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ABSTRACT

Disaster responders play a vital role in protecting communities from escalating hazards. This study explored disaster responders' lived experiences of courage under crisis using the Photovoice method. Six participants from Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Offices (MDRRMOs) in Agusan del Sur, purposively selected, participated in the study. Data were collected through photographs, written reflections, and in-depth interviews guided by the SHOWED framework. The data were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Seven major themes emerged: courage grounded in preparedness and readiness; courage rooted in service and humanitarian commitment; personal factors strengthening responders' courage; social and organizational support fostering collective courage; environmental risks motivating responsive action; empowerment through competence and preparedness; and identity formation through service and leadership. The study concludes that courage in disaster response is not merely an individual trait, but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of multiple factors. It is recommended that the administration improve training programs, enhance inter-agency coordination, and strengthen the professional development of disaster responders by implementing structured and evidence-based strategies.

Keywords: courage, crisis, preparedness, disaster, humanitarian commitment, resilience, empowerment, identity formation

INTRODUCTION

Recurring typhoons, floods, earthquakes, landslides, and other hazards continually threaten communities across the Philippines, causing damage, disrupting lives, and weakening recovery capacity. The proactive involvement of local officials plays a crucial role in fostering disaster awareness within communities, reducing vulnerability, and ensuring coordinated and effective responses during emergencies (Cabanig, 2023). As disasters become more frequent and intense, they strain resources and test the readiness of emergency systems. It is crucial to remember that emergency preparedness is a shared responsibility, involving governments, communities, organizations, and individuals (Mokulo, 2023). According to PAGASA, an average of 20 tropical cyclones enter the Philippine Area of Responsibility (PAR) each year. This high frequency contributes to a significant humanitarian impact, with an average of 12.1 million Filipinos affected by disasters annually.

In this context, disaster responders play a vital role in protecting communities from escalating hazards. They conduct search-and-rescue operations, evacuate at-risk families, provide emergency medical assistance, and coordinate the distribution of relief goods, particularly to vulnerable groups. By deploying personnel and establishing evacuation points during the disaster preparation phase, effective disaster management can be ensured during the disaster response phase, thereby reducing the disaster's impact (Ozdemir et al., 2026). As the community's first line of defense, their coordinated efforts are essential in minimizing losses and restoring safety during increasingly frequent disasters. The core of an effective and responsive crisis management framework is the intricate coordination of efforts, especially between national government agencies and local government units (Eleorda, 2025). Coordination among multiple organizations is crucial since disaster management encompasses various actors, government agencies, LGUs, civil society, the private sector, international organizations, and local communities, working together across preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery phases (Ishiwatari, 2021).

However, despite their vital role, disaster responders perform these duties under extremely challenging and hazardous conditions, operating in physically dangerous environments marked by collapsing structures, swift floodwaters, unstable debris, and exposure to hazardous materials. Disaster responders are highly vulnerable to operational stress injuries, which arise from prolonged exposure to traumatic events, high-risk environments, and intense workloads, often leading to burnout, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Mundo et al., 2025). Disaster responders' perceptions of moral challenges in relation to their well-being, which could be integrated into organizations' support structures for responders before, during, and after deployment (Gustavsson et al., 2022). Long work hours with limited rest, combined with scarce resources and equipment, intensify the pressure placed upon them during prolonged operations. Responders in groups reported a range of symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. In contrast, alternative responders demonstrated greater awareness of the signs and a broader range of positive coping methods to address these symptoms (Choate et al., 2025). Taken together, these challenges reveal the immense personal cost responders endure while protecting communities from escalating disasters.

Most existing studies and disaster reports focus on operational efficiency, response timelines, casualty figures, and logistical outcomes, providing mainly technical perspectives on crisis management. Nevertheless, challenges persist during emergencies, including limited resources, poor planning, inadequate communication, insufficient training, and uneven distribution of services (Masbi et al., 2024). As a result, personal narratives of struggle, fear, courage, and resilience remain underrepresented in formal documentation. Online narration offers a less formalized opportunity for authentic self-disclosure (Casas & Benuto, 2022), yet respondents' lived experiences beyond protocols and statistics remain insufficiently explored. Addressing these recurring issues as part of a continuous quality improvement process may help reduce injuries, illness, and deaths among responders in future disasters (Rosen et al., 2023). Taken together, this gap underscores the need for research that humanizes disaster response by giving voice to frontline responders' emotional and experiential realities.

Finally, this study is significant because it deepens understanding of the lived experiences, courage, and emotional struggles of disaster responders, dimensions often overlooked in technical and statistical disaster research. By documenting their firsthand accounts, it humanizes disaster response and highlights the psychological and emotional demands faced in high-risk environments. The findings provide practical insights for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) agencies and Local Government Units (LGUs) to design more responsive training programs, safety protocols, and psychosocial support systems grounded in real

operational challenges. It also offers policymakers evidence-based perspectives to strengthen disaster management policies, particularly in enhancing responder welfare, mental health support, and resource allocation. Additionally, the study contributes to academic literature by emphasizing the importance of qualitative, experience-centered approaches in disaster research. Ultimately, it promotes a more holistic disaster management framework that recognizes and supports responders not only as operational personnel but as individuals facing significant emotional and psychological demands.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Psychological Resilience by Ann S. Masten (2001)

Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman explains that stress arises from an individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation and their perceived ability to cope with its demands. These strategies help individuals to adapt their behaviors to the environmental constraints they face (Raccanello et al., 2023). It highlights that people manage stress through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, which influence how effectively they adapt to challenging or high-risk situations. While most disaster responders manage and have adequate resilience to overcome the trauma, a few require professional help (Kar 2023). Several types of workplace stress remain crucial to describe because they determine the nature of the stress, its role within the enterprise, and the extent to which individual behavior, characteristics, or values affect it (Wang 2021). Thus, this theory helps explain how responders interpret challenging situations and develop coping strategies that influence their courage, empowerment, and role perception in disaster response.

Problem-focused coping is reflected in their preparedness, training, and strategic actions to mitigate the impacts of disasters. In contrast, emotion-focused coping is shown in their ability to regulate fear, manage stress, and maintain composure during crisis. This study provides valuable insights into how resilience dimensions, prior disaster experience, and demographic factors influence disaster preparedness and avoidance behaviors (Wu et al., 2025). These coping mechanisms directly influence their level of courage, resilience, and performance in the field. However, the choice of coping strategy depends on numerous factors, such as past experiences, personal character traits, and examples set by family members (Bondarchuk et al., 2024). This supports Stress and Coping Theory and aligns with the current study, which shows that disaster responders' Photovoice narratives reflect how they cope with fear, trauma, and high-stress conditions during disaster response. Disasters are complex events that can have severe physical, psychological, and social consequences for affected individuals and communities. The coping strategies employed by survivors are critical for developing effective interventions and support programs (Olonilua & Ogbeleakhu, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

This study explores the lived experiences of disaster responders and how their photographed experiences reveal the development of courage during disaster response operations. The conceptual framework illustrates how different factors interact to shape responders' courage, ultimately leading to empowerment and identity formation.

Courage Grounded in Preparedness and Readiness. Training, drills, and operational preparation strengthen responders' competence and confidence when facing disasters. Preparedness equips them with the technical skills and mental readiness needed to act decisively in high-risk situations. The role of courage, career adaptability, and professional readiness as protective factors toward life (Magnano et al., 2021). Thus, preparedness and readiness serve as the foundation upon which courage is developed, sustained, and translated into effective disaster response actions, ultimately empowering responders and enhancing their overall performance in emergencies. Disaster readiness means moving beyond technical skills and knowledge to include personal mental preparedness and a willingness to confront risks and take the necessary precautions to stay safe and resilient in efforts to help others (Hugelius & Harada, 2025). High physical fitness enables first responders to perform difficult tasks efficiently (Alqarni et al., 2025).

Local government units, the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (MDRRMC), and other concerned parties will be used in crafting more responsive disaster preparedness programs in the locality (Lumabi et al., 2025). This highlights that continuous engagement with these institutions enables disaster responders to internalize their roles as leaders, coordinators, and protectors within the community. The factors that affect flood disaster preparedness are a lifeline during flood disasters (Kurata et al., 2023). Community protection requires systematic approaches that account for the complexity of health emergencies and place the needs and realities of at-risk or affected communities at the forefront of response (WHO 2024). Over time, such involvement strengthens their professional identity, shaping how they perceive their responsibilities and reinforcing their commitment to service and leadership in disaster response.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore and honor the courage and lived experiences of disaster responders during crises as revealed through the Photovoice method.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did disaster responders describe their lived experiences of demonstrating courage during crisis situations, as captured through their photographs and narratives?
2. What personal, social, and environmental factors influenced the manifestation of courage among disaster responders during emergency operations?
3. How did disaster responders' experiences of courage promote empowerment, shape identities, and influence role perceptions in disaster response?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically a phenomenological research design, and was supported by the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997). Phenomenology is a method undertaken in qualitative research to describe participant experiences, focusing on the lifeworld of the individual (Sinfield et al., 2023). This approach focuses on understanding

the essence of lived experiences, making it appropriate for a study seeking to uncover how responders personally perceive, feel, and make meaning of courage in high-risk disaster environments. Photovoice enables participants to express complex emotions and insights that may be difficult to articulate in traditional interviews, making it especially valuable in high-stress, emotionally charged contexts (Bray et al., 2023). By integrating photovoice with phenomenology, your research design creates a multidimensional framework that captures both the visual and narrative dimensions of disaster response, offering a richer, more empathetic portrayal of resilience and bravery.

Settings

This study was conducted in the province of Agusan del Sur, located in the Caraga Region of Mindanao, Philippines. Agusan del Sur was a landlocked province known for its rich natural resources, diverse cultural heritage, and agricultural economy. The province comprised 13 municipalities and one city, with Prosperidad as the capital. The research focused on selected municipalities within Agusan del Sur that were highly vulnerable to floods. This heightened vulnerability was attributed to the Agusan River Basin, which contributed to recurrent flooding during the rainy season.

Participant

The study participants consisted of six individuals from selected municipalities in the province of Agusan del Sur, including three MDRRMO personnel and three MDRRMO officers. The MDRRMO officer was the head of the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office. It was responsible for directing and managing disaster-related programs in the local government. At the same time, MDRRMO personnel served as the support workforce, executing plans and assisting with operational tasks to ensure effective disaster risk reduction and emergency response. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) MDRRMO personnel who had experienced several disasters and had at least three years in service; (2) MDRRMO officers who had experienced several disasters and had at least three years in service; and (3) willingness to share their personal experiences during a disaster. All participants were briefed on the study's purpose and provided informed consent before data collection.

Instruments

The researcher collected data from the participants using interview guide questions based on the SHOWED framework, a widely used tool in photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997), which facilitated participant reflection and narrative development regarding their photographs. The guide included an introduction, an opening question, and exit questions. The SHOWED framework consisted of the following questions: "What do you see here?" "What is really happening in this photo?" "How does this relate to our lives?" and "Why does this issue, concern, or strength exist?" This structured set of questions supported participants in critically analyzing their visual data and linking it to their lived experiences, aligning with the phenomenological design's aim of understanding the essence of participants' experiences. The SHOWED framework's participatory and reflective nature empowered disaster responders to express their courage and challenges through imagery and discussion, generating rich qualitative data. The interview guide was translated into a language the participants understood to ensure effective communication. The researcher also used digital recording equipment to document the interviews. The recorded data were transcribed and analyzed to formulate themes.

Ethical Considerations

In this qualitative study, ethical principles were strictly observed throughout participant selection, data collection, and analysis. The researcher complied with the ethical standards set by the university, and the study underwent review and approval by the Misamis University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC). All required ethical documents were completed prior to conducting the study. Permission was also secured from the respective heads of the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Offices (MDRRMO).

Voluntary participation was strictly upheld. All participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and nature of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to their involvement. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits. Given the use of the Photovoice method, additional ethical considerations were emphasized. Participants were guided to capture photographs responsibly, ensuring respect for privacy, dignity, and safety. They were instructed to avoid taking identifiable images of individuals without proper consent and to refrain from capturing sensitive or potentially harmful content.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes to participants and securely storing all data, including photographs, transcripts, and recordings. Only the researcher had access to the data, which were used solely for academic purposes. All procedures adhered to Republic Act No. 10173, or the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring the protection of participants' personal information. The researcher also prioritized participants' emotional well-being, recognizing that recalling disaster experiences may evoke distress. Participants were treated with respect, sensitivity, and care throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this Photovoice study was conducted using a systematic, rigorous, and multi-layered qualitative approach that integrated both visual and narrative data. All collected data, including photographs, written reflections, and interview transcripts, were organized, anonymized, and labeled using participant codes to ensure confidentiality. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data.

The analysis followed the core processes of Photovoice, namely selection, contextualization, and codification. In the selection phase, participants identified significant photographs that represented their experiences of courage. In the contextualization phase, participants explained the meaning of each image using the SHOWED framework, linking their visual data to personal and social experiences. In the codification phase, recurring ideas and patterns were identified across participants' narratives. Visual data were examined using Rose's (2016) Visual Methodology, focusing on the content, context, and symbolic meaning of each photograph. Narrative data were analyzed using the SHOWED framework to capture participants' interpretations and lived experiences.

Thematic analysis was then conducted following Braun and Clarke's phases: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing analytic narratives. This process enabled the identification of key themes related to courage, influencing factors, and meaning-making. To further deepen the analysis,



empowerment, as well as identity formation and role perception among disaster responders.

Triangulation was employed by comparing data from photographs, written reflections, and interview transcripts to ensure consistency and credibility of findings. Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo, codes, themes, and visual annotations were systematically organized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants were active disaster responders from local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Offices (DRRMOs) who were directly involved in emergency preparedness and response activities, including flood monitoring, water rescue, and community evacuation. The participants in this study were six disaster responders from the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (MDRRMO), divided into two groups: three MDRRMO officers and three MDRRMO personnel.

Among the MDRRMO officers, two were female, and one was male, while all three MDRRMO personnel were male. In terms of length of service, the participants demonstrated substantial experience in disaster response. From the Municipality of Esperanza, the MDRRMO personnel had 11 years of service, while the MDRRMO officer had 8 years. In La Paz, the MDRRMO officer had 6 years of service, while the personnel had 8 years. Meanwhile, in Prosperidad, the MDRRMO personnel had 9 years of service, while the MDRRMO officer had the longest tenure, with 13 years. Their experiences were grounded in real-life exposure to hazardous environments, requiring both technical competence and psychological resilience. As frontline responders, they shared a common professional background rooted in public service, teamwork, and a commitment to community safety.

From the analysis of the narratives and photographs, seven major themes emerged: courage grounded in preparedness and readiness; courage rooted in service and humanitarian commitment; personal factors strengthening responders' courage; social and organizational support fostering collective courage; environmental risks motivating responsive action; empowerment through competence and preparedness; and identity formation through service and leadership. These themes indicate that courage among disaster responders is not merely an individual trait but a multidimensional and dynamic process shaped by personal, social, and environmental factors.

Courage Grounded in Preparedness and Readiness

Disaster responders emphasized that courage in disaster response is strongly rooted in preparedness, training, and operational readiness. The requirements needed to perform the flood responder role, as well as to specify the personnel qualifications and competencies needed to fulfill those requirements (Hosken & O'Sullivan, 2025). Preparing equipment, monitoring environmental conditions, and organizing response systems enable responders to confront disaster situations with confidence despite uncertainty and risk. Drills and training can be improved to better prepare for disaster management challenges (Mahdi et al., 2023). The presence of rescue gear symbolizes readiness and reinforces their confidence when responding to emergencies. Similarly, rescue tools used during operations also strengthen responders' sense of safety and determination when confronting dangerous environments. Their experiences map out how creativity, cooperation, and community action become lifelines during crises (Canape et al., 2025).

"The life jacket and the rescue helmet are what we always wear when we conduct surveys to measure the water level, and especially when we have rescue operations here in our municipality (P1)".

This statement highlights that protective equipment ensures not only physical safety but also psychological assurance among responders. The nature of emergency responders' work puts them at the top of professions that face a considerable number of occupational health and safety hazards, often unavoidable (Toma et al., 2023). The presence of such equipment strengthens their confidence and willingness to engage in high-risk situations. It also reflects how safety resources contribute to both competence and appreciation of life in disaster work. It provides detailed preventive strategies, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), appropriate training, adequate rest periods, and emergency procedures (Cetintepe & Ilhan, 2025). The participant's response highlights the essential role of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as life jackets and rescue helmets, in ensuring both the safety and confidence of disaster responders during operations. Personal protective equipment (PPE) serves as the primary means of individual protection to ensure the safety of emergency responders while performing their jobs (Ludy & Eyre, 2024).

Adherence to operational protocols further strengthens responders' courage and discipline. This is evident in the participant's statement:

"As responders, we are not allowed to engage in water rescue operations or board the boat if we are not wearing the proper Personal Floating Device. This is part of our operational protocol to ensure the safety of responders and the general public. Even when we conduct augmentation in other municipalities, the same rule applies: responders cannot board the rubber or fiber boat without wearing a PFD". (P1)

Following protocols reduces risk and ensures responsible action during emergencies. It also reflects a culture of discipline that enhances both individual and team confidence. However, (Aksoy et al., 2025), failure to comply with safety rules puts both the person and the victim in danger. The following safety rules are especially important when responding to disasters, especially when rescuing people from water. This means they can do their jobs and stay safe at the same time. (Yabe & Takahashi 2025), suggest that employees' perceptions of the benefits and risks associated with safety violations play a key role in their decision-making process. It also shows that being brave when responding to disasters is not about doing things that might get you hurt on purpose. Responders who consistently follow safety guidelines and use appropriate protective equipment demonstrate higher levels of confidence and situational control during high-risk operations (Schwitzer 2022)

Participants also described how rescue tools serve as both functional and symbolic sources of courage. This is explained by Participant 1.



“This rope is what we use when the water current is very strong, and because of this rope, we can avoid accidents during our operation, and it gives us the courage to help people during disasters. Our rescue equipment serves as our partner and also gives me the strength and courage to respond to any disaster”. (P1)

These statements demonstrate that rescue tools enhance both operational effectiveness and psychological readiness. Equipment is viewed as a partner that supports responders in dangerous situations. (Kedia et al., 2022), state that policy and governance are the foundation of effective disaster response, and technologies have the potential to provide rapid and shared situational awareness for response agencies. The strategic plan provides for disaster response, recovery, and preparedness capacity, fostering a resilient and proactive emergency management system capable of addressing all phases of emergencies (Camacho & Regacho 2026). The use of a floating rope in strong water currents illustrates how specialized tools are not only functional but also life-saving, as they increase visibility, accessibility, and efficiency during rescue operations. Enhances disaster preparedness and management by enabling faster, more efficient response and recovery efforts (Khorram-Manesh et al., 2025). The rope, described as a partner, reflects the responders' dependence on tools that support their actions and reduce operational risks.

“Courage in disaster response is not only shown during actual rescue operations but also in the commitment to preparedness. Every time we deploy this boat during heavy rains or rising floodwaters, we face uncertainty and danger, yet we proceed because lives depend on us.” (P2)



This statement highlights that courage is expressed through commitment and responsibility even before actual rescue takes place. The importance of disaster preparedness in helping people to mitigate the impact of disasters and cope with relevant consequences (Cong et al., 2023). Preparedness becomes a foundation for decisive and courageous action. Higher levels of disaster response self-efficacy are strongly associated with proactive behavior, preparedness, and a willingness to engage in emergency response even before disasters occur (Göktepe et al., 2025). The participant who shows courage in a crisis is not solely about saving individuals. It also involves being prepared for unfortunate events. Boat-supported flood evacuation is an effective tool that enhances the overall flood response strategy (Moussa et al., 2024). Choosing to use a boat to assist individuals in a flood goes beyond merely performing a task. Those who assist others need to consider their knowledge and beliefs about what is right before beginning to rescue individuals. The participant further elaborated on the role of rescue equipment in their operations:

This tool represents the actual resources that our MDRRMO office uses when responding to emergencies. The rescue boat shows that our office is prepared and equipped to conduct rescue operations, especially during flooding and water-related disasters. The rescue boat reflects our preparedness and the reality of our work as responders”. (P2)

Preparedness strengthens both confidence and operational capability, and the availability of resources enables responders to act effectively in high-risk situations. It also reinforces their identity as protectors of the community. The Remote-Operated Human Rescue Boat System project has successfully demonstrated its potential to revolutionize flood rescue operations by enhancing safety and efficiency (Bais et al., 2025). The participant's response highlights the importance of having adequate,

functional resources, such as rescue boats, to ensure effective disaster response operations. The presence of this equipment reflects a high level of preparedness within the MDRRMO, enabling responders to act promptly and efficiently during flooding and water-related emergencies. The rescue system has been developed with effective communication (Asianuba & Saana, 2022). At the same time, the challenges encountered during deployment, such as strong currents, low visibility, and unpredictable conditions, demonstrate the demanding nature of their work and the courage required to carry out their duties. Improving evacuation awareness is an issue that must be addressed immediately (Matsuki & Hatayama, 2023). This underscores that, beyond equipment, a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to community protection drives responders to face risks and perform their roles despite difficult and hazardous situations.

In addition to equipment readiness, participants emphasized environmental monitoring as an essential component of preparedness. One participant stated:

“Standing near a river that could potentially flood requires alertness and readiness to make critical decisions. Even simple actions, such as monitoring a river and documenting conditions, can contribute significantly to disaster prevention



and effective response. The river represents a natural environment that can become dangerous when there is heavy rainfall or when a low-pressure area develops, which may lead to possible flooding in nearby communities”. (P2)

Floods are among the most devastating natural hazards and cause serious loss of life and economic damage, necessitating the establishment of a rapid and accurate method to monitor and assess flood disasters to ensure people’s safety and reduce economic losses (Yuan et al., 2021). These statements indicate that courage is also demonstrated through vigilance and proactive decision-making. Monitoring hazards allows responders to anticipate risks and act early. Disaster awareness and preparedness are part of disaster risk management and refer to measures taken to prepare for and reduce the effects of disasters, and to predict and prevent them where possible (Hargono et al., 2023). The participant highlights the importance of alertness and proactive oversight in minimizing disaster risk. Monitoring river conditions, particularly during significant rainfall or emerging weather disturbances, underscores the essential role of early warning systems in averting disasters. Several industries and organizations can contribute to disseminating knowledge on flood preparedness, efficient response, and recovery (Rahman et al., 2024). It emphasizes that courage is shown in preparedness efforts, where responders assume responsibility for identifying risks and implementing preventive measures to reduce the effects of potential flooding

Another participant emphasized that preparing rescue assets before an approaching typhoon strengthens responders’ confidence and readiness to protect communities.



“The preparation of our rescue equipment gave us the courage to respond to those people who were flooded. My identity as a responder is shaped by being a protector who inspires trust, and my empowerment comes from knowing that preparedness itself is a courageous act.” (P3).

A disaster is an event beyond the control or response mechanisms of either the individual or the community, whereas typhoon preparedness involves greater preparation and action to minimize its impact (Mideksa et al., 2021). Preparedness strengthens both confidence and identity among disaster responders, shaping how they perceive themselves as capable protectors. Effective response requires a well-structured plan and collaboration among first responders (Al-Ibraheem et al., 2024). Access to and proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as life vests, ropes, and helmets, not only ensures physical safety but also enhances confidence during high-risk operations like flood and rescue missions. Rescuer must have personal protective equipment (Upreti 2022). Moreover, viewing readiness as a form of bravery highlights how presentation and accountability foster empowerment and strong professional identity in disaster response. Floods are natural disasters that should be taken seriously due to their threat to human lives and the economy.

The findings that continuous training, proper safety equipment, and strong operational preparedness are essential in strengthening disaster responders' courage and confidence during emergency operations. Disaster preparedness involves taking measures to mitigate the effects of disasters on people and communities (Camacho & Regacho, 2026). Ensuring adequate resources, regular drills, and organized response systems can help responders perform their duties safely and effectively in hazardous situations. Beyramijam et al (2021) also highlight that the most important elements of disaster preparedness include the size and scope of the incident, surge capacity, planning, communication, training and education, policymaking, financial support, coordination, safety and security, early warning system, disaster response experience, and legal considerations. A well-planned disaster risk reduction program is effective in minimizing hazards and casualties (Lopez Jr et al., 2022). Lastly, courage is demonstrated through vigilance and proactive decision-making, as responders actively monitor risks and implement preventive measures to reduce the impact of disasters.



Courage Rooted in Service and Humanitarian Commitment

Beyond preparedness, disaster responders also described courage as deeply rooted in their commitment to serve communities and protect vulnerable individuals during crises. The Philippines is frequently affected by natural disasters, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and, most especially, weather-related calamities such as typhoons and accompanying severe flooding and landslides (Kim et al., 2022). A natural disaster can happen anytime, anywhere, and responders also need training for different disaster situations and events (Asio 2021). Participants highlighted that their sense of duty, compassion, and teamwork motivates them to respond despite the risks involved. The success of disaster response capabilities depends heavily on field collaboration and innovation because these capabilities stand ready to meet future challenges (Neoaz, N. 2023).

One participant explained that courage involves acting even when fear is present, especially during rescue missions in difficult conditions. Similarly, participants emphasized that disaster response operations rely heavily on teamwork, coordination, and quick decision-making among responders.

“Courage during a crisis is not the absence of fear; it is the ability to act despite it. As an MDRRMO personnel, I see my role as someone who must remain prepared, courageous, and committed to helping others during disasters. Without this equipment, it would be very difficult for us to reach communities that are surrounded by floodwaters. The boat represents our ability to respond and assist people during emergencies, and it supports our mission to protect and save lives”. (P3)

The participant's response highlights that courage in disaster response is rooted in the ability to act despite fear, reinforced by a strong sense of duty and preparedness. The use of essential equipment, such as rescue boats, demonstrates how resources enable responders to translate courage into concrete action. Preparedness, it is crucial to encourage citizens' belief in their own ability to take effective preparedness measures and to cope in exceptional situations (Nikkanen et al., 2023). Their role as MDRRMO personnel requires constant preparedness, commitment, and responsibility, reinforcing the idea that courage is sustained through duty and professional obligation. Efficient emergency response, which is one of the main pillars of the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) and plays a critical role in the national and local socio-political landscape, given its situation as a disaster-prone country (Aporto et al., 2026). Disaster awareness, adaptation, and risk perception were also found to positively influence the responders' perceived preparedness (Gumasing et al., 2022).

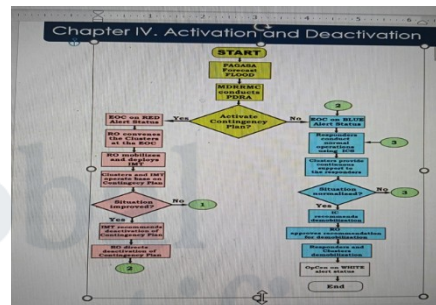
“The photos highlight coordination, teamwork, and quick decision-making, which are key components of effective DRRM management. They demonstrate how trained personnel apply preparedness plans in real situations. It shows how teamwork, dedication, and leadership are essential in performing our tasks and roles, and how these qualities help us carry out our mission to save lives”. (P4)

Another participant highlighted that courage also involves leadership and responsibility in guiding response operations and ensuring coordinated actions among responders. Disaster risk reduction and management involve developing and

implementing effective programs and practices to improve local and national strategies (Mendoza 2025). The use of rescue boats and proper PPE demonstrates how preparedness plans are translated into actual operations, ensuring both responder safety and efficient service delivery to affected communities. Their immediate deployment reflects strong organizational readiness and leadership, allowing responders to act quickly and collaboratively in high-pressure situations. Reducing the impacts of disasters is imperative in these times when disasters continually threaten people’s lives (Lin et al., 2023). Disaster Risk Management encompasses all activities related to predicting, preparing for, and responding to disasters, as well as reducing their impacts (Baltazar et al., 2024).

Courage in disaster response is demonstrated when responders act decisively within established protocols despite uncertainty and risk. My role as an MDRRMO officer is not only to lead but also to empower responders through clear guidance and shared purpose. The picture shows the structured process from activation to deactivation, ensuring that the response is well-coordinated and effective”. (P5)

The presence of established guidelines, contingency plans, and a clear operational flow ensures that responders understand their roles, minimizing confusion and enabling decisive action during critical moments. Floods cause the most frequent and severe damage every year, causing loss of life, disease, property, and other damages the flowchart is designed in estimating overview of the whole process (Mardaid et al., 2023). This structured coordination not only strengthens operational efficiency but also empowers responders by providing direction and shared purpose, reinforcing the idea that courage is supported by planning, leadership, and collective readiness in disaster management. Disaster risk reduction and management involve developing and implementing effective programs and practices, and improving local and national strategies (Mendoza 2025). Reducing the impacts of disasters is imperative in these times when disasters continually threaten people’s lives (Lin et al., 2023).



“This photo powerfully reminds us that even in the most challenging times, compassion and courage shine the brightest. True heroism is found in acts of service, compassion, and selflessness. We are performing a rescue operation, using our rescue assets and equipment to ensure the safety of both the victims and the responders. This reflects our role as MDRRMO personnel. The photo shows how our knowledge, skills, and resources allow us to act courageously and responsibly during disasters”. (P6)

Floods cause the most frequent and severe damage every year, resulting in loss of life, disease, property damage, and other impacts. The flowchart is designed to provide an overview of the whole process (Mardaid et al., 2023). The participant’s response highlights that courage in disaster response is closely tied to structured systems, clear protocols, and effective leadership within the MDRRMO. The factors in disaster risk management preparedness and the challenges they might encounter in preparing for hazards are reflected in the disaster risk reduction management action plan (Sangat & Estores, 2023). The activation of responders and clusters even before the disaster strikes demonstrates a proactive, well-organized approach, reducing uncertainty and enhancing confidence among personnel. This structured coordination not only strengthens operational efficiency but also empowers responders by providing direction and shared purpose, reinforcing the idea that courage is supported by planning, leadership, and collective readiness in disaster management. Effective crisis management requires thorough risk assessment, contingency planning, clear communication channels, and coordinated actions to minimize any adverse effects (Marjori, 2026).

“Our coordination and cooperation with different agencies give us a big advantage in overcoming the disasters and challenges that may affect our community. I see our team prepared with water rescue assets, ready to respond



immediately if a call for help comes. We are monitoring the approaching typhoon and taking proactive measures to protect the community. We are actively preparing for a potential disaster by readying our rescue equipment and teams” (P6)

The participant highlighted the importance of teamwork and inter-agency coordination in strengthening their ability to respond to disasters effectively. When accidents occur, immediate responders work together to provide aid to the best of their ability (Brodin et al., 2025). The image of responders actively assisting affected residents demonstrates how preparedness, training, and proper equipment use enable them to act decisively and responsibly in critical situations. Enhancing communication is essential to ensure effective crisis management, institutional resilience, and effective emergency management (Camacho & Regacho, 2026). Their alertness and coordination reflect a strong sense of duty and professionalism, ensuring both the safety of victims and the protection of responders during operations. Successfully planning, mitigating risk, and responding to the effects of emergencies requires leadership to coordinate across all levels (Fos et al., 2021).

The findings reveal that the lived experiences of disaster responders reflect two interconnected dimensions of courage: operational courage, grounded in preparedness, and humanitarian courage, rooted in service and compassion. Disaster leadership and humanitarian work emphasize that compassion, empathy, and commitment to alleviating suffering are central drivers of action, highlighting that responders are motivated not only by skill but by a deep humanitarian purpose (Crosweiler, 2022). Through their photographs and narratives, the responders illustrate that courage is not only expressed during high-risk rescue operations but also through consistent preparation, teamwork, leadership, and dedication to safeguarding communities. These findings highlight the critical role of disaster responders as frontline protectors who embody both professional competence and moral commitment in disaster risk reduction and emergency response. Frontline responders, such as emergency personnel, play a crucial role in disaster situations, where outcomes depend heavily on the speed, coordination, and competence of their initial actions (Noh & Bae, 2025). Resilience theory conceptualizes responders' capacity to function effectively under stress as a dynamic process shaped by both individual competencies, such as skills and preparedness, and external supports, such as teamwork and organizational systems (Sadeghi et al., 2025).

Personal Factors Strengthening Responders' Courage

Disaster responders described courage as strongly influenced by personal qualities such as commitment, discipline, training, and a sense of responsibility to serve others. Being equipped refers to their readiness to respond to natural disasters and other emergencies (Araña, 2025). These individual attributes enable responders to act decisively even in the face of danger and uncertainty. Disaster training and professional experience are positively associated with both preparedness and willingness to respond, highlighting how knowledge and skill development empower responders with confidence and commitment in crises (Choi et al., 2022). Improving their resilience, critical thinking, coordination, problem-finding, and problem-solving abilities (Zhang et al., 2024).

One participant emphasized that preparedness and dedication to duty strengthen their confidence in responding to disasters. Another participant highlighted how personal motivation and commitment to learning disaster response skills contribute to their readiness and courage during emergencies



“As an MDRRMO personnel, our preparedness gives us the courage to respond to any disaster. When our office is always prepared for any disaster, this gives us the influence we need to improve our duties in responding to disasters that will damage our area. We are actively preparing for the typhoon’s landfall by readying our resources. The team ensures readiness to help those affected and to test how the community responds to warnings from authorities”. (P1)

The participant’s response highlights that preparedness is a fundamental source of courage and effectiveness in disaster response. Emergency preparedness is a multifaceted process that demands a strategic and comprehensive approach to minimize the impact of disasters on individuals, communities, and nations (Mukolu, 2023). Natural and human-induced disasters remain a persistent challenge to human security and sustainable development and play a pivotal role in cultivating disaster awareness, preparedness, and resilience among communities (Abril & Francia, 2026). The detailed actions, such as briefing personnel, preparing rescue boats, and monitoring the Gibong River, demonstrate a proactive approach that ensures readiness before the disaster strikes. This level of preparation reflects strong organizational discipline and situational awareness, both of which are crucial for minimizing risks and ensuring timely intervention during emergencies. Community preparedness and engagement in crisis communication involve proactive efforts to ensure that communities are ready to respond effectively to emergencies and disasters (Panagiotou &



Nikezis, 2024). Moreover, the commitment to 24/7 operations and continuous monitoring demonstrates a deep sense of responsibility and dedication to protecting the community.

“Individual dedication, discipline, physical endurance, and the willingness to learn and improve disaster response skills are my personal motivations as MDRRMO officers. The photo showed the individuals participating in search and rescue training for preparation to be part of a responder here in our province. They will undergo 10 days of proper training to acquire the knowledge and capabilities to make them rescuers who are ready to help those in need”. (P2)

The success of rescuing and surviving the victims depends on the personnel training to improve the efficiency of search and rescue operations (Mykhailov et al., 2021). Similarly, training and experience were identified as important factors that empower responders to perform rescue operations despite the risks involved. Participants also emphasized that continuous training enhances their competence and strengthens their confidence during emergency operations. The emphasis on dedication, discipline, physical endurance, and the willingness to learn reflects how individual commitment drives continuous improvement in disaster response capabilities. To determine the effectiveness of the disaster simulation training that integrates didactic and simulation learning (Gundran et al., 2022), this training enables individuals not only to gain technical knowledge but also to develop the courage to act in real-life emergencies. Responders’ training and learning regarding how to work safely and effectively in disaster situations (Heldring et al., 2024).

to develop the courage to act in real-life emergencies. Responders’ training and learning regarding how to work safely and effectively in disaster situations (Heldring et al., 2024

Training, experience, and personal commitment as responders, helping people in need despite the risks. From experiences like this, I realized that being a disaster responder is a serious responsibility that requires courage,



compassion, and readiness. The photo shows a flooded community, with a small wooden house made of bamboo and other light materials partially submerged and appearing damaged. Due to the heavy rain, this house could no longer handle the amount of water, so it was destroyed” (P3)

The participant’s response highlights how real-life disaster experiences strengthen both the competence and emotional commitment of responders. Severe flood rescue requires a more rapid response and decision-making than other types of disaster rescue (Xue et al., 2022). The situation of a flooded, damaged house illustrates the vulnerability of communities during extreme weather and the urgent need for immediate, skilled intervention. The use of rescue boats despite strong water currents demonstrates the application of training, experience, and teamwork in saving lives under dangerous conditions. Equipping first responders with the right training to perform in dangerous, dynamic situations is an important aspect of public safety (Partarakis et al., 2025). A massive increase in the number and intensity of flood disasters has resulted in the loss of human lives (Hasan et al., 2021). This experience also underscores the essential qualities of personal commitment, courage, and compassion that drive responders to act despite the risks involved.



“Through continuous learning, drills, and teamwork, we develop confidence, discipline, and preparedness to face any emergency situation. This training not only equips us with technical knowledge but also instills a strong sense of responsibility, compassion, and commitment to protect lives. This training not only equips us with technical knowledge but also instills a strong sense of responsibility, compassion, and commitment to protect lives, promote safety, and support our community in times of disaster and crisis”. (P6)

The participant shows that disaster response training is both skill-building and character-forming. Search and rescue (SAR), a disaster response activity aimed at locating and saving victims, primarily involves collective sensemaking and planning

(Alharthi et al., 2021). Continuous learning, drills, and teamwork strengthen confidence, discipline, and readiness, enabling responders to act quickly and effectively in emergencies. Crucial for improving communication strategies and providing more effective support during critical care situations (Li et al 2024). At the same time, training goes beyond technical skills by instilling responsibility, compassion, and commitment, shaping responders to value human life and service. The field of rescue and emergency services is a very stressful occupation, with a balance between satisfaction and commitment to the community (Hussain et al., 2023). Overall, it highlights that preparedness is not only about knowing what to do, but also about developing a strong sense of duty and community support.

The findings reveal that disaster responders' courage is strongly shaped by personal attributes such as commitment, discipline, responsibility, and a deep sense of duty to serve others. Individuals engaged in disaster response and relief efforts exhibit key personality traits, including selflessness, perseverance, responsibility, and fearlessness, which enable them to confront risks and continue functioning effectively in crises (Hu and Ou 2025). The concept of resilience in disaster and emergency aid workers will ultimately serve as a guide for officials in planning and implementing appropriate interventions to promote resilience in aid workers (Sadeghi et al., 2025). These qualities enable responders to act decisively and remain composed in high-risk, real-life disaster situations. Preparedness activities, competence, and situational awareness allow them to respond effectively during emergencies. A disaster-resilient village is highly influential in community preparedness for disasters and other emergencies (Ayuningtyas et al., 2021).

Social and Organizational Support Fostering Collective Courage

This theme emphasizes how strong relationships and effective institutional systems enable disaster responders to act bravely and remain resilient in crises. Social support through trust, teamwork, and shared experience reduces fear and reinforces a sense of not facing danger alone. Training and interventions for trusted others should take the various forms of support to the responders and proactively address others' needs (Tjin et al., 2022). Organizational support through training, clear leadership, protocols, and adequate resources builds competence, confidence, and a sense of security. Leadership skills in emergencies should involve the parallel development of decision-making and emotional competencies (Barański et al., 2025). Emergency response teams emphasize that team dynamics and leadership are influential determinants of team effectiveness in emergency settings, with clear communication, shared goals, and cohesive interaction contributing to better collaboration and collective functioning under pressure (Parry et al., 2023). Together, these supports transform courage from an individual trait into a collective strength, allowing responders to act decisively, sustain commitment, and function effectively under pressure.

One participant noted that cooperation between the community and the local government significantly improves disaster response and reduces casualties. Another participant emphasized that collaboration among agencies and volunteers enhances their ability to respond effectively.



“If people follow these warning signs, we will be able to respond to our duties faster and it will give us courage because we will be able to avoid casualties. If there is cooperation with the community and local government, we can avoid casualties. The photo depicts a public safety sign that outlines flood warning levels and corresponding evacuation procedures” (P1)

The participant emphasizes that a clear warning system and community cooperation strengthen both preparedness and courage in disaster response. Promoting protective behaviors requires consideration of multiple factors, including exposure to and comprehension of warning signs and risk messages, prior experience with floods, and risk assessments (Stephens et al., 2025). By following flood warning signs and evacuation procedures, people reduce uncertainty, allowing responders to act faster and more effectively while minimizing casualties. Flood Early Warning System (EWS) should be implemented in flood-prone areas (Henao & Zambrano, 2022). This preparedness builds confidence among responders because risks are more controlled. The public safety sign represents this organized communication system, demonstrating that when people are informed and work together, courage becomes a collective outcome grounded in preparedness and trust. The installation of the flood warning system exemplifies the provincial disaster risk reduction and management office's commitment to prioritizing the safety and well-being of the community and mitigating flood impacts (Pelone & Arellano, 2024).



“It gives courage because different agencies are willing to help, even the volunteers, the more rescuers there are, the easier it is to provide help. The people who need help are the ones who have influenced me to help the people immediately. It represents the partnership of different agencies, but with one goal: to help those affected by the flood”. (P3)

The participant emphasizes how inter-agency collaboration and volunteer involvement strengthen collective courage in disaster response. An organization working alone cannot address the complexity of the needs associated with disaster preparedness and disaster response (Donato & Lorica, 2020). The presence of multiple responders increases capacity and efficiency, making it easier to deliver timely assistance while reducing individual burden and fear. The shared involvement of stakeholders and the practice of practical actions strengthen preparedness despite limitations, and community collaboration enhances resilience (Samson & Buot, 2023). Their motivations are also shaped by empathy, as the urgent needs of affected individuals drive immediate action. The persistent challenges in cross-agency communication require a comprehensive approach that integrates technological advancements with enhanced organizational practices and stronger interpersonal relationships (Abbas & Miller, 2025). Overall, the situation reflects a unified partnership in which diverse groups work together toward a single goal: saving lives and supporting affected communities.



“Through teamwork and structured communication, responders align strategies, mobilize resources, and strengthen operational readiness for faster and more efficient disaster response. The DRRM meeting focused on the activation of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and response clusters to ensure a coordinated and effective emergency response”. (P4)

The participant emphasizes that structured coordination mechanisms, such as DRRM meetings, enhance collective courage by ensuring clarity, unity, and preparedness among responders. Proactive planning and preparation have become essential concerns and reflect a changing attitude of society during disasters (Bajwa & Mehdiratta, 2020). Through teamwork and organized communication, responders can align strategies, mobilize resources efficiently, and reduce uncertainty in emergencies. The Incident Command System ensures effective implementation by providing a standardized approach to command, control, and coordination (Iserson 2024). The activation of the Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and response cluster reflects a systematic approach that strengthens operational readiness and decision-making. Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) are crucial institutions responsible for coordinating disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (Florendo 2025). This coordinated structure fosters confidence among responders, enabling them to act swiftly and effectively in a disaster situation.

“Teamwork, leadership, and coordination among agencies strongly influence how we act. As an MDRRMO officer, I give instructions to them, share updates, and organize our tasks before deployment. In this scene, our courage is shown through the responders’ readiness to listen, prepare, and follow instructions even though they know the mission may involve a rescue operation and rescue retrieval”. (P5)

The participant shows the role of leadership, teamwork, and inter-agency coordination in shaping effective and courageous disaster responses. Leadership is important in coordinating disaster response to minimize loss of lives and property damage (Ochieng & Adero, 2024). Clear instructions, information sharing, and organized task delegation enhance preparedness and reduce uncertainty before deployment. Experience can be an effective means for improving communication among multiple personnel and agencies (Griffiths, 2022). The responder’s willingness to undertake the mission despite inherent risk. This dynamic illustrates that courage is collectively reinforced through disciplined coordination, readiness, and confidence in the team’s structure. Emphasizing the importance of leadership and structured communication in high-pressure situations (Andrews et al., 2025).

Resilience is the most effective way to deal with natural disasters (Narter, 2023). These findings demonstrate that courage among disaster responders is socially reinforced through collaboration, leadership, and community engagement. Rescue teams and emergency services face high levels of mental health problems due to their frequent exposure to traumatic situations that require the rescue of people trapped in flooded homes and the evacuation of at-risk areas (Ancarani et al., 2025). The image of responders attentively listening and preparing for deployment reflects discipline, trust, and a shared commitment to a common goal. Leadership plays a crucial role in guiding actions, as clear instructions, updates, and task organization help ensure that each responder

understands their role in the operation. Leadership style significantly influences the effectiveness of disaster management systems that promote sustainable, inclusive, and participatory disaster governance (Kpuduk, 2026). This structured preparation minimizes uncertainty and enables responders to act confidently, even when facing potentially dangerous rescue missions.

Environmental Risks Motivating Responsive Action

The participants emphasize that exposure to hazards such as flooding, typhoons, and other natural disasters drives responders to act with urgency, preparedness, and courage. Risk perception and perceived threat from environmental hazards significantly influence individuals' likelihood of preparing and taking action in a disaster (Kang et al., 2023). These risks push the responders to remain committed to their duties while strengthening coordination, planning, and teamwork before deployment. Leadership communication also strengthens team coordination, enabling response teams to collaborate more effectively, share information efficiently, and execute tasks in a well-organized manner (Ali Salem Haboush & Al-Najjar, 2025). Training and simulation further enhance confidence, enabling safer and more effective responses. Communication is critical during disaster response and the cornerstone of effective disaster response and recovery (Alabi, 2023). Overall, environmental risk does not hinder action but instead motivates organized, timely, and courageous efforts to protect communities.

Participant 2 described how monitoring rivers during heavy rainfall requires courage and vigilance due to potential hazards. Another participant explained that the presence of disaster risks motivates responders to remain organized and prepared before deployment.



“Courage is demonstrated when responders continue to carry out their responsibilities even when facing unpredictable water currents, dangerous debris, and rapidly changing weather conditions. Communities living near rivers depend on timely warnings and coordinated response efforts from local government units. The photo represents a potential flood situation caused by continuous heavy rain; it also highlights the responsibility of disaster responders to stay alert, assess risks, and take action to protect people living in vulnerable areas”. (P2)

The participant emphasizes that courage in disaster is demonstrated through sustained action despite exposure to high-risk environmental conditions such as strong currents, debris, and rapidly changing weather. The impacts of resilience will require sustained investment, inclusive policymaking, and multisectoral collaboration in disaster response (Morris et al., 2025). These hazards create a context where responders must remain vigilant, continuously assess risk, and make timely decisions to protect vulnerable communities, particularly those living near rivers. Floods involve unusually high water levels that inundate the landscape across diverse settings, from urban areas to mountains, the coast, and along rivers (Blöschl 2022). The role of the early warning system and coordinated efforts by local government units demonstrate that an effective response is both an individual and collective responsibility. Natural disasters cause enormous damage and loss of life every year. The Early Warning System (EWS) is an architecture of hazard monitoring, forecasting and prediction, disaster risk assessment, communication, and preparedness (Esposito et al., 2022). Overall, the situation reflects that courage is not only about facing danger, but about maintaining readiness, accountability, and decisive action to prevent loss of life danger, but about maintaining readiness, accountability, and decisive action to prevent loss.

“The presence of potential hazards such as flooding or other disaster risks creates urgency and requires us to be prepared and organized before deployment. The purpose of the briefing is to ensure that every team member understands the situation, the risks involved, and the strategy for responding effectively”. (P5)

The participant highlights how the recognition of potential hazards, such as flooding, serves as a trigger for a proactive and organized response. Emphasize that heightened risk perception and early warning awareness significantly influence preparedness behaviors, planning, and timely action among individuals and communities (Kurata et al., 2023). This reflects the role of risk awareness in shaping preparedness behaviors, where urgency serves as a critical mechanism for establishing shared situational awareness, clarifying risk, and aligning response strategies among team members. Risk perception enhances preparedness



intentions and behaviors through cognitive and social processes, strengthens collective norms and coordinated action, and improves situational awareness and response efficacy in disasters (Ng, 2022). This process enhances coordination, reduces uncertainty, and ensures that field actions are timely, coherent, and effective. These capabilities significantly enhance the accuracy of decision-making and reduce the risks associated with entering unstable environments (Lukman, 2023)



“Since our municipality is one of the flood-prone areas in Agusan del Sur, we conduct this training so that participants can also help their families and communities during emergencies. In this activity, they were performing a river crossing, which is one of the techniques used to help responders move safely and avoid difficulty when crossing a river with a strong current. This type of training builds courage because it prepares people with the knowledge and skills on what to do during disasters”. (P6)

The participant reflects on how living in a flood-prone context shapes proactive capacity-building efforts within the community. The training, particularly in river-crossing techniques, provides experiential learning that enhances both technical competence and situational confidence in high-risk environments. Haverkamp et al. (2022) highlight that their training needs should be continuously monitored to ensure alignment between preparation strategies and preparation needs. By equipping participants with practical skills, the program not only improves safety during operations but also extends preparedness to families and the wider community. For instance, a community-based preparedness module was found to significantly increase participants’ knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills, thereby improving readiness at the individual, household, and community levels (Suparji et al., 2025). This indicates that courage is developed through knowledge and repeated exposure, where individuals become more willing and capable of responding effectively during an actual disaster. Disaster training programs consistently improve participants’ psychological readiness and decision-making capacity, particularly when simulations and repeated drills are used, reinforcing the role of continuous exposure in building confidence and effective response behavior (Özden, 2026).

The findings reveal that the interaction of personal, social, and environmental factors shapes the manifestation of courage among disaster responders. Personal attributes such as commitment, training, and responsibility strengthen individual confidence, while teamwork, leadership, and community cooperation reinforce collective courage. Disaster management is a strategic, multi-faceted process for mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery to protect vulnerable communities and critical infrastructure from disasters (Abid et al., 2021). At the same time, environmental hazards such as flooding and extreme weather conditions create the urgency that motivates responders to act. Community-based approaches can also help people become more resilient and better prepare for and respond to natural disasters (Krichen et al., 2024). Innovations may include intelligent prediction, monitoring, early warning technologies and equipment, and precise and objective disaster risk assessment, prevention, and control technologies (Cui et al., 2021). Together, these factors illustrate that courage in disaster response is not solely an individual trait but a dynamic process influenced by personal values, social support systems, and environmental realities that require responders to remain vigilant, prepared, and committed to protecting their communities.

Empowerment Through Competence and Preparedness

Participants described how their photographed experiences of disaster preparedness, training, and operational readiness strengthen their confidence and empower them to perform their roles effectively during crises. The images depicting rescue equipment, training activities, and operational briefings symbolize the development of skills and competencies that enable responders to confront dangerous situations with courage. Disaster preparedness refers to proactive planning, organization, and readiness measures implemented to mitigate the potential impact of a disaster or emergency (Tang et al., 2024). Emergency preparedness has become an essential public health priority as communities implement these programs, which improve resource utilization, strengthen communication pathways, and enhance community resilience (Alharbe et al., 2025). Community empowerment is crucial for building long-term resilience in the face of disasters (Khorram-Manesh, 2025).

Training activities were frequently mentioned as experiences that build confidence and strengthen responders’ capabilities in disaster response operations. There is a need for comprehensive interventions to improve disaster preparedness and ensure a more effective response to emergencies (Olorunfemi & Adesunloye, 2024). These experiences empower them by equipping them with the knowledge, technical skills, and practical strategies necessary for emergencies. Disasters often occur unexpectedly, causing chaos and overwhelming healthcare systems, so proper training ensures that staff can manage emergencies efficiently and minimize harm (Hawsawi 2025). Significant approaches are used to understand how transformational leadership is related to the outcome of readiness for change (Khan et al., 2025).

For instance, participant 6 described how training activities prepare responders to face hazardous situations and contribute to community safety. Similarly, participant 2 emphasized that search-and-rescue training strengthens both competence and motivation to serve the community. Skill development and operational preparedness are essential to empowering disaster responders to perform effectively during crises. Strengthening capacity-building programs and practical training opportunities can enhance responders' competence, confidence, and ability to ensure community safety during disaster situations.



“This type of training builds courage because it prepares people with the knowledge and skills on what to do during disasters. Through continuous learning, drills, and teamwork, we develop confidence, discipline, and preparedness to face any emergency situation.” (P6)

The participant illustrates how structured disaster preparedness training fosters psychological readiness and operational competence in responders. Haverkamp et al. (2022) highlight that their training needs should be continuously monitored to ensure alignment between preparation strategies and preparation needs. Continuous learning, drills, and teamwork function as an experiential process that strengthens knowledge retention, discipline, and coordination skills needed in emergencies. Disaster drills and simulation-based training provide hands-on, scenario-driven learning, allowing participants to apply theoretical knowledge in realistic settings and thereby improve decision-making, skill mastery, and preparedness (Alanazi, 2025). These activities are reduced during a disaster, thereby enhancing their confidence. Moreover, highlights that frequent and well-designed drills improve coordination and teamwork by clarifying roles, strengthening inter-agency collaboration, and developing shared situational awareness among participants (Zhuge et al., 2024). Ultimately, the statement shows that courage in disaster response is not innate but developed through sustained training, practice, and preparedness.

“They will undergo 10 days of proper training to acquire the knowledge and capabilities to make them rescuers who are ready to help those in need. Individual dedication, discipline, physical endurance, and the willingness to learn and improve disaster response skills are my personal motivations as MDRRMO officers. As an MDRRMO officer, training is



one of the most critical steps in preparing responders for real emergencies” (P2)

Participants also described how preparedness activities, such as equipment readiness and operational briefings, strengthen their sense of empowerment and readiness to respond to disasters. The success of rescuing and surviving the victims depends on the personnel training to improve the efficiency of search and rescue operations (Mykhailov et al., 2021). Such training simulates real disaster conditions, allowing participants to experience and prepare for the physical and psychological demands they may face in actual operations. Simulation-based and disaster training exercises expose participants to realistic, high-stress environments, requiring them to respond under pressure, thereby enhancing both cognitive and emotional readiness (Giaume et al., 2024). The willingness of individuals to undergo this demanding preparation reflects their dedication and commitment to serving others, which is a clear manifestation of courage even before deployment. Willingness to participate in disaster preparedness is a critical component of effective response, shaped by individuals' motivation to help others and their readiness to face potential risks (Kyne, 2023).

One participant explained that preparedness within their organization enhances their confidence in performing disaster response duties. Another participant emphasized the importance of organized briefings and strategic planning before deployment.



“As MDRRMO personnel, we are prepared to respond to any disaster. When our office is always prepared for any disaster, we have the influence we need to improve our disaster response duties. As a responder or rescuer, this equipment will help us save lives. Without this rescue equipment, our lives could be in danger. We are not confident that we know how to rescue. Always safety first”. (P1)

The participant’s response highlights that preparedness, supported by the availability and proper use of rescue equipment, is a key factor in building both confidence and courage among MDRRMO personnel. Disaster preparedness is a multidimensional construct that includes not only knowledge and skills but also the ability to effectively use equipment and resources during emergencies, which significantly influences responders’ readiness and performance (Kongur et al., 2026). The availability of essential tools for water rescue and emergency operations ensures that responders can perform their duties safely and effectively, reducing the risks in disaster situations. Trained responders must operate within their level of expertise and with appropriate equipment, as attempting a rescue without adequate tools significantly increases the risk of injury or death (Kongur et al., 2024). This equipment not only provides physical protection but also enhances the responder’s sense of security, thereby strengthening their courage to face hazardous situations such as typhoons and flooding. Personal protective equipment (PPE) serves as the primary means of individual protection to ensure the safety of emergency responders while performing their jobs (Ludy & Eyre, 2024).

The emphasis on “safety first” reflects a strong professional mindset where protecting the lives of both responders and victims is prioritized



“The purpose of the briefing is to ensure that every team member understands the situation, the risks involved, and the strategy for responding effectively. Our collective courage and teamwork enable us to face challenges and make meaningful contributions to community safety and resilience. This picture represents the deployment of our Incident Management Team using the Incident Command System (ICS). (P5)

The participant’s response highlights the critical role of structured planning and coordination in ensuring an effective disaster response. Team Leader briefing efficiency represents a professional competency with direct life-saving implications (Bradley 2025). The use of the Incident Command System (ICS) and the conduct of tactical meetings demonstrate a systematic approach to identifying needs, allocating resources, and organizing operations in response to real-time conditions. The ICS provides a standardized framework for command, control, and coordination, enabling responders to manage incidents through clearly defined roles, structured communication, and organized operational functions (Farcas et al., 2021). The ICS enhances inter-agency coordination and operational efficiency by organizing emergency response into key functional areas such as command, operations, planning, and logistics, which are essential for identifying needs and deploying resources effectively (Sarte, 2025). These processes ensure that every team member clearly understands the situation, the associated risks, and their specific roles, minimizing confusion and enhancing operational efficiency.

The findings reveal that disaster responders’ empowerment primarily develops through competence and preparedness gained through continuous training, simulations, and operational experience. The availability and proper use of rescue equipment further strengthen their sense of security, enabling them to perform duties safely and effectively during emergencies. To ensure their effectiveness and safety, it’s crucial to enhance training and protective equipment for successful missions (Cvetković & Miljković, 2024). In addition, structured systems such as the Incident Command System (ICS) and tactical briefings improve coordination, clarify roles, and enable efficient decision-making in disaster operations. Incident management systems for emergencies can be used as a basis for effective management (Clark-Ginsberg et al., 2023). Communication systems can also enhance first responder safety by providing alternative means of situational awareness (Danaher et al., 2022). Overall, empowerment in disaster response is built through the integration of training, resources, and organized systems that collectively foster confidence, discipline, and effective action during crises.

Identity Formation Through Service and Leadership

Another key theme that emerged from the analysis is how photographed experiences of disaster response activities shape responders’ identities and influence their perceptions of their roles within their communities. Photovoice has much to offer in the development of effective education for public awareness and preparedness regarding disasters and hazards (Bray et al., 2023). Effective disaster risk management strategies might include community-based early warning systems, localized evacuation planning, and incentives for household-level mitigation measures (de la Roche et al., 2025). Disaster leadership demonstrates that responders who engage in rescue operations and community coordination develop deeper roles as leaders and agents of resilience, strengthening both their personal and social identities within the community (Abenir et al., 2022).

Participants frequently described their experiences in rescue operations as defining moments that reinforced their identity as protectors and servants of the community. Identity formation is shaped through engagement in recovery and response activities, where individuals reinterpret their roles and develop a stronger sense of purpose and belonging within their communities (Cordenillo, 2025). Their photographs depicting rescue missions and disaster-affected communities reflect the responsibility they carry in safeguarding lives during crises. Emergency shelters are a vital component of disaster response (Chauhan et al., 2022). Increase the effectiveness of the initial community-based disaster response and improve search-and-rescue operations (Alhaffar et al., 2023).

For example, participant 3 described rescuing a family during a flood and reflected on how this experience shaped their identity as a disaster responder. These experiences illustrate how disaster response operations reinforce the responders' identity as protectors who prioritize the safety and well-being of affected communities. Participants also described how their experiences in planning, coordination, and leadership activities influence their perception of their roles as disaster responders.



“We used our rescue boats to get them to the evacuation area so we could save their lives. From experiences like this, I realized that being a disaster responder is a serious responsibility that requires courage, compassion, and readiness. Training, experience, and my commitment as a responder to carry out rescues even in difficult conditions. As an MDRRMO personnel, I see my role as someone who must remain prepared, courageous, and committed to helping others during disasters”. (P3)

The participants' responses highlight that disaster response involves preparedness, training, teamwork, and the proper use of resources, all of which contribute to effective, courageous action during emergencies. Disaster preparedness and structured training programs significantly improve knowledge, functional skills, and response capacity, enabling individuals to act effectively in emergencies (Lin et al., 2024). The use of rescue boats in flood-prone areas like the Municipality of La Paz demonstrates how essential equipment enables responders to reach affected communities and save lives, underscoring that reliable tools support courage. The primary goal is to design and deploy advanced rescue boats that can be rapidly deployed in emergencies, ensuring the safety of individuals (Turkane et al., 2025). Furthermore, the use of structured communication, planning, and augmentation reflects how coordination and teamwork enhance operational readiness and ensure that responses are organized and efficient. Collaborative planning concepts, tools, and techniques can help overcome the resistance to effective disaster recovery planning and management before an event occurs (Shmueli et al., 2021).

Another participant highlighted the importance of leadership and coordination during response operations.

“Teamwork, leadership, and coordination among agencies strongly influence how we act. My role goes beyond simply responding to disasters, and also responsible for guiding, coordinating, and supporting responders so that our efforts remain organized and effective.” (P5)

These narratives demonstrate how disaster responders perceive their roles not only as frontline rescuers but also as



leaders, coordinators, and facilitators of organized disaster response operations. Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) are crucial institutions responsible for coordinating disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (Florendo 2025). The participant's response highlights that effective disaster response is strongly grounded in teamwork, leadership, and coordination among agencies, which shape how responders act during critical situations. The role of an MDRRMO officer extends beyond direct response, encompassing guidance, organization, and support to ensure that all team members function cohesively and efficiently. Local disaster management leaders play a crucial role in guiding teams, disseminating information, and strengthening coordination and communication, all of which are essential for maintaining cohesion during disaster operations (Mercado, 2024). This demonstrates that courage is not only shown in action but also in the willingness to prepare, cooperate, and follow leadership for the mission's success. Commitment to serving others, Cooperation, and adherence to coordinated leadership structures are essential elements of effective response, reflecting a shared sense of responsibility and purpose among responders (Crosweiler, 2022).

The findings indicate that disaster responders' photographed experiences of courage serve as powerful mechanisms for empowerment, identity formation, and role clarification. The coping strategies shape emotional regulation and psychological outcomes, influencing how individuals process and adapt to repeated exposure to traumatic events (Díaz-Tamayo et al., 2025). Through training, preparedness activities, and operational experiences, responders develop confidence and competence that empower them to perform effectively during crises. Drills provide an integrated assessment of preparedness by simultaneously evaluating plans, staffing, training, procedures, facilities, equipment, and materials (Puryear & Gnugnoli, 2023). Disaster planning and management involve a variety of techniques and tools that increase resilience, readiness, and response capabilities (Isangadighi & Udeh, 2023). At the same time, rescue operations and leadership responsibilities shape their identities as protectors, community servants, and coordinators of disaster response efforts.

These findings suggest that courage among disaster responders is not only expressed through physical acts of rescue but is also cultivated through professional development, collective responsibility, and a deep commitment to community safety and resilience. Community resilience is important to public safety in the face of unexpected disruptions caused by public emergencies (Tian et al., 2025). Developing and strengthening information-sharing systems for public health emergency preparedness and response (Myers, 2021). A positive perspective on using a tool for empowering vulnerable groups to achieve community resilience and sustainability (Grace et al., 2025).

Conclusion

1. Courage in disaster response is a learned and structured capacity shaped by continuous training, operational readiness, and access to appropriate resources. It is not merely an emotional reaction but a disciplined practice rooted in preparedness that enables responders to act effectively under pressure.
2. A deep sense of service and ethical responsibility toward the community fundamentally drives courage. This indicates that responders' willingness to face danger is anchored in altruistic values, positioning courage as a commitment rather than an individual trait.
3. Courage is reinforced by personal attributes such as resilience, experience, and emotional regulation, which develop over time through repeated exposure to disaster situations. These internal factors enable responders to manage fear and sustain effective performance in high-risk environments.
4. Courage emerges as a collective phenomenon strengthened by teamwork, leadership, and organizational structures. Supportive environments and a coordinated system reduce uncertainty and empower responders to act with shared confidence and accountability.
5. Environmental hazards function as both challenges and catalysts that activate responders' courage. Rather than inhibiting action, these risks intensify their sense of duty and urgency, prompting decisive and adaptive responses during crises.
6. Courage is closely linked to perceived competence, where skills mastery and preparation foster psychological empowerment. This empowerment enables responders to transition from passive participants to confident and proactive agents in disaster operations.
7. Courage contributes to the ongoing formation of responders' professional identity as protectors, leaders, and community servants. Through lived experiences, courage becomes internalized, shaping both their sense of purpose and their long-term commitment to disaster response.

Recommendations

1. Disaster management agencies institutionalize continuous, scenario-based training and regular equipment audits to sustain high levels of preparedness among responders. Strengthening readiness programs will ensure that courage remains a practical and reliable capacity during emergencies.
2. Organizations should reinforce values formation programs that emphasize service, ethics, and humanitarian principles in disaster response. Integrating these values in training and organizational culture will sustain responders' intrinsic motivation and commitment to public service.
3. Programs focusing on psychological resilience, stress management, and emotional regulation should be implemented to support responders' personal development. Continuous exposure through simulations and experience-sharing activities can further enhance confidence and adaptive coping mechanisms.
4. Agencies should strengthen teamwork through a structured communication system, leadership development, and collaboration training exercises. Enhancing the organizational support mechanism will foster trust, coordination, and collective confidence during operations.
5. Disaster preparedness initiatives should incorporate risk-specific training that simulates real environmental hazards to improve situational awareness and decision-making. Providing updated risk assessments and adaptive strategies will enable responders to navigate dynamic, high-risk environments effectively.
6. Agencies should invest in continuous development, certification programs, and access to modern rescue technologies. Strengthening competence will enhance responders' sense of empowerment and their ability to take proactive roles in complex operations.
7. Leadership development and mentorship programs should be established to nurture responders' professional identity and sense of purpose. Encouraging reflective practices and a recognition system will reinforce their roles as community protectors and sustain long-term engagement in disaster response.
8. Future studies may explore courage in disaster response using longitudinal or mixed method approaches to capture its development over time and across different contexts. Researchers are also encouraged to examine other influencing factors such as culture dynamics, gender perspective, and inter-agency collaboration to provide a more comprehensive understanding of courage in disaster settings.

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