Living in the Time of ‘Tokhang’: Perspectives from Filipino Youth

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About the Authors

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NoBox Transitions Foundation, Inc. (NoBox Philippines) is a non-profit organization which advocates for harm reduction in the Philippines. The organization envisions a society which upholds the value and dignity of each person regardless of involvement with drugs by espousing harm reduction as a way of life. The organization aims to be the leading civil society organization advocating for effective drug-related policies and responses in the Philippines in collaboration with various public and private sectors. NoBox Philippines leads honest conversations, conducts research, advocates for just laws and policies, provides harm reduction services, and mobilizes communities towards a more supportive and humane society for people involved with drugs.
Executive Summary

Drug policy in the Philippines is characterized by a punitive approach, which has reached its peak in the ongoing war on drugs. This reflects a serious lack of input from the key target demographic: the drug users themselves whose perspectives, lived experiences, and life trajectories can help policymakers craft a more humane and effective program.

This study aims to help fill this gap. Building on previous ethnographic surveys on drug users in the country, it follows 18 to 25 year olds from a low-income community near the outskirts of Metro Manila who have past or present experience with drugs, particularly marijuana and methamphetamine or shabu.

Most of them are out of school, and are either informally employed or jobless, with their neighbourhoods not offering much in the way of career or life opportunities. Drug use figures in their everyday lives. Marijuana enhances merrymaking during inuman or drinking sessions that form the highlight of their social life. Meanwhile, shabu plays the roles of pampagilas and pampagising, helping them feel more energetic and alert as they worked at night, or for long hours.

At the same time, the youth speak of being able to slip in and out of drug use even without rehabilitation or incarceration, and make important distinctions between recreational and practical use of these substances on the one hand, and harmful dependence (pagkalulong) on the other.

Moreover, they have ambivalent views towards tokhang or the drug war. They revealed that the cost of shabu has increased since, which had some turning instead to marijuana and alcohol. While they note that death squads, police corruption, and lawless killings are nothing new, some expressed their heightened fear over the perceived intensification of violence, with a few having close personal experience with raids, such as a friend or a neighbour getting killed.

But drug use continues among the youth in this community, demonstrating how higher prices and fear were not effective deterrents. Informants also point to the policemen’s corrupt practices such as extortion and planting of evidence, which breed distrust in the anti-drug campaign. Finally, many of them still deal with irregular work and joblessness - two factors that influence the decision to resort to drug use.

All these findings point to the limitations of a merely prohibitionist drug policy. What the situation calls for is a holistic and reflexive approach, where the government is able to challenge long-held societal views, look at the risk environment in the communities, and respond to the conditions that engender drug use. A war on drugs not informed by this big picture is bound to fail.
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Introduction

Putting a human face to the drug war

Throughout history, the Philippine drug policy is characterized by a punitive approach, which has reached its peak in the present administration’s ongoing war on drugs. However, drug use in the country has persisted, and by some measures, even increased (McKetin et al. 2008, PDEA 2016). While various views about drug use have been raised in government rhetoric and public discourse, drug users themselves are seldom consulted for input especially regarding their backgrounds, lived experiences, and the socio-economic contexts they are in (see Lasco and Mallari, forthcoming).

This critical gap needs to be addressed, as a drug policy can only be truly effective and relevant if it is informed by the situation and actual needs of its key target demographic. If the government is to match identified problems with evidence-based responses, the perspectives of people who use drugs, particularly the youth, must be heard and form the cornerstone of issue-analysis. Moreover, feedback from said stakeholder group concerning existing policies should serve as an essential guide for reform.

This study seeks to help fill this lacunae through a phenomenological study that looks at the ‘life trajectories’ and ‘lived experiences’ of young people involved with drugs. Building on previous ethnographic research among drug users in the Philippines (Lasco 2014, 2017, 2018) and elsewhere in the region (e.g. Sherman 2008), it features young women and men who have had experiences in drug use, and for whom the drug war is an everyday reality. By looking at their viewpoints and life trajectories, policymakers will be better able to understand the ‘lived impact’ of the anti-drug campaign, and craft programs that are more humane and effective.

Changing understandings of drug use

Social scientists have long critiqued the very idea of a ‘drug’, arguing that it is an arbitrary term whose meaning has changed over time; they have likewise highlighted the fact that pharmakon - the Greek word for drug - can refer to either remedy or poison, suggesting the ambivalence of views concerning medicinal substances (see Derrida 1995).

Amphetamine, for instance, was used as a treatment for asthma and nasal congestion in the 1930s, while methamphetamine itself was
used by both Allied and Axis soldiers during World War II to ward off fatigue and boost their endurance, alertness, and wakefulness. However, the 20th century, particularly the latter half, saw an increasing criminalisation of methamphetamine and other substances, and by the 1970s, many governments began conducting ‘drug wars.’

From the beginning of these ‘wars’, anthropologists have sought to understand the experience of drug use by listening to, living, and “hanging out” with drug users (Agar 1977; see also Bourgois 2003). These accounts were crucial in interrogating harsh policies and humanising the “addict”. Contemporary scholarship, meanwhile, has highlighted the importance of looking at the ‘risk environments’ (Rhodes 2002) that drug users find themselves in, interrogating notions such as ‘pleasure’ (Moore 2008), and expanding critical focus to go beyond what is currently defined as ‘illegal drugs’ (see Hardon and Hymans 2014), mindful of the ever-increasing diversity of substances or ‘chemicals’ that people use in their everyday lives.

Drug use in the Philippines

The Philippines has had a long history of drug use: opiate narcotics, which may have come from Chinese and Dutch merchants, appear in historical accounts from the 1640s, although use was not widespread. By the 1840s, however, there were hundreds of opium dens in the country, described as ‘hotbeds of immorality’. Associated heavily with the Chinese settlements, these dens were viewed as a threat to society by the nascent American regime (Zarco 1995). Marijuana, which arrived in the country in 1954 or 1955, was likewise considered a problem by the independent Republic (Ibid). Attempts to historicise drug use in the country largely fell to textbook writers who saw it as a moral ‘evil’ (e.g. Vidal 1998). Even so, these works, newspaper accounts, and the country’s legal history can still help people piece together a history of drugs: one which has seen a series of drug wars: the first coinciding with Marcos’ initiation of Martial Law, the second being the anti-drug campaigns of presidents Joseph Estrada and Gloria Arroyo, and the third being the ongoing campaign of Rodrigo Duterte (Lasco and Mallari, forthcoming).

The reports of the country’s lead agencies in responding to drug use - the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) - are also important sources of information about the drug situation in the country, as well as government policies, programs and implicitly, prevailing official attitudes towards drugs. The “2015 Nationwide Survey on the Nature and Extent of Drug Abuse in the Philippines”, for instance, highlights the DDB’s mandate to “develop and adopt a comprehensive, integrated, unified, and balanced national drug abuse prevention and control strategy.” This survey of 5,000 individuals found 113 individuals who used drugs at least once within a one-year period, providing the basis for the government’s estimate of 1.8 million drug users (DDB 2016).

Until very recently, drug use has not been the subject of much scholarship in the social sciences. In a notable exception that highlights the value of research on the subject, Tan (1995:27) wrote how media and political discourses help create ‘moral panic’ around drug users, who are portrayed “as a young male who deviates in a ‘progressive’ way from one vice to another”, and “drug addiction”, which becomes “synonymous with all forms of deviance: from transvestism to kidnapping”.

Almost two decades later, Lasco (2014b) found that methamphetamine - or shabu - for young men was a performance enhancer or pampagilas, which helps them take on the various income-generating opportunities in an informal economy. Drug use was also useful in sex work (Lasco 2017), but their lifeworld is full of legal and physical risks; they report numerous encounters with law enforcers who they call kalaban or enemy because of their perceived hypocrisy, unfair treatment, and perpetration of injustice (Lasco 2018). Meanwhile, a clearer picture of the extent of drug use is also
augmented by studies like that of Njord (2010), who found a high prevalence of substance use and trading among street children in Metro Manila, and Visetpricha (2015), who linked substance use with homelessness.

Despite not specifically tackling the issue of drugs, however, many scholarly articles reference drug use in various contexts. For instance, several studies on sex workers (e.g. Urada et al. 2012; Urada et al. 2014) reveal that many of them use methamphetamine, corroborating Lasco’s findings. Meanwhile, studies that delve into peace and order likewise document the emergence of drug use as a perceived security concern, imbricated in conflict zones like those in Mindanao (Rajendran 2006; Cagoco-Guiam and Schools 2013). There is also a small strand of scholarship that approaches the phenomenon of drug use from the perspective of psychology and mental health. Tuliao and Liwag (2011) found that self-efficacy, negative affect, motivating, coping, and craving predicted relapse among shabu users.

All these works notwithstanding, scholarship on drug use in the Philippines remains very thin; it is hoped that this current study can contribute to the growing number of works on the subject.

Accessing a ‘hidden population’

With the main objective of charting young people's trajectories and documenting their lived experiences, particularly in relation to their drug use, the study made use of an ethnographic, “experience-near” approach, one in which the validity rests on the element of trust built through long-term engagement with informants. Participant-observation and in-depth interviews were the cornerstones of the data generated from the research.

Given the time frame and security concerns, the researchers chose a community that already has an existing relationship with NoBox Philippines. Participants were aged 18 to 25 years old, with present or past experience with drug use. A partner NGO working in the community referred the first set of informants, and from this initial pool, snowball sampling was used to reach a number that is enough for data saturation. In the absence of an institutional review board in the principal researcher’s university, the same ethics protocol used in his earlier work (Lasco 2014a) was adopted, and consultations were made with social scientists from the University of the Philippines in Diliman to reflect on changes needed considering the new study context.

Data gathering methods

Qualitative methods were used in the study: participant-observation (i.e. “hanging out”), focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The ethical protocol for the study called for full anonymity of both the informants and their identifying data, as well as the fieldsite; consent was secured verbally and as mentioned, prior relationship with the community was a requirement for site selection.

Transcripts from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, as well as field notes and reflections, were coded in NVivo 10.0, and themes were identified by reading through the transcripts. Specific techniques included determination of word frequency and virtual pile-sorting. From these themes, key domains were enumerated. Validity was tested by comparing responses from various informants (i.e. data source triangulation) and by comparing the results across various methods.
Findings

The Community

“It’s as if people from every corner of the Philippines were thrown in here.”
- John, 28, security guard

The community - which will be referred to as “Project B” throughout the report - is a housing project with a population of several thousands, and is part of a large barangay (pop. 100,000). It is less than 20 kilometres away from the outskirts of Metro Manila, but getting there can take anywhere between 1 to 2.5 hours from the major thoroughfares of the metropolis, depending on the traffic situation.

Residents trace the establishment of Project B to the late 1990s as a relocation site for informal settlers living in Metro Manila. Those who belonged to this initial batch recall the first few years to be a difficult time, with frequent shortages of water and electricity. But within the next years, the woodlands and grasslands surrounding the young settlement gave way to expansions of the relocation site.

At first, the houses were uniform: small, two-bedroom units measuring around 70 square meters. Many residents have modified their houses since, but because the plots of land allocated to each family remained the same, the only way to expand is by building up. The height of one's houses served as some form of status symbol. As one local said, “If your house has two floors, that means you’re rich. Most of the houses just have a single floor.”

The residents of Project B come from diverse backgrounds: some are migrants from Mindanao, others from Northern Luzon, and then there are the above-mentioned settlers from Metro Manila. Not surprisingly, there is also a diversity of religions, with a “Muslim group” seen as a distinct community within a community. Other religions do not figure prominently in people’s identification but are nonetheless valuable affiliations. Iglesia ni Cristo, for instance, is said to have tanods (sentries) that members can ask help from if they run into trouble.

There is a wide range of economic activities, reflecting the residents’ socio-economic state. Some belong to the informal economy: selling goods in the thrice-weekly market, or going to Manila or nearby provinces everyday to avail of whatever income opportunities there are. “There are no jobs here,” Tessie, 48, says, making a distinction between trabaho (jobs) and the much more common
hanapbuhay (livelihood) or pinagkakakitaan (income opportunity). Those who finished college could work as call center agents or clerks, but most of the young people are in informal work, serving as assistants for catering services or cafeterias, or CBs or constru-boys (helpers in construction work who do not get the full minimum wage).

Given the sheer number of people coming and going, transportation is a major activity; many men and women work as padyak (pedicab or tuktuk) drivers, who lie in wait in the highway to conduct passengers to various clusters. These transportation services are available 24 hours and many drivers stay up at night, to cater to the many residents who leave early to go to and arrive late from Metro Manila, especially because of the nature of their livelihood.

Some community members have family members working abroad - the so-called ‘overseas Filipino workers’ (OFWs) who remit money from their income as caregivers, nurses, drivers, bartenders, sailors, and domestic helpers all over the world. Families of OFWs are considered to be among the wealthier ones.

Some residents say that life in Project B is filled with hardship. Ginggay, 45, wife of a pedicab driver, shares,

“It’s somewhat hard because [driving a] sidecar is my husband’s only work; I don’t have work and we have children. Paying for electricity, water…it’s really difficult. Especially now, especially here…before, we just used to use kuntador and jumper (illegal connections) for our utilities.”

They also use the term “magulo” (chaotic) to describe their community, but offer the caveat that the violence is targeted and does not effect the majority. “If you don’t do anything bad and if you’re not into drugs, there’s nothing to fear,” Elena, 46, says, uttering an oft-mentioned trope. Still, the fear is palpable especially at night, when motorcycles would pass through.

A number of suspected drug users have been killed in the community since President Duterte took office, but unexplained killings have been happening even before the administration’s war on drugs. According to the locals, the mayor himself has a ‘death squad’ that makes use of the same riding-in-tandem tactic. Some of these killings were linked to drugs, but they may also be political score-settling, as one local said: “If you don’t obey the mayor, he can hit you…or if you don’t turn over the right amount of (drug) money.”

The young people

One researcher (Gideon Lasco) followed two barkadas (peer groups) belonging to two clusters within the community, while another researcher (Jana General) interviewed women who formed the third cluster. As with the rest of the community, their backgrounds were as diverse as their everyday activities.

Some of the young people are either college or high school students. Most in this cohort are enrolled in a nearby public institution, but the researchers also encountered two who were studying at a private college in Metro Manila. One of them, Maynard, is taking up mechanical engineering; the other is taking up Hotel and Restaurant Management (HRM). Both have an OFW parent who supports their education.

The majority of the youth, however, are out of school, and are engaging in various activities. Reuben, 22, the self-styled leader of one of the barkadas in this study, is an example. A former helper in a water refilling station, he was jobless throughout the researchers’ visits to the community, but vows for 2018 to be different:

“I promise myself to really look for a job this year. I’m a new father and it’s embarrassing that I don’t even have the money to buy milk powder for the baby. I can go to construction, or hopefully my uncle can help me be a konduktor
Another is Miko, 18, who recently dropped out of school. He says he is helping his cousin run a computer shop which offers internet use for one peso (around 0.02 USD) per minute. For 10 hours of staying in the shop, he earns 150 to 200 pesos (3 to 4 USD) a day. Miko also used to serve as an assistant to his father, helping transport the fish that they would buy in Navotas and then sell in the local market.

On top of the students and the informally employed, a third category would be the self-declared ‘tambays’. One of them, Benjie, 17, describes his everyday life in this account:

“I love roaming around (gumala). Play (basketball) here, play there… I’m easy to invite for any kind of ‘trip’. I find school boring so I dropped out.”

The barkada is a very important part of the young people’s lives; many of their activities, like playing basketball, are shared with their barkada. These groupings are mostly geographic: youths of the same neighbourhood tend to stick together and form a barkada, although a few members can belong to other areas. It is also gendered: the two barkadas in this study were all-male. When asked why they do not have female members, Reuben replies:

“It’s hard. What if we drink together, there’s seven of us, and there are only two girls. Then what if all of us take interest in one of them? We can’t all have her - that’s bad. So they will just be a cause of conflict.”

Although girls are excluded from the barkada, the young men are sexually active, claiming to have multiple sex partners. Also, while most of them profess a heterosexual orientation, another of their income opportunities is doing informal sex work for the gays in the community. Benjie, 17, explains:

“If they like you they will pay 300 or 500 for [oral sex]. There’s nothing to lose there. But most of the time, I just fool around with them and trick them, once I get the money I run away. It’s easy money. I think almost all of the gays here have done it with me.”

The high point of the barkada’s social life is the inuman (drinking session), where they all come together despite having different activities. This is usually held on Saturday nights, because on weekdays many of them are stationed in construction sites, boarding houses, dormitories, or girlfriends’ homes. In the inuman sessions, which can last until the wee hours of the morning, stories are shared and bonds, reinforced.

Drugs and the drug war

Drugs in their everyday lives

According to the Dangerous Drugs Board, around 1.8% of Filipinos used drugs at least once in the past year (DDB 2016). In the community, it is much more common. Of the 21 young men in this study, nine admitted to using methamphetamine in the past year, and all 21 disclosed using marijuana. Drug use among the young women was less frequent, but the researchers managed to interview two who disclosed using shabu. No other drugs were mentioned. Notably, this disclosure occurred later in the ethnographic survey; initially there was much reluctance, even outright denial, when talking about drugs. During those engagements, the young people pointed to other areas in the community where drugs are ‘talamak’ (widespread).

Drugs figure in the everyday lives of the young people in various ways. Marijuana is mostly associated with social gatherings and inuman; it is seen to enhance merrymaking, or, in the words of the youths, make the ‘tripping’ more exciting. Jude, 20, says:

“Iba ang tama ng doobie. Swabe lang, sakto lang. Tamang tawananan, tamang kwentuhan. Hindi gaya ng
alak na susuka ka at ang lakas ng hangover. (Marijuana has a different ‘hit’. It’s smooth, just right. Just the right laughter, just the right conversation. Unlike alcohol which makes you vomit and causes a strong hangover.)

The young men perceived marijuana to be less dangerous than shabu in terms of both its effect and the legal ramifications of its use. This may explain why all of them disclosed using it; it was experienced as a more benign substance. Still, they used it discreetly, cognizant that being caught with it can also get them into trouble.

Shabu, meanwhile, is seen as a more powerful drug - and also one that is also more dangerous. Like marijuana, there are different kinds of shabu - some purer and therefore more hard-hitting, others adulterated (some members of the community claim that Duterte ordered the adulteration of shabu, to discourage use). And like marijuana, the price of shabu - also referred to as basura (trash) or ‘items’ - has increased since the proclamation of the war on drugs, from 100-200 to 500 pesos (4 to 10 USD).

The use of shabu among the youth of Project B is similar to what Lasco (2014a: 74-75) observed in his ethnography of young drug users in a Philippine port community. The study furnishes a thicker description of the ongoing practice:

“Using shabu requires paraphernalia slightly more complex than in using marijuana. Three strips of aluminum foil are required, as well as the ink-tube of a ballpoint pen, a lighter, and of course the tiny sachet of shabu itself. Of the three strips of aluminum foil, two are fashioned into tiny tubes. One of them is attached to the lighter to create a tiny flame; another serves as the panghigop (suction tube or inhaler). Onto one of the edges of this strip, the shabu powder is emptied. The lighter is then placed underneath the strip to heat the powder. As it melts into a semi-opaque liquid, smoke is released, and the user then uses the other strip to inhale the smoke through his mouth. The smoke is easily funneled into the tube, inhaled, and retained in the lungs for a few seconds before exhaling. A single inhalation usually lasts for as long as the liquid is running down the strip; when it reaches the other side, the one ‘serving’ (that is, holding the strip and lighting the flame) pulls down one side so that the liquid would keep sliding down the strip for the next user. This process is repeated until all the liquid has evaporated, taking just a few minutes.”

This practice is usually done in the houses of drug dealers called puwestuhan (compare with ‘puwesto’ in Lasco 2014).

How are the young people introduced to shabu, and why do they use them? There are two explanations from the young people themselves. The first makes use of the language of addiction. Kevin (22 years old) shares his experience:

"Wala ka na sa sarili mo, hinahanap-hanap mo talaga yung items, parang wala kang lakas pag di ka nakagamit. (You’re not your own self, you’re really yearning for shabu, it feels as though you don’t have strength if you don’t use it.)"

On the other hand, some participants speak of an “acceptable” way of using shabu, as voiced by Jude, 20:

"Nasa’yo naman kung gagamitin mo yung shabu o ikaw yung mappagagamit sa shabu. (It’s up to you if it is you who will use shabu, or you will be the one consumed by it)."

A distinction is made between those who are ‘adik’ (addicted) and those who are gumagamit lang (just using the drug). Drivers, market vendors, trucking assistants, and pedicab drivers are ‘just using’ it to make them
feel more energetic and alert — and allow them to work long hours at night or early morning. To the participants, the above practice is tolerable, if not acceptable.

On the other hand, the youths frown at using shabu to boost energy for illegal activities, such as theft and carnapping, or, conversely, stealing or selling possessions (e.g. mobile phones) to buy shabu.

“Ultimately, shabu will only help you to do what you already have in mind,” as Reuben puts it. On top of their effects qua drug, shabu and marijuana are also potential merchandise; drug trade can be a lucrative income opportunity; a source of “easy money” - save for the risks involved. Most users also end up doing small-time “pushing” - they sell just enough so they can have their own free share - complicating the distinction between “user” and “pusher”.

Using drugs, however, is, not a permanent state, and the young people spoke of the practice as something they can slip out of - and back into. Maynard, 24, for instance, points to having a child as a reason for discontinuing drug use (and trading):

“I experienced doing it, selling shabu and marijuana. I supplied drugs in our school. The return is good - you can double your money in one week. But I stopped when I had a baby. You really change when you’re a father.”

Tales of tokhang

Tokhang - the drug war - is received with ambivalence by the youth in this study. During our initial engagements, they were usually hesitant to express sentiments critical of the government, and instead were wont to echo the apology of the drug war’s supporters: “You have nothing to fear if you did nothing wrong”. Others cite the feeling of safety: “I feel safer now, even the women they can walk on the streets at night with peace of mind”. Crucially, they note that ‘death squads’ are not really new, and neither are motorcycle-riding assassins, which they claim have been employed in the past by local politicians. But one change that brought immediate and glaring consequence is the increased cost of drugs: from 100 to 500 pesos in the case of shabu, and 20 to 50 pesos in the case of marijuana. Some cite this as the reason why they no longer use shabu, turning instead to marijuana and alcohol.

However, there is also a sense of fear, a feeling of unease and worry that became more fully articulated in the continued interactions. Brix, 22, says that a neighbor was recently “natombang” (died in a ‘tokhang’ operation) and adds that the mere sound of motorcycles at night makes him somewhat uncomfortable. Benjie, 18, shares a close - and painful - personal experience with a tokhang raid:

“It was around midnight; my tropa (buddy) and I went to my house to hang out. We didn’t take shabu, we only drank some Red Horse. Then he said, I’m going home. I told him I can accompany him, but he said it’s okay. Just minutes later, I heard gunshots. I knew it was him. I know that he didn’t have a gun or shabu with him. He used [shabu] before but he’s not a pusher. I wanted to see what happened, but my older brother stopped me, he said I might also become a victim. Later, they said they were really after my buddy’s uncle but he was killed instead. It was [a case of] palit-ulol. I was so shocked that I couldn’t eat for days I just used shabu. I used shabu because I couldn’t accept what happened. That was the last time I used it.”

These experiences inform their perception of the police, who they believe have ‘quotas’ and are rewarded for the number of

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1 Our informants describe ‘palit-ulol’ as a grim form of substitution: “If you can’t point to the suspect, point to someone else and we’ll go after him instead”
'suspects' they are able to ‘eliminate’. They also speak of the police as having no qualms about planting evidence. But the community youth have been putting some thought on what to do should they be apprehended: Reuben, for example, talked about insisting on undressing himself, and asking to see the officers’ open palms, lest they slip a packet of shabu in his pockets.

These personal experiences also shape the way they view events beyond the confines of their community. On the day that the actor Mark Anthony Fernandez was arrested with a kilogram of marijuana, the informants reacted with disbelief over the way he was treated. “If we were the ones caught with it, we'll be dead by now”. One key informant, Cheng, 30, compares the arrest of her husband with that of 17-year old Kian delos Santos:

“Sometimes, what they’re doing is no longer right, just like in the case of Kian. You already saw in the CCTV that he didn’t do it, but the police insist...just like with my husband, before he got jailed. He was beaten, and was told not to say he was beaten...they asked for P500,000 so he will not be jailed. ‘If Duterte were already president you would have been dead already,’ I told him.”

Moreover, there are accounts of mistaken identity:

Gideon: “Aren’t you afraid that you’ll get mistaken for being a drug user?”

William: “I’m also afraid, that’s why I’m avoiding the places.”

Gideon: “But what if all of a sudden they go to your cluster?”

William: “What can I do? If it’s your time, it’s your time.”

What about getting jailed? Not one of the informants reported having been jailed; they categorise themselves - if at all - as users who just use drugs - unlike ‘adiks’ (addicts) or those who are “nalulong na” (got hooked) to drugs. Their conflicted views of prison, however, are informed by those who have been there. Some would say, “It’s better to be jailed than dead...at least you still have the hope of having a new life, if you’re in jail.” On the other hand, some, like Marvin, 19, expresses the fear of many about prison conditions:

“I would rather get killed than get jailed because in jail you get raped even if you’re a guy. They will make you a slave. There’s no place to sleep. They’re treated worse than animals.”

In the drug war, Duterte plays an almost mythic role; various actions are ascribed to him - such as the alleged instructions to adulterate the shabu supply. Paolo, 18, for example, shares this narrative with conviction:

“Last month he came here just by motorcycle and visited the mayor. He punched the mayor in the face and told him to surrender his mayoralty or get killed. A day later the mayor fled and until now he’s in hiding.”

William, 20, meanwhile attributes the violence not to Duterte himself, but to the rank-and-file law enforcers:

“It’s the policemen’s fault, all they’re after is the money. How can they have no mercy? Even if Digong’s plans are good, it is ruined by those who are nasa baba (at the bottom [of the hierarchy]).”

Although the government (i.e. local officials, law enforcers) itself is perceived as hypocritical and unjust, the president himself is viewed with fear and awe. Thus, he continues to enjoy support from the young people; and they remain ambivalent about the drug war.
A ‘risk environment’

An important step that the researchers took during data analysis is to consider the young people’s community as a ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes 2002): one which engenders the use of drugs. Following Lasco (2014a)’s framework, this approach entails looking at the (1) everyday lives of the young people, (2) the drugs they use, and (3) the ‘lived effects’ of these drugs.

Observing the youths’ everyday lives revealed that many of them are deeply immersed in an informal economy where income opportunities are limited and irregular, and where those who do find themselves with
jobs are pressed to work at night, or for long hours. We can also see the continued availability of shabu and marijuana - despite the increased prices brought about by the drug war.

In this context, the utility of shabu as pampagilas and pampagising makes understandable the reasons why many see it as a useful or acceptable part of their lives.

Beyond these effects of shabu, we can also probe into their sense of fulfilment in their lives and the mental health issues they face. One of the limitations of the study is the lack of opportunity for the researchers to engage with the participants beyond several months, or to probe into their familial relationships. Nevertheless, the limited picture points to lack of parental support, irregular family arrangements, and involvement of other family members in drug use and/or trade. The participants were also observed to have been welcoming and appreciative of the conversations with researchers, which may have been a channel for them to express their various concerns. Furthermore, given the established connection between drug use and mental health, it is possible that drugs serve not only economic but also psychological purposes; they are a means to escape the problems presented by their financial and social predicaments.

A factor that has not been explored in the literature is the role of boredom in drug use. This is a theme that deserves further analysis, given how many of the informants identify as ‘istambays’ (see Batan 2010) and complain that they have nothing to do (“walang magawa”). Mindful that chemical substances “enact the eventhood of their activities” (Lasco, forthcoming), researchers should also consider the use of drugs and alcohol in light of the lack of meaningful activities available for youths who are not enrolled in school or are gainfully employed.

Furthermore, this study’s framework looks at the drug scene not just as a ‘risk environment’, but as a ‘local moral world’ (Kleinman, 1999). Borrowed from medical anthropology, this concept speaks of how people's values can be very local, and highly contingent on their experiences. Held in this view, the young people of this study may be described as more tolerant of activities that skirt the boundaries between licit and illicit; and that financial considerations often trump moral conundrums. Drug use and trade may be dangerous and socially undesirable, but people may turn to it as a last resort, a desperate measure captured by the Filipino idiomatic expression kapit sa patalim (holding on to a blade). ‘Risk’, then, is a subjective assessment that young people make on their own, as Duff (2003) argues.

Rethinking addiction

How do young people get in and out of drugs? Government discourse is divided: one side views drug users as ‘beyond redemption’ (see Lasco 2017), the other sees drug users as in need of rehabilitation. There is little to no recognition, however, that the vast majority of drug use is ‘non-problematic’ (UNODC 2017) and that many people use drugs without necessarily getting ‘addicted’ to it in the classical (or biomedical) sense of the word.

In fact, even the Dangerous Drugs Board’s own surveys show that people may discontinue drug use without necessarily undergoing rehabilitation. According to their 2015 report, for instance, 36% of those who quit did so because of their families; this includes Project B’s Reuben, who quit drugs and discontinued the drug trade after the birth of his son (see DDB 2016). The same report lists physical health (38%) and lack of money (25%) as the major reasons for quitting. Additionally, 9% cite the need “to focus on education or work”. Though these numbers require unpacking, they - together with this study's findings - hint at alternative ways to look at “addiction” and “dependence”.

One of these is by focusing on the young people’s environment and addressing the conditions that lead them to drug use in
the first place, creating what Rhodes calls an ‘enabling environment’ (Rhodes 2002). As Lasco (2014:787) states: “To attain bagong buhay, a ‘new life’, young people need skills and opportunities to move out of the informal economy – one which generates demand for drugs that are pampagilas or ‘performance enhancers’ – a necessity in an arena where performance means survival.”

Fear and distrust

What makes the present time different from the past, before the ‘drug war’? On one hand, death squads, police corruption, drug use, and lawless killings have been reported in their community long before Duterte came into office. On the other hand, we also observe a perceived intensification of violence - and a heightened element of fear.

Fear, in government discourse, is conceived as a means to effect change i.e. to make people discontinue their use of drugs. And to a certain extent, the youth do report takot (fear) as one of the reasons why they are now hesitating to use drugs.

That some of them continue to do so, however, should demonstrate the limited efficacy of fear as a deterrent. This pattern may be explained by the state of the young people’s environment, which has always been - as our informants state - fraught with danger. Thus, “while images of dead bodies lying on the streets may shock, scandalize, and perhaps eventually desensitize the public at large, the threat of death will unlikely sway the minds of young people whose own lives they have always seen as being in a perpetual state of risk and danger.” (Lasco 2018:43).
Conclusion

The stories of this study’s participants are, in many ways, the story of many young people around the country, particularly those belonging to low-income urban communities where living conditions are poor, violence is prevalent, and opportunities are extremely limited. Young people in these communities typically form barkadas, peer groups from which they draw social support. Some have the chance to go to school, but many do not graduate and fall under an ‘informal economy’ which demands their physical effort and diskarte (creativity). In this context, drugs like shabu are considered useful because of the energy and enhancement they provide, among other desirable effects, even as these drugs bring them medical harm and physical risks, on top of the dangers exacerbated by the ongoing drug war.

Notably, however, the youth perceive drug use as occurring in a spectrum, recognizing its recreational use and stimulating effects to sustain physical labor, as well as the harms of addiction and dependence. Marijuana use is embedded in urban youth culture of social merrymaking, the psychoactive effects of marijuana preferred over alcohol, which causes vomiting and/or ‘hangover’. On the other hand, shabu, while reportedly a less preferred substance, is noted to help boost the youth’s physical strength as they perform daily tasks.

The participants also make distinctions regarding the effects of drug use based on the person’s character, where the frequency of drug use and its impact are seen to ultimately depend on one’s purpose for using. Nevertheless, people continue to use drugs for various reasons, and persistently so despite punitive and deadly measures in place.

These insights must be reflected in policy design, as a mere prohibitionist response to drug issues proves to be futile. Based on the youth’s accounts, drug use occurs in a context where they serve particular purposes, and responsive policies must not focus on mere law enforcement alone but also take into account social and economic determinants of human behavior. Further, the youth have expressed that they can opt in or opt out of drug use when there are changes in their social settings, and this can happen even without such interventions as mandatory placement in rehabilitation centers or incarceration.

In addition, the findings show the urgent need to repair trust in the government and law enforcement. Despite claims of success
by the police force, and although many speak highly or respectfully of President Duterte, one clear finding is that young people are deeply distrustful of the police. Fueled by their own experiences and observations, this distrust makes them highly unlikely to respond to calls for ‘rehabilitation’ or community-based interventions even when these are made available and earnestly implemented. Reports of corrupt practices among law enforcers, such as extortion and planting of evidence, should be taken seriously, and subject to proper documentation, investigation, and action.

The prohibitionist drug policy also creates more danger for people who use drugs (see Puras and Hannah 2017; Nadelmann 1989). Reports of shabu changing quality or being ‘poisoned’ raise concerns about chemical harms in the use of drugs. This veers away from the primary purpose of drug policymaking – ensuring that people are first and foremost kept alive and healthy. Equally concerning is the observation that people are turning to other drugs - legal (alcohol) or illegal (drugs) - in response to the limited supply. Indeed, without changing the ‘risk environment’, punitive drug measures can change young people’s drug use practices without making them stop using drugs, or bringing themselves to risky situations engendered by them.

This study also points to directions for future research. There are many more communities - including rural areas - whose residents’ patterns of drug use require documentation, even as Project B community itself will benefit from a longer-term study, which will allow the researchers to further explore the informants’ lifeworlds and follow their life trajectories, plotting it against the socio-political events. The perspectives of law enforcers in various locales would also be a valuable source of insights.

Finally, it is important to chart the political and cultural history of drug use, and the discourses that have prevailed throughout the years. In what ways does the present government’s rhetoric reflect long-held societal views? If, as this study’s informants suggest, drug-related violence has been happening before Duterte, then our society must also interrogate the conditions of possibility that allowed them to be just as hidden as the victims it has claimed through the years.

Only a holistic and reflexive approach will allow the government to fully understand how to effectively address drug use. Without this commitment to seeing the big picture, its war on drugs is bound to fail.
References


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