

# Dissent and disinformation: Outlining Duterte's gendered discourses and #BabaeAko movement's gendered counter- discourses in the Philippines

Jose Mari H. Lanuza\*  
*University of the Philippines Manila*

## ABSTRACT

Populism is just as much about rhetoric and discourse as it is about policies and programs. Using discourse analysis on the pronouncements of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, his cabinet members, and #BabaeAko's responses to these pronouncements, this study aims to examine the Philippine experience with gendered populist discourse and #BabaeAko movement gendered counter-discourse. This article aims to achieve three things. First, outline the gendered discursive battle against misogyny between Duterte and #BabaeAko, a women's rights movement in the Philippines. Second, show how #BabaeAko creates a feminist counter-discourse to reposition themselves as *contra* to what Duterte's discourse defines them. Lastly, show that

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\* Correspondence address: Unit 506, Tower C, MPlace Residences, Mo. Ignacia St, Brgy South Triangle, Quezon City 1103 Philippines; Email: [jlhanuza@up.edu.ph](mailto:jlhanuza@up.edu.ph)

Duterte's responses to these counter-discourses take a disinformative character with the aim of preserving his popular legitimacy.

Keywords: Duterte, disinformation, gendered populism, #BabaeAko

## INTRODUCTION

For all of his controversial statements, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte continues to enjoy popular support as the head of government. In 2018 Duterte had an average of 81% for his approval ratings, peaking at 88% in June 2018 (ABS-CBN News, 2019; Gonzalez, 2018). In the first two quarters of 2019, he scored 87% and 88%, respectively (ABS-CBN News, 2019). This, amid sexist and misogynistic pronouncements that have caused opposition and uproar among certain groups. One example of this is Duterte's statement last May 2018, regarding the replacement for former Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno. Duterte stated that the next Chief Justice should neither be a politician nor a woman (Placido, 2018a), prompting backlash from women's groups and advocates in the country. Duterte responded to criticisms by stating that not all jobs are for women (Morallo, 2018), implying that women are by nature too soft for some jobs in government. While the generalizations made by Duterte are laughable at the very least, his stable trust ratings show that his supporters do not mind.

These stable trust ratings are attributable to the success of Duterte's populist discourse (Curato, 2016), which he had established during his presidential campaign period in 2016. Duterte banks on the securitization of Philippine underdevelopment, which in turn relies on the projected salience of the ongoing bloody drug war as a necessity for good governance, and the militaristic approach to internal and external threats as a necessity for peace and safety (Quimpo, 2017). Aside from the dissatisfaction and frustration with poverty, this discourse taps into anxieties from criminality and social injustices (Teehankee, 2016). Such a discourse takes on a masculine form to establish legitimacy, but also covers a broad range of interests and interest groups, including women.

Along with the past administration's failed promises of good governance and economic development perceivable by those at the margins, Duterte's discourse provides a good alternative against elite failures (Arguelles, 2016). Duterte symbolizes an alternative that delivers, regardless of whether these outcomes are real or only deceptively so.

Populism is just as much about rhetoric and discourse as it is about policies and programs. Using discourse analysis on the pronouncements of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, his cabinet members, and #BabaeAko's responses to these pronouncements, this study aims to examine the Philippine experience with gendered populist discourse and #BabaeAko movement's gendered counter-discourse. This article aims to achieve three things. First, outline the gendered discursive battle against misogyny between Duterte and #BabaeAko, a women's rights movement in the Philippines. Second, show how #BabaeAko creates a feminist counter-discourse to reposition themselves as above what Duterte's discourse defines them. Lastly, show that Duterte's responses to these counter-discourses take a disinformative character to preserve his popularity as a leader.

In order to accomplish these I first establish the gendered discursive field on which Duterte and opposition groups engage each other by discussing literature on gendered mediation and gendered discourses in Philippine politics. I then trace the process of the discursive battle of the administration and women in civil society by outlining the feedback loop between Duterte and his cabinet officials, and #BabaeAko, to show how Duterte disrupts the discursive field of gender and Philippine politics. I analyze Duterte's pronouncements as transcribed by media outlets to establish how he assumes and justifies a misogynist realpolitik. I then show how #BabaeAko responds to this through their counter-discourse, which reclaims the place and identity of a woman under Duterte's macho-popular regime. Lastly, I establish how the administration's responses to #BabaeAko's counter-discourse assume a disinformative character by analyzing how he frames his responses vis-à-vis his gendered policies as a politician in an effort to negate the allegations of misogyny thrown against him.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it provides a case demonstrative of how leaders resort to disinformation

to legitimize both their regime and their policies. Second, it adds to the limited literature on the relationship between gender and populism by discussing how gendered discourses and gendered policies play against populist leadership, as opposed to literature discussing gender as one of the dimensions populist policy tries to accommodate to amass a wider support base (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). Third, it contributes to the literature on populism by adopting De Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, and Stanyer (2018)'s definition of populism as a communication phenomenon and using this as a lens to analyze Duterte, who seems to fit neither the stereotypical left-wing nor right-wing populist.

## METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the #BabaeAko Movement for two reasons. On the one hand, its nature of origin as an online trend against Duterte's misogynistic statements, which later evolved into a mass movement, reflects an organic discourse of opposition to Duterte's popular leadership. This case shows how organic opposition groups operate against a publicly supported populist leader.

On the other hand, as the single broadest women's movement of its scale opposing Duterte's misogyny during his presidency, its status as a genuine representative of (at least a significant segment of) women and women's sensibilities in this time of a macho presidency is legitimized. This is not to say that no other group registered their opposition to Duterte's misogyny in any way since the start of his presidency; however, #BabaeAko remains the broadest and most comprehensive women's movement—both in size and ideological persuasions—dedicated to this cause specifically. Thus, a focus on their responses as a movement allows us to draw in broad strokes the characteristics of the feminine and feminist counter-discourse without diluting its substance.

Studies of misogyny in mainstream media content see misogyny as expressed in language “that encourage, condone, or glorify the objectification, exploitation, or victimization of women” (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009, p. 10). This study looks at Duterte's statements that express such whether at face value or contextually. Using #BabaeAko's responses as

a starting point, this paper traces the feedback loop to identify which statements are perceived as misogynistic, and analyzes what elements and contexts define these statements as such.

This study relies on news reports from the 2016 electoral campaign period to 2018 which transcribes Duterte's interviews or statements as the primary units of analysis for Duterte's discourse, while also making room for historical events that may have served as contexts to these statements, to serve as a check against selection bias. Reports were selected based on which of Duterte's statements #BabaeAko has responded to, and tracing which articles covered and reported those statements. The process starts with a cursory Google search of #BabaeAko's responses to any misogynist statement or act from Duterte, and then followed by tracing the actual reports on these acts, whether by following the hyperlinks in the report or searching for such reports on Google. Since the focus of the discourse was on the actual quotes and not the media framing, the media outlets serving as report sources do not have much bearing. Reports had to have either the actual quotes as part of the text or multimedia sources within the report, to get a more accurate representation of the discourses. By focusing on these sources the study is able to minimize external feedback on the discourse, and maintain the mediated discursive field between Duterte and #BabaeAko. These statements are assumed to be misogynistic. From there, reports of #BabaeAko's responses to these statements were analyzed next to see how women responded to such statements, thus establishing a feedback loop. The study then analyzes how Duterte interprets and responds to the women's sentiments, thus showing how the feedback influenced the origin of misogynistic discourse in the feedback loop.

Critical discourse analysis is applied to the statements of both the Duterte camp and #BabaeAko in order to explore the "otherwise hidden connections between language, power and ideology" (Fairclough, 2000) of their feedback loop, since this study aims to show how Duterte provides a disinformative discourse which, in the process, legitimizes his policies and maintains public support for him despite his misogyny. I see Duterte's use of disinformative discourse to defend his misogyny as a tool for power consolidation, by simultaneously negating the discourse of #BabaeAko

and creating discursive spaces of support for Duterte's realpolitik. Duterte's misogynistic actions are taken as a starting point buoyed by both patriarchal political culture and his paternalistic imagery. The counter-discourse provided by #BabaeAko serves as discursive attempts at equalizing power in defining acceptable and non-oppressive forms of political communication. Duterte's response is then taken as self-preserving acts that reinforce the status quo, nullify the opposition, and consolidate public support by relying on persistent and context-devoid counter-discourses, to the point of disinformation.

Only statements that deliberately exhibit the values of misogyny detailed above are included in the analysis. As noted by Weitzer and Kubrin (2009), not all statements which may be perceived as offensive to women can be regarded as misogynistic; for example, this study does not include presidential interviews or statements that include curse words (e.g., *putang ina mo*, lit. son of a bitch) since the statements were not necessarily intended to devalue, objectify, or victimize women. Viewing populism as a communication phenomenon, this study concludes by examining the feedback loop in terms of the political actor (Duterte administration), the media (media reports of both Duterte and #BabaeAko), and the citizens (#BabaeAko) and seeing whether Duterte generated disinformation in the feedback loop.

## GENDERED DISCOURSES IN PHILIPPINE POLITICS

Discourses are the combination of ideas that spur actions, and the actions that follow from the conception of these ideas. This means that more than language, discourse is a process which includes not only your choice of words that represent your ideas, but also to whom you say it, how, why, and where in the process of policy construction and political communication in the "public sphere" (Schmidt, 2008). The creation of "shaped" information is inherent in the formation of discourses, since there is a need to put forward ideas that fit the contexts and understanding of your intended audiences to spur actions as necessary follow-throughs. The success of this exercise explains why some ideas, but not all, actually become expressed through policies or programs (Schmidt, 2008). It is

useful for this study to first outline the discursive characteristics of Philippine politics, through a review of literature discussing mediated gendered discourses in the country. By first establishing the discursive norms within which political actors operate, the contrast between the usual and Duterte's gendered discourse becomes more apparent.

On the one hand, political leaders have traditionally resorted to macho campaigns for popular support. Rafael has previously written on how former president and dictator Ferdinand Marcos utilized portrayals of himself as *Malakas* (lit. strong) from Philippine folklores, as part of the Marcosian creation of "cultural repertoire that ranged from narratives of virility and romance to spectacles of nationalist vigor..." (1990, p. 298). Former president Joseph Ejercito-Estrada rode on the coattails of the macho roles he played in movies all the way to a dominant presidential victory, leading by almost 24% more than the competition (Hedman, 2001). In analyzing the movie roles he played, Tolentino (2014) and Evangelista (2017) pointed out that the proactive aksyon hero character was positively perceived by audiences embedded in the Philippine sociopolitical context especially during his presidential campaign, drawing parallels between everyday life and Estrada's movies, showing how Estrada's macho discourse became relatable and even admired. Masculine discourses in Philippine politics depict sturdy pillars of reliability; appealing, in the eyes of a population thirsting for a change from the condition of mundane underdevelopment and everyday violence.

On the other hand, feminine discourses also find space for public and mediated political communication. Corazon Cojuangco Aquino was the first female president not only in the Philippines but in Asia as well. Her campaign image and discourse was carefully crafted as an antithesis to Marcos: an ordinary housewife untainted by corruption (as opposed to a seasoned politician), a homemaker who would "clean up the country using the domestic (women's) skills of thrift, efficiency, and competence" (Niu, 1999, p. 92). Following the death of her son in 2003, former senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago was portrayed as a grieving mother (Gloria, Tabunda, & Fonbuena, 2004) as opposed to her usual tough demeanor, possibly generating sympathy votes that contributed to her victorious bid for the Senate in 2004. Aside from name recall and trust, the model

wife and mother image was also successfully used in the 1998 senatorial campaign of then political neophyte and broadcaster Loren Legarda (Rimban, 1999), although it is not credited as the sole or even the major reason for her victory. Former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) also tried to package herself as a mother of the nation prior to the 2004 elections, as a way to tap into the *masa* (mass) support base of her predecessor. Upon seeing that it was ineffective, GMA was repackaged as a results-oriented politician who delivered (Gloria et al., 2004) in a game dominated by men. There is obviously space for feminine discourses in Philippine politics, but it is not femininity that causes positive outcomes. Rather, it becomes either a point of weakness or only a supporting detail. In the case of Defensor-Santiago and Macapagal-Arroyo, the feminine image was not enough in and of itself; instead it is the contrast between this feminine image and their usual tough image that was marketed to the public. This is in contrast with masculine discourses, which are highlighted in portrayals and serve as strong points for marketing leadership.

Feminist theories of communication and media research paint media content as patriarchal. This means mediated discourses are made and perceived in gendered forms. Female politicians in media are usually portrayed with gender stereotypes, and media coverage of women reinforces the dominant culture where women are marginalized (Banducci, Gidengil, & Everitt, 2012). In the Philippine context, the mediation of gendered discourses in Philippine politics are usual. Negative, subjugated, subordinated, or muted representations of women had historically been dominant in Philippine media (Azarcon-dela Cruz, 1988, 1989), and had reinforced the position of masculine and feminine discourses as unequal. Such status was also evident in policy formation and social life scrutiny in general (Hilsdon, 1995).

However, what is common in the varied use of gendered discourses in Philippine politics is how the discourses are performed and enunciated to the public without vulgarity or rashness. Evangelista (2017) argues that there is a bipolar performative spectrum composed of what he calls the ideal statesman, and the popular or *masa* politician usually employing a macho image. The discourses employed by the two sides differ in their

degree of (in)formality as established in Philippine culture: composed and elite versus emotional and familiar. However opposite both discourses are, they are still prudent and measured. Even though Evangelista (2017) classified Estrada as macho-popular, Estrada's language was only relatively crude compared to the ideal statesmen he succeeded. By contrast, compared to previous Philippine heads of state, President Duterte employs a similar, albeit more aggressive and offensive macho-popular discourse that has been the subject of controversies.

Duterte is popular because his discourse is, both in substance and in form. Duterte's speech acts have depicted him as a non-traditional politician in word and in deed. During the presidential campaign period he was frequently seen with women sitting on his lap or kissing him (Santos, 2018). His speeches were often interlaced with expletives, and he used informal speech. This is part of his overall discourse as well; whereas his electoral opponents were formal and traditional politicians, he was not a candidate from an ivory tower. He was not a Luzon-centric political elite; instead, he came from peripheral Mindanao, and he was relatable and acted similar to the ordinary Filipino, thus invoking sentiments of relatability and familiarity (Arguelles, 2019; Cabañes & Cornelio, 2017). However, Duterte's discourse adds another layer that plays to Filipino sensibilities, thus augmenting its potential for popular support: gender.

These discourses also translate to policy. Ideas and institutions—foundations of discourse—define the current state of affairs of the political playing field and in turn the possible policy directions that can be taken. For Duterte, a securitized national discourse requires actions and policies ideationally explained by a logic of interpretation of fear and dissatisfaction with previous administrations' shortcomings. In the process of discourse formation such a rationale taps into people's anxieties, and responds with a solution of hope (Curato, 2016). Duterte does this by relying more on discourses of protection rather than provision, relative to his predecessors. Such protection is realized through masculine positions (on the side of policy) and expressions (on the side of personal imagery and projections), creating an aura of reliability in times of perceived disorder and insecurity.

## IS “DUTERTISMO” MACHO?

Aside from appearing to address popular demands, one more reason why Duterte’s discourse remains popular is ideational follow-through. Discourses contribute to the success or failure of ideas through content articulation, consistency, and coherence across policy sectors (Schmidt, 2008). Through these, Duterte employs a tactic that is responsive to Philippine sensibilities on gender. Duterte’s discourse contains a paternal slant, manifested in his language through either what he swears he will do, or who is allowed to do what. The former securitizes, and frames Duterte and his actions in the light of a father responsible for his children (Johnson, 2018; Papa, 2018; Placido, 2018b; Presidential Communications Operations Office [PCOO], 2017; Ranada, 2018d); it is not a coincidence why many of his supporters, especially from his home region of Davao, refer to him as *Tatay Digong* (Father Digong). Meanwhile, the latter enforces his authority as emanating from his own person, rather than from an institution whose legitimacy is derived from the consent of the people with a social contract.

These two dimensions contribute to create a gendered aspect of Duterte’s discourse, apparent in content articulation, consistency, and policy coherence. These dimensions can be observed in the following ways: first, Duterte’s authoritarian assertions are always securitized, which are then justified using paternal performances. A strategy utilized since his presidential campaigns, Duterte projected a father looking out for his children by prioritizing not only the present, but also the future, generation’s security (Tatcho, 2018). Such portrayals have also been observed in Latin American populism, and creates parallels between the state and the family (Abi-Hassan, 2017).

Second, Duterte’s authoritarian assertions employ macho bases, which function in itself as a discourse that creates ideas responsible for policies. Since there is a gendered basis for the idea, the succeeding policy output from this idea is naturally gendered as well. For example, Duterte’s desire to solve the drug problem by force instead of rehabilitation plays into his campaign discourse of political will and strong leadership, getting political support from the masses and the police and military. *Machismo*

is exemplified in both policy and discourse: continuous budgetary increases for security and defense spending, and pronouncements exhorting police to use lethal force against anyone involved in drugs, including their own peers in the police force, in exchange for rewards (Mariano, 2018). The approach to peacebuilding with armed groups has also denigrated to an all-out war command earlier in 2019, in pursuit of justice (Gamil & Alipala, 2019) after the twin bombings in Jolo in January 2019. These speech acts that encourage military actions are backed up by financial policies that allow Duterte to maintain support from the armed forces, such as increases in police salary and the budget for defense.

Duterte's macho discourse is also projected by the example on the next Chief Justice (currently Chief Justice Lucas Bersamin), where securitized issues are also masculinized; that is, when an issue is securitized, it is also being framed as an issue that requires masculine answers from masculine actors. However, a closer analysis of these actors show that the main identity required to qualify as masculine is whether the actor subscribes to Duterte's discourses. All other actors possibly on the opposition are feminized and projected as ineffective. Last March, 2019, at an event celebrating Outstanding Women in Law Enforcement and National Security of the Philippines, Duterte addressed his women critics by calling them *puta* (lit. whore), crazy, and rejects of priests (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). In the process criticisms are delegitimized and portrayed as insubstantial. Another example of this is the continued incarceration of Senator Leila de Lima, a vocal critic of the war on drugs. Her trials involved Congressional hearings that brought up de Lima's affair with her ex-driver and even went as far as viewing her alleged sex tape in the halls of Congress. This affair was first brought up by no less than Duterte himself (ABS-CBN News, 2016). In fact, Duterte even pointed to de Lima's sexual relations (referring to it as *libog* or lust) as the root of de Lima's difficulties (Placido, 2017). By resorting to character assassination, Duterte attempted to degrade de Lima's social standing and delegitimize her opposition to Duterte by putting into question her character. It can be inferred from these examples that Duterte's machismo is discursively expressed in two ways: in a securitized manner and in a more traditional, masculinized manner.

## A GENDERED RESPONSE FROM BELOW

The #BabaeAko Movement (lit. I am a Woman Movement) started as a response of women fed up with Duterte's misogynistic pronouncements (Amoroso, 2018; Haynes, 2018; Macaraig & Agence France-Presse [AFP], 2018), such as the sentiment that women cannot do some jobs in Duterte's government. This movement began as an online social media campaign that aimed to raise awareness and bring together women from different backgrounds to mount a united critique against Duterte's macho discourse exhibiting a degradation of the status of women through objectification, and a portrayal of the male self as above the woman due to the objectified reference to the woman. Table 1 shows a partial list of Duterte's misogynist remarks.

#BabaeAko founders come from diverse backgrounds, including journalist Inday Espina-Varona, Jean Enriquez from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), and Edna Aquino from the art-media group Let's Organize for Democracy and Integrity (LODI), among others. It eventually translated into a big offline mobilization against Duterte's misogyny and sexism (Leonardo, 2018) after Duterte kissed a married woman while speaking at a live event with overseas Filipino workers in South Korea in June 2018.

When #BabaeAko began online, women posted videos of themselves registering their dissent and ending it with declarations that they will fight (Rappler, 2018) (see Figure 1). Table 2 shows some statements from #BabaeAko and their sympathizers in the media. The discourse employed by #BabaeAko is both feminist, in that it allowed women to speak up against Duterte's misogyny and put themselves in a position of power, and "feminine," in the sense that it showcased opposition to Duterte's paternalistic and securitized discourse. This is showcased by the movement's calls for Duterte's resignation, which came on the heels of Duterte's promise to resign should women protest his kiss (Asian Correspondent, 2018; Leonardo, 2018).

One of the chants during the mobilization was "Duterte, torete, takot sa babae<sup>2</sup>" (lit. "Duterte, speechless, afraid of women"). This is

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3pXQCd5nAQ>

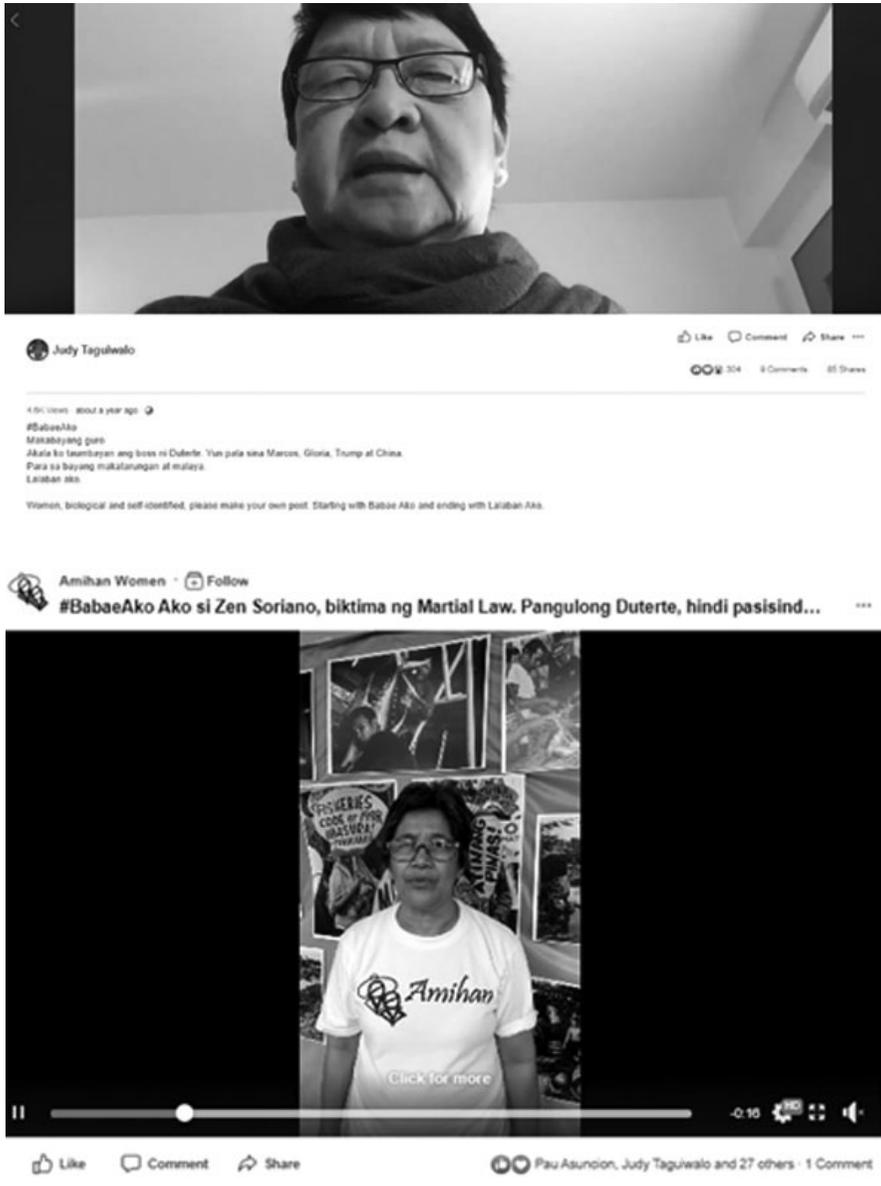


FIGURE 1.  
Screenshots of select #BabaeAko  
video proclamations on Facebook.

clearly in contrast with Duterte's masculine discourse. The choice of words attempt to depict Duterte as the opposite of his masculine projections. *Babae ako, lalaban ako* (lit. I am a woman, I will fight), the battle cry of #BabaeAko, also demonstrates feminist strength by first establishing the identity of the agent, and then proclaiming strength by stating the determination to engage. This is again in contrast to Duterte's pronouncements that women are too soft or unable to undertake difficult acts. The woman is established and defined in the media as a woman who fights through #BabaeAko. Furthermore, the call for Duterte's resignation serves as an exclamation point that shows how women also wield power in society, not only in feminine ways, but also in ways that the masculine discourse dictates as exclusively masculine—in this case, affairs of government and governance.

The #BabaeAko movement thus fights in two ways: first, as a backlash against misogyny by calling for an end to all of Duterte's sexist and misogynist acts; and second, as a backlash against his authoritarian tendencies. #BabaeAko opposes not just how he engenders his discourse, but also how he follows through with policy actions and programs. When Duterte called for all-out war and cancelled the peace talks, the masculine discourse of strong-handed leadership and undeniable political will was legitimized, but at the expense of those most susceptible to conflict. When Duterte's female cabinet appointees underwent controversial confirmation declinations, Duterte was silent; these appointees were replaced by former military men because Duterte claims that these men get the job done (CNN Philippines, 2018; Kabling, 2018). These actions reinforce Duterte's masculinization of policy and governance: for a securitized framing of Philippine underdevelopment, strong and masculine actors are the best options.

Table 1. A partial list of Duterte's sexist remarks during his presidency

DATE	CONTEXT	QUOTE	TRANSLATION	REFERENCE
30-Nov-15	On how getting elected as President won't stop him from womanizing	"Kung may magagandang naghihintay diyan sa labas (ng Malacanang), buksan ko yung pinto ng kwarto ko."	I will open all the books of Malacañang. If there are beautiful women waiting outside, I will open the door to my room.	<a href="https://www.philstar.com/test-microsite-clone/2015/12/10/1531232/duterte-our-donald-trump">https://www.philstar.com/test-microsite-clone/2015/12/10/1531232/duterte-our-donald-trump</a>
12-Apr-16	On the Australian missionary who was raped and murdered,	"Tiningnan ko yung mukha, 'tangina parang artista sa America na maganda. Putangina, sayang ito. Ang nagpasok sa isip ko, nirape nila, pinagpilihan nila doon. Nagalit ako kasi nirape, oo isa rin 'yun . Pero napakaganda, dapat ang mayor muna ang mauna. Sayang."	I looked at her face, son of a bitch, she looks like a beautiful American actress. Son of a bitch, what a waste. What came to mind was, they raped her, they lined up. I was angry because she was raped, that's one thing. But she was so beautiful, the mayor should have been first. What a waste.	<a href="https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/12/9784-viral-video-duterte-joke-australian-woman-rape">https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/12/9784-viral-video-duterte-joke-australian-woman-rape</a>
7-Mar-17	Duterte tells former Agriculture undersecretary Romulo Puyat to close her legs so as not to distract him	"Berna, nadi-distract ako, you close your legs. National TV, no."	Berna, I'm getting distracted, you close your legs. We're on national TV.	<a href="https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/07/17/watch-duterte-jokes-about-being-distracted-by-da-execs-legs">https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/07/17/watch-duterte-jokes-about-being-distracted-by-da-execs-legs</a>
16-Jul-17	Duterte jokes about raping Miss Universe		You can mess with, maybe a Miss Universe. Maybe I will even congratulate you for having the balls to rape somebody when you know you are going to die.	<a href="https://www.newsweek.com/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-miss-universe-637536">https://www.newsweek.com/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-miss-universe-637536</a>
25-Jan-18	Duterte jokes that only the ugly women should've died during Typhoon Yolanda	"Tingin ako sa langit, sabi ko, 'Lord sana 'yung mga pangit lang ang namatay na. Ang magaganda huwag sana. Sabi ni Lord, 'Okay lang."	I looked up to the sky and said, 'Lord, I hope only the ugly died. I hope the beautiful ones did not.' The Lord said, 'That's okay.'	<a href="https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/inside-track/159733-duterte-jokes-humor-fragrant-philippines-ugly-yolanda-victims">https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/inside-track/159733-duterte-jokes-humor-fragrant-philippines-ugly-yolanda-victims</a>
7-Feb-18	President Duterte orders soldiers to shoot women in the vagina	"Order bag-o ni mayor. Di lang daw mo patyon. Pusion lang mo sa bisong arong—' Og wa na ma'y bisong, wa na ma'y silbi."	There's a new order coming from Mayor. We won't kill you. We will just shoot your vagina, so that – if there is no vagina, it would be useless.	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-orders-soldiers-to-shoot-female-rebels-in-the-vagina">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-orders-soldiers-to-shoot-female-rebels-in-the-vagina</a>

Table 2. A partial list of #BabaeAko's responses at the height of their movement

DATE	CONTEXT	QUOTE	TRANSLATION	REFERENCE
20-May-18	Former DSWD Secretary Judy Taguiwalo join different women in posting videos online saying they will fight against Duterte's brand of misogyny and politics. Start of #BabaeAko online.	"Akala ko taumbayan ang boss ni Duterte. Yun pala sina Marcos, Gloria, Trump at China. Para sa bayang makatarungan at malaya, lalaban ako,"	I thought the masses were Duterte's bosses. It turns out that it's actually Marcos, Gloria (Macapagal-Arroyo), Trump, and China. For a just and free nation, I will fight	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/jmtaguiwalo/videos/10213793589291839/">https://www.facebook.com/jmtaguiwalo/videos/10213793589291839/</a>
03-Jun-18	Former Solicitor-General Florin Hilbay reacts to Duterte kissing a married woman in South Korea	"WAG TULARAN, this is that path that normalizes misogyny. suportahan ang #BabaeAko"	Don't imitate. This is that path that normalizes misogyny. Support #BabaeAko.	<a href="https://twitter.com/fthilbay/status/1003258486443032576?lang=en">https://twitter.com/fthilbay/status/1003258486443032576?lang=en</a>
04-Jun-18	Journalist Kara David reacts to Duterte kissing a married woman in South Korea	"A woman is not an object. She is not something; she is someone. You treat a woman with respect. She is not your toy, She doesnt owe you anything just cause you are a man. Grow up and start treating women how they deserve to be treated" #BabaeAko		<a href="https://twitter.com/karadavid/status/1003514595049238528?lang=en">https://twitter.com/karadavid/status/1003514595049238528?lang=en</a>
11-Jun-18	#BabaeAko March on June 2018. #BabaeAko calls out Duterte's bluff of resignation should any women find his act of kissing a married woman protest-worthy.	"Duterte should make good his promise to resign should women protest this so-called 'no malice kiss,' Here we are, marching in protest and many others are taking the social media, and we dare him to make good on his pronouncement."		<a href="https://www.bulatlat.com/2018/06/14/social-media-streets-women-call-dutertes-misogynistic-behavior-babaeako-march/">https://www.bulatlat.com/2018/06/14/social-media-streets-women-call-dutertes-misogynistic-behavior-babaeako-march/</a>
11-Jun-18	#BabaeAko March on June 2018. One of the movement founders, Jean Fernandez, registers her dissent as she marches.	"We are saying we have had enough. All the acts of the Duterte administration and he himself contributed to us, the women, coming out."		<a href="https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/656649/women-tell-duterte-enough-during-babaeako-march/story/">https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/656649/women-tell-duterte-enough-during-babaeako-march/story/</a>

## DUTERTE'S DISINFORMATION

Disinformative discourse is characterized in terms of intention and depth or intensity. Cheyfitz (2017, p. 23) defines disinformation as “a deep, historical process of erasing history itself, culminating in a disruption or blockage of critical thinking in which particular fictions, through repeated and widespread use in our major institutions (schools, media, government, and political parties), substitute reflexively for facts.” This is different from misinformation, defined as either a mistake in reporting, or a misleading representation of truth. Therefore a disinformative discourse can be characterized as a deliberate and continuous rejection of actual occurrences and events in favor of an alternative interpretation, the value of which is anchored not in its ability to represent truth, but in its brazen assertion of its view as *the* truth.

This definition fits well with Duterte, when he attacks the mainstream media or defends his actions. In an October 2017 press briefing he claimed that Rappler, a media outfit critical of Duterte, was Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-funded, and previously claimed that it was 100% American-owned (Esmaguél, 2017). Duterte also creates disinformation to create supporting claims for his actions. In one speech in October 2018, VERA Files shows Duterte making nine false claims, including an exaggerated claim of economic performance for his home province of Davao, an inflated number of police killed in the drug war unsupported by government data, and a supposed absence of killings in Davao (Tordesillas, 2018; VERA Files, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d).

Whether it be through intransigent assertion of claims, or outright denial of facts, Duterte and the people around him have continuously created alternative truths—more so for justifying the drug war. Originally a claim of 3 million drug addicts in the Philippines during his presidential campaign, this figure increased to 3.7 million during Duterte's first state of the nation address, which then ballooned to 4 million in 2017, based on Philippine National Police (PNP) data (Ranada, 2017). Government officials even said that the 3 million figure was only a guesstimate based

on knowledge of the situation on the ground (Baldwin & Marshall, 2016; Cabato, 2017; Tordesillas, 2018; VERA Files, 2018d) and the claim of 4 million drug addicts exceeds actual figures. Duterte had arbitrarily increased this figure to 7-8 million in 2019, using this to challenge the PNP without stating his sources (Esguerra, 2019; Kabling & Geducos, 2019; Talabong, 2019). These inflated numbers had served as the basis for the drug war, which has claimed thousands of lives until the time of writing (Tomacruz, 2018). While government figures have perplexingly declined from estimates of 6,600 in June 2019 (Gonzales, 2019) to 5,526 in July 2019 (Tomacruz, 2019; Tostevin & Morales, 2019), independent monitoring and activist groups' estimates go as high as 27,000. Continuously asserting that narcopolitics is the main driver of poverty, and that the drug war is thus a major solution to poverty, constitutes the deletion of several key aspects of critical assessment of current Philippine society, and instead goes for an ahistorical and incomplete interpretation of underdevelopment. Such actions systematically negatively affect the process of critical thinking because the audience is decontextualized and instead placed in a one-sided imagination of the Philippine condition.

With this framing, Duterte oversimplifies Philippine underdevelopment as only concerns of political will and discipline (Tatcho, 2018). His securitized presentation of Philippine politics also represents the point of view of a political outsider who does not care much for the formalities of bureaucracy and democracy, and instead goes for the action with immediate and visible results. Securitizing underdevelopment meant a new perspective was relatable: crime as the main problem, political will and punitive justice as the main solution. Curato (2016) calls this penal populism, opposite the perceived penal elitism (justice is only for the well-to-do) in the country. More than relatability to everyday life, this also exuded a sense of inclusivity, by showing that justice is now attainable to the common people as well. An example of this is a quote he said during his final presidential campaign rally in May 2016, which demonstrates how his masculine approach to justice in the form of penal populism is expressed:

“Forget the laws on human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just as I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because, I'd kill you.”

– President Rodrigo R. Duterte  
(Mogato, Lema, Lague, & Morales, 2016)

What this shows is that disinformation has more than one expression. While disinformation is usually assumed to directly convince audiences to support the drug war, this disinformation creates a discursive environment conducive to the drug war as well, by making narcopolitics more salient, and by focusing on fluctuating numbers instead of institutional transparency and accountability, which human rights watch groups have recently noted (Tostevin & Morales, 2019).

## **POPULIST DISCOURSE AS GENDERED DISINFORMATION**

Duterte's gendered disinformation is two-fold: his establishment of masculine policy as the only policy option for development, and his self-presentation as a non-misogynist, anchored on populist policies and misogynist delegitimization of the opposition. This section first details how his response elaborates on his pro-women policies. His counter-discourse on allegations of misogyny are then discussed. This section then shows how treating populism as a communication phenomenon can help make sense of Duterte's counter-discourse to #BabaeAko.

The Duterte administration's responses to allegations of misogyny involve a certain level of misdirection, which can be examined both from an ideological and a discursive perspective. Duterte had proceeded to say that he loves women, using as proof the gender code of Davao which was passed during his term as Davao City mayor (Al Jazeera English, 2018). His then spokesperson Harry Roque defended his remarks by saying that this was just borne out of frustration, and that contrary to people's claims, Duterte actually loves women (Morallo, 2018). Roque also deflected by saying that to his knowledge, Duterte does not discriminate against

women, and that technically anyone qualified can be appointed in government (de Guzman, 2018).

Sara Duterte, current Davao City Mayor and daughter of Duterte, defended him by personalizing the issue and saying that she was the favorite among all of Duterte's children (Madarang, 2018), thus showing how Duterte supposedly favors women. She also reaffirmed Duterte's notion that "many women and some men are known to be damsels in distress" (Madarang, 2018) but that Duterte's dislike lies not in that they are women, but in that they are damsels in distress. This attempts to separate the personal from the political, the identity from the characteristic. When #BabaeAko marched in opposition to Duterte kissing a woman abroad, Duterte and his supporters responded with the following points: envy, inaccuracy of claims, and his own pro-women actions as a political leader. He downplayed the gravity of the criticisms by simply attributing it to critics' *inggit* or envy, instead of morality and appropriateness. His framing of envy is also more personal rather than political: he claims the critics are only envious of the kiss (Ranada, 2018c) and not even his position of power. He invokes personality as well by saying that this is simply his style, alluding back to his days as a mayor in Davao City where he boasts of having kissed plenty of women as well during campaign periods. Roque and the Palace rode the statement of the woman Duterte kissed when she said that there was no malice in the kiss, and Duterte said they and everyone else in the audience enjoyed it, thus there should be no issue (Corrales, 2018; Ranada, 2018b).

It is easy to use policies for women as a shield against accusations of misogyny. In fact, literature shows that populism can accommodate even women's policies as a thin-centered ideology, and has in fact been central in Latin American populist experiences (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). Duterte's populist leadership adopts such pro-women policies to ensure the widest support possible from the widest mass base. Duterte's misogyny is then discursively cloaked with a *masa* image, and claims that infantilize women's concerns. The simplification of the kiss as a consensual act between two individuals assumes there is no imbalance in power relations, and the president's actions should only be seen as the actions of an individual. What this discourse excludes

is the fact that a woman, facing a state leader in front of an audience, faces pressure to comply as well (Curato & Varona, in Al Jazeera English, 2018). Furthermore, the use of the woman as a prop for entertainment is also set aside in favor of discourses on what Duterte has done with and for women. Discursively he projects himself as an individual relatable to the masses, and he identifies an out-group by delegitimizing his detractors as petty. This is identified as “excluding populism” (de Vreese et al., 2018), using a discourse that refers to the people and the exclusion of an out-group.

Moreover, this paper argues that attempts to gloss over criticisms and instead assert Duterte's point of view functions as disinformation. For example, when Duterte ordered troops to shoot female rebels in the vagina (Table 1), then-Spokesperson Harry Roque responded by simply asserting that Duterte is serious about protecting women's dignity, and that he does not promote violence against women; there was also the call to “not take the words of the President literally, but of course, we should take the President's word seriously” (Ranada, 2018a). This was supplemented by claiming that Duterte was a joker, but that he should be judged by what he has done, policy-wise. Roque then proceeded to enumerate positive events and policies that took place during Duterte's administration, such as the decrease in rape cases from 9,384 in 2016 to 8,114 in 2017<sup>3</sup> (PCOO, 2018). Roque said this is one of the evidence for Filipinos feeling much safer under Duterte, due to the war on drugs. The press release also cited several policies of Duterte that benefit women.<sup>4</sup>

When jokes and humor are invoked as a defense, the idea is to reduce the gravity of the action in question by saying that this is not meant

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<sup>3</sup> Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) cited figures from the Philippine National Police (PNP); Meanwhile news outlets like Rappler also cited PNP figures but reported a different number of cases, from 8,663 in 2016 to 7,584 in 2017 (<https://www.rappler.com/nation/191747-philippines-crime-statistics-2017-all-crimes-drop-except-homicide-pnp-year-end-2017>).

<sup>4</sup> These include the banning of sending overseas Filipino workers to Kuwait to avoid abuse and exploitation, and the signing of Executive Order No. 12, which sought to attain and sustain “zero unmet need for modern family planning” through the strict implementation of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (PCOO, 2018).

to offend or harm. The production of discourse through Duterte's reply did exactly this. Misdirection was then employed by re-focusing on policies rather than symbolic actions. First, this is misleading. Humor has a social function that defines individual identities into groups of insiders and outsiders. To the outsider, humor is used as an excuse; to the insider, humor is used as a validation tactic that makes the joke in question seem acceptable, regardless of the gravity of the offense (Steed, 2004). Second, the assertion that we should focus on Duterte's policies makes the mistake of attributing the policies to Duterte as a single political actor, when in fact policies are made by multiple political actors, including actors who demand from the grassroots level. While the policies may have been put to effect during Duterte's term, it was not Duterte's sole effort as an individual that created these policies. In fact, such policies might have been possible in the first place only because Duterte's populism encourages him to create positive relationships with all groups in civil society. Brazen assertions of Duterte's singular influence and role in passing these policies also misdirect the discussion to that of outputs, when the outputs themselves do not cancel out the wrongness of Duterte's actions in any way. Such misdirection attempts to whitewash history by selectively highlighting favorable events and removing other relevant events and processes, or even the contexts in which the events and actions are embedded.

By misdirecting and framing, critical thinking is then hindered and whole truths are set aside in favor of partial and subjective interpretations of truth. A disinformative discourse is then created and put into effect. The same process is employed in the response to #BabaeAko. Popular and relatable emotions and sensibilities other than humor are evoked in Duterte's discourse, such as envy or individual self-conduct. This is then used to validate his actions from the perspective of the masses, eschewing the fact that there are inescapable differences in power relations between actions performed by citizens and actions performed by heads of state. The dismissal of such in favor of popular behavior and language erases the truth values of criticisms against Duterte.

## CONCLUSION

In the case of Duterte's gendered disinformation, disinformative discourse comes in the form of outright denials and rejections to claims of misogyny and sexism, which are then painted as false with his pro-women actions or policies—which are more due to civil society activism than Duterte's initiative himself. There is no rectification and remorse expressed, since doing so would mean acceptance of the criticism. There is no degendering in the policy follow-through. The gendering of work roles and languages are also retained, and defended in terms of either humor or security. Humor and security work to strengthen the populist image-building: humor as a relatable trait, counter to the elite character of traditional politicians; and security as Duterte's brand of exercise of political will that addresses the popular interests. Taken together, what these discursive exercises attempt to do is to set aside Duterte's character and history of sexual harassment and militaristic policies. Duterte's discourse acts as blinders that force us to focus on how his administration sees his gendered actions, and how his actions are justified with his populist policies. By forcing us to focus on the (marginally) good outcomes of his leadership, they essentially take his actions out of social contexts and excuse him from societal consequences simply because he is a leader who performs.

Independently the formation of Duterte's counter-discourse to #BabaeAko exhibits characteristics that allow it to qualify as disinformative. This means that while contemporary definitions of disinformation involve portrayals in high-choice media such as social media, this study points out that disinformative elements are already at play even before Duterte's discourse reaches social media. Of course social media can contribute to the proliferation of disinformation, but this article presents the argument that disinformative content does not solely rely on what Ong and Cabañes (2018) refer to as architects of networked disinformation, which include relationships between politicians, and big public relations firms and troll farms. Disinformation can also be covertly published by mass media acting as platforms for populist political actors, which lends legitimacy to the disinformative discourse

since mass media content can be easily fact checked while mass media framing is easily overlooked. Of course this does not mean that networked disinformation is not a problem.

Rather, this study posits that not all disinformative content can be addressed at the root with either content or process regulation. While takedowns of disinformative pages online are welcomed, literature argues that these are not enough, and that a focus on processes of transparency and accountability must also be pursued (Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019). In July 2019 an anti-fake news bill was passed in the Philippine Senate, aiming to penalize fictitious accounts that spread disinformation. While good in intention, the political climate in the country makes such measures prone to silencing dissent. We cannot call for the censorship of certain parts of public discourse without endangering our own right to create counter-discourse. In addition to process regulation, stronger anti-discourses which challenge populist disinformative discourses need to emerge from the people as well. An upswell in popular discontent can result in the dislocation of populist support. But popular discontent can only be achieved in the first place if a popular discourse against populist leadership is established.

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In solidarity with all women victims of patriarchal and macho-fascist politics. In your opposition we find hope that a new world is not only possible, but certain.

### NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

JOSE MARI HALL LANUZA is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines Manila, where he handles courses on political analysis, qualitative research methods, and Philippine politics. His research interests are on democratization, elections, and political communication—particularly on the interplay of disinformation, media systems, and the discourses of the political elite.

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