of care or practicality. Consequently, it enables moral disengagement, which produces policies that focus on abandonment, neglect, or even elimination of PSUDs cloaked in “compassion”. It constructs justice as the removal of unproductive individuals hence it is justice as subtraction.

The participant’s dependence on these discursive constructions highlights that when PSUDs are perceived as needing support for recovery, the construction of justice is being in a facility that allows them to recover. Through this, the participants resisted punitive measures for PSUDs. Justice is seen on how it is applied to the PSUDs and how they can reintegrate in the community. In contrast, when justice is perceived as due to the community, substance use disorder is treated as a criminal behavior thus the suggested response is incarceration. PSUDs are seen as threats, shifting the response from care to incarceration and justifying the denial of health services. This framing portrays them as morally deficient and detached from their communities. As Barragan et al. (2022) argue, such narratives legitimize punishment over treatment. Another form of punishment is elimination of PSUDs or retributive justice which aligns with discussions on the politics of drug rehabilitation in the Philippines. Similarly, research sees that public discourse often oscillates between punitive measures and compulsory rehabilitation, both of which can marginalize individuals with substance use issues and frame them as threats to societal well-being (Lasco & Yarcia, 2022). This type of justice only functions when the individual is perceived as a burden to the family and irredeemable. These characteristics violate societal norms specifically in a culture that is family centered. Aiding the family is what is expected from an individual whilst becoming a burden is frowned upon. Furthermore, it highlights the feelings of shame, and the obligation families feel to police drug use within their homes (Kusaka, 2020). Violating social norms often elicits disgust (Haslam,

2006) which is a precursor to dehumanization. Consistent with these results, Simmons et al. (2023) prove that the dehumanization of PSUDs favors punitive measures and creates a culture of punishment that serves the goal of alienating offenders.

4.4. Media as Determinant of Discourse Regarding PSUDs

Informed beliefs that the violent War on Drugs was necessary. By adopting the same war-and-enemy rhetoric that Habib et al. (2023) identify as core to media-driven dehumanization, Duterte's speeches effectively recast people who use drugs as a homogenous, faceless threat whose very existence jeopardizes "peace". Belen's tentative endorsement of the War on Drugs is revealed as more than personal conviction but a product of an orchestrated discourse that legitimizes EJKs by framing them as necessary acts of self-defense against an inhuman adversary (Habib et al., 2023). Thus, this reveals how media-driven narratives offer individuals a repertoire in which they can justify punitive state violence while keeping a sense of moral rationality while enabling violence against PSUDs. As such, the media is not a mere informant but an ideological apparatus that constructs PSUDS as subjects that need to be killed.

News and social media shape discourse. On the other hand, Malou (F, 26) focused on the technical aspects of the War on Drugs. Malou positions herself as an autonomous individual capable of forming their own thoughts and comprehension from the information they encounter. The metaphor of "*bulok*" or rot in spoiled food stands for perception of PSUDs while the spoiled food presents the graveness of the dilemma of illegal drugs in the country. This positions Duterte as an incompetent leader that implements band-aid solutions that are incapable of addressing the root of problems. The usage of "*bulok*" as a representation of PSUDs and justifies "cleansing" discourses.

Participants' accounts critique the Drug War due to its unjust and non-empathic approach to substance use. The access to information on unjust arrests challenged the legitimacy of state violence and reframed the War on Drugs not as a necessary crime-control measure but as a moral failure. Duterte's leadership was repeatedly described as emotionally detached and punitive. Ian (M, 26) positioned himself as an empathetic individual that aligns with the bereaved family. This discourse constructs a moral high ground where justice is associated with compassion and human life, not in a retributive stance taken by Drug War supporters. This positions the families of victims of Drug War as having an emotional burden

due to the death of a loved one. This shifts the focus of substance use disorders from criminality to the importance of human life. This supports that presenting addiction as a treatable health issue reduces stigma and public support for punitive sanctions while the absence of such framing leaves dehumanization unchecked (McGinty et al., 2014).

Participants' talk about Duterte's War on Drugs reveals how media narratives operate as powerful sites of ideological reproduction and contestation. Participants also negotiate and resist these dominant narratives by drawing on alternative media sources and human rights discourses. These resistant discourses humanize PSUDs, foreground structural violence, and emphasize empathy and justice over retribution.

Media-driven discourses do not merely reflect social realities, but they form the subject positions of individuals which shape how individuals understand their relationship to PSUDs and war on drugs. The media serves as a window in which the participants view PSUDs according to the media's angle. This also includes the severity of the cases related to crime and PSUDs and the urgency of "solution" that they need. Thus, media narratives about the War on Drugs form a contested discursive battleground where state power is both reproduced and challenged. This highlights the importance of critically examining the media's role in shaping public opinion, political subjectivities, and the ongoing negotiation of state violence and human rights in the Philippines.

5. Conclusion

Psychoactive Substance Use Disorders (PSUDs) have often been portrayed by mainstream media as threats to public safety, particularly during the height of Duterte's War on drugs. This framing fueled beliefs that violent and punitive actions, such as extrajudicial killings, were needed to protect the public. This study explored how participants either justified or resisted these narratives, revealing two main discourses: one that dehumanizes PSUDs as hopeless and threat to society and another that recognizes their struggles and the need for genuine care and rehabilitation. The results confirm that mechanistic dehumanization supports punitive measures while framing PSUDs as a threat justifies moral outrage and retributive justice. This highlights the role of language and media in shaping public opinion, often diverting attention away from systemic causes of substance use.

The study foregrounds structural drivers of drug use in a way most dehumanization studies have not fully explored, which suggests a node for empathy-building interventions. The

study explored that these repertoires function as political practices through which participants position themselves and others, navigating ideological dilemmas between safety and rights, punishment and care, legality and moral outrage. The use of language is constitutive of political realities shaping who is rendered killable, who is mourned, and who is deemed responsible.

While the study offers deep insight into the moral and ideological scaffolding of retributive justice, its scope is limited by the underrepresentation of older participants and a geographic concentration in urban areas. Future research should aim to include more diverse age groups and explore how family roles, media exposure, and regional contexts influence the uptake and resistance of dominant narratives.

The study offers insight into how ordinary citizens absorb and reproduce state narratives through everyday talk, showing how ideological violence is internalized and made emotionally acceptable. By identifying localized discursive strategies that mirror global patterns of punitive populism, the study connects Philippine-specific cases to broader theoretical frameworks of dehumanization and state violence. Hence, this study stresses the need to reframe substance use disorder as a health issue and recognize PSUDs as people in need of care and systemic support, rather than subjects of violent punishment.

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This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Philippine Normal University. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by the Philippine Normal University Research Ethics Committee with the research ethics code REC 2025-077.

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