The War on Drugs and The Opioid Crisis:

An Analysis of Twitter Activism for #SupportDontPunish

Gena Pickett

PID: 730092056

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**Introduction**

The International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking is observed annually on 26 June and coincides with the release of the United Nations World Drug Report. The Report is historically meant to convey a message of international progress with drug use and abuse, especially in the day and age of the war on drugs. In light of the widespread and devastating opioid epidemic, which took the lives of 585,000 in 2017 alone, an increasing number of international organizations have created a platform of global advocacy on behalf of those suffering from addiction, or the so-called ‘victims’ of the war on drugs (Fordham, 2019; UNODC, 2019, p. 1). Elizabeth stone (2017, p. 8) credits the severity of the opioid epidemic for the heightened public awareness around the issue and the shift in perspective among the international community of the addict.

Political officials are increasingly realizing that the law and order approach is not an effective policy to reign in drug use, which is reflected by the World Drug Report’s finding that approximately 271 million people had reportedly used drugs in 2017 (UNODC, 2019). The Report (UNODC) also states that opioid use has increased by 56% from 2016 to 2017, providing further evidence that the intended celebration of the progress of international drug use by the UN is actually a recognition of the hawkish ideology behind the unfolding crisis (Reuter, 1992, p. 16).

International activism in support of the end of punitive drug policies expanded through more than 240 cities on the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. The outpouring of public support was largely fueled by the ‘Support. Don’t Punish’ campaign- hence the SupportDontPunish hashtag under analysis- that advocates for harm reduction-based approaches to drug use and denounces the draconian drug policies that arose from the law and order- based war on drugs. The international campaign wishes to “reclaim the message of the day” imposed by the UN by calling on a Global Day of Action, evidenced by the large scale turnout of activists across the globe (Fordham, 2019).

This study attempts to capture one Twitter community’s dialogue regarding the Global Day of Action, as opposed to the UN’s labelling of the day. The aim is to better understand how the international community perceives drug users and addicts, current drug policies, and activism surrounding drug policy reform in favor of harm reduction. The inherent sociopolitical dimensions of the handling of the opioid crisis is bound to create various dialogues based on stigma, personal experience, and knowledge, or lack thereof, of addiction and criminal justice (Kennedy-Hendrick et. al., 2017).

**Methods**

I used the Twitter Archiving Google Sheet (TAGS), an automated template that captures Twitter data, to analyze and code tweets containing the hashtag #SupportDontPunish. The first run of the hashtag returned approximately 3,000 tweets from 17 June 2019 through 26 June 2019. By doing so, I was able to amass a set of tweets representing the community’s disposition leading up to and on the Global Day of Action. I reduced the number of tweets from over 3,000 to 156 through filters and manual examination. To eliminate all of the retweets, I selected the column containing the text of the tweets and used the filter ‘begins with RT’ and brought the corpus to approximately 900 tweets.

Given the context of the hashtag, the conversation of the Twitter community expanded across the globe and thus contained input in languages such as Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese, among others. I thus deleted all tweets that did not have ‘en,’ or English, in the user language column. This brought my data count to roughly 600. Other decisions involved the elimination of advertisements, and tweets that solely contained the hashtag. I randomly selected 200 to delete, and upon further manual examination, 44 more tweets fell under the considerations for other eliminations. The final corpus is composed of 156 tweets.

The original codes centered around the most frequently referenced topics (Figure 1), such as addiction, justice, women, and cannabis. However, I found this set of topic-based codes slightly random and found richer insight by looking for emergent patterns in the data that revealed the most prominent aspects of conversation within the Twitter community.

Figure 1. Number of Tweets coded by topic

Addiction is the most frequently used code, likely due to its breadth and the multiplicity of angles one could take towards this overarching theme, which necessarily limits its power and significance to the study. More interesting is the vilification of addicts, which was codified based on the tone, the rhetorical appeal and the rationale behind the tweet. For instance, tweets that referenced the sociopolitical criminalization of addicts and the punitive drug policies that arose from the war on drugs, or that mentioned addiction as a disease rather than an immoral character defect, were codified as such. Although some tweets under the vilification code mentioned the war on drugs, I chose to make the war on drugs into a separate code as the latter is inherently political, while the former doesn’t explicitly contain political content. The topic of harm reduction is also a code of interest, as the #SupportDontPunish campaign and research into drug reform policies both acknowledge the efficacy of such a method.

A separate group of codes was formed based on the aforementioned rationale behind the Twitter community’s conversational inputs with the hashtag of SupportDontPunish. The reasoning behind each Twitter account’s decision to submit a post is coded as sociological, political, ethical, or pathological (Figure 2). A tweet is coded sociological when the content surrounds public support or the community engages in discussion about personal experiences with addiction. The political code covers conversation on drug policy, the war on drugs, and the criminalization of addicts in the criminal justice system. A tweet is coded as ethical when an account expresses concern about the morality of drug abuse and the ways in which international governments handle such cases with punitive and inhumane mechanisms. Finally, a tweet is coded under pathological when members of the Twitter community highlight addiction as a disease that requires treatment of root conditions, or offers opinions of how to support those suffering from mental illness and substance abuse.

**Results**

 The aforementioned frequency of various topics discussed with #SupportDontPunish embedded in the text are indicative of the Twitter community’s primary concerns. The rationale behind the Tweet provides insight into why members of the community bring forth the topics or concerns that they do, which allows us to uncover the angle and stance that Twitter users are taking. Tweets that are of pathological nature account for

Figure 2. Percentage of Tweets using rationale.  30.1% of conversation, followed by ethical concerns at 25.5%, and political at 24.2% (Figure 2).

**Discussion**

Societal understanding of addicts fits into a binary, wherein individuals adopt either a sympathetic or unsympathetic stance that aggregate to polarized policy proposals of harm reduction-based treatment or punitive measures of imprisonment and long sentences (Stone, 2017, p. 9; Reuter, 1992, p. 18)). Gstein (2018) explores the frames that influence legislative decision-making, wherein policy formation is hindered by the promotion of narratives that drug users are criminals and that the primary issue is centered around morality (p. 80; Reuther, 1992, p. 18). That sentiment is echoed by one Twitter account’s post that says “It is time we view drug and substance abuse in a different perspective #SupportDontPunish (a\_ongesa, Twitter).” The message is conveyed as a logical appeal to the issue of addiction from a sociological angle. The individuals and organizations that advocate for a change in societal perceptions are most likely to adopt a logical or ethical view. This falls under the umbrella of ethopolitical discourse that humanizes addicts and frames addiction as a disease just as valid as cancer, which is largely expressed by the community and has led to the discussion of drug policy reform (Stone, 2019).

Most of the Twitter community rallied behind the Global Day of Action by expressing their support for an end to the war on drugs in favor of humane, harm reduction styled legislation. Scholarly research is in agreement that such an approach is most likely to be effective and lessen the severity of the opioid crisis, while simultaneously helping addicts to recover rather than penalizing them.

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