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Beyond the Gangway: Seafarers' Shore Leave Experiences and Mental Well-Being

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Abstract. Shore leave has long been regarded as a key recovery mechanism for seafarers, yet access to it has become increasingly rare and brief. Existing studies tend to treat shore leave as a minor component of seafarer welfare or to measure it through access and frequency, so little is known about how seafarers' lived experiences of both access to and restriction from shore leave shape their mental health and emotional well-being. This study explored these experiences and their perceived influence on seafarers' mental health and emotional well-being. A descriptive qualitative design guided by reflexive thematic analysis was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 purposively selected seafarer graduates of a Philippine maritime institution, who were sampled to capture both accessible and restricted shore leave experiences, until data saturation was reached. Data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Six themes emerged: (1) restorative impact of shore leave; (2) emotional and social reconnection; (3) variability in psychological reliance on shore leave; (4) psychological and operational risks of restricted or denied shore leave; (5) structural, financial, and cultural barriers to access; and (6) recommendations for institutional and welfare reform. When accessible, shore leave was described as a source of psychological reset and social renewal, whereas its prolonged absence was linked to frustration and, in some accounts, to fatigue and safety risk. Some participants reported minimal reliance on shore leave when protected by adequate rest hours, a manageable workload, or personal coping resources. Shore leave therefore functions as a conditional, situational recovery mechanism whose value depends on access, fairness, and compensating onboard protective factors. The findings support institutionalizing structured, equitable shore leave practices and inform recommendations for shipping companies, port authorities, maritime education institutions, and policymakers.

Keywords: Emotional Well-Being; Mental Health; Seafarers; Shore Leave; Shore Leave Restriction

Introduction

Seafarers sustain the global economy by operating the vessels that transport the majority of the world's commodities, food supplies, and manufactured goods, yet this indispensable contribution is achieved under working and living conditions that are physically and psychologically demanding (Pauksztat et al., 2022; Tang, 2022). Life onboard is characterized by confined spaces, extended working hours, limited rest, rotating watch schedules, and prolonged separation from family. These conditions have been consistently linked to stress, fatigue, and declining morale among crew members (Pauksztat et al., 2022).

Shore leave, the period during which seafarers are permitted to disembark from the vessel while docked at port, has long been recognized as a key maritime welfare practice. The Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 provides that seafarers "shall be granted shore leave to benefit their health and well-being" (International Labour Organization [ILO], n.d.). Beyond its recreational value, shore leave is understood as a mechanism of occupational recovery: it enables psychological detachment from

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shipboard routines, physical movement, and social reconnection outside the hierarchical structure of vessel life (Pauksztat et al., 2022; Tang, 2022). Recent global survey evidence reinforces the urgency of this inquiry. A 2024–2025 survey of nearly 6,000 seafarers, conducted by the ITF Seafarers' Trust and analyzed by the World Maritime University, found that more than a quarter of seafarers received no shore leave at all during an average 6.6-month contract, a third went ashore only once or twice during their entire contract, and 93.5% of those who did disembark spent less than six hours ashore (ITF Seafarers' Trust & World Maritime University, 2025). These figures indicate that restricted access to shore leave is not an isolated or exceptional circumstance but a widespread condition affecting the majority of the global seafaring workforce, and that access varies considerably by port, vessel type, workload, and rank rather than by any fixed characteristic of the seafarer.

Studies on Filipino seafarers in particular have shown that mental strain is intensified by isolation and limited access to psychological support (Abila & Acejo, 2021), while evidence from Chinese seafarers has linked the deprivation of shore leave to increased fatigue (Zhao et al., 2023). Career-intention research has further connected unresolved psychological strain to seafarers' decisions to leave the profession altogether (Svetina et al., 2024).

Taken together, these studies indicate that shore leave matters for seafarers' well-being, yet it is frequently examined as a minor component of broader welfare research or measured through access and frequency (Pauksztat et al., 2022; Tang, 2022). What remains unclear is how seafarers' lived experiences of both having and being denied shore leave shape their mental health and emotional well-being. Therefore, this study aimed to explore seafarers' lived experiences of shore leave during periods of access and restriction, and their perceived influence on mental health and emotional well-being.

Research Questions

This study explored seafarer's lived experiences of shore leave and their perceived influence on mental health and emotional well-being. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do seafarers experience shore leave, in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being, when access is granted?
2. How do seafarers experience restricted or denied shore leave, in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being?
3. What onboard protective factors and personal coping resources shape seafarers' reliance on shore leave?
4. What structural, financial, and cultural barriers affect seafarers' access to shore leave?
5. Based on these experiences, what recommendations may be offered to strengthen shore leave as a welfare and recovery mechanism for seafarers?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study explored how seafarers experience shore leave, both when it is accessible and when it is restricted or denied. It also covered how they connect those experiences to their mental health and emotional well-being, what protective factors and barriers shape them, and what recommendations they offer. It used a descriptive qualitative design guided by reflexive thematic analysis, with semi-structured interviews of five questions. The study was delimited to graduates of the maritime program of Palompon Institute of Technology from the 2021, 2022, and 2023 batches who had completed at least one shipboard contract. Fourteen of the 245 eligible graduates took part (about 6%), five from 2021, four from 2022, and five from 2023. Many others could not join because they were onboard, had poor or no internet connection, had conflicting schedules, or were in a different time zone. The three batches are therefore not equally represented, and the findings do not speak for all graduates of the institution. They also may not transfer to seafarers trained elsewhere, of other nationalities, or employed under other company or flag-state welfare regimes. The study also set aside some distinctions on purpose. It did not compare participants by rank, vessel type, voyage type (domestic or international), or years of sea service, because it focused on shared lived experience. It therefore cannot show whether any of these changes how shore leave is experienced. Future studies could examine this, using the rank and vessel-type breakdowns in large surveys such as the ITF Seafarers' Trust and World Maritime University (2025) study. Several limitations apply. First, participants recalled shore leave from completed contracts rather than during active deployment, so recall and reconstruction effects are possible. Second, the design was refined during data collection, from a planned comparison of two participant groups to an examination of access and restriction as situations within each participant's own career. This is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, but it departs from the original plan. Third, as with

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all thematic analysis, building the themes involved the researcher's interpretation. Member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive bracketing were used to support credibility and confirmability, but some interpretive influence remains.

Literature Review

Shore Leave as a Right and as a Conditional Entitlement

Shore leave is recognized in international and Philippine instruments, but with conditions. Regulation 2.4, paragraph 2, of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 states that seafarers "shall be granted shore leave to benefit their health and well-being," and Regulation 4.4 requires Members to ensure that shore-based welfare facilities, where they exist, are easily accessible (ILO, n.d.). The ILO also points to the Convention on Facilitation of International Maritime Traffic (FAL Convention, Standards 3.44 and 3.44bis), an International Maritime Organization Assembly resolution on fair treatment of crew members in respect of shore leave and access to shore-side facilities, and a 2018 resolution of its Special Tripartite Committee that urges Member States to ensure the efficient exercise of the right to shore leave (ILO, n.d.). In the Philippines, the standard terms of the seafarer's employment contract that applied to the participants' deployments from 2021 to 2023, issued by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration [POEA], provided in Section 13 that the seafarer "shall be allowed shore leave when practicable, upon the consent of the master or his deputy, taking into consideration the operations and safety of the vessel" (POEA, 2010). The 2026 standard terms of the Department of Migrant Workers [DMW] now entitle the seafarer, in Section 15, to reasonable periods of shore leave for health and well-being while the vessel is safely berthed or anchored, subject to the rules and measures of the port state, in compliance with the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, and taking into consideration the operations and safety of the ship (DMW, 2026). The earlier clause thus made shore leave depend on practicability and the master's consent, and the current clause frames it as an entitlement within port-state rules and operational limits. In both, the practical exercise of shore leave depends on operational conditions. Survey evidence suggests that the principle is not being realized. As noted earlier, the ITF Seafarers' Trust and World Maritime University (2025) survey of 5,879 seafarers found that more than a quarter received no shore leave during an average 6.6-month contract. It attributed this to minimal crewing and high workloads, increased inspections, port security and operational efficiency that leave little time in port, a lack of shore-based facilities, and transport costs and port charges. Officers, and seafarers on offshore vessels and tankers, were the least likely to go ashore.

Shore Leave, Recovery, and Well-Being

Studies that connect shore leave with well-being are limited, and most treat it as one factor among several. In a qualitative study of seafarers and superintendents in one shipping company, participants said that shore leave had become scarce and that this reduced their opportunities to relieve stress (McVeigh et al., 2018). A scoping review of seafarers' well-being lists offering regular shore leave among the measures that support work–life balance and mental well-being (Şenbursa, 2024). A study that used expert judgments from maritime human resource professionals and seafarers found that organizational support, including shore leave flexibility and financial incentives, ranked highest among the criteria for shore leave policy, and its authors recommended flexible, financially supported shore leave policies (Yang et al., 2025). A review of research on Filipino seafarers found that published research on their mental health is scarce and that seafaring is socially isolating (Abila & Acejo, 2021).

Restriction, Fatigue, and Strain

Evidence on the effects of restriction comes mostly from studies of fatigue and strain. In a mixed-methods study of Chinese seafarers, fatigue rose during the COVID-19 pandemic, and interviewees listed the deprivation of shore leave among the contributing factors (Zhao et al., 2023). In a study of seafarers from 12 countries, social stressors, including isolation from family and friends, were most closely tied to thoughts of leaving the industry, while bans on disembarkation in ports mattered comparatively less (Svetina et al., 2024).

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Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). A descriptive qualitative design was appropriate because the study sought to describe, in participants' own words, how seafarers experience shore leave, rather than to test relationships between variables. Through semi-structured interviews, the design allowed participants to recount their experiences when shore leave was accessible (Problem 1) and when it was restricted or denied (Problem 2), to describe the personal and onboard factors that shaped their reliance on it (Problem 3) and the barriers that limited their access (Problem 4), and to offer recommendations (Problem 5). Reflexive thematic analysis then allowed the researcher to identify patterns of shared and divergent meaning across the accounts and to develop themes that informed the recommendations. The inquiry was informed by a phenomenological orientation, which centers on the lived meanings individuals attach to their experiences, situated within a constructivist ontology that treats reality as shaped through personal interpretation, and complemented by a pragmatist orientation that directs the findings toward practical welfare recommendations.

Research Locale

The study was conducted among seafarer graduates of Palompon Institute of Technology (PIT), a maritime institution in Palompon, Leyte, Philippines. Because participants were dispersed across vessels, countries, and voyage schedules at the time of data collection, interviews were conducted through a combination of in-person sessions, video calls, and recorded voice sessions, depending on each participant's availability and deployment status.

Research Participants

The study population comprised the 245 baccalaureate graduates of the maritime program of Palompon Institute of Technology from the batches of 2021 (n = 70), 2022 (n = 94), and 2023 (n = 81). Maritime students earn their baccalaureate degree after completing 12 months of shipboard training, and the cohorts of this period were small because few cadets could join vessels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The list of graduates was obtained from the Registrar's Office with the approval of the College President. Fourteen graduates were selected through purposive criterion sampling, using criteria tied to the Statement of the Problem: (1) graduate of the institution from the 2021 to 2023 batches, and (2) completion of at least one shipboard contract, including contracts served during the 12-month shipboard training, because within one or two contracts a seafarer may encounter both access to and denial of shore leave, which is the experience that Problems 1 and 2 require. Participation was limited mainly by graduates' deployment, connectivity, and schedules, as described in the Scope and Delimitation. The participants were five graduates from the 2021 batch, four from 2022, and five from 2023, which represents roughly 7%, 4%, and 6% of each batch, respectively. Fourteen participants are not intended to represent the views of all graduates of the three batches. Qualitative inquiry aims for rich, in-depth accounts from people who have lived the phenomenon, not statistical representation. Studies that tested sample sizes found that saturation was typically reached within 9 to 17 interviews when the population is relatively homogeneous and the objectives are narrow (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The present study's aim was narrow, and all participants shared an educational background and direct experience of shore leave, which supports the sufficiency of the sample (Malterud et al., 2016). Recruitment ended when later interviews no longer yielded new meanings relevant to the research questions. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2021b), this was treated as a situated judgment about adequacy, not a fixed threshold.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-made, semi-structured interview guide consisting of five open-ended questions with probing prompts. The questions were developed from the reviewed literature on seafarer shore leave and well-being and from the researcher's own experience as a seafarer, and they covered participants' shore leave experiences, the perceived effects of shore leave and its absence on mental health and emotional well-being, the barriers encountered, and recommendations for improvement. The guide was content-validated by the thesis panel, composed of PhD and EdD holders from different majors, including one with a major in maritime studies, who recommended no

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revisions. Because the instrument was researcher-made, permission to use an existing instrument was not required.

Data Gathering Procedure

Following institutional approval from Palompon Institute of Technology, in coordination with the PIT Alumni Office and the College Registrar, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent, supplemented by detailed field notes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the participants' own words and expressions.

Results and Discussions

Thematic analysis of the fourteen interviews yielded six themes, presented below according to the questions in the Statement of the Problem, with the discussion of each question placed immediately after its results. All fourteen transcripts contributed to code generation and theme development; the statements presented below are complete passages selected to illustrate each theme. Participants' statements are reproduced exactly as they were given, including their original spelling and grammar. Table 1 summarizes the codes, sub-themes, and themes.

Table 1. Thematic Map of Seafarers' Experiences of Shore Leave

Initial Codes	Sub-Theme	Main Theme
1. Mental reset; stress relief; escape from routine; sense of normalcy; cognitive recharge	Psychological Reset and Renewal	Theme 1: Restorative Impact of Shore Leave
2. Family reconnection; crew bonding; reduced isolation; positive mood; socializing with new people	Social and Relational Renewal	Theme 2: Emotional and Social Reconnection
3. Unaffected by lack of shore leave; reliance on protected rest hours; spirituality/prayer as coping; light workload as buffer; short domestic voyages and day work	Protective Factors and Personal Disposition	Theme 3: Variability in Psychological Reliance on Shore Leave
4. Frustration; envy; extended-duty resentment; burnout; agitation; short temper; safety and accident risk	Psychological Strain and Safety Concern	Theme 4: Psychological and Operational Risks of Restricted or Denied Shore Leave
5. Port and immigration restriction; captain's discretionary judgment; transport cost and distance; language barrier; visa and TWIC access	Institutional and Environmental Constraints	Theme 5: Structural, Financial, and Cultural Barriers to Access
6. Short port stay; port closing hours; heavy workload; peak season; emergencies	Time and Operational Demands	
7. Unspoken pressure not to request leave	Cultural Pressure	
8. Safety ashore; trouble and penalties; budgeting; guilt over spending	Personal Safety and Spending Concerns	
9. Seafarers' welfare clubs; subsidized or free transport; reliable internet; honoring agreed schedules; shore leave as a right, not a privilege	Welfare and Policy Enhancement	Theme 6: Recommendations for Institutional and Welfare Reform

Research Question 1: How do seafarers experience shore leave, in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being, when access is granted?

Problem 1: Experiences When Access Is Granted

This section answers the first question: How do seafarers experience shore leave, in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being, when access is granted?

Theme 1: Restorative Impact of Shore Leave

Participants described time ashore as a mental reset that interrupted the routine of shipboard work, even when the break was short. R4 said, “Shore leave lasts only a few hours, but it's like a rewind or a reset.” R13 used a similar image: “Like a reset button in a computer, stepping on land feels like

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home." R8 described how small things ashore could break the mindset of work: "Even hearing a car driving on the road breaks the mindset of the long watches and any work at the ship."

Several participants linked this reset to relief from stress and fatigue. R3 explained, "Shore leave really helps relieve stress and refreshes you, especially if you've come from heavy work. When you're able to go on shore leave, it reduces your fatigue and eases your stress." For R14, going ashore restored energy and focus:

Stepping off the ship lets you completely unplug from the endless grind of planned maintenance and resets your brain. Every time I head back to the gangway, I feel as energized and sharp as I did on day one of the contract. (R14)

R1 added, "It really helps lighten your mood when you return to the ship, sir."

Theme 2: Emotional and Social Reconnection

Participants also described shore leave as a chance to connect with people. For some, this meant crewmates. R7 said, "Just socializing and have some drinks with crewmates. Feels relaxing," and R10 said, "It's fun and relaxing especially if you go with your colleagues." R1 described shared outings:

Sometimes, if we are in the US and it happens that we are in a major state with an NBA team, we also watch a game. Like in Houston during our last contract, we watched an NBA game, and the next day we visited the NASA museum. (R1)

For others, it meant meeting people outside the ship. R6 shared, "talking to other people outside of work from other countries is a good experience." R8 connected this to isolation: "also, it can lower the loneliness and isolation we always encounter onboard as we can socialize and interact to people ashore," and reflected:

Also, it reminds us that we need to socialize to other people from time to time not just to our colleagues onboard. Thus, not just physical but also social, psychological and emotional sides are being reset when we go ashore. (R8)

For participants on domestic voyages, reconnection meant home. R2 said, "I usually spent my shore leave going home to rest and recuperate," and R11 said, "Since I only have domestic experience, I usually just go home and recuperate."

Discussion of Problem 1

Participants described shore leave as a reset, which is consistent with the Job Demands–Resources Theory (Bakker et al., 2023), in which shore leave works as an occupational resource that offsets the demands of confinement, long duty hours, and operational pressure. R8's statement that "Even hearing a car driving on the road breaks the mindset of the long watches and any work at the ship" and R13's "Like a reset button in a computer, stepping on land feels like home" illustrate the psychological detachment that is a recognized recovery experience (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007) and echo prior findings that even brief detachment from work settings restores attentional and emotional resources (Sonnentag et al., 2023). R3's report that shore leave "reduces your fatigue and eases your stress" and R14's feeling "as energized and sharp as I did on day one of the contract" show restored capacity for work after a break. The social findings correspond to descriptions of seafaring as socially isolating (Abila & Acejo, 2021). R8 said shore leave "can lower the loneliness and isolation we always encounter onboard," and Svetina et al. (2024) found that social stressors, including isolation from family and friends, were among those most closely tied to seafarers' thoughts of leaving the profession.

Research Question 2: How do seafarers experience restricted or denied shore leave, in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being?

Problem 2: Experiences When Shore Leave Is Restricted or Denied

This section answers the second question: How do seafarers experience restricted or denied shore leave, in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being?

Theme 4: Psychological and Operational Risks of Restricted or Denied Shore Leave

Participants described the absence of shore leave as building stress through monotony and confinement. R1 recalled the pandemic, when shore leave was not permitted: "You had no way to divert your mind since shore leave wasn't permitted. Different days, same faces, same job orders, and the same overtime. It really became more stressful because of that." R10 similarly said, "Lack of shore leave

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sometimes makes you easy to be stressed out from thinking of work all time," and "Not having shore leave in entire contract make the stay in ship more exhausting."

Restriction also produced emotional reactions toward crewmates and the situation. R1 said,

"Not being able to go on shore leave because you don't have a visa, or because you're on duty and have no companion while all your crewmates go out — that really makes you feel envious, sir, hahaha," and added, "It was already frustrating that we couldn't go out, and then our duty got extended." R7 described mild disappointment: "Sometimes a little dissapoimt especially now some port are very expensive to go ashore." R4 noted the effect on the group: "This sometimes affected the mood and added stress to the crew."

One participant described consequences for safety and work. R14 said, "Denying shore leave creates a severe mental health crisis on board. The resulting burnout and lack of motivation breed a dangerous level of boredom and fatigue, significantly increasing the risk of crew illness and workplace accidents." R14 then described their own experience:

I've experienced periods where my morale was so low that I became easily agitated. Being in that headspace made it difficult to stay focused and definitely took a toll on my work efficiency. There were times when my frustration and lack of motivation got the better of me, making me short-tempered and negatively impacting my performance on board. (R14)

Discussion of Problem 2

Accounts of monotony and exhaustion, such as R1's "Different days, same faces, same job orders, and the same overtime" and R10's "Not having shore leave in entire contract make the stay in ship more exhausting," align with evidence that deprivation of shore leave contributes to seafarers' fatigue (Zhao et al., 2023) and with the finding that scarce shore leave reduces seafarers' opportunities to relieve stress (McVeigh et al., 2018). R14's reference to "burnout and lack of motivation" that "breed a dangerous level of boredom and fatigue" also fits broader findings that link unresolved psychological strain to seafarers' career intentions (Svetina et al., 2024). R14's view that this raises the risk of accidents is a participant's account, since this study did not measure accidents.

Research Question 3: What onboard protective factors and personal coping resources shape seafarers' reliance on shore leave?

Problem 3: Protective Factors and Personal Coping

This section answers the third question: What onboard protective factors and personal coping resources shape seafarers' reliance on shore leave?

Theme 3: Variability in Psychological Reliance on Shore Leave

A number of participants reported that shore leave, or its absence, had little effect on their mental health. Several linked this to conditions onboard. R5 explained:

For me, sir, it's okay if I can't go on shore leave because in our case we are always busy in the engine room. So whether shore leave is possible or not, it's still okay for me. It doesn't affect my mood. I'm already used to rarely going on shore leave. (R5)

R11 pointed to workload and rest:

Personally, the lack of extended shore leave did not significantly affect my mental health. My engine watch schedule was relatively light, with a maximum of three hours, which gave me enough rest and personal time onboard. This allowed me to manage stress and maintain a healthy mental balance even when shore leave was limited. (R11)

R11 also said, "I believe a supportive onboard environment is just as important as shore leave for overall well-being." R13 attributed it to circumstances: "I dont have. Because for me it doesnt matter if i have shoreleave or not because it all depends on the port, and most specially if very busy."

For some, the explanation was short domestic voyages. R2 said:

As I mentioned, since we only had short voyages, it did not really affect me much whether I took shore leave or not. However, I would still take it because having an extra day or two to rest really helped with my relaxation and overall well-being. (R2)

Others pointed to personal coping resources and individual differences. R3 said:

For me, not having shore leave does not affect me. Especially for me — if you serve God, you will have peace of mind. Stress and anxiety are not really in me. I just use prayer, especially during my last contract when I wasn't able to go on shore leave even once. It always depends on the person. (R3)

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R4 likewise said, "I don't think it affects me much. It really depends on the person and how they behave onboard." R3 recognized that this is not true for everyone: "But for other seafarers, they really expect shore leave, especially considering the long duration of their contract onboard." R12 expressed a balanced view: "I'm happy whenever I can go out. But I'm not sad not angry or disappointed if ever I can go out."

Discussion of Problem 3

Participants who reported little effect from limited shore leave pointed to conditions onboard or to personal resources. R5 said, "we are always busy in the engine room," R2 said that "since we only had short voyages, it did not really affect me much whether I took shore leave or not," and R3 said, "if you serve God, you will have peace of mind." These accounts extend the Recovery–Stress Model (Kellmann & Kallus, 2001) in an important direction: recovery need is not the same for all seafarers but depends on compensating protective factors already present, such as protected rest hours, manageable workload, and personal coping, including spirituality. R11 stated that "a supportive onboard environment is just as important as shore leave for overall well-being," which is consistent with Svetina et al.'s (2024) finding that social stressors, such as bullying and supervisor demands, weighed more heavily on seafarers' intentions than port disembarkment bans. That study examined career intentions and not day-to-day well-being, so the comparison is indirect. Because several of these accounts come from short domestic voyages, this pattern may reflect voyage type as well as personal coping. Interventions built only around expanding access may be incomplete without attention to rest-hour management and psychosocial support as parallel protective mechanisms. This contrasts with participants who reported strain when shore leave was absent, so the psychological necessity of shore leave is conditional, with direct implications for how welfare interventions should be targeted.

Research Question 4: What structural, financial, and cultural barriers affect seafarers' access to shore leave?

Problem 4: Barriers to Access

This section answers the fourth question: What structural, financial, and cultural barriers affect seafarers' access to shore leave?

Theme 5: Structural, Financial, and Cultural Barriers to Access

Institutional and environmental constraints. Participants described rules at ports and onboard as the main barrier. R8 said:

Most of the time, the stricter rules and regualtions of the place. In some cases the port closes at 1700, when this is the time we can go ashore after a long-day work. I should say from port restrictions and authorities of the place. (R8)

R1 described a captain's discretion overriding permission:

There are also situations where the immigration officers of the country allow you to take shore leave, but your captain does not want to let you go out because he heard that it's dangerous outside — that there are many cartels, gangs, or drug addicts — so you still don't get to go on shore leave, sir. (R1)

R3 agreed: "Sometimes there are captains who do not allow shore leave. There are also times when the place is dangerous, so they do not issue shore passes." Cost of transport was also raised. R4 said, "I think one of the main barriers is port restrictions. As I mentioned in Japan, and in other ports as well, the port authority arranges the taxis, but they are very expensive," and R6 added, "Transport and fearing of spending too much. Specially in US. Lack of TWIC access and transport." R12 identified language: "Number 1 is language barrier. English is a universal language however not all countries knows how to speak it."

Time and operational demands. Many participants said that duty and short port stays limited their chances to go ashore. R1 said:

And time, sir, is also one of the barriers. You can't fully enjoy your shore leave because you're constantly checking the time, wondering if you still have enough time to buy your needs and wants or to go sightseeing. After all, the time we use for shore leave is only our free time after duty. (R1)

R5 said:

Second, if there are many jobs in the engine room or on deck, you can be busy the whole day, and your senior officer may not allow you to go ashore because of the workload. Third is emergency situations — unexpected problems that may arise. (R5)

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R2 described peak season: "There are times during peak season, especially during fiestas in Camotes Island or in Ormoc, or during the passenger season, when there are many passengers onboard. During these times, we cannot leave the Engine Control Room." R11 and R14 accepted these limits as understandable. R11 said, "The main challenges were limited port time, operational demands, and sometimes tight schedules during port stays. In some cases, duties and watch responsibilities made it impractical to go ashore, especially when turnaround times were short." R14 said, "The lack of time for port stay and busy day in port were usually the challenge in taking shore leave. Since it's a operational necessity for the vessel, I completely understand and have no issue with the situation."

Cultural pressure. R14 described an unspoken pressure: "When the decision is left to the individual, the Captain's question can unintentionally create pressure or intimidation. This often leads crew members to stay on board simply because they feel judged or fear appearing less committed to their duties."

Personal safety and spending concerns. Some participants described the risks and costs of going ashore. R5 cautioned, "However, I also advise that shore leave is not only about relieving stress or relaxing — you must also be responsible for what you are doing outside. Always think about your safety," and "Shore leave can help release stress, but it can also add stress. So safety first and be responsible during shore leave." R10 warned, "Be more careful especially with people(strangers) being too good, because most of the times they are after for something else." R12 admitted, "Though, afterwards I can feel slight of guilt because of the money I spent. But most of it, I feel happy," and R9 advised, "Prepare an allocated budget for the shore leaves during your contract."

Discussion of Problem 4

Participants' barriers echo the structural limitations documented in prior maritime welfare research (Petrov, 2023) and match recent global survey findings that access to shore leave has become rare and brief, with high workloads, little time in port, transport costs, and facilities far from town as reported barriers (ITF Seafarers' Trust & World Maritime University, 2025). R5's "if there are many jobs in the engine room or on deck, you can be busy the whole day," R9's "The time itself. It's too short," and R4's "the port authority arranges the taxis, but they are very expensive" each correspond to these barriers. R1's account that "your captain does not want to let you go out because he heard that it's dangerous outside" shows that permission from port authorities does not guarantee leave. R1's recollection that no shore leave was allowed during the pandemic is consistent with Zhao et al. (2023), who linked pandemic-era conditions to deprivation of shore leave. The informal social pressure described by R14, in which "the Captain's question can unintentionally create pressure or intimidation," extends this literature by identifying an informal, relational barrier that complements the formal, policy-level barriers more commonly discussed.

Research Question 5: Based on these experiences, what recommendations may be offered to strengthen shore leave as a welfare and recovery mechanism for seafarers?

Problem 5: Recommendations for Strengthening Shore Leave

This section answers the fifth question: Based on these experiences, what recommendations may be offered to strengthen shore leave as a welfare and recovery mechanism for seafarers?

Theme 6: Recommendations for Institutional and Welfare Reform

Participants' recommendations centered on welfare facilities, the status of shore leave, connectivity, transport, and onboard conditions. R1 proposed:

I hope that every country, especially those with international ports, can establish a Seafarers' Club. It is truly a big help in reducing the stress of seafarers. The services of Seafarers' Clubs are really good — some countries even offer free rides from the port to the city and vice versa. They also have their own recreational areas in their buildings where seafarers can relax and unwind, helping relieve work-related stress. (R1)

Several wanted shore leave treated as a right. R14 said, "Shore leave should be a standard, automatic right in every port rather than an optional request," and R8 said, "They should take shore leave as a right of a seafarer than of a privilege. One thing I cay say is that, prioritize giving normal working time or hours to the seafarers." Some asked that agreed schedules be honored: R2 said, "I would suggest that they honor the agreement," and R11 said, "Honoring the prior agreement of shore leave."

Participants also asked for practical support. R4 suggested:

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My recommendation to the company or the captain is that if taxis are needed — since the port authority charges very high fares — the captain could use the money earned from scrap sales so that all crew members can go ashore. This would be very beneficial for us. (R4)

R7 said, "Free transportation Just keep good communication to family," and R12 hoped that "all ship's have unlimited internet on board." R3 explained, "My suggestion is that it is better to have internet onboard. If you have internet, you can feel refreshed and relieved because you can browse Facebook, watch YouTube, play online games, and communicate with your family." Finally, R11 and R6 pointed to rest. R11 said, "Aside from shore leave, ensuring reasonable watch schedules, proper rest hours, and access to recreational facilities onboard greatly supports recovery," and R6 said, "Better application and management of Rest hours."

Discussion of Problem 5

Participants' recommendations grounded the practical contribution of the study in their own priorities. Their call to treat shore leave as a right, as in R14's "Shore leave should be a standard, automatic right in every port rather than an optional request" and R8's "They should take shore leave as a right of a seafarer than of a privilege," together with requests for welfare infrastructure (R1: "I hope that every country, especially those with international ports, can establish a Seafarers' Club"), connectivity (R3: "it is better to have internet onboard"), transport support (R7: "Free transportation"), honoring agreed schedules (R2: "I would suggest that they honor the agreement"), and onboard rest (R11: "ensuring reasonable watch schedules, proper rest hours, and access to recreational facilities onboard greatly supports recovery") directly inform the recommendations of this study. These recommendations parallel Yang et al.'s (2025) call for flexible and financially supported shore leave policies, and they aim to institutionalize shore leave as a structured component of seafarer welfare, in line with the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (ILO, n.d.), and with the direction of current international advocacy on this issue (ITF Seafarers' Trust & World Maritime University, 2025).

Synthesis of the Findings and Contribution to the Research Gap

The six themes of this study depict shore leave not as a fixed trait of a seafarer's career but as a situational and conditional recovery experience, whose psychological value depends on access, fairness, and the presence or absence of compensating onboard protective factors.

Contribution to the research gap

This study addressed the gap identified at the outset: how seafarers' lived experiences of both access to and restriction from shore leave shape their mental health and emotional well-being. In seafarers' own accounts, access was experienced as a psychological reset and social reconnection, and restriction as monotony, strain, and, for some, safety-relevant fatigue. The effect depended on the protective factors available onboard and on the barriers that limited access. These findings add to studies that treat shore leave as one factor among many or measure its frequency, by showing in seafarers' own words how, and under what conditions, shore leave matters. They also view the statement in the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 that shore leave benefits health and well-being (ILO, n.d.) from the seafarer's side. Participants' accounts of a captain's discretion and of informal pressure illustrate how an entitlement that depended on practicability and the master's consent (POEA, 2010) can be difficult to exercise.

Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of the study was established using Lincoln and Guba's four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility and dependability were ensured through member checking and peer debriefing with maritime professionals and research experts. Confirmability was maintained through researcher reflexivity and an audit trail documenting the development of codes and themes. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants' shore leave experiences and the maritime context. However, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the single-institution sample. The study also secured formal institutional approval and observed ethical research practices, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning participant codes (R1–R14) instead of using names. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

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Conclusions

Based on the results and discussion, the study concludes the following, in answer to the questions in the Statement of the Problem: When access is granted, seafarers experience shore leave as a psychological reset and an opportunity for emotional and social reconnection. Even brief time ashore was described as relieving stress and fatigue, lifting mood, restoring energy and focus, and reducing loneliness and isolation through contact with crewmates, people ashore, and, for those on domestic voyages, home. When shore leave is restricted or denied, seafarers describe monotony, stress, exhaustion, frustration, and envy of crewmates who can go ashore. One participant also described agitation, reduced work efficiency, and, in their view, greater risk of accidents, although these effects were not described by every participant. Seafarers' reliance on shore leave varies with the protective factors available. Some participants reported little effect from limited shore leave when they had adequate rest hours, a manageable workload (including short domestic voyages), personal coping resources such as prayer, and a supportive onboard environment. The psychological necessity of shore leave is therefore conditional. Access is limited by structural, financial, and cultural barriers. These include port and immigration restrictions, a captain's discretion, the cost and distance of transport, language, short port stays and heavy workloads, concerns about safety and spending ashore, and an unspoken pressure not to request leave. The participants' recommendations were to treat shore leave as a right and not a discretionary request, to honor agreed schedules, to provide affordable transport, seafarers' clubs, internet access, and recreational facilities, and to protect rest hours. These recommendations are presented by stakeholder in the next section. Taken together, shore leave functions as a conditional, situational recovery mechanism whose psychological value depends on access, fairness, and the compensating protective factors available onboard.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following are recommended: Shipping companies and manning agencies, institutionalize shore leave as an automatic entitlement and not a discretionary request, supported by fair and transparent scheduling. Honor agreed shore leave schedules and, where operations require changes, communicate them clearly to the crew. Provide reliable internet access and recreational facilities onboard, especially when shore leave is not possible. Consider supporting transport costs so that going ashore is not limited by what seafarers can afford. Ship masters and officers, manage rest hours and watch schedules so that crew members can recover onboard, which participants described as a protective factor. Make it easy and acceptable for crew to ask for shore leave, so that no one feels judged or less committed for going ashore. Port authorities and seafarers' welfare organizations, expand access to affordable or free transport between ports and cities. Establish and promote seafarers' clubs and welfare facilities, including recreational areas, in international ports. Maritime education institutions, integrate mental health and recovery literacy into training curricula, including onboard rest-hour management as a complementary protective strategy. Prepare cadets for going ashore responsibly, including personal safety and budgeting, as participants advised. Seafarers, make use of shore leave when it is available, since participants described even short time ashore as restorative. Plan ahead for safety and spending when going ashore, and keep other recovery resources, such as rest, family communication, and personal coping, available when shore leave is not possible. Maritime policymakers and regulators, support policies that treat shore leave as a welfare entitlement, in alignment with the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006. Future researchers, evaluate the effects of structured and equitable shore leave practices on seafarers' mental health and emotional well-being across diverse shipping contexts and seafarer ranks. Compare experiences by rank, vessel type, and voyage type (domestic and international), which this study did not examine.

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