

Navigating Psychological Riptides: How Seafarers Cope and Seek Help for Mental Health Needs

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors of Filipino seafarers in addressing their mental health challenges, with a focus on the adoption of telemental health services. Drawing on the Integrated Behavioral Model of Mental Health Help-Seeking (IBM-HS), the findings reveal structural barriers, such as financial constraints, digital security concerns, and limited infrastructure, along with cultural influences, significantly shape seafarers' engagement with mental health care. Telemental health services have been found to offer practical benefits, including convenience, privacy, and timely access to care, particularly in addressing the challenges inherent in maritime work. However, stigma, limited awareness of digital mental health platforms, and distrust in online interactions have impeded their widespread acceptance. The study emphasizes the importance of fostering a supportive culture, enhancing digital literacy, and addressing structural barriers through subsidized services and improved internet connectivity. These insights inform policies for improving mental health care access in the maritime industry, paving the way for interventions that enhance the productivity, well-being, and resilience of seafarers.

Keywords: Mental Health, Maritime Industry, Seafarers, Telemental Health, and Help-Seeking

1. INTRODUCTION

Maritime transport remains the backbone of global trade and manufacturing supply chains, powering the transportation of a staggering 90% of the world's goods [1]. The vast global fleet consists of about 150 nations, with around 100,000 ships and nearly two million seafarers [2]. Since 1987, the Philippines has been the leading provider of seafarers to the international shipping community [3]. Data show that approximately 25% of international seafarers are Filipinos [4].

Seafaring has always been a high-risk profession, with month-long tours of duty testing the resilience of those at sea. Seafarers face a host of challenges, including loneliness, boredom, overwork, injuries, piracy, and even disappearances at sea [5, 6]. These challenges place many of them at heightened risk for mental health struggles, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and dependency on alcohol or drugs [7]. The isolation experienced at sea subjects them to unavoidable, diverse sources of stress that put their mental health at risk [8].

Despite their critical role in the maritime industry, existing research on seafarers fails to capture the full spectrum of health challenges that they face onboard, particularly in mental health [9]. In-depth studies on how they cope and seek help for mental health issues, including the use of telemedicine, remain limited [1, 9]. The predominant focus on European seafarers in the literature may have also overlooked significant cultural and regional differences in mental health experiences and needs [1]. These gaps in understanding are particularly evident for Filipino seafarers, who constitute a substantial portion of the global maritime workforce. The lack of comprehensive studies on coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors for mental health concerns represents a missed opportunity to address the unique challenges faced by this population [10].

Hence, this case study explored the coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors of Filipino seafarers regarding their mental health concerns onboard. It likewise examined their adoption of telemental health services, which involve the delivery of digital mental health solutions using information and communication technology, to address their mental health needs. Given the high-risk nature of seafaring and the scarcity of research on non-European seafarers, this case study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of the mental health issues in the maritime industry. Furthermore, its insights into the use of telemedicine as an accessible and timely intervention offer practical implications for improving mental health support, particularly for seafarers navigating

the isolating and stressful environment of life at sea. The findings could inform the development of tailored interventions and policies to enhance the well-being and productivity of Filipino seafarers, ultimately benefiting the maritime industry as a whole.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Integrated Behavioral Model of Mental Health Help-Seeking (IBM-HS) provides a lens for understanding the factors that influence individuals' decisions to seek professional mental health care. Building on the theory of planned behavior, it integrates elements from various behavioral models to address the unique challenges associated with seeking help for mental health issues. The IBM-HS identifies key determinants, beliefs, mechanisms, and pathways that guide the process of seeking care, with an emphasis on understanding cultural and structural barriers to mental health care access [11].

At the core of the model are help-seeking determinants, which include structural forces (systemic barriers and oppression), cultural influences (norms, values, and traditions), environmental constraints (logistical barriers, such as cost, access to care, and transportation), past experiences with help-seeking (positive and negative experiences of mental health care), evaluated need (perceived necessity of seeking help), mental health perceptions, knowledge, and skills (mental health literacy), and social support (emotional or instrumental assistance from social networks). These determinants shape individuals' beliefs about help-seeking and moderate the relationship between their intention to seek help and actual behavior [11].

The IBM-HS also recognizes the importance of help-seeking beliefs, which are individuals' subjective perceptions of seeking help. These beliefs are categorized into outcome beliefs (expectations about the results of seeking help), experiential beliefs (emotional reactions to the idea of seeking help), and beliefs about others' expectations and behaviors (social norms and perceived actions of reference groups). Additionally, logistical beliefs focus on practical considerations, such as time constraints or the perceived complexity of accessing mental health care [11].

The model identifies three help-seeking mechanisms—attitude, perceived norm, and personal agency—that mediate the relationship between beliefs and intentions. Attitude refers to an individual's overall positive or negative evaluation of seeking help, which is influenced by their beliefs about outcomes and experiences. Perceived norms capture social pressure or encouragement from important others to seek help, while personal agency reflects confidence in one's ability to navigate the logistical and procedural aspects of accessing mental health care [11].

Finally, the IBM-HS emphasizes the importance of help-seeking intentions and behaviors as key outcomes of the process. Intention represents a person's readiness to seek professional mental health care and is strongly influenced by their attitudes, perceived norms, and personal agency. However, translating intention into actual behavior is often moderated by external factors, such as environmental constraints and structural barriers [11].

The IBM-HS recognizes that barriers to mental health care are not isolated issues but rather a complex web of social, economic, cultural, and systemic factors. By identifying these factors and how they interact, the IBM-HS can provide a comprehensive framework for designing interventions and policies that foster equitable access to mental health care [11].

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a case study approach, which is especially valuable for gaining an in-depth understanding of an issue, event, or phenomenon within its natural, real-world context [12]. A case study approach involves the identification of themes through a comparison of similarities and differences in the lived experiences of study participants [13]. It entails the generalization of ideas such that its findings can be applied in other contexts [14].

Setting and Participants

The Associated Marine Officers' and Seamen's Union of the Philippines (AMOSUP) is the largest maritime labor organization in the Philippines that has been dedicated to promoting the rights and welfare of Filipino seafarers. It was formed in 1960 to address challenges faced by Filipino seafarers, such as poor working conditions and inadequate compensation. It offers a range of benefits to its members alongside their families, including health care services, maritime training and education, and welfare programs [15].

To become a member of the union, a seafarer must serve on a vessel covered by a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) with AMOSUP. Membership becomes automatic upon joining such a vessel. To continue availing the various benefits of AMOSUP, a seafarer must apply for a membership card within six months after disembarking [16].

Filipinos, male seafarers aged 18 to 65 years old, associated with AMOSUP, and willing to be interviewed were eligible as study participants. AMOSUP facilitated the recruitment of study participants while ensuring the data privacy rights of affiliated seafarers. Recruitment was conducted via an on-site booth at the AMOSUP Sailor's Home, where a document detailing the study's information, eligibility criteria, risks, and benefits, and a

consent form was distributed. A communications officer of AMOSUP liaised the researchers with Filipino seafarers, who expressed an interest in participating in this study.

Case studies focused on gaining deep insights typically require small sample sizes, often with fewer than 12 participants, to achieve data saturation [17, 18]. In homogeneous samples, where study participants share similar characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question, as few as six to seven interviews can capture significant themes [19]. Although small sample sizes may limit generalizability, they enable researchers to devote more time to each study participant, fostering a deeper understanding of individual experiences and perspectives.

Data Gathering

Each study participant underwent semi-structured interviews. The initial questions explored their roles and responsibilities as seafarers, length of membership in AMOSUP, and availed benefits from the union. The interview then delved into mental health challenges experienced as seafarers, coping strategies, help-seeking behaviors for their mental health needs offshore, familiarity with telemental health services, and their opinions on its usefulness and implementation in the maritime industry. Finally, study participants were asked about their willingness to use telemental health services for mental health support, preferences between digital and face-to-face counseling, and recommendations for its adoption and improvement.

Data Analysis

Researchers began thematic analysis by immersing themselves in the data to familiarize themselves with their content, by manually transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews and repeatedly reading the verbatim transcripts. This process enabled them to identify notable segments and to assign codes and themes. Using an inductive approach, researchers generated themes emerging directly from the data, which were then systematically labeled, defined, and organized for clarity and consistency. The relationships between themes were mapped throughout the analysis. Finally, the researchers interpreted the emerging themes vis-à-vis the theoretical framework to arrive at insights into coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors of Filipino seafarers, as well as their adoption of telemental health services for mental health concerns onboard.

4. FINDINGS

Nine Filipino seafarers participated in this study. They assume a wide range of roles and responsibilities that are crucial to maritime operations. With decades of combined

experience, these seafarers held roles, such as deck supervisors, engineers, machinists, and able-bodied seamen. Their tasks included deck and engine maintenance, waste management, machinery operation, bunkering, welding, security, and administrative duties. Each contributed uniquely, from supervising critical equipment to ensuring ship safety and compliance with international codes.

Many struggled with homesickness and the emotional strain of being physically distant from their loved ones. Social isolation is common because the nature of maritime work often leaves them detached from their usual social support networks. Work-related stress and exhaustion further compounded these difficulties, with irregular schedules, demanding tasks, and unpredictable work environments taking a toll. Interpersonal conflicts, power dynamics, and feelings of insignificance in the workplace also contributed to the emotional burden. Finally, loneliness and the lack of an onboard support system led to a sense of isolation and evolving mental states, with some seafarers noting significant changes in their mental health over time. Collectively, these challenges highlight the critical need for mental health support in the maritime industry.

Coping Strategies to Maintain Mental Health

Seafarers have employed various strategies to cope with mental health concerns offshore, such as using virtual communication tools, establishing support systems at work, engaging in recreational activities, and promoting resilience.

Virtual communication tools. Access to the internet onboard was a lifeline for many seafarers, providing a way to stay connected with loved ones and alleviating homesickness. The study participants emphasized how constant communication through messaging and video calls helped them cope with feelings of isolation. For many, maintaining these virtual connections offers emotional stability during long stretches away from home. As one shared:

If I get homesick, I just message or video call my family. It is a good thing our company provides 24/7 internet access even in the middle of the ocean.

Another study participant expressed how advances in technology made long-distance communication more accessible:

It is modern now. Wi-Fi connection has become important. It is better nowadays because we can make video calls, which is something we could not do before.

Seeing and hearing loved ones in real time provides a deeper connection, easing life at sea.

Social media platforms also serve as a means of fostering relationships and providing emotional support. As one seafarer recounted, “*I just go on TikTok. That is where I met my girlfriend,*” showing how these platforms can create new avenues for companionship and support despite physical distance.

Support systems. Strong relationships with colleagues onboard proved to be a vital coping mechanism for seafarers, offering emotional support and fostering a sense of belonging in an environment often marked by isolation and stress. Many study participants likened their coworkers to their family, where camaraderie and mutual respect were essential for maintaining morale. As one seafarer expressed:

Respect is number one for us. Even though you are a captain, you also need to act like a brother to us, like family. This avoids homesickness.

The benefits of strong interpersonal bonds extend beyond emotional comfort. Study participants noted that positive relationships with colleagues also helped them manage the long duration of their contracts and monotony of maritime work. “*Having a good relationship with colleagues makes the time onboard feel shorter,*” stated another. These connections create a shared sense of purpose and solidarity, making the challenging aspects of life at sea more bearable.

Moreover, this sense of camaraderie played a crucial role in helping seafarers navigate the stress and negative emotions that threaten their mental health. By fostering trust and open communication, colleagues can serve as a reliable support system during difficult times.

Recreational activities. Recreational activities and organized entertainment onboard serve as a crucial source of relief and well-being for seafarers, providing both physical and mental health benefits. Study participants found that engaging in sports, exercise, and videoke gave them opportunities to stay active and counteract the monotony of life at sea. One study participant shared:

There are recreational activities like videoke and basketball. There is also a gym where you can use the treadmill. These activities help us stay active and avoid just sleeping all the time.

Such opportunities helped them maintain their physical health while also offering them a mental break from work-related stress.

Organized events, such as billiard tournaments, parties, raffles, and games, also played a significant role in strengthening interpersonal connections among seafarers. Study participants expressed appreciation for these social

gatherings as they provided opportunities to relax and bond with their colleagues. As one noted:

[Human resource personnel] organize parties, raffles, and games. These activities really help us relax and bond with one another.

This sense of camaraderie and shared enjoyment were critical in alleviating feelings of isolation and promoting a supportive onboard environment.

Additionally, many seafarers turned to personal hobbies, which were often encouraged and facilitated by human resource personnel. These hobbies, such as watching movies, allowed them to find moments of “*personal enjoyment*” and “*mental refreshment*,” contributing further to their ability to cope with the stress of maritime life.

Resilience. Adopting a mindset focused on reframing negative experiences into opportunities for growth helped them endure the isolation, stress, and homesickness inherent in their profession. One seafarer shared, “*Always turn negatives into positives,*” illustrating how a shift in perspective can transform challenges into manageable situations.

Discipline was also emphasized as a cornerstone of resilience. Another study participant stated, “*Discipline is the most important onboard, and you need to have a strong heart,*” underscoring the significance of mental strength and self-regulation in maintaining emotional stability. For seafarers, this combination of positive outlook and resilience provides a foundation for managing the unpredictable and demanding nature of their work, ensuring that they remain focused and motivated despite the hardships they face.

Help-Seeking Behaviors to Support Mental Health

Seafarers rely on both informal resources, such as guidebooks, for managing onboard emergencies, and formal health support through AMOSUP and employer-provided services. While guidebooks address immediate needs, formal systems offer more comprehensive care.

Informal help. In the absence of professional medical assistance onboard, seafarers rely heavily on guidebooks to address medical emergencies and mental health concerns. These resources provide step-by-step instructions for managing situations requiring immediate attention. As one participant explained:

We follow the guide in the book. That’s where we base our actions on health-related concerns.

Even senior crew members, such as chief officers, who occasionally assume the role of onboard medical

personnel, depend on these guidebooks to respond to health-related challenges.

While these resources provide a practical solution, they also reveal gaps in the immediate access to professional medical care offshore. Support systems, such as telemedicine or additional training for crew members in basic medical procedures, remain underexplored.

Formal help. The study participants benefited from comprehensive health insurance and medical services provided by AMOSUP Seamen's Hospital. One of them pointed out how support for their physical and mental health is *"one call away"* because of their insurance. Others elaborated on the free health care services available, including check-ups and treatments, as well as financial assistance for major medical procedures.

Seafarers also received similar health care benefits from their employers. A study participant shared:

We have a free medical package on every joint ship. It includes medical and neuropsychology services, which are part of the health insurance coverage for seafarers.

Additionally, they would have access to various types of mental health support through their respective employment agencies. The mental health support onboard includes monthly meetings on coping with stress, mental health awareness sessions during officers' meetings, and psychological assistance or debriefing after incidents. Some agencies would also administer mental health assessments to promote well-being. Seafarers could likewise approach human resource personnel for advice and support regarding their personal concerns.

Adoption of Telemental Health Services

Telemental health services present a promising solution to the mental health challenges faced by seafarers, by offering convenience, privacy, and timely access to expert care. However, adoption is influenced by various enablers and barriers.

Perceived benefits. Telemental health services have been widely regarded as convenient and accessible mental health solutions for seafarers. Digital platforms can provide a faster alternative to traditional face-to-face counseling, particularly for seafarers, who face logistical challenges in accessing onshore health facilities. As one study participant noted:

Digital is better because anytime, wherever you are, as long as you have load, you can easily access it, and the response is quick.

For another study participant, *"Telemental health is good because we can hardly leave the ship."* It also saves time,

a crucial factor in the fast-paced maritime industry, because consultations can be scheduled efficiently.

Additionally, study participants agreed that the privacy offered by telemental health services encourages seafarers to seek mental health support without fear of judgment. They felt secure receiving care within the privacy of their quarters, allowing them to confide freely in such a safe space. Privacy is particularly important in an industry where mental health struggles are often stigmatized.

The study participants believed that telemental health services could address the lack of medical professionals on most ships. Consequently, telemental health services can provide an alternative to self-medication by offering immediate access to expert advice.

These digital platforms can address critical gaps in onboard mental health care, providing timely, expert assistance that is logistically and financially practical. By offering a secure and stigma-free environment, telemental health services hold the potential to transform mental health support for seafarers whose professions are marked by isolation and stress.

Enablers. Financial accessibility was identified as a significant factor influencing seafarers' willingness to avail telemental health services. Many study participants brought up the importance of offering free services to encourage help-seeking behaviors for mental health support. A study participant stated:

... probably if there were free services, if contacting licensed psychologists onboard were free, if the service was 24/7... seamen like things to be free.

This sentiment reflects the financial realities of seafarers, who often prioritize allocating their income to support their families back home, leaving little room for personal health expenditure.

As awareness of telemental health services is lacking among seafarers, several study participants suggested a multi-pronged approach to raising awareness by combining the use of social media to reach younger seafarers with traditional media, such as news channels, to cater to older ones. Partnering with seafarer unions and training institutes could help disseminate information about telemental health services during pre-departure briefings and onboard orientation.

Most study participants also supported integrating mental health topics into mandatory training programs and seminars to build awareness and normalize conversations about mental well-being. They recognized the need for structured educational initiatives to foster a culture of acceptance. Such initiatives could help reduce stigma and create a more supportive work environment in which seafarers feel comfortable seeking help when needed.

Barriers. Older seafarers seemed reluctant to engage in discussions on their mental health. This reluctance stems from societal norms during their upbringing, in which mental health has rarely been addressed. As one study participant observed:

It depends on how they were raised, their generation, whether they talk about health, mental health specifically. They will think, "Do I really need this? I have lived to this age without discussing mental health."

Older generations tend to view emotional struggles as something to be bottled, making it difficult for them to embrace telemental health services for support. By contrast, younger seafarers may feel more comfortable discussing such topics because of the increased openness fostered by digital platforms.

Another significant barrier is the lack of awareness of telemental health services. Before the interviews, most study participants revealed that they were entirely unfamiliar with these digital mental health solutions. This lack of awareness suggests that insufficient efforts have been made to educate seafarers about the existence, benefits, and accessibility of telemental health services.

Seafarers' hesitancy toward telemental health services is compounded by their lack of prior experience with digital mental health platforms. While many study participants indicated familiarity with digital tools for communication or entertainment, they had never used these tools for mental health purposes. As one seafarer shared:

We have not used [telemental health services] yet. But now that we know about it, we can use them, and it can help us greatly.

This limited exposure creates uncertainty, as seafarers may feel uneasy about engaging with health care services that they have not previously encountered.

Financial constraints present another significant challenge in the adoption of telemental health services. Most study participants expressed concerns about costs. They reported being unable to afford the technology and internet connectivity required for such services.

Moreover, distrust in online interactions adds another layer of resistance to telemental health services for mental health support. Study participants raised concerns about the security of digital platforms, fear of scams, or unreliable services.

Face-to-face meetings are superior to online modes. Because if you are not sure who you are talking to, it is possible that you have conversed with a scammer.

As observed by one study participant, many seafarers still preferred traditional face-to-face consultations, associating them with greater trust and reliability.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, interpreted through the lens of the IBM-HS, reveal that seafarers' engagement with telemental health services is influenced by a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and individual factors.

Structural Forces and Environmental Constraints

The IBM-HS posits that structural forces and environmental constraints play a critical role in shaping individuals' ability to seek and access mental health care [11]. In the context of seafarers, these structural barriers include budget constraints, digital security concerns, and lack of accessible infrastructure for telemental health services. These challenges are rooted in the unique realities of maritime work and are pivotal in influencing help-seeking behaviors.

Budget constraints. Seafarers often face financial limitations, particularly because a significant portion of their income is allocated to supporting their families. These constraints result in additional expenses, such as mental health services, which are difficult to justify. Such financial limitations are not only individual concerns, but also systemic barriers that can reduce seafarers' perceived ability to engage in help-seeking behaviors for their mental health concerns [20].

Digital security concerns. Qualms regarding the reliability and safety of digital platforms further exacerbate seafarers' reluctance to adopt telemental health services. This distrust reflects broader apprehension about digital interactions, which are perceived as less secure than traditional face-to-face consultations. However, digital platforms for common mental health issues can be just cost-effective as face-to-face therapy [21]. Nonetheless, fear of scams and misinformation discourages seafarers from using digital mental health solutions, hindering them from accessing much-needed support.

Lack of infrastructure and availability. The maritime environment presents unique obstacles to providing adequate mental health support for seafarers [23]. Limited internet connectivity at sea severely restricts access to online mental health resources, telemedicine services, and virtual counseling sessions that are increasingly common onshore [24]. This digital divide can leave seafarers feeling isolated and unable to seek help when needed. Additionally, the absence of medical professionals on most vessels means that immediate in-person mental health support is rarely available [23]. This lack of professional assistance can be particularly

problematic during mental health crises, or when seafarers experience acute stress or emotional distress.

Cultural Influences and Perceived Norms

Cultural and generational attitudes significantly affect seafarers' willingness to seek mental health care. Older seafarers demonstrated reluctance to discuss mental health rooted in traditional norms, where such topics were taboo. Noticeably, cultural stigma around mental health is less pronounced among younger seafarers due to the influence of social media and other digital platforms on normalizing conversations about mental health [22].

Social Support and Perceived Norms

The supportive role of colleagues and family is a cornerstone for promoting mental health help-seeking behaviors among seafarers, as revealed in the findings. The IBM-HS emphasizes the importance of social networks in shaping perceived norms, reducing stigma, and reinforcing positive help-seeking behaviors [11].

Colleagues as social buffers. Seafarers often live and work in isolated environments for extended periods of time, making their onboard colleagues a critical part of their social support system. Strong interpersonal bonds onboard not only help mitigate feelings of isolation but also encourage a culture of openness and trust, making it easier for seafarers to discuss and address mental health challenges [8, 25].

In the context of IBM-HS, these relationships influence perceived norms, a key construct that refers to an individual's beliefs about what others think they should do [11]. When supportive colleagues normalize discussions around mental health or advocate for seeking help, it reduces stigma and fosters a sense of acceptance of digital mental health solutions [25, 26].

Family as an anchor. For many seafarers, families play a vital role in their resilience, even from a distance [26]. Study participants expressed how maintaining communication with loved ones through digital tools, such as messaging and video calls, helped alleviate their homesickness and stress. These interactions help maintain a positive outlook.

Family members, who encourage help-seeking for mental health needs, can significantly influence seafarers' attitudes and intentions to use telemental health services. Knowing that their families support these actions may reduce hesitation and strengthen their resolve to seek help [11].

Mental Health Perceptions and Knowledge

The IBM-HS identifies knowledge and perceptions of mental health as key determinants that influence attitudes

and intentions to seek care. Misconceptions or a limited understanding of mental health issues may lead to negative perceptions, fear, or reluctance to seek help. Conversely, literacy about mental health can help dispel myths and reduce stigma, thereby promoting more positive attitudes toward seeking care [11].

Furthermore, individuals are more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviors when they possess sufficient knowledge of available resources and perceive these services as effective and accessible [27]. The lack of awareness among seafarers in this study about telemental health services suggests that their ability to form positive attitudes and intentions toward digital platforms was hindered from the outset. Without adequate information, seafarers are unable to recognize the potential benefits of digital mental health solutions, limiting their motivation to explore or use these resources.

Minimal exposure to telemental health platforms also fosters uncertainty and hesitancy, as individuals are naturally cautious about engaging with unfamiliar systems, particularly for sensitive issues, such as mental health. This lack of prior experience, coupled with generational stigma, creates a barrier whereby older individuals may outright dismiss the need for these services, while younger seafarers may remain unaware of their existence or how to access them [24, 28, 29].

Attitudes and Beliefs

Younger seafarers tended to demonstrate positive attitudes toward the convenience and accessibility of telemental health services. These attitudes are shaped by beliefs about the practicality and effectiveness of digital platforms, particularly in overcoming the logistical challenges of their profession [24, 28]. Study participants emphasized features, such as privacy, quick response times, and the ability to access care virtually anywhere as critical advantages of digital mental health solutions.

IBM-HS views personal agency (belief in their ability to access care) and self-efficacy (belief in their ability to successfully perform behaviors necessary to access care) as key determinants of help-seeking behavior [11]. Younger seafarers, familiar with digital platforms, expressed greater ease in using these services because their digital literacy fosters a sense of agency and perceived efficacy in seeking mental health care [24]. Conversely, older seafarers find accessing mental health support through digital means not as intuitive and manageable. As a result, they are less likely to perceive telemental health services as a viable option for addressing their mental health concerns [27].

Intentions and Help-Seeking Behaviors

While many seafarers included in this study expressed openness and willingness to use telemental health services,

their ability to act on this intention was significantly influenced by structural and cultural barriers. These barriers may include limited internet connectivity at sea, concerns about data privacy and confidentiality, lack of dedicated private spaces for telehealth consultations on vessels, and potential stigma associated with seeking mental health support in maritime culture. Additionally, time constraints owing to demanding work schedules and the challenge of coordinating appointments across different time zones can further complicate access to these services [22, 23, 24]. Such interplay between behavioral intentions and external moderators underscores the complexity of implementing digital mental health solutions in the maritime industry.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Several practical implications can be gleaned from the findings, such as promoting help-seeking for mental health concerns among seafarers by addressing structural, cultural, and individual factors that hinder them from accessing mental health support.

A key practical implication is the need to subsidize or offer free telemental health services, which can help alleviate financial burden and increase accessibility. Collaboration with unions, such as AMOSUP, and maritime companies to expand free mental health support are critical. Additionally, government subsidies could ensure widespread access to digital mental health solutions for Filipino seafarers, who constitute a significant portion of the global maritime workforce.

Improving internet connectivity at sea is another pressing issue. Limited access to reliable internet severely hampers the feasibility of telemental health services, restricting real-time consultations and digital resources. Maritime companies must invest in satellite-based internet systems, while governments and regulatory bodies can implement policies that ensure minimum connectivity standards for vessels. Collaboration with technology firms to provide cost-effective, maritime-specific internet solutions could address this challenge.

Digital security concerns must also be addressed to foster trust in digital mental health solutions. Seafarers' distrust of online platforms, driven by fear of scams and data breaches, deters them from engaging in telemental health services. Partnering with reputable telehealth providers to ensure secure platforms coupled with user education to identify legitimate services can mitigate these fears. Moreover, implementing stringent privacy measures can reassure seafarers regarding the confidentiality of their consultations.

Raising awareness of mental health support using digital platforms is essential, as many seafarers are unaware of their existence and benefits. Targeted campaigns using

social media can engage younger seafarers, whereas traditional media, such as news channels, can cater to older generations. Additionally, integrating orientation sessions on telemental health services into pre-departure briefings or onboard training programs could bridge this gap.

Reducing stigma through education and peer support is another important implication of this study. Cultural norms, particularly among older seafarers, often stigmatize discussions on mental health and make structured educational initiatives vital. Mandating mental health awareness seminars during onboard training, and leveraging social support systems, such as family and colleagues, can normalize conversations and reduce stigma.

Finally, strengthening digital literacy among seafarers is crucial for the adoption of telemental health services. Providing onboard workshops, practice simulations, and user-friendly interfaces tailored to seafarers' needs can empower them to engage in digital mental health platforms.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how Filipino seafarers cope with and seek help to address their mental health concerns. However, several limitations have been acknowledged, which can provide directions for future research.

First, the study involved only nine Filipino male seafarers, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. The study participants may not fully represent the broader population of seafarers, particularly those of different nationalities or cultural backgrounds. Future studies should include a larger and more diverse group of seafarers encompassing various nationalities, genders, and employment settings.

Second, reliance on self-reported information introduced the possibility of a response bias. Participants may have underreported or exaggerated their mental health experiences and help-seeking behaviors. Future research could employ triangulation of data sources to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of how to promote the adoption of digital mental health solutions among seafarers.

Third, the study was not able to deeply investigate systemic issues, such as organizational policies or industry-wide regulations, which might influence mental health support at sea. Future studies could examine how policies and workplace culture influence the adoption of telemental health services.

Finally, a snapshot of the participants' experiences was captured. Changes in mental health perceptions, coping

strategies, and help-seeking behaviors over time were not considered. This limitation can be addressed using longitudinal research.

8. CONCLUSION

The promotion of telemental health services among seafarers requires targeted interventions to address structural barriers, foster cultural acceptance, and empower individuals. By improving accessibility, raising awareness, and reducing stigma, the maritime industry can create an environment in which seafarers feel supported and motivated to seek help, ultimately enhancing their productivity, well-being, and resilience.

9. DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

10. DECLARATION OF USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Paperpal, a generative artificial intelligence application, was used for literature search and language editing.

11. ETHICS CLEARANCE

Ethics approval (HSc-2023-19) was obtained from the Ateneo de Manila University prior to data collection.

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