



UNAWAIN ANG SUMASAKLOLO: FIREFIGHTERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES FOLLOWING AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE OPERATION

Victoria Joy C. Depano¹, Jeremy Calvin S. Enriquez¹, Desiree Castillo-Bisquera²

¹Psychology Student, College of Education, Liberal Arts and Sciences

²Faculty, College of Education, Liberal Arts and Sciences

*Corresponding author Email: victoriajoy.depano@letran.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

The qualitative study aims to explore the lived experiences of firefighters after an emergency response operation, particularly their thoughts and feelings following those events, how those experiences influence their ability to perform effectively, what factors aid/hinder their performance, coping strategies to manage challenges, and how their mental health status shapes their decision-making and behavior. A total of eleven firefighters along stations in Tondo, Manila, using purposive sampling, were involved in the study, with an average of ten years. In which data was collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that they encounter various personal, environmental, and organizational challenges that impact their well-being and performance, such as physical exhaustion, emotional stress, high-pressure decision-making scenarios, community conflicts, and resource limitations. However, they still showed solid coping mechanisms such as recreational activities, including social support from peers and family; as well as organizational support such as compensation and benefits, and financial aid, that all play a critical role in their psychological health and enhancement of their ability to respond effectively. Some firefighters demonstrated satisfaction with the current salary/benefits/support from the organization, while some still demanded necessary equipment, regular stress debriefing, and free health checkups. To conclude, maintenance of the firefighters' mental health is a collective responsibility, including the organization, wherein integration of services for this can enhance the firefighters' emotional regulation, decision-making, and efficiency during response operations. As firefighters in the Philippine context, cultivating resilience and strong interpersonal bonds are the key to their well-being and effectiveness.

Keywords: *lived experiences, ppe and relief efforts are primarily coordinated through the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Manage Psychological toll, firefighters emotional burden*

INTRODUCTION

Nationwide, in every disaster emergency response Office whilst in the local unit of government. In every municipality, according to the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010, the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office is in charge of disaster risk reduction and management within the city's borders. This unit includes local fire departments, rescue teams, and community disaster volunteers.

A series of severe fire outbreaks has caused an alarm to the public. In the country's capital, where almost two million individuals reside (PSA, 2020), alone, a series of catastrophic fire incidents caused massive destruction to thousands of individuals, raising the public's concern. In the middle of the night of the 23rd, April when more than three hundred forty-three residential homes were destroyed in Barangay 123 in Tondo, Manila, causing the loss of 10 million worth of property and affecting 2,691 individuals. A fire broke out at Port Manila almost five kilometers distant, nearly two hours before the horrific event in Tondo, Manila, leaving 300 families without a place to live (Ong, 2025; NDRMMC, 2025). The Manila Chapter of the Philippine Red Cross responded to another significant fire catastrophe in Tondo in 2015 that destroyed over 1,000 homes and claimed the lives of over 50,000 people (Ong, 2025; DREF, 2015; Quezon City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office, n.d.). A recent nationwide record by Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) shows that last year's fire outbreaks were 11.09% higher than the previous

year (Chavez, 2025). This incident shows that a fire incident is a safety concern in the country.

BFP, is a bureau under the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) whose main responsibility is the prevention and suppression of fires and the imposition of laws regarding them; By law of Republic Act No. 6975, it was created in 1990. The BFP's responsibility does not end in firefighting but also extends to disaster risk reduction, as mandated by the Republic Act No.10121 (Longa & Perena, 2024). The BFP has its different units and offices nationwide for different facets of emergency response and fire protection; the BFP also performs fire related awareness campaigns and safety inspections. Despite strengths in BFP such as being capable in firefighting operations and emergency medical services, there is still a struggle of lack of personnel and equipment in some units, which hinders the true potential of BFP (Longa & Perena, 2024).

A fire incident where flames cannot be managed or contained and is progressively and actively burning everything around it, requires an immediate response from the nearest fire department. In this scenario, BFP serves as a frontline agency in managing these situations. However, there are scenarios where the agency lacks resources to put out the fire (Lagata et al., 2022) volunteer firefighters' group often provide support to overcome these shortages.

TXF Fire Philippines is a non-profit organization that often relies on donations and limited funds. It consists of numerous fire brigade

volunteers like Katuparan Fire and Rescue Volunteer Brigade Inc. and KC West Filipino Chinese Volunteer Fire Brigades Inc. (TXTFire, n.d.). Another firefighting-related organization supporting BFP with over 40 brigade members nationwide is the Association of Philippine Volunteer Fire Brigades Inc. (iOrbit News, 2022). In the National Capital Region (NCR) alone, there are over 800 volunteer brigades aiding the government, acting as another manpower (Manila Bulletin, 2022).

Firefighting does not only require physical strength but is also mentally and emotionally demanding. As stated by Johnston, (2017) there are tasks that can affect firefighters personally that also impacts their physical and psychological well-being. Stress from occupations ranks as the second most frequently common reason why people seek medical support. It can happen when workers feel like their job is too demanding and they can't handle it comfortably (Adegboro, 2019). As stated, firefighters work can be taxing and requires almost most of the time of a firefighters, for instance, a study by Lagata et, al., (2022) results that firefighters experience challenges in managing their responsibilities effectively due to the physically and mentally demanding nature of their works, that significantly strains their capacity to work.

While work efficiency is the ability of the firefighters to perform in their work effectively and without much problem despite the condition of working in an intense and uncertain environment. Firefighters often experience psychological strain due to witnessing trauma (De Guzman Jose, 2025). As studied by Ellis and Knight (2018), there are two forms of trauma that firefighters typically encounter: primary trauma, which occurs when they personally experience the traumatic event, and secondary trauma, which arises when they are not directly involved but are exposed to others' traumatic experiences through frequent observation or hearing about them, resulting in psychological strain.

Firefighters improve their work efficiency through upgrades and advancements of their equipment which helped them keep pace with modernization and challenges in rural and urban areas and respond to them more accordingly and effectively (TDT, 2023). Different studies have probed that those who undergo consistent training and professional development, especially those who undergo consistent job-specific training programs, improve their operational efficiency and skills. Additionally, to improve their operational efficiency, address their physical and mental health, alleviate communication and mental fatigue, and address coordination issues (Ballo, 2023; Widiyanto & Nasri, 2024). Also addressing the firefighters' challenges and enhancing their collaboration can help in their efficiency (Lagata, L.S. et al., 2022). These challenges in facing fire incidents bring high stress levels to the firefighters that could influence the way they work effectively and efficiently for the community.

Responders from the Bureau of Fire Protection also play a crucial role in disaster situations by ensuring swift and effective emergency response, rescue, and recovery operations. They are also responsible for conducting search and rescue missions, providing multi-role emergency responders, delivering fire suppression, basic emergency medical services, technical rescues, disaster assistance, particularly in communities with limited emergency infrastructure, facilitating evacuation to safe areas. These responders also coordinate with local government units, non-government organizations, and other agencies to distribute relief goods and restore essential services. Additionally, they assist in damage assessment and post-disaster rehabilitation efforts to help affected communities recover. Their prompt actions and coordination help minimize casualties, reduce property damage, and enhance overall disaster resilience (LawPhil, 2021).

While the Philippines has established a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for disaster risk reduction (e.g., the DRRM Act of 2010), the existing body of research and policy primarily focuses on

structural and administrative aspects of disaster management, such as preparedness, institutional responsibilities, and coordination among national and local councils. However, there is a notable lack of empirical research that centers on the psychosocial dimensions of disaster response personnel and on how these affect their capacity to work. Relatively, firefighters also require social support; thus, a framework that is based on their experiences can cater to their psychological recovery, improving their efficiency. Moreover, the local implementation of disaster management is often hindered by understaffed, underfunded, or undertrained local councils, which adds additional strain on individual responders. Despite being at the frontlines of disaster situations, the psychological well-being, coping mechanisms, and work performance of these responders remain underexplored, especially in the Philippine context (Harkey, 2014). Furthermore, the study of Amorillo et al. (2024) stated that there is a gap in research that is focused on the firsthand psychological and emotional experiences of firefighters, especially in the context of how they cope, make decisions under stress, and sustain resilience in high-pressure environments.

Additionally, as the population continues to rise, this would be leading to more frequent and unpredictable fire incidents even in previously low-risk areas—there is insufficient focus on how responders are psychologically adapting to this increasing uncertainty. Considering that there is an increase in fire incident occurrences in Tondo, Manila, from different incident reports such as: BFP (2024), DSWD (2025), and Hoey, (2024). Current research tends to generalize community preparedness or focuses on climate-related risks broadly, overlooking the individual experiences of the firefighters who deal directly with high-stress, high-uncertainty environments.

Review of Related Literature

Fire Incident Reports

Numerous fire incidents reported by BFP (Bureau of Fire Protection), PRC (Philippine Red Cross), and TXT Fire (volunteer firefighter group) include the following:

Table 1. Fire Incidents Statistics recorded by BFP

	2022	2023	2024	2025
Fire Incidents	13,195	16,426	18,217	2,442
Documented by BFP				(first 64 days)
Percentage	2.68%	24.49%	10.9%	43% decrease
Increase / Decrease from the past year	increase compared to last year	increase compared to last year	increase compared to last year	compared to last year's first 64 days
Property Damage	5.2 billion Pesos	13.1 billion Pesos	13.8 billion Pesos	–

As seen from the table 1, there were a total of 14,894 fire incidents from January to June in 2024, while recording a total of 4,316 fire incidents during the first 64 days of 2024. Despite this, there was a 43% drop from the same first 64 days of 2025, with a total of 2,442 fire incidents; electrical issues continue to be the main cause of these fire events (Cabato, 2025). According to a narrative report from the BFP, compared to the 16,426 fire occurrences recorded by the BFP in 2023, there were 18,217 fire events reported by the BFP in 2024, representing an increase of 10.9 percent (Chavez, 2024), while the property damages in 2024 were approximately 13.8 billion pesos, which had a slight increase compared to 2023, which was 13.1 billion pesos (Villamente, 2024). the NCR (National Capital Region), including Manila, has the most fires, and electrical problems are the primary cause of these incidents. The BFP emphasized that they do need 159 more fire trucks among different parts of the Philippines (Cariaso, 2024).

Tondo, Manila, for this study specifically, as there are a significant number of fire incidents in Tondo, Manila, such as the fire incident in Port Area, Barangay 650, Tondo; Barangay 123, Tondo; Barangay 58, Coral Street, Tondo; and Barangay 20, Islang Puting Bato, Tondo (BFP, 2024; DSWD, 2025; Hoey, 2024). All of which were from November 2024 to April 2025. Resilience in the context of disaster risk reduction (DRR) is increasingly viewed through a community lens, offering a more localized and holistic understanding of disaster response and recovery. While communities may be fragmented and not always act cohesively, they nonetheless hold intimate knowledge of their unique vulnerabilities and capacities. Their embedded social networks, norms, and practices—such as bayanihan, a Filipino tradition of mutual aid—play a significant role in shaping disaster outcomes. Community-based preparedness, especially when driven from within rather than imposed externally, has been shown to be more effective and sustainable. This grassroots approach is particularly critical in the Philippines, where geographic vulnerability to natural disasters necessitates that the first line of response is often community members themselves. Thus, evaluating resilience at the community level not only acknowledges local expertise but also empowers the very people most affected by calamities (Alcayna et al., 2016).

According to ODI et al. (2013), bridging the gap between science and policy is essential for effective disaster risk reduction, particularly in contexts like the Philippines where vulnerability is high and disasters are recurrent. They emphasize the importance of producing policy-relevant scientific knowledge and ensuring that policy decisions are grounded in sound, locally contextualized research. This approach supports the notion that community-based insights and scientific expertise must work together to build more resilient and responsive disaster management systems. In the Philippine context, while national mechanisms for disaster response are considered functional, challenges persist in areas such as risk communication, early warning, and long-term recovery. Local capacity building remains crucial, yet is hindered by inadequate contingency planning, political influences, and inconsistent training. Emotional regulation and work efficiency among responders, such as those in LGUs and community-based DRR units, are deeply influenced by these systemic factors. Responders must navigate high levels of uncertainty and psychological strain while operating within networks that are both supportive and, at times, overstretched. Understanding how these responders manage uncertainty is essential for improving not just their own well-being, but the efficiency and resilience of the disaster response.

Firefighters' Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Firefighters in the Philippines often face the challenge of lack of access to resources (fire trucks and protective gear), lack of manpower, and insufficient tools and equipment that ensure their safety (Lagata, et al., 2022 & Primo and Collado, 2024), and excessive workload places significant stress (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023), which results in restraining the ability of the responders to work effectively. Consistently being exposed to work-related traumatic exposures can eventually lead to influencing the quality of life, specifically mental health, of the firefighters; as firefighters' common mental health problems are suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Whitman, 2023). Despite the difficulties the firefighters struggled with, communication with their colleagues and their belief in God are what give them strength to keep on helping others without expecting anything in return (Castillo & Dela Cruz, 2022).

The study of Umeda and colleagues (2020) has emphasized the importance of alleviating stressful situations and managing crises among responders through a combination of individual awareness and organizational support. Early recognition of personal signs of fatigue and crisis can aid in timely intervention, while psychological first-aid training

equips responders to support each other effectively. Organizations play a crucial role in establishing systems that address trauma even before deployment and in adapting workloads during high-stress periods to reduce psychological strain. In cases of overwhelming stress, involving mental health professionals and assessing a responder's capacity to continue duties becomes essential. Post-deployment, allowing ample recovery time and ongoing access to mental health resources is vital, with workplace adjustments made as needed to support long-term wellbeing.

In the study of Collado and Primo (2024), the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms are what define the firefighters' professional lives. These firefighters in Baguio encounter challenges such as conflicts with coworkers and superiors due to staff shortages, insufficient equipment, heightened stress levels, and overwhelming workloads, which affect the performance of the firefighters. Additionally, there is a lack of formal emotional support groups available for firefighters in the Philippines to alleviate their work stress and provide a proper mental health service. However, these firefighters have their own coping mechanisms in responding to these challenges through praying and open forums/peer discussions; moreover, their interpersonal relationships with their colleagues in their workplace also serve as their practical and emotional support community.

These firefighters, who always face life-threatening situations, rely on their ability to manage their fear through their teamwork, experience, and intensive training, helping them act more accordingly during emergency situations. As their dedication and resilience depend on how fulfilled they are in saving lives and their obligation. Lastly, an ideal firefighter for responding to fire incidents would be not just well trained but someone who is well equipped and has a team who is present in aiding them (Amorcillo et al., 2024).

Corey Norton's study highlights the critical mental and emotional health challenges faced by disaster responders, emphasizing the profound impact these issues have not only on their professional performance but also on their personal lives. Research indicates that a significant number of disaster responders experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and emotional distress, which can lead to increased risks of suicide, substance abuse, and strained relationships (Isabirye et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2021). Studies by Aldrich and Cerel (2020) further reveal that recurring nightmares and intrusive thoughts are common among this population. Given the essential role disaster responders play in maintaining public safety, prioritizing their mental health is not only a matter of individual wellbeing but a societal necessity.

Factors influencing the Firefighters' Performance in responding to Fire Incidents

The factors that influence a firefighters' performance in responding to fire incidents are the individual's mental and physical health, frustration, distribution of workload (Lagata et al., 2022), coping mechanisms, resource availability, stressors in work environment (Primo & Collado, 2024), and training and knowledge (Ballo, 2023). According to a study by Lagata and her colleagues in 2022, being a firefighter requires a high level of mental and physical health, as this will compensate for the job's heavy workload and insufficient personnel, which could lead to heightened stress and fatigue, which wouldn't happen if someone had enough physical and mental stamina; Frustration is another factor that influences a firefighter's performance since this lessens the firefighter's will to work, morale, and motivation, while workload distribution also influences the performance of a firefighter due to a shortage of firefighters, therefore also leading to frustration and fatigue. Coping mechanisms, such as praying and peer discussions with coworkers, positively influence firefighters' performance by helping them manage stress and maintain resilience. Conversely, the availability of resources negatively affects their

performance because essential tools and equipment are necessary to ensure the safety of both rescuers and the community. Additionally, workplace stressors, including exposure to stressful situations and traumatic events, can adversely impact firefighters' mental health, particularly due to the lack of proper access to formal mental health support groups (Primo & Collado, 2024). Lastly, appropriate knowledge and training about health standards, occupational safety, and fire codes would enable the firefighter to provide a safe and effective operation (Ballo, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Stress and Coping Theory proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), this lays out a relevant lens for understanding the lived experiences of firefighters following emergency response operations. This theory posits that psychological stress is a result of an individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation and their perceived ability to cope with its demands. It also outlines two main processes: primary appraisal, where an individual evaluates whether a situation poses a threat, challenge, or harm; and the secondary appraisal, where they assess their accessible tools and choices for handling the circumstance.

In this paper there are two coping strategies, the problem-focused coping where it addresses the source of the stress and the emotion-focused coping where it manages emotional responses to the stressor. This framework, coping, is defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to manage the internal and external demands of stressful situations (Chowdhury, 2019).

In the context of emergency response operations, firefighters are often exposed to high-risk and emotionally taxing situations. These experiences demand rapid assessment (appraisal) and immediate coping strategies, both during and after the incident. The theory helps irradiate how firefighters perceive their experiences, evaluate their capacity to respond, and employ coping mechanisms to maintain their psychological well-being and performance.

This framework is particularly useful in addressing the study's central and specific research questions. It guides the exploration of what goes through firefighters' minds after emergency responses, how these experiences impact their performance, and what personal or environmental factors influence their coping. Furthermore, it provides a basis for understanding how their mental health status interacts with decision-making and behavior, and how their coping strategies shape their capacity to continue operating effectively in future incidents.

By applying Lazarus and Folkman's theory, this study seeks to uncover the subjective processes behind firefighters' experiences—how they make meaning of their roles, respond to stressors, and sustain resilience in the face of danger.

Research Question

Determining the lived experiences of the firefighters following an emergency response operation. Moreover, it aims to specifically provide discussion on the following questions:

1. How do the firefighters perceive, experience, and interpret the psychological and environmental factors that influence their performance and well-being following an emergency response operation?
2. In what ways does their mental health status shape the decision making and behavior of firefighters in the field?

METHODS

Research Design

The study incorporates a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of the firefighters and learn how they interpreted those significant experiences; besides, using the aforementioned method would give contextualized insights regarding the firefighters' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies and provide how these factors influence the way they work. After which the researchers used a narrative inquiry approach to allow the themes to naturally emerge from the respondents' lived experiences. The use of qualitative narrative analysis design allows the researchers to understand how individuals create stories from their personal experiences (McLeod, 2024).

The use of qualitative research design allows the firefighters' an opportunity to answer 'how' and 'why' questions about perceptions, thoughts, and perspectives specifically (Cleland, 2017) and would gain more profound insight through those lived experiences by the responders (firefighters) (Ho & Limpachet, 2022).

Participants and Study Sites

The study involved eleven firefighters from Tondo, Manila, as participants. The sample size was deemed appropriate for a qualitative research design, which prioritizes depth of understanding over numerical representation. Suggesting that a sample size between five and twenty-five is recommended for phenomenological studies, wherein the sample size is neither too low nor too high (Bekele & Ago, 2022). The researchers used a purposive sampling method in gathering their participants in order to be able to handpick respondents who would surely have necessary and valuable information they could provide for the study. The eligibility for being included in the study is to be a firefighter with at least three years of experience; since work experience, along with experience and training in responding to disasters, plays a crucial role in being a predictor of preparedness for disasters (Goniewicz et al., 2021) and the longer the service of a firefighter, the more they are adaptable to challenges, but the more they experience mental health challenges such as depression, PTSD, and substance abuse (Whitman, 2023), allowing the firefighters to have sufficient exposure experience with more developed knowledge and skills in facing their experiences. The criteria of the participants were consistent with the local study as follows: A minimum of 3 years of experience among firefighters in Baguio City was used to identify their lived experiences in the study of Primo and Collado in 2024, giving detailed information about how the firefighters' experiences influenced their response to incidents.

Using the purposive sampling technique and based on the criteria, a total of eleven participants were selected for the study. The participants were recruited through formal coordination with the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP). An approval letter was submitted to the BFP to request permission to interview firefighters. Upon approval, the office disseminated the letter to the respective station commanders, after which the interviews were scheduled. Table 2 presents the demographic of participants who voluntarily consented to narrate their experiences. This includes pseudonyms of the participants, fictitious names of their fire stations, sex assigned at birth, and years of experiences.

Table 2. Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Fire Station	Sex	Years of Experience
Agoncillo	Aguinaldo Station	Male	12 years
Bonifacio	Aguinaldo Station	Male	5 years
Carino	H. Luna Station	Male	3 years
Del Pilar	H. Luna Station	Male	11 years
Escoda	Quezon Station	Male	22 years
Flores	Quezon Station	Male	11 years
Gomes	Aguinaldo Station	Female	11 years
Hilario	H. Luna Station	Male	5 years
Isabelo	H. Luna Station	Male	13 years
Julian	Quezon Station	Male	4 years
Kapitan	Quezon Station	Male	15 years

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2020), the National Capital Region (NCR) is the second most populated region in the Philippines, with approximately 13 million residents across 16 cities. Due to its dense population, the NCR, including Manila, frequently experiences floods and typhoons. Furthermore, around 45% of its urban population resides in informal settlements, making the region highly susceptible to urban fires (MECC, 2024; Morin et al., 2016). Given the high incidence of fire incidents in Tondo, Manila—one of the most affected areas in the NCR—the researchers selected this location for participant recruitment. This selection ensured that the target participants possessed substantial experience in responding to emergency situations, thereby meeting the study's inclusion criteria.

Research Instruments

The study incorporated a semi structured interview method with open-ended questions, as it aligned with the narrative inquiry research design that was utilized. This approach served as a guide for the researchers in conducting face-to-face individual interviews, allowing for a balance between structure and flexibility in exploring the participants' lived experiences of the firefighters through their narratives. The interview questions underwent a validation process to ensure their validity, plausibility, and adequacy in capturing the essence of the firefighters' lived experiences.

The interview guide consisted of questions regarding participants' personal information, such as sex, years of service, and working hours. After this, the interviews focused on the emotional, cognitive, and practical aspects of firefighting work. Participants were asked to share stories regarding their experiences after particularly challenging fire incidents, including the thoughts or feelings that tended to linger and the reasons behind their lasting impact. The interviews also explored how these experiences influenced their confidence and approach in future emergency responses.

In addition, questions were directed toward identifying the personal strengths and environmental factors that either supported or hindered optimal performance during fire incidents. Strategies for coping with occupational stress and collective approaches to managing challenges were also discussed. The role of mental well-being in decision-making and on-ground actions during emergencies was examined, along with the types of organizational and psychosocial support that firefighters wished to receive to enhance their effectiveness in disaster response situations. Follow-up questions were also asked when necessary to clarify responses and gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences.

Data Gathering Process

To deepen their understanding of the topic, the researchers began by reviewing existing literature related to the study. This initial step was necessary to frame the research question and to broaden their knowledge of the context of firefighters (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this review, the researchers identified blind spots, gaps, and omissions within the current body of work. Recognizing these research gaps is a crucial step in determining the type of data needed (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2016).

To gain a comprehensive and context-rich understanding of the subject, the researchers conducted an ocular visit to the firefighter's department to immerse themselves in the field. This immersion was vital in qualitative research as it enables a deeper grasp of participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Subsequently, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to help the researchers better understand the participants' perspectives. This method was chosen because it provides a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing the researchers to probe for deeper insights while ensuring that all relevant topics are adequately covered. The participants included firefighters with a minimum of three years of experience and were identified through the Bureau of Fire Protection Tondo headquarters office; researchers inquired in the office for possible stations and firefighters that were credible. The researchers also visited these stations and offices increasing the chances of direct engagement. Once contact was made, participant involvement was confirmed, and the interviews were scheduled and conducted based on their availability.

Prior to the interview, informed consents were obtained. Participants were thoroughly briefed about the study's purpose, their voluntary involvement, and the recording of interviews. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality was emphasized, ensuring that only the researchers and their adviser have access to their identities (Israel & Hay, 2006). The interview was conducted in the morning in a setting where the participants can interact easily with the interviewers, in a conducive environment, allowing participants to speak freely, and comfortably without external interruptions. The researchers ensured that no other individuals were present during the interview to maintain privacy and minimize potential biases. The researcher also prepared a distress protocol to address any potential emotional disturbances during the interview. Despite the sensitivity and emotional weight of the topic, participants remained composed throughout the discussion and were able to recount their experiences clearly and thoughtfully. After all the participants were interviewed, the researchers were welcomed by the other officers on duty and were given a brief tour of the station to verify the participants' claims regarding the availability and condition of firefighting equipment.

After each interview, the researchers expressed their gratitude and requested the participants' contact information for possible follow-up or verification of the gathered data. This process guarantees the findings' reliability and credibility.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of all participants. Given the emotionally and professionally demanding nature of firefighters' work, particular care was taken to protect the psychological well-being of the participants throughout the research process.

Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. The researchers clearly explained the purpose, procedures, and scope of the study, emphasizing that participation is entirely voluntary. Participants were also

informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. The informed consent form also stated that interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission for the purpose of data accuracy and that all responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

To protect participants' identities, all personally identifiable information was anonymized during transcription, analysis, and publication. The raw data will only be accessible to the researchers and their academic advisor. Data is securely stored and will be destroyed after the completion of the study in accordance with Data Privacy Act of 2012.

Additionally, the researchers acknowledged the potential emotional risks associated with recalling disaster experiences. As such, participants were reminded that they are not required to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable. Should emotional distress arise, the researchers were prepared to pause or terminate the interview and provide participants with referrals to mental health resources, if necessary, which fortunately did not proceed to that course of action.

Data Analysis

The nature of the study was a qualitative approach; therefore, the data underwent inductive thematic analysis (ITA) to uncover recurring patterns, themes, and concepts. ITA is a method where themes are derived directly from the raw data, allowing the findings to naturally emerge from participants' experiences and perspectives. It follows a systematic and structured procedure to ensure accuracy and coherence in data interpretation. First, the researchers became familiar with the data to develop a deep understanding, during this process, the data was transcribed and analyzed for possible codes, manually. These codes then formed the foundation for developing themes, which were further divided into sub-themes based on emerging patterns. After this, it was

essential to review and refine the themes by external validators to ensure they align with the data, making any necessary reorganizations or adjustments to establish clarity and stability. The entire corpus of data was then evaluated to assess the organization of themes and their interrelationships. Each theme was clearly defined to ensure precision and alignment with the study's main objectives. This included refining the themes to remove ambiguity and confirm their relevance to the research goals. Finally, after thematizing all data, researchers answered their research questions, all documenting the dataset, key findings, and all aspects of the analysis process. This report provides a clear and detailed presentation of the themes, ensuring transparency and rigor in the study's qualitative analysis (Nicolas, 2021).

RESULTS

The study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of the firefighters following emergency response operations. According to the responses of the firefighters, a total of three major themes has emerged. The analysis highlights a few dimensions, including their traumatic recollections and the repercussions of their responses on their psychological being, intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges in firefighting, the support the firefighters received as performance enablers, and the firefighters' strengths for efficient and effective performance. Additionally, the firefighters expressed recommendations and suggestions for further improvement of government support towards firefighters. Table 2 exhibits the following themes mentioned and the subthemes subordinated, encompassing contextualized definitions based on the responses acquired from the firefighters.

Table 2. Table of Themes/subthemes and definitions

Themes and Subthemes	Definition
Traumatic Recollections	The theme shows each negative memorable experience of the firefighters during emergency response operations, including traumatic experiences and the lingering psychological toll of firefighting, which is the lasting psychological effects of their experiences — such as difficulty sleeping or eating, and the thoughts that occupy their minds after a response operation
Work-Related Challenges and Adversities in Firefighting	The theme concentrates on the firefighters' varying challenges and adversities that they face throughout their careers, whether it's within their control or not.
Subtheme 1: Interpersonal and Systemic Challenges	The subtheme's main concentration is the challenges firefighters face in relation to the engagement of the community, organization like equipment and manpower, and work environment.
Subtheme 2: Operating Under Constant Pressure	The subtheme focuses on how, due to the nature of their job, firefighters constantly face intense pressure that makes their work more challenging, such as physical and health challenges and personal limitations and weaknesses— including the urgent, high-stakes situations they encounter and the critical decisions they must make to fulfill their duties.
Personal and External Coping Mechanisms to Manage Stress and Challenges	The theme provides the diverse coping mechanisms of the firefighters they rely on to manage their stress and challenges in their work.
Subtheme 1: Psychological Adaptation and Growth through Firefighting Experiences	The subtheme illustrates the long-term psychological evolution resulting from firefighting service such as strengthened mental and emotional resilience, development of safety and awareness and presence of mind, and lifelong learning and self-development mindset. Covering how exposure to operational demands strengthens mental resilience and fosters adaptive mindsets. This growth is specifically viewed by firefighters as enhancing their operational efficacy and shaping effective decision-making in high-pressure field situations, thereby detailing the individual attributes crucial for sustained performance.
Subtheme 2: Psychosocial Support Enabling Firefighters' Performance	This subtheme shows the combination of external support systems and internal adaptive coping strategies like institutional support, familial and peer support, and their personal coping strategies which maximize the effectiveness of firefighters' performance.
Subtheme 3: Personal and Interpersonal Strengths Enabling Effective Firefighting Performance	This subtheme suggests the firefighters' recommendations and suggestions they would want to be incorporated that would further elevate the support of the organization/government towards firefighters.

Traumatic Recollections

In this first major theme, different negative experiences throughout their service of being a firefighter emerged, having such traumatic recollections in which the firefighters memorialized the victims of fire events in the past they experienced firsthand, showcasing the remembrance of the firefighters of those they weren't able to save, lasting negative memories, and the psychological toll of their experiences. These are evident from the accounts of almost every participant:

"after na bumupa apoy at usok... nakita namin yung magkapatid na magkayakap. So parang pinoprotektahan niya yung kapatid niya na wag masunog, pero wala ng chance wala silang malalabas kasi walang secondary exit— puno ng metal grills ang kanilang bintana; at unang nasunog yung main stair, so saan pa sila dadaan wala na silang ibang dadaanan. So ginawa nila, pumunta sa sulok, niyakap niya yung nakababata niyang kapatid, kaya magkadikit yung katawan nila, na nasunog dun sa insidente na 'yon" (AGONCILLO - 23)

"kung mababalitaan mo, yung nangyari na sunog na barko dito sa may Delfan, 'di ko maalala kung twenty twenty one ba 'yon o twenty twenty two. Isa 'yon sa mga...unforgettable ko na sunog na nangyari sa buhay ko, kasi isa 'yon— malapit na medyo madisgrasya don kasi yung nasunog na 'yon is isang barko na may mga laman na gasoline— basta flammable liquids." (BONIFACIO - 1)

"sa sampaloc ano siya abm nagrerent lang sila tapos magnanay sila. Tapos nasunog ung ano, nakita sila ng mga tao na lumalaban sila na para makalabas doon sa bahay. Kung maalala niyo yung sunog sa sampaloc ano siya yung mag nanay na nakita sa bintana na nakaupo ung bata doon. Ung nanay nilagay niya yung anak niya doon pero hindi pa rin sila nakalabas. Nakakaawa lang tignan eh kasi yung hanggang sa buling bininga nila alam mo yung nanay niya na talagang nililigtas niya yung bata." (GOMES - 12)

"Ayon yung sa may binondo nga, yung... kung familiar kayo, ayun kasi may nasunog doon na eleven na tao, tapos kami yung naunang rumesponde tapos babang lumalaban kami sa sunog, kabharap namin yung mga bangkay nila na sunog." (HILARIO - 12)

"Tapos yon ung namatay dyan sa may binondo. Maghubat ng mga fire victims, onse ata yung namatay doon." (ISABELO - 1)

"halimbawa ako non nadaganan ako ng isang malaking yero, buti nga tumama sa ulo ko, nakahelmet ako. Eh kung dito tumama (points at back of the neck), edi tapyas na ulo ko. Ganon po talaga nangyayari sa amin, pagkatapos nga non tinatanong ko ung kasama ko bui pakitapik mo nga ako kung buhay pa ako baka mamaya kaluluwa ko lang tong nakatayo "eh buhay ka pa naman sir" sabi sa akin. [laughs]." (ISABELO - 2)

"during chinese new year, celebration ng chinese new year, nasunog sa may _ street ung condominium. Wherein di natin naisalba ung dalawang kababayan natin na kasambahay kasi wala eh puno ng usok ung banyo eh saka di namin nabanap kung nasaan sila naka kwarto. Saka sinabi sa amin na may natrap doon na dalawa." (JULIAN - 13)

"I think a year ago lang 'to, Carvajal fire incident, siguro ung mga kasama ko yan din ung sinabi. Dito lang sa may binondo. Nareceive namin ung call, nakarespond kami within two minutes pero ung dinatnan namin labing isang patay. Labing isang patay tapos yung apoy ung term kasi namin ano eh, conflagration kapag na sobrang laki na, ung mawalakan na talaga, tapos ung apoy is fully developed na, technically wala ka nang magagawa kung 'di pigilan lang ung pagkalat niya hanggang mamatay. Pero the rest, property specially life, wala nang makakasurvive doon. Yung challenge doon is how to prevent further challenge talaga, given the fact na ganon yung challenge doon sobrang lungkot mo na din talaga kasi alam mo na nagfail na ung operation mo." (KAPITAN - 11)

The responses emphasize the traumatic feeling of not being able to save the lives of other people despite doing their best and being present in the situation as well as near-death experiences during emergency responses. Along with the lingering psychological toll of these experiences on them, affecting the way they work as firefighters, which is present in the responses below:

"Mayroon akong narespondihan na sunog— so meron kaming na rescue...apat na tao. Kaya lang yung isang nakalabas na 'yon, seventy years old na siya— dito lang yun sa Camba street, corner Moriones, bumalik siya sa loob, so hindi siya na monitor nung family na bumalik— binalikan niya yung kaniyang one thousand peso bill— birthday niya kasi yung araw na 'yon. Di na siya nakalabas— namatay siya. So parang naapektuhan din kami dahil buhay na 'yon na nailigtas" (AGONCILLO - 13)

"So 'yon yung mga experiences ko na hindi ko makakalimutan kasi parang may mga questions sa sarili na 'paano kaya kung nailigtas natin', so buhay pa sana tong magkapatid na 'to o pano kaya kung nagawan natin ng paraan o dumating tayo nang mas maaga o nang mas mabilis" (AGONCILLO - 15)

Participants also expressed fear and recounted near-death experiences that reflected their constant awareness of danger. This is supported by the accounts of Participants, who emphasized their recognition of the risks inherent in firefighting.

"parang nakaka ano lang— baka mamaya ikaw yung isa sa maputukan— maging kuwento ka nalang 'no...siyempre nakakatakot talaga 'yon, kaya 'di ko makakalimutan 'yon lalo na bago pa ko non mga twenty twenty one, twenty twenty two." (BONIFACIO - 10)

"nakaramdam tayo ng takot, pangangamba, kung itutuloy pa natin yung serbisyo na ganun; kasi diba once na madisgrasya ka dito sa ano natin...minsan 'di mo na alam kung ipagpapatuloy pa yung trabaho eh, kasi once na masunog ka— malamang sa malamang di ka na fitted sa gamitong trabaho, so ayun nakakatakot" (BONIFACIO - 12)

"yung isang paa namin is laging nasa buhay 'no. So every fire response o emergency response— medical man 'yan or disaster; nasa panganib lagi din yung buhay namin, and syempre may pamilya kaming iniisip— na uunwan 'no, kaya 'yon yung naiisip namin na siguro yung challenging yuh— kada labas namin ng istasyon ay may pinwedeng mangyari sa amin." (CARINO - 2)

"may mga insidente na meron talagang buhay na nawawala...at yung pinaka...tinatawag natin na traumatic talaga na nangyari— for my experience, yung nangyari last year, August two, two thousand twenty four, kami din area din namin sa San Nicolas dito sa may Binondo Carbajal street, eleven yung namatay, kaya after non— nakikita ko pa yung...yung scenario 'no, kung paano na— yung pose nila nung namatay sila, 'yon nakikita pa rin sa ano ko sa— medyo ano 'di makalimutan talaga." (ESCODA - 15)

"Maghubat ng patay, magcadaver recovery, pag may sunog may namamatay kami rin talaga yung ano, yung kumukuba sa kanila. Yun ung pinakachallenging sa labat...Pagdating mo pa lang may reports na na missing and possibly dead. And upon confirmation patay nga talaga. We were talking three personnel tapos naging eleven sila. Yun siguro ung pinakachallenge, isang buwan akong di nakatulog eh kasi lima doon ako yung ano eh, naghubat" (KAPITAN - 3)

Although participants came from different fire stations, the traumatic recollections that exhibit lingering psychological toll of firefighting emerged as a significant theme. The traumatic recollection's theme highlights that firefighting experiences are a significant source of hardship, producing prolonged stress that alters one's mental and emotional state. This theme also signifies that participants frequently

experience stress leading to existential questioning. Their experiences reveal the presence of lingering trauma, chronic fatigue, and mental exhaustion. Consequently, moral fatigue has become a common dilemma among firefighters, reflecting the cumulative emotional toll of their service.

Work-Related Challenges and Adversities in Firefighting

This theme emerges to highlight firefighters' intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges such as challenges with community engagement, equipment and manpower (organizational), and the environment of the work that pose an obstacle in doing their job that generates immense amounts of pressure. This includes the pressure in making critical decisions in order to perform and the pressure in the physical aspect that makes their job much more challenging. It highlights how the intense nature of firefighting requires continuous perseverance and adaptability to effectively perform their duties.

The first subtheme: Interpersonal and Systemic Challenges, focuses on uncontrolled challenges, specifically, community engagement, equipment and manpower (organizational), and the environment of the work. The following participants recalled how these challenges hindered their performance;

"hindi po talaga labat ay nalalaanan ng budget, So naranasan namin diyan yung hindi sapat yung ating mga equipments, SVE- yun yung mga self continuity apparatus. yun po yung mga isa sa nagpapahirap sa amin sa fire operation. Yan yung mga challenges, pero 'di naman yan dahilan para hindi tayo mag serbisyo sa publiko." (AGONCILLO - 3)

"Pinaka nagpapahirap talaga mag perform samon is yung...mga obstruction sa daan, mga double parking, then, yung mga participation ng mga community, kung paano makakainas sa mga sunog," (BONIFACIO - 21)

"number one talaga na sasabihin na problema namin is yung...advancement natin when it comes to equipment, technologies, compared to the other countries 'no. Kasi nga kung mapapansin natin sa Pilipinas- buong Pilipinas, not only in the Manila, yung ibang firetrucks natin medyo luma na 'no, may kalumaan na, yung iba twenty years old na. 'Yon lang- 'yon lang yung mga nagiging hindrance o challenges namin pag dating sa mga ginagawa naming trabaho. Siyempre pag may maganda kang kagamitan, may maganda kang aparato, mas naperform mo yung duty mo beyond pa don sa expectations ng mga tao." (CARINO - 14)

"may times kasi na 'di maisip nung mga higher ups o nasa taas yung experience na nararanasan namin dito sa operation eh. Yung nasa field kung tawagin namin, siguro 'yon lang- 'di nila mavisualize pa or 'di pa nila nararanasan kasi yung nararanasan namin. Siguro 'yon yung nagiging hadlang para magkaroon ng- mas palakasin nila yung mental support 'no para dun sa mga firefighters natin na nakakaranas ng stress o possibly nakakaranas ng...mental disorder.(traumas)" (CARINO - 22)

"Manila kasi is the most densely populated city in the world 'no, bakit, kasi andito yung mga tinatawag nating informal settlers area. Ano yung mga informal settlers area natin, nandiyan yung Baseco, nandiyan yung Parola, Isla Puting Bato, Happy Lands, Smokey Mountain, Aroma, 'no. All of those places were congested by people with houses made up of materials, kaya napaka prone sa sunog" (ESCODA - 7)

"pag nagpupuna kami dun ng sunog, ay isang informal settlers area o mga highly congested area, may threat na sa buhay namin, so- 'yon na sobrang stressful talaga 'yon 'no; lalo na pag pinagbabantaan na yung buhay mo, minsan binabato yung truck tapos pinagbabantaan kang saksakin- stressful 'no." (ESCODA - 13)

"sa community, kasi 'di rin nila alam eh, natataranta sila kung anong gagawin nila... imbis na mag tulong-tulong para patayin yung apoy, nag babakot ng gamit, kaniya kaniya silang alis. Yung mga fire extinguisher sa barangay minsan walang available" (FLORES - 16)

"traffic eh, ung kapag rumeresponde kami tapos traffic. kung hindi naitawag agad sa amin, kumware hindi natawag sa amin or nalate lang kami ng pagresponde, pagdating namin doon sa nasusunugan parang nasa amin pa yung sisi." (HILARIO - 3)

"Tapos. Abb minsan sa mga paano magresponde minsan di mo alam yung lugar meron kang pagaalinlangan, Tapos pag iniisip mo ung mga gamit mo kulang kulang. Safe ba ko dito o hindi? kasi minsan tulad niyan pag confined space mga kulob na lugar hirap pumasok kelangan naka BA eh kulang kulang ung mga BA" (ISABELO - 6)

The following statements from the firefighters discuss the lacking of allocation of budget for equipment which results to reliance to outdated equipment and technologies used for response operations, obstructions on the road, participation and behavior of the community and aggressive people threatening their lives in some areas, higher ups failing to recognize the magnitude of the problems in the perspective of the ground level, which becomes a hindrance to mental support for the ground level, informal settlers area being prone to fire incidents, unavailability of fire extinguishers in communities, traffic environment which sometimes leads to late responses therefore the blame being pinned on them, and unfamiliar areas which brings uncertainty to their safety. Each and every one of the said challenges were all difficulties encountered by firefighters restraining their performance.

The interpersonal and systemic challenges, which include community, organizational, and work setting, are all environmental factors that hinder the performance of the firefighters in performing their duty of responding to fire responses.

The second subtheme: *Operating Under Constant Pressure*, concentrates on the firefighters' issues regarding their physical health and exhaustion as it piles up along with their work; the psychological aspect of pressure dressed as stress that poses a challenge in their decision-making; and the awareness of the firefighters of their own weaknesses and limitations. The following responses indicate the said subtheme:

"pagod yung katawan, pati yung mind mo, talagang hindi maiiwasan na humina yung aming immune system" (AGONCILLO - 19)

"kapag nakulangan ka sa tulog kasi ano eh malaking factor kasi talaga siya sa mga bumbero... nahihirapan sila lalo na magmaneho ng gabi... chances kasi na kapag kakagaling lang namin sa sunog tapos may sunog na naman eh tapos kapag, tapos may mga duty pa ng gabi mga every three hours, para may malalapitan mga tao kapag gabi, tapos may times na duty ko natatapat ng 3am tapos magkakasunog ng alaisays ayon kulang tulog." (HILARIO - 9)

"stamina and strength, pagsubok talaga yan, ubos parati yan kabiti gaano ka kalakas, kabiti gaano kalakas ang condition mo...In cases na tumatagal ang operation, walang unwan, walang kain, wala talagang rest sa performance ng job namin, yun yung pinakachallenging sa labat." (KAPITAN - 4)

The responses from above emphasized the weakening of the body due to firefighting, lack of sleep because of the frequent fire responses throughout the day and night, depleted stamina and strength, and the absence of rest and eating meals, which all sum up to physical pressures that make performing effectively more difficult.

"Isa sa mga factor na nakakahirap sa pag responde- una dahil tayo ay nag nwork under pressure and stress," (AGONCILLO - 18)

"Challenging...kung paano mo iassess yung situation- kung papaano yung decision-making mo, dapat mabilis. Kailangan mo mag assess ng within split second...dapat mabilis ka- mabilis, yun ang challenge samon" (DEL PILAR - 2)

The statements from the firefighters concentrate on working under pressure and stress, critical decision-making within crucial moments despite it being under pressure, and mandatory compliance despite being difficult for their mental condition, which all contribute to the mental pressure that constrains their peak performance that the firefighters have to put up with.

"minsan nawawalan ka ng lakas ng loob sa mga nararanasan mong pagod." (ISABELO - 5)

"weakness is knowing your own body's limit. I was born with asthma so hindi dapat talaga ako naghubumberto. Ano pa ba? Mayroon akong fear of heights, merong fear of electrocution." (KAPITAN - 17)

The statements displayed the demoralization due to exceeding the threshold of bearable fatigue and being aware of the personal capability. These add as another pressure that restricts the firefighters' effective and efficient performance.

The combination of all these challenges are all personal factors that contribute to the constant pressure for firefighters to work with, despite being hindrances in their performance in responding to fire incidents.

Personal and External Coping Mechanisms to Manage Stress and Challenges

For the first subtheme: Psychological Adaptation and Growth through Firefighting Experiences, despite the traumatic experiences they have encountered from the past and the psychological toll of those experiences, participants still demonstrated how these experiences fostered adaptation and personal growth. This subtheme illustrates how exposure to high-pressure situations enabled firefighters to strengthen their mental and emotional resilience, as well as to develop a more mature and reflective mindset following significant response operations. To further substantiate this subtheme, the firefighters manifested the development of emotional maturity and strengthened interpersonal understanding among firefighters. It also highlights their ability to maintain emotional stability despite exposure to distressing events. Participants Isabelo and Kapitan expressed empathy, adaptability, and emotional steadiness through their accounts:

"Actually doon ka mapapaisip na kelangan talaga ung kalakasan ng loob, paguunawa. Na kelangan mo din lakasan ung pagunawa mo pagintindi sa mga kapwa katrabaho mo, sa mga taong makakasalamuha mo. Minsan nakakalungkot minsan masaya naman." (ISABELO - 10)

"mas naging kalmado ako over problems talaga, kapag ka mayroong situation na nagaarise. Parang nasanay na ako na ung dapat mataramta ka, hindi ka masyadong natataranta." (KAPITAN - 7)

Their psychological adaptation and growth in firefighting also emphasized the importance of safety and maintaining presence of mind during response operations. Participants Bonifacio and Carino reflected a strong sense of situational awareness and prioritization of personal safety as a prerequisite to saving others:

"hindi ka na makakaligtas ng ibang buhay pag napabamak ka eh, so mas marami kang maililigtas na buhay kung hindi ka mapapabamak, so mas maganda safety first" (BONIFACIO - 15)

"presence of mind lang talaga yung kailangan every responses, kasi siyempre nagsasagip ka ng buhay ng ibang tao, 'wag na tayong- kaming dumagdag bilang irectue pa 'no. So magawa namin trabaho namin nang safe din kami." (CARINO - 9)

While also highlighting the continuous learning and self-development that firefighters gain through their professional experiences. Their reflections show how encounters with adversity foster humility, gratitude, and a deeper sense of purpose in service.

"apaka suwerte pala namin. Mas masuwerte pala- para sa'kin o mas blessed tayo nob...yung tayo yung tumutulong, yung hindi tayo yung kailangan bigyan ng tulong. So yun yung naka apektong sa'kin kaya mas minahal ko yung trabaho ko bilang isang bumbero at patuloy tayong nag seserbisyo sa publiko-" (AGONCILLO - 9)

"yung mga experiences namin dito, kinikeep lang namin para, ayun matuto; tsaka shineshare namin sa mga bawat isa sa mga bumbero namin- ka bumberohan, para hindi rin sila mapabamak in the long run" (BONIFACIO - 19)

This subtheme reflects that through their numerous experiences, firefighters undergo a process of positive transformation despite some of these being traumatic. These experiences allowed them to acquire new skills, coping mechanisms, and perspectives that contribute not only to their occupation but also to their personal growth and resilience.

In the second subtheme: Psychosocial Support Enabling Firefighters' Performance, this subtheme emerged as participants shared how they managed to continue performing their duties as firefighters despite experiencing stress and exposure to traumatic events. Multifaceted psychosocial support enables firefighters to sustain and enhance their performance, such as peer and familial support, institutional support, and their personal coping strategies.

This subtheme captures the emotional and social support that firefighters receive from their families, peers, and colleagues. Participants emphasized how these relationships serve as vital sources of strength and emotional release, especially after distressing response operations. Family and peer interactions help them process their emotions, reduce stress, and regain mental balance.

"pinaguusapan na iopen sa pamilya, sa asawa, na merong ganitong pangyayari...para makakuha rin ng opinyon kung ano yung mga makatulong sa decision making mo...dabil marami ka na rin iniisip- para kumbaga mairelease mo lang yung nararamdaman- yung mga emotions na 'yon 'no... sa mga kaibigan, sa mga kapwa rin namang bumbero, so 'yon yung paraan para mairelease mo yung mga stress and problems na naencounter sa work" (AGONCILLO - 21)

"kung hindi man natin masabi sa mga katrabaho, kaibigan natin, siyempre yung family or loved ones namin. Minsan pag ka uwe namin ng station, tumatawag kami, nag vvideo call, kinekwento namin yung buong nangyari 'no- yung experiences namin dun sa mga ginawa namin, para kabiti papano nailalabas namin yung saloobin namin kasi mahirap nga naman na- lalo na pag sa mga point na meron tayong casualties, may namatay, siyempre ang bigat isipin pag uwi namin ng istasyon bakit hindi namin naisalba yung buhay niya or 'di namin na rescue yung mga victims natin na 'yon o mga tao na 'yon 'no. 'Yon tatawag kami dun sa loved ones namin- ako, sa fiance ko, kinekwento ko kung ano yung nangyari tapos magaan sa loob na makarinig lang ng mga bagay na "okay lang 'yan, ginawa mo naman yung best niyo diba", "ginawa niyo naman yung trabaho niyo", talagang 'di lang natin maimasan yung mga ganong talagang insidente. At least napapagaan yung loob." (CARINO - 16)

"far away from home eh. tumatawag ako sa parents ko sa kanila ako nakikipagano, through communication lang din naman ang ano ko sa kanila wala naman din akong ginagawa kung di yun lang, makita ko lang sila, nakakausap through video call okay na ako narerefresh na ung sarili ko sa trabaho" (JULIAN - 14)

"you make families on the station eh ang siguro pinakamasayang experience dito kasi eh sa istasyon kasi mas mababa talaga ung oras namin sa station namin over our families." (KAPITAN - 14)

These accounts highlight that firefighters rely heavily on both family and peer support systems to cope with the emotional strain of their work. Familial support provides a space for emotional expression and understanding, while peer support fosters camaraderie and shared resilience within the station. Together, these relationships serve as emotional anchors that sustain firefighters through the demands of their profession.

While there is also institutional support that they receive, it reflects the organizational and governmental support received by firefighters, which strengthens their capacity to perform effectively. Participants noted the availability of benefits, financial assistance, and recognition efforts initiated by their institution. These forms of institutional support provide both emotional assurance and practical aid that enhance their morale and well-being.

“health benefits bilang isang bumbero kasi meron kaming naka MOA sa Chinese Gen na once na ikaw ay ma aksidente during fire operation, meron kang libre na health benefits para sa iyong kalusugan— nangyari sa’yo na accident— sa during fire operation ” (BONIFACIO- 38)

“kung meron mang extraordinary activities, recognition from the higher offices or even dun sa mga non government organization. Malaking bagay na ‘yon samin na nagttrabaho dito sa ground level.” (ESCODA - 30)

It also includes the firefighters’ individual adaptive coping strategies that firefighters employ to manage stress and maintain emotional stability. Participants shared that they engage in recreational activities, exercise, prayer, and rest as ways to strengthen resilience and sustain performance.

“meron tayong mga recreational activities diyan para makatulong sa pag release ng stress, mental health natin, physical activities isa ‘yan sa ginagawa namin, nag bbasketball

kami...nakakapag build din ng camaraderie mahilig ako motor, so nag nature ride tayo” (AGONCILLO - 20)

“nag jogging ako, ayun nawawala yung stress ko eh. Then minsan nag gym din ako, isa rin ‘yon sa pag papawala ng stress ko, then syempre yung time mo sa family, yung pag lalabas kayo ng asawa niyo, isa ‘yon sa nakaka wala talaga ng stress para sakin” (BONIFACIO - 23)

“mahilig ako mag jogging, running ‘yan, mga physical activities, kasi bukod sa stress reliever, ano rin samin ‘yon eh beneficial din samin sa trabaho namin, kailangan din mag palakas ka ng katawan eh kasi mabigat talaga ang trabaho ng— physical ano— physically able talaga sa pag bubumbero.” (FLORES - 23)

These responses reveal that firefighters adopt a range of adaptive strategies to regulate stress and maintain psychological balance. Through physical activity, recreation, and spiritual reflection, they develop mechanisms that promote both mental well-being and work efficiency.

Overall, this subtheme demonstrates that firefighters’ performance is deeply sustained by a combination of personal, social, and institutional support systems. Their shared experiences underscore the importance of camaraderie, external recognition, and structured psychosocial programs in fostering resilience. Furthermore, several participants suggested that group debriefing facilitated by mental health professionals could further enhance their emotional recovery by helping them distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies.

As for the third subtheme: Personal and Interpersonal Strengths Enabling Effective Firefighting Performance, while the firefighters utilize their growth and improvement through their firefighting experiences and the psychosocial support that enables their performance, they also have

their natural strengths that aid them in their work. Numerous identified personal and interpersonal strengths that enable them to perform effectively in their line of duty. This subtheme highlights the importance of cognitive, emotional, and physical attributes that contribute to firefighters’ efficiency and endurance in high-pressure situations.

Their strengths focus on how firefighters utilize their cognitive abilities during emergency response operations. It demonstrates that effective firefighting requires focus, quick decision-making, adaptability, and optimism. The ability to remain mentally alert and responsive allows firefighters to manage complex and rapidly changing situations. Participants expressed the following:

“Isa sa mga strength ko kasi ay kaya kong mag cope up sa mga changing situation at yung pag handle ng stress— kasi kami bilang fire officer, katulad din naman sa pulis, kami ay palaging under pressure; kami ay inoorsan. Meron tayong mga minimeet na deadlines at mga time...so palaging work under pressure.” (AGONCILLO - 17)

“minsan sa fire scene...ma aano ka na niyan eh— mental block eh, kasi ‘di mo alam kung ano uunahin mo, pero kapag— na rumeresponde ka...focus lang— focus ka sa mission, focus ka sa lugar, focus ka kung ano yung mga dapat gawin, kasi kapag na distract ka, maaari mong ikapahamak o kaya ipahamak din ng iba na nasa paligid mo” (BONIFACIO - 16)

“pagiging positive sa labat ng pagsubok, kasi sa labat ng responses namin din nairrelate ko siya sa in real life ko din na pag gawa namin nang maayos lagi yung isang bagay. Ganon din naadapt ko rin, naaply ko rin sa sarili ko na kada may gagawin akong bagay— kada may pag dadaanan, kailangan maaccomplish ko siya...nang tama, hangga’t maaari.” (CARINO - 5)

“The first thing that we have to develop as firefighters is resiliency. Kasi minsan ang sunog, twenty four hours, minsan one week, so you have to be resilient, how do you manage yourself para ‘di ka mag break down physically and mentally ‘no— lalo na pag ano— ‘yon nga may namatay— so resiliency and dedication to the job of course” (ESCODA - 19)

While some firefighters also noted that firefighting often involves emotionally charged situations, requiring patience, understanding, and empathy. This subtheme also illustrates how firefighters regulate their emotions and practice composure when dealing with distressed individuals and chaotic environments.

“kelangan habaan mo yung pasensya mo kasi hindi mo kontrolado yung mga tao sa paligid mo. Kasi may mga tao na ano eh kapag rumesponde ka mas marunong pa sayo eh, kaya ayon kelangan sila unawain” (HILARIO - 8)

“yung pagiging minsan unawain, mas mahabang pagunawa. Pagtitimpi minsan, minsa pagrerresponde sa sunog dami mong maririnig na salita puro mga salitang “wala kang silbi, ganon.. Minumura ka. Syempre kelangan mo ng mahabababang pagunawa ung pagintindi na ganon siguro ung nararamdaman ng isang gusto nilang maapula ung sunog. Di nila namamalayan ung mga pinagsasabi nila kaya hinayaan ko na lang pagintindi.” (ISABELO - 13)

These accounts show that emotional regulation is essential to maintaining professionalism and focus amid intense pressure. Firefighters’ ability to remain composed and empathetic helps them navigate both operational challenges and interpersonal dynamics during response situations.

Firefighting is an occupation that demands exceptional endurance and physical fitness. Participants emphasized that physical strength is a key factor that enables them to perform their duties efficiently and safely.

”physical fitness, malakas na pangangatwan kasi ayun talaga yung kailangan bilang isang bumbero eh. kailangan maganda yung pangangatwan mo para maka responde. Kailangan talaga ng malakas na pangangatwan...so sakin naman medyo okay

naman— physical fitness naman tayo— siguro ayun na rin yung pinaka strength ko para sa trabaho ko.” (BONIFACIO - 20)

In summary, this subtheme illustrates that effective firefighting performance is sustained by a combination of resilience, focus, adaptability, patience, empathy, teamwork, and physical fitness. These personal and interpersonal strengths allow firefighters to perform efficiently under pressure while maintaining both their mental stability and sense of purpose.

Despite the firefighters being able to adapt to the traumatic occurrences and manage their challenges, the firefighters still call for aid, hoping for future interventions to lessen the burden and strains of their job. This fourth subtheme: Recommendations for Enhancing Organizational Support encompasses the participants’ recommendations for enhancing organizational support. Organizational support refers to the assistance, programs, and resources that firefighters expect from their organization to help them perform effectively and sustain their well-being and, at the same time, manage their stress and challenges. While most participants noted that their current income is sufficient to meet their daily needs, they also expressed concerns regarding occupational risks and the rising cost of living. As such, the provision of hazard pays, and additional allowances emerged as an essential recommendation to boost morale and recognize the risks associated with firefighting.

”siguro magkaron man lang kami ng...hazard pay, para— siyempre dito sa Manila kasi sobrang dami ng sunog yung lifespan mo talaga ay iikli” (BONIFACIO - 28)

In addition to financial assistance, participants pointed out that equipment and funding deficiencies hinder their operational efficiency. They emphasized that some stations lack adequate protective gear and that firefighters often have to purchase or maintain their own equipment, such as Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA). This underscores the need for increased logistical and equipment support from the organization.

“stress debriefing, para mawala yung mga trauma ng mga personnel natin sa mga ganong scenario. Each personnel magkaroon na sana ng SCBA, ayon magandang program na pwedeng makatulong sa kapwa bumbero natin.” (BONIFACIO - 31)

Another major recommendation centered on mental health and psychosocial support, including regular stress debriefing, professional counseling, and morale-boosting activities. Participants emphasized that these interventions could help mitigate the psychological toll of their work and prevent long-term emotional distress.

“naiisip ko lagi...magkaroon tayo ng...post debriefing talaga— regular ‘no, na bindi lang yung within the station level— ‘di lang kami-kami. Magkaron agad ng intervention para ‘di na dumating pa sa point na iisipin namin ‘yan for one month or one year na sinisisi namin yung sarili namin dahil dun sa nangyari.” (CARINO - 23)

“yon ang number one motivation. Pero aside from that, ‘yon nga yung sinasabi niyong mental health...na dapat ipolicy that will support the mental health of the Bureau of Fire Protection personnel, especially sa ground na ‘to kasi nandito yung bakbakan eh, dapat focus yung mental health ng nasa baba, especially pag may mga crisis situation nirerespondehan diba.” (ESCODA 34)

In addition, participants raised the importance of medical assistance and healthcare benefits as part of organizational support. They noted that firefighting exposes them to numerous health risks, including long-term respiratory and cardiovascular conditions. Free health check-ups and a dedicated Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) hospital were among the most significant recommendations.

“Free health check up, kasi mostly kapag retiree na ung mga bumbero nandyan nagkakaroon ng sakit eh, kabiti free quarterly or annually checkup na nanggaling sa government.” (JULLAN - 18)

“Establishment of a BFP hospital for our health conditions, for our families health conditions, needs. Kasi marami kaming medical personnel sa BFP, I think sixty percent of BFP are medical ano or fifty percent. Pwede kaming gumawa kasi, para meron kaming prioritization talaga saka kapag retire namin, sigurado kasi yan kapag ka retire namin lalabas ang mga sakit namin. The operation alone, everytime na pumupunta kami sa sunog meron tayong carcinogens na dumidikit sa ating PPEs so everytime na rumeresponde kami sa sunog. Diba ang sigarilho nagbabawas ng limang minuto kada stick. I think kapag sumugod ako sa isang sunog, nababawasan ng limang araw ang lifespan ko. So I need myself to be healthy, to be treated, and my family. So ayon ang gusto ko sana BFP Hospital.” (KAPITAN -33)

This subtheme highlights firefighters’ recommendations to strengthen institutional, financial, psychological, and logistical support within their organization. Participants believe that improved equipment and logistical resources will ensure their safety and efficiency during operations. Meanwhile, organizational initiatives that address mental health and provide adequate medical assistance are seen as essential for maintaining morale, reducing emotional strain, and fostering long-term well-being among firefighters.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of the study, the firefighters recall their traumatic experiences about certain emergency responses; this reflection covers the firefighters' near-death experiences and responses in which numerous victims died before their eyes that continue to persist in their memories, bringing emotional and psychological burdens, making it an unforgettable experience for the firefighters. Narrating their experiences in a precisely detailed manner, emphasizing the danger each firefighter faces in order to perform effectively as a firefighter. The firefighters interacted with those who passed away shortly after, collected their bodies afterwards, and saw them right in front of their eyes perish as they were seeing them suffer being burnt alive, not being able to do anything. These experiences of the firefighters result in a lingering psychological toll, in which they experience guilt, self-blame, self-questioning, fear, anxiety, recurring flashbacks of the poses of their dead bodies, and even not being able to eat meat for a month due to the same smell of burning meat and difficulty in sleeping for a month. These are parallel with the current study's findings, which also elaborate on firefighters potentially acquiring longer post-traumatic stress due to witnessing dismembered bodies and burnt victims firsthand during operations (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023) and exposure to traumatic and tragic events causing emotional exhaustion and tolls in addition to their resource challenges (Primo & Collado, 2024), acting as unique experiences of the firefighters throughout their service.

The impact of the firefighters' experiences strengthens numerous of their abilities, resulting in effective performance. Their experiences made them more understanding and patient towards the people around them despite the intense pressure, and they were calm whenever distressing events occurred, which focused on their strengthened mental and emotional resiliency and how essential emotional regulation is as an ability for effective performance in firefighting. Furthermore, by keeping their experiences in firefighting, they have turned them into lifelong learnings, which led to a self-developmental mindset after experiencing those occurrences, leading to new skills and outlooks and perspectives. Since the firefighting profession is a demanding job that involves a lot of immediate critical decision-making scenarios, exposure to these situations made them adapt to it; they were able to cope with changing situations,

they were able to be optimistic through challenges, and they were able to be resilient as firefighters. The firefighters' exposure to emergencies shapes adaptive thinking, improves calm under pressure and emotional regulation in stressful situations, and makes them more efficacious during fire response operations (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023). Recurrent exposure to fire incidents builds adaptability and sustained resilience, improving the quality of service (Maskay & Maskay, 2025); their experiences are one of the things that determine their profession as a firefighter (Collado & Primo, 2024). Some findings of the study provide almost similar findings to those of the local studies, wherein the experiences of the firefighters impact their abilities, such as emotional regulation, adaptability, and resilience, thus rendering effective performance.

Moreover, the firefighters demonstrated multiple factors they perceived as a hindrance to their performance in fire responses. All are composed of both personal and environmental factors; for environmental factors, there are the uncertain number of responses that may recur anytime, deficiency in equipment and manpower, traffic environment, conflict with the engagement and behavior of the communities, especially during fire responses, and perception failure of the higher-ups on the gravity of ground-level challenges, which hinders support from the organization. For personal factors: depletion of stamina and strength, lack of sleep, rest, and meal consumption, stress and pressure, and demoralization due to fatigue. The challenges that the Philippine firefighters often come across are insufficiency in manpower and equipment, physical health (Lagata et al., 2022 & Primo and Collado, 2024), excessive workload placing significant stress (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023 & Fianitog, 2024), stressors in the work environment, and the additional stress from the communities' negative comments regarding their response times and sufficiency of resources (Primo & Collado, 2024). The factors that hinder the performance of the firefighters prove to be congruent with the challenges and hindrances of other BFP firefighters in the Philippines.

In contrast, there are also a lot of personal and environmental factors that firefighters perceive as an aid to their performance. In the findings, there was support from their families and colleagues that helped them in processing their emotions, regaining mental balance, reducing stress, and coping with the challenges from their work; there was also support from the organization that takes form in benefits, financial assistance, and recognition efforts that boost the morale and well-being of the firefighters, leading to enhanced performance. Additionally, gratitude and appreciation from the community motivate the firefighters to do their job better. As well as different recreational activities to destress. The firefighters' focus level, quick decision-making, adaptability, optimism, patience, understanding, and physical fitness are all factors that contribute to efficiency as firefighters. Firefighters in the Philippines emphasize the importance of social support from family and colleagues, which alleviates stress and yields better coordination (Amorcillo et al., 2024), along with community support and regulating emotions and maintaining composure (Primo & Collado, 2024). Other factors include activities as coping strategies for the firefighters, which were also evident in the studies of De Castro and Cabarrubias in 2023, Fianitog in 2024, and Primo and Collado in 2024, all of which were factors that contributed to firefighters' efficacy in their occupation.

Drawing from Folkman and Lazarus's Psychological Stress and Coping Theory, it can be inferred that firefighters engage in a cognitive process of evaluating a situation before taking action. When they perceive the situation as stressful or potentially harmful, they assess their internal coping resources such as emotional regulation and self-control, as well as their external resources like peer support and available equipment. Through this appraisal process, firefighters are able to determine the most appropriate and effective way to respond to the demands of the situation while maintaining their performance and composure. Coping Strategies

refer to mechanisms individuals use to manage stress and challenges. In the context of firefighting, coping plays an important role in sustaining performance and psychological balance despite exposure to life-threatening situations and emotionally taxing experiences. Participants' narratives revealed that over time, they have developed personal and collective strategies to lessen the psychological burden of their work. Among the various coping strategies identified, peer and familial support emerged as the primary source of emotional strength. Firefighters expressed that spending time with family during their day offs helps them decompress and recover from stressful experiences. Such interactions allow them to temporarily detach from the intensity of their profession while receiving emotional validation and understanding from important people of their lives. The findings also aligned with the collectivist nature of Filipino culture, where social bonds and interpersonal harmony are central to coping and adaptation (Rilveria, 2018). In the Filipino context, family and peers are not merely sources of companionship but paramount systems of emotional and instrumental support, especially in high-stress occupations.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that institutional support emerged as a critical coping resource for firefighters. For instance, many participants indicated that formal debriefing and evaluation of their experiences after a response operation would significantly help them process their emotional and mental states. This aligns with the view that clear after-action review mechanisms facilitate recovery of the firefighters. Additionally, adequate equipment and functioning logistics were seen as foundational in lessening the burden of firefighting. Majorities of respondents observed that facing workplace challenges becomes easier when they have reliable self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) units; such equipment reduces their worry about risk and thus enables clearer thinking during operations. This is consistent with local studies noting the widespread shortage of PPE and SCBA among Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) personnel, a factor that undermines both safety and morale (Bureau of Fire Protection [BFP], 2022). This echoes findings that fire station strategies and programs are significantly constrained by inadequate budgeting and resource allocation (De Guzman Jose, 2025). Furthermore, participants identified sufficient financial support and morale-booster programmes (e.g., recognition, hazard-pay, rest-and-recreation allowances) as instrumental for sustaining their resilience on the job.

Consequently, the respondents reported employing adaptive coping strategies to manage workplace challenges. They held peer debriefing sessions where they talked about what went wrong during operations and discussed what could be done better next time, this is aligned with problem-focused coping strategies where they address the source of the stress. Similarly, participants engaged in emotion-focused coping through activities that help regulate their emotional responses to stressors, such as nature tripping, long-rides, exercising at the gym, travel and other recreational activities. This cognitive process, involving primary and secondary appraisal, shapes how firefighters regulate their emotions and make decisions under pressure. For instance, when faced with high-risk operations, firefighters who perceive a situation as a challenge rather than a threat are more likely to engage in problem-focused coping, relying on training and teamwork to act decisively. This theoretical framework helps explain why those with stronger emotional regulation and resilience, demonstrate better adaptive behavior and sound decision-making even amid intense psychological strain.

In the present study, participants recount what went through their minds during and after response operations, they were able to vividly narrate recollections of traumatic events. Participants reported enduring feelings of guilt and self-questioning, accompanied by a persistent emotional burden. Some described experiences of helplessness, feeling that their efforts were insufficient, while others reported anxiety and avoidance

behavior triggered by life-threatening encounters. Intrusive recollections and flashbacks were noted in several accounts, often provoking existential reflections regarding survival and the meaning of their existence. These narratives collectively indicate a mental state characterized by emotional distress, internalized guilt, mental exhaustion, and moral fatigue. Evident trauma-related symptoms were prevalent, underscoring the lingering psychological impact of their professional duties.

Empirical evidence supports these observations, a study among first responders demonstrated mild but statistically significant levels of secondary traumatic stress, which correlated with diminished mental health outcomes (Cabujat & Juan, 2025). Persistent feelings of guilt and self-questioning are common, particularly in scenarios where outcomes are uncertain or tragic. Anxiety, avoidance, and intrusive memories are consistent with trauma-related symptomatology observed. As revealed in Sabalosa's (2024) phenomenological study of BFP station chiefs in the Philippines, such personnel contend with both internal psychological pressures and external operational constraints (inadequate resources, public dissatisfaction, leadership complexity) which together heighten cognitive load and demand robust adaptive capacities.

Despite these psychological burdens, the participants' narratives also reflected remarkable strength, adaptability, and mental discipline. The mental state of the participants appeared to influence their decision-making and behavioral responses during operations. The ability to remain composed under pressure, to prioritize logical reasoning over emotional reactions, and to maintain presence of mind during critical moments emerged as key manifestations of their behavior during operations. Many respondents described engaging in reflective practices and learning from previous operations to guide future actions. This finding is consistent with the study of Wu et al. (2024), which demonstrated that firefighters with a clearer self-concept are more capable of regulating their emotions and adapting effectively under high-pressure situations. Similarly, Heydari et al. (2021) emphasized that mental health plays a crucial role in firefighters' occupational resilience and performance, where those who experience anxiety or distress are more prone to emotional or erroneous decisions during emergencies. Their heightened situational awareness and capacity for adaptive cognition under extreme stress illustrate how emotional endurance contributes to effective decision-making and performance in the field. Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive attitude and professional restraint when interacting with the community, especially during emotionally charged scenarios. While their mental state revealed traces of distress and trauma, it simultaneously highlighted a transformative form of psychological strength in which emotional pain coexists with empathy, discipline, and an enduring commitment to service.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of firefighters during and after emergency response operations, uncovering the complex emotional and psychological states that accompany their work. The findings revealed that firefighters experience traumatic events that they can vividly recall even after a year has passed. The study also showed that their experiences are closely connected to how they perform and make decisions in the field. Their experiences are diverse, and they often turn their adversities into lessons and constant reminders that their profession carries risks to life. The findings revealed that the firefighters experience lingering psychological tolls, experiencing guilt, self-blame, self-questioning, fear, anxiety, and recurring flashbacks, making them more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023) and emotional exhaustion (Primo & Collado, 2024). Despite having these negative

experiences that could affect their performance, these same experiences also strengthened their emotional and mental resiliency, manifesting that emotional regulation is a necessary trait for firefighters for effective performance. Their exposure to these firefighting experiences shapes their adaptive thinking, improves their calm under pressure and emotional regulation (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023), and most importantly, improves the quality of their service (Maskay & Maskay, 2025). The findings also revealed numerous repeated challenges that impact the quality of their performance as firefighters, which are both personal and environmental. Some of these are insufficient manpower and equipment (Lagata et al., 2022 & Primo and Collado, 2024), excessive workload placing significant stress (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023 & Fianitog, 2024), and additional stressors such as communities' negative comments toward them (Primo & Collado, 2024). In contrast with this, there are personal and environmental factors that the firefighters perceived as an aid to their performance. These consist of support from families and colleagues, helping them process their emotions, regain mental balance, reduce stress, and cope with the challenges in work, yielding better coordination (Amorcillo et al., 2024); support from the government in the form of benefits, financial assistance, and recognition efforts, resulting in a morale boost and well-being, which leads to enhanced performance.

Firefighters assess and evaluate their experiences before taking action; perceiving it as stressful or harmful would lead them to use their internal (emotional regulation and self-control) and external coping resources (peer support). Through this process, firefighters determine the most effective way to respond to the demands of their current situation. One of their coping mechanisms revealed the collectivist nature of Filipino culture, wherein social bonds and interpersonal harmony are central to coping and adaptation (Rilveria, 2018). The overall psychological burden of the firefighters built their strength, adaptability, and mental discipline, influencing their decision-making and behavioral responses during fire operations. However, this does not change the fact that firefighters experience a lot of traumas from their fire responses and day-to-day challenges they face that both personally affect them as human beings and influence their work performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

As a prerequisite for an effective service by the firefighters, besides the enhancement of procurement of equipment like SCBA and PPEs by the higher officials and improving the services in medical and mental support. There should be at least monthly medical or mental health free services partnered with the local government or NGOs for immediate health monitoring and stress debriefings of firefighters, coordinating with local authorities to ensure clear pathways during emergency responses, and implementing mandatory fire safety education and community awareness programs such as information campaigns in the form of seminars or talks integrated with fire drill exercises, in order for them to be always aware and understanding of the challenges of the firefighters for communities vulnerable to fire incidents. Since stress management workshops and mental health counseling would ensure the welfare of the Philippine firefighters (James & De Guzman, 2025). Additionally, practitioners in the field of psychology could develop mental health interventions specifically structured for firefighters' experiences and challenges. Given that there is a shortage in manpower (De Castro & Cabarrubias, 2023; Fianitog, 2024; Lagata et al., 2022), including practitioners of psychology in the profession of firefighting, they could take this opportunity to collaborate with authorities and officials in providing them mental assistance since there is a limited availability of formal support groups for work-related stress management that could improve mental health support for firefighters (Primo & Collado, 2024). Nevertheless, the study

focused on the general challenges, coping mechanisms, and support and was limited to the specific single point in time, which does not capture long-term challenges, which can be further improved by providing pictures of equipment in the stations for more credibility of statements and focusing more on their mental health and the viable interventions that can be done to reduce trauma and burnout, and possibly conducting longitudinal studies that will allow assessment of the improvement of the support along with its influence on their efficiency.

Another identified limitation of this study is the lack of gender representation, as seen in the participant profile. The majority of the participants were male, reflecting the male-dominated nature of the firefighting profession in the Philippines. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the perspectives, challenges, and coping mechanisms of female firefighters or other gender identities within the field. For instance, female responders may face additional psychosocial pressures, such as gender bias, limited access to leadership opportunities, or differing expectations regarding emotional expression and resilience. Considering gender-based factors in future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how mental health, coping, and support systems interact across diverse firefighter populations.

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