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Negotiated Justice: A Case Study on The Impact of Plea-Bargaining on Drug-Related Cases in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Plea bargaining is a legal process that enables the resolution of criminal cases through negotiated agreements between the accused and the State, subject to court approval. This study examined the influences of plea-bargaining in the administration of justice, case disposition, and rehabilitation outcomes within the criminal justice system. A qualitative case study design was employed to allow an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon through multiple sources of data. The participants consisted of nine individuals, including Availed Accused (AA), Defense Attorneys (DA), and Prosecutors (Pros), conducted in Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines, where four major themes, namely: Plea Bargaining as a Structured Mechanism Balancing Efficiency and Institutional Control; Plea Bargaining as a Decision-Making Process Shaped by Liberty Concerns and Legal Risk Assessment; Plea Bargaining as a Process Constrained by Systemic Limitations and Shaped by Power Dynamics and Social Consequences; Plea Bargaining as a Mechanism Balancing Efficiency, Consequences, and Rehabilitative Potential. Together, these themes capture the interplay between legal processes, institutional structures, and lived experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of how plea bargaining operates within the criminal justice system. Findings indicate that plea bargaining enables efficient case resolution but is shaped by institutional controls, evidentiary factors, and procedural and social challenges. The study concludes that it operates as a complex system balancing efficiency, legal structure, and human experience. It is recommended that justice institutions enhance safeguards, transparency, resources, and reintegration support to improve outcomes.

Keywords: Case Resolution; Criminal Justice; Decision-Making; Defense Attorney; Drug Case; Institutional Controls; Legal Risk Assessment; Negotiation; Plea Bargaining; Philippines; Prosecution.

1.0. Introduction

The Philippine criminal justice system continues to face longstanding challenges involving court congestion, delayed disposition of cases, and overcrowded detention facilities. These concerns are particularly evident in the handling of drug-related offenses, which constitute a substantial portion of criminal cases filed before trial courts in the country (Brannon, 2025; Ciocchini & Lamchek, 2023). The increasing number of drug cases has contributed to prolonged detention among accused individuals and has strained the capacity of courts and correctional institutions to administer timely justice. Such conditions undermine not only judicial efficiency but also the constitutional guarantee of a speedy trial under Republic Act No. 8493 (Garcia & Marcelo, 2023). In response to these systemic problems, the Philippine justice system has adopted plea bargaining as a mechanism intended to expedite case resolution, reduce court backlog, and provide alternative pathways for rehabilitation while preserving legal accountability.

Plea bargaining refers to a legal process in which the accused voluntarily pleads guilty to a lesser offense in exchange for a reduced penalty or dismissal of other charges. In the Philippines, this mechanism is anchored under Rule 116, Section 2 of the Rules of Criminal Procedure and is further guided by policies and issuances of the Supreme Court and the Department of Justice (Respicio, 2025). The mechanism is intended to streamline judicial proceedings by reducing the need for lengthy trials, conserving judicial resources, and easing congestion in courts

and detention facilities (Pangalangan, 2001). Beyond procedural efficiency, plea bargaining is also viewed as a restorative approach that promotes accountability, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders into society (Caniban, 2020). This restorative dimension became more significant in drug-related cases following the implementation of Republic Act No. 9165 or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002, which imposed stringent penalties on drug offenses and contributed to the dramatic increase in drug-related prosecutions.

Recognizing the growing burden of drug cases, the Supreme Court issued A.M. No. 18-03-16-SC, which established specific guidelines for plea bargaining in drug-related offenses (scweb, 2024; Primer on Plea Bargaining in Drug Cases, n.d.). The framework permits plea bargaining under particular conditions and only for specific violations under R.A. 9165. Subsequent issuances, including OCA Circular No. 63-2024, further clarified that plea bargaining is not an absolute right of the accused but remains subject to judicial discretion and approval based on whether it serves the ends of justice (Circulars, 2025). Since its implementation, plea bargaining has reportedly improved case disposition rates, increased convictions, and expanded access to probation and rehabilitative interventions among eligible offenders (Buan, 2021). Data from the Dangerous Drugs Board also revealed that a notable percentage of admitted drug users in rehabilitation programs had availed of plea bargaining, indicating its growing role within the broader framework of restorative justice and rehabilitation (Statistical Analysis - Republic of Philippines - Office of the President, 2025).

Despite these reported benefits, plea bargaining in drug-related cases remains a contested and evolving practice within the Philippine criminal justice system. Critics argue that the process may disadvantage marginalized accused individuals who lack access to competent legal representation, thereby creating unequal outcomes in negotiated settlements (Langer, 2021). Concerns have also been raised regarding voluntariness, as some accused persons may feel compelled to accept plea agreements due to fear of harsher penalties or prolonged detention if their cases proceed to trial (Canoy & Villasanta, 2022). Moreover, while plea bargaining is often justified in terms of efficiency, questions persist regarding its long-term effects on rehabilitation, reintegration, and perceptions of fairness. Existing literature has largely focused on legal procedures, policy implications, and statistical outcomes, while limited qualitative attention has been given to the actual experiences and perspectives of those directly involved in the process.

This gap in empirical and practical knowledge highlights the need for a deeper qualitative exploration of plea bargaining beyond its procedural function. There remains limited understanding of how prosecutors, defense attorneys, law enforcement investigators, probation or social workers, and accused individuals perceive and experience plea bargaining in actual practice. Examining these perspectives is essential in determining whether plea bargaining genuinely advances the goals of justice, fairness, accountability, and rehabilitation within the Philippine criminal justice system. Guided by Procedural Justice Theory and Restorative Justice Theory, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges surrounding plea bargaining in drug-related cases. Through this inquiry, the study aims to contribute meaningful insights that may assist policymakers, justice practitioners, social workers, and future researchers in improving the implementation of plea bargaining as both a procedural mechanism and a rehabilitative justice strategy.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to examine the influences of plea bargaining on the administration of justice, case disposition, and rehabilitation outcomes within the criminal justice system. Specifically, it aimed to:

1) Determine how plea bargaining is justified in drug-related cases;
2) Identify the factors that influence participants to agree to plea bargaining;
3) Examine the challenges and issues that arise during the negotiation, implementation, and outcomes of plea bargaining in drug-related cases; and
4) Analyse the implications of plea bargaining for judicial efficiency, fairness, and the rehabilitative goals of the criminal justice system.

2.0. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to explore the influences of plea bargaining in the administration of justice, case disposition, and rehabilitation outcomes in drug-related cases. The qualitative case study design was appropriate because it allowed an in-depth examination of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges encountered by individuals directly involved in the plea-bargaining process within a bounded context (Yin, 2018; Merriam, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Stake, 1995). The study was conducted in the province of Zamboanga del Sur, a setting considered appropriate due to the active involvement of judicial, prosecutorial, law enforcement, and social welfare institutions in handling drug-related cases. A total of nine (9) participants were included in the study, consisting of three accused individuals who availed of plea bargaining, three defense attorneys, and three prosecutors. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques based on their direct involvement and relevant experiences in plea-bargaining proceedings. Data saturation served as the basis for determining the final number of participants.

Data were gathered using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions aligned with the objectives of the study. The instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the Misamis University Ethics Committee (MUREC), and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were conducted in English, Filipino, or the local dialect depending on participant preference and lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to capture contextual details. All responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Yin's (2009) six stages of case study analysis, namely: plan, design, prepare, collect, analyze, and share. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study.

3.0. Results and Discussion

This qualitative case study was organized according to the study objectives and analyzed through triangulation of experiences and perspectives from the Availed Accused (AA), Defense Attorneys (DA), and Prosecutors (Pros).

The triangulation process enabled the integration of individual experiences, professional interpretations, and institutional perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of plea bargaining in drug-related cases. Across the interviews, four major themes and eight sub-themes emerged, demonstrating the complex interaction between judicial efficiency, institutional discretion, legal risk assessment, systemic limitations, and rehabilitative outcomes within the plea-bargaining process. The themes collectively revealed that plea bargaining operates not merely as a procedural mechanism for case disposition but also as a negotiated process shaped by power relations, evidentiary considerations, and the lived realities of accused individuals.

3.1. Plea Bargaining as a Structured Mechanism Balancing Efficiency and Institutional Control

The findings reveal that plea bargaining is primarily justified as a legally sanctioned mechanism for efficient case resolution while remaining subject to institutional controls and procedural regulation. Across all participant groups, plea bargaining was consistently framed as an important strategy for expediting criminal proceedings, reducing court congestion, and minimizing prolonged detention. However, the participants also emphasized that its implementation is regulated by legal standards, evidentiary requirements, and judicial discretion.

The Availed Accused justified plea bargaining from the perspective of immediate personal relief. Participants described it as a practical avenue for obtaining reduced penalties, faster disposition of cases, and access to probation. AA1 stated that plea bargaining was understood through media and peer information as “a speedy disposition of cases” that could allow probation rather than prolonged incarceration. Similarly, AA2 explained that his lawyer recommended plea bargaining “to lessen the penalty” and avoid a longer sentence. These accounts demonstrate that the accused perceive plea bargaining as a pragmatic solution for minimizing the burdens associated with trial and detention.

Defense attorneys and prosecutors, however, framed plea bargaining within broader institutional objectives. DA2 emphasized that plea bargaining “contributes significantly to the speedy disposition of cases and helps address jail congestion,” while Pros1 similarly noted that cases are resolved “without prolonged trials.” These responses reveal a convergence between legal practitioners regarding the systemic function of plea bargaining as a mechanism for case management and judicial efficiency.

The triangulation of these perspectives demonstrates that plea bargaining is justified at both the individual and institutional levels. For the accused, the justification lies in liberty preservation and reduced punishment, whereas for legal practitioners, it lies in administrative efficiency and resource management. These findings support existing studies arguing that plea bargaining is widely used to address systemic inefficiencies such as court backlog and detention congestion (Bellin & Turner, 2023; Ciocchini & Lamchek, 2023). The findings also align with Procedural Justice Theory (Tyler, 1990), which posits that legal processes are more likely to be perceived as legitimate when they provide clear, efficient, and understandable outcomes.

At the same time, the findings reveal that efficiency alone does not fully justify plea bargaining. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the process remains subject to legal eligibility, prosecutorial consent, and judicial approval. AA2 explained that plea bargaining “cannot proceed unless there is consent from the prosecution and law

enforcement," while DA1 stressed that "all parties must follow legal steps before it can be granted." Prosecutors further highlighted that agreements must comply with Department of Justice and Supreme Court frameworks before approval. This demonstrates that plea bargaining is not viewed as an unrestricted right but as a controlled legal mechanism embedded within institutional authority.

The triangulated findings therefore indicate that the justification of plea-bargaining rests on a balance between expediency and legal accountability. While participants recognized its role in accelerating justice delivery, they also acknowledged that institutional controls are necessary to preserve fairness, consistency, and due process. These findings reinforce the conceptualization of plea bargaining as both an efficiency-driven mechanism and a regulated institutional practice.

3.2. Plea Bargaining as a Decision-Making Process Shaped by Liberty Concerns and Legal Risk Assessment

The findings reveal that decisions to enter plea bargaining are shaped by two interrelated factors: the urgent desire to regain liberty and the rational assessment of legal risks. Triangulation among accused individuals, defense attorneys, and prosecutors demonstrates that plea-bargaining decisions emerge from the interaction between personal pressures and evidentiary evaluation.

For the accused, the dominant factor influencing participation in plea bargaining was the desire to avoid prolonged detention and uncertainty in trial proceedings. AA1 admitted that he "had no other choice" because plea bargaining appeared to be the only practical option available to reduce the consequences of his case. Likewise, AA3 explained that he accepted the plea agreement because he "didn't want to be incarcerated for too long." These statements indicate that liberty concerns strongly shape decision-making among accused individuals. The findings suggest that plea bargaining is often experienced not as a fully autonomous choice but as a pragmatic response to constrained legal conditions.

Defense attorneys reinforced this interpretation by emphasizing the high stakes associated with criminal prosecution. DA3 stated that "it is the life and liberty of the accused that is at stake," explaining why many defendants choose plea bargaining. This perspective highlights the emotional and practical pressures surrounding criminal litigation, where accused individuals must weigh the risks of conviction against the possibility of reduced penalties.

Prosecutors, meanwhile, emphasized evidentiary strength and legal strategy as critical factors influencing plea decisions. Pros1 explained that when "the evidence is strong, the accused is more inclined to enter into plea bargaining to avoid harsher penalties." Similarly, defense attorneys emphasized that decisions are guided by "probability of conviction" and "possibility of probation." These findings demonstrate that plea bargaining decisions are not purely emotional but are grounded in legal reasoning and risk assessment.

The triangulated findings reveal that liberty concerns and evidentiary realities operate simultaneously in shaping plea decisions. The accused prioritize immediate release and reduced penalties, while defense attorneys and prosecutors evaluate the strength of evidence and potential outcomes. These findings are consistent with related literature emphasizing that plea bargaining is influenced by both personal urgency and strategic legal assessment (Garrett et al., 2023; Covey, 2022; Paolini, 2025).

Viewed through Procedural Justice Theory, the findings suggest that individuals are more likely to accept negotiated outcomes when they understand the reasoning behind legal advice and institutional decisions. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of legal counseling in explaining risks and consequences. AA2 noted that his lawyer explained the "advantages and disadvantages" of plea bargaining, helping him understand why it was the "better option." This highlights the role of legal representation in supporting informed decision-making and enhancing perceptions of fairness.

However, the findings also reveal concerns regarding voluntariness. The repeated expression that accused individuals felt they had "no other choice" indicates that decisions are shaped within conditions of limited autonomy. This reflects the tension between legal strategy and coercive pressure that has been identified in existing plea-bargaining literature (Langer, 2021; Canoy & Villasanta, 2022). The findings therefore suggest that while plea bargaining may be rational and strategic, it also raises important ethical concerns regarding informed consent and genuine voluntariness.

3.3. Plea Bargaining as a Process Constrained by Systemic Limitations and Shaped by Power Dynamics and Social Consequences

The findings reveal that the implementation of plea bargaining is affected by significant procedural, institutional, and social challenges. Although plea bargaining is intended to expedite case resolution, participants reported delays, documentary burdens, institutional inefficiencies, unequal power relations, and post-case reintegration difficulties. Triangulation among participants demonstrates that these issues affect not only the pace of proceedings but also perceptions of fairness and long-term rehabilitation.

The Availed Accused described procedural delays as one of the primary barriers encountered during the process. AA1 reported that hearings were postponed "due to the absence of key persons," causing delays and uncertainty. Defense attorneys similarly emphasized difficulties in securing documentary requirements, particularly for accused individuals without family support. DA3 explained that compliance becomes challenging "especially when the accused has no family support." Prosecutors pointed to institutional limitations such as the shortage of accredited physicians required for Drug Dependency Examinations, which delayed proceedings.

The triangulated findings indicate that plea bargaining remains vulnerable to systemic inefficiencies despite its intended function as a speedy mechanism. Delays arise not only from legal procedures but also from institutional resource limitations and logistical problems. These findings support studies arguing that procedural inefficiencies and limited resources continue to undermine criminal justice processes (Nash et al., 2024; Gormley, 2022).

Beyond procedural concerns, participants also highlighted unequal power dynamics within the plea-bargaining process. AA1 described plea bargaining as "a game of chance because it depends on whether the State will approve it." This statement reflects the perceived dependence of accused individuals on prosecutorial and judicial discretion. Defense attorneys further acknowledged that accused persons "may feel pressured to accept plea deals due to the risk of harsher penalties and system constraints." These findings indicate that decision-making authority is concentrated in institutional actors, creating a sense of limited agency among accused individuals.

Prosecutors, while emphasizing compliance with legal standards, also acknowledged limitations in achieving rehabilitative goals after case resolution. Pros1 admitted that "rehabilitation and reintegration after release remain concerns." This reveals that the effects of plea bargaining extend beyond legal disposition into broader social realities.

The triangulation of responses demonstrates that plea bargaining is shaped by institutional dominance and post-case vulnerability. While the accused experience uncertainty and dependency, defense attorneys recognize the pressures created by legal risks, and prosecutors acknowledge continuing reintegration challenges. These findings are consistent with Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes that perceptions of fairness are influenced by individuals' opportunities for voice and participation within legal processes (Tyler, 1990). The findings also align with Restorative Justice Theory by highlighting the importance of reintegration and social recovery after legal resolution. Another significant issue emerging from the findings is stigma. AA2 explained that after the case, he "experienced stigma and had difficulty rebuilding relationships in the community." This demonstrates that the consequences of plea bargaining continue even after legal proceedings have ended. Existing literature similarly notes that criminal labeling and social exclusion may hinder reintegration despite negotiated settlements (Miller, 2025; Findley, 2022).

Overall, the findings indicate that the challenges of plea bargaining are multidimensional, involving procedural inefficiencies, institutional resource limitations, unequal power dynamics, and post-case social consequences. These issues suggest that the effectiveness of plea bargaining cannot be evaluated solely based on efficiency but must also consider fairness, voluntariness, and long-term reintegration outcomes.

3.4. Plea Bargaining as a Mechanism Balancing Efficiency, Consequences, and Rehabilitative Potential

The findings reveal that plea bargaining has significant implications for judicial efficiency, perceptions of fairness, and rehabilitative outcomes. Triangulation among accused individuals, defense attorneys, and prosecutors demonstrates that while plea bargaining effectively improves case disposition, it also generates long-term personal consequences and varying opportunities for rehabilitation.

All participant groups acknowledged the efficiency gains associated with plea bargaining. Defense attorneys described it as "very effective in dec-logging court dockets and ensuring faster case disposition," while prosecutors emphasized that it "significantly reduces court congestion." These findings confirm that plea bargaining contributes to faster case resolution and improved judicial efficiency. The findings support previous research indicating that negotiated settlements are widely used to manage judicial workload and reduce delays within criminal courts (Ciocchini & Lamchek, 2023).

However, the accused also highlighted the experiential trade-offs associated with these efficiency gains. AA2 explained that while the process "felt fair because my case was resolved quickly," it was also "unfair because I now carry a criminal record." This demonstrates that perceptions of fairness are shaped not only by procedural speed but also by the long-term consequences attached to plea agreements. Defense attorneys similarly acknowledged that plea bargaining "may pressure accused persons to plead guilty even when the risks are uncertain."

The triangulation of these findings suggests that judicial efficiency does not automatically translate into substantive fairness. While participants appreciated the speed and predictability of plea bargaining, concerns remained regarding stigma, criminal labeling, and pressured decision-making. These findings align with Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes that fairness depends not only on outcomes but also on how individuals experience the process and its consequences.

Despite these concerns, the findings also reveal the rehabilitative potential of plea bargaining. AA1 described the process as transformative, explaining that it "helped me reflect on my actions and improve myself." AA3 similarly stated that plea bargaining "encouraged me to take responsibility and work toward a better future." Defense attorneys framed plea bargaining as "a second chance for offenders to redeem themselves," while prosecutors highlighted the role of probation and reintegration programs.

These triangulated responses demonstrate that plea bargaining may function not only as a mechanism for efficiency but also as a pathway toward accountability and behavioral reform. The findings strongly support Restorative Justice Theory, which views justice as a process aimed at healing, accountability, and reintegration rather than solely punishment (Zehr, 1990).

However, participants also emphasized that rehabilitation depends heavily on the availability of support systems. Prosecutors acknowledged continuing concerns regarding reintegration, while defense attorneys recognized limitations in post-case support. The findings therefore indicate that rehabilitation is not guaranteed by plea bargaining alone. Instead, meaningful reform requires continuous institutional support, including probation services, counseling, livelihood assistance, and community reintegration programs.

The triangulated findings ultimately suggest that plea bargaining has both beneficial and problematic implications for the criminal justice system. It improves efficiency and provides opportunities for rehabilitation, but it may also create unequal power relations, pressured decision-making, and long-term social consequences. The findings therefore underscore the need for a more balanced approach to plea bargaining that safeguards voluntariness, strengthens procedural fairness, and enhances rehabilitative support mechanisms.

3.5. Synthesis of Findings

The overall findings of the study demonstrate that plea bargaining in drug-related cases operates as a multidimensional legal process shaped by efficiency concerns, institutional authority, evidentiary assessment, systemic limitations, and rehabilitative aspirations. Through triangulation of the perspectives of accused individuals, defense attorneys, and prosecutors, the study reveals that plea bargaining cannot be understood solely as a procedural shortcut for case disposition. Rather, it is a negotiated process where personal liberty, legal strategy, institutional control, and social consequences intersect.

The study further demonstrates that while plea bargaining contributes significantly to judicial efficiency and case management, it also raises important concerns regarding voluntariness, fairness, reintegration, and post-case support. The findings support both Procedural Justice Theory and Restorative Justice Theory by illustrating how perceptions of fairness, accountability, and rehabilitation are shaped by participants' experiences within the

plea-bargaining process. Ultimately, the study suggests that the effectiveness of plea bargaining depends not only on its ability to expedite cases but also on its capacity to uphold procedural fairness, promote informed decision-making, and support meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration within the criminal justice system.

4.0. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Conclusion

The study concludes that plea bargaining in drug-related cases functions as a multidimensional mechanism that promotes judicial efficiency while simultaneously shaping decision-making, perceptions of fairness, and rehabilitative outcomes within the criminal justice system. Through the triangulated perspectives of the accused, defense attorneys, and prosecutors, the findings revealed that plea bargaining serves as a practical strategy for expediting case resolution, reducing court congestion, and providing opportunities for probation and rehabilitation. However, the process is also influenced by institutional discretion, evidentiary considerations, procedural limitations, and unequal power dynamics that affect the voluntariness and experiences of the accused. Furthermore, while plea bargaining offers pathways toward accountability and personal reform, challenges such as stigma, reintegration difficulties, and limited post-case support continue to affect long-term outcomes. Overall, the study affirms that the effectiveness of plea bargaining extends beyond procedural efficiency and depends on the extent to which fairness, transparency, informed decision-making, and rehabilitative support are sustained throughout and beyond the legal process.

4.2. Recommendation

The Department of Justice, in collaboration with courts, law enforcement agencies, social workers, and Local Government Units, may strengthen the implementation of plea bargaining in drug-related cases by enhancing procedural transparency, improving access to legal orientation and psychosocial support, streamlining documentary and institutional requirements, and expanding reintegration and rehabilitation programs for individuals who avail of plea bargaining. Strengthening coordination among justice institutions and community-based support systems may help ensure that plea bargaining not only expedites case resolution but also promotes fairness, informed participation, accountability, and meaningful social reintegration. Future researchers may further explore the long-term effects of plea bargaining on recidivism, rehabilitation, procedural fairness, and reintegration experiences across different jurisdictions and participant groups within the criminal justice system.

Declaration

Declarations

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors have declared that no competing financial, professional or personal interests exist.

Consent for publication

Both authors contributed to the manuscript and consented to the publication of this research work.

Authors' contributions

The first author conducted the study, gathered and analyzed the data, and prepared the manuscript. The second author served as the research adviser, providing guidance, supervision, and critical revisions throughout the completion of the study. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. The participants were properly informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of the information they provided.

Availability of data and material

Supplementary information such as the raw files of the participants' responses are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not Applicable

Ethical Approval

The manuscript underwent ethical review and approval by the Misamis University Research Ethics Committee prior to the conduct of the study.

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Declaration of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only for language improvement, grammar checking, and refinement of the manuscript. All interpretations, analyses, and final content of the study remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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