Students' Perceived Awareness of the Geopolitical Conflict Between the Philippines and China in the West Philippine Sea

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ABSTRACT

In a fast-changing political sphere, awareness of international political issues is of utmost importance. The West Philippine Sea dispute between China and the Philippines accentuates this importance, where shifting territorial claims challenge sovereignty, national security, and economic stability. This study investigated the awareness and perceptions of Filipino students at Saint Mary's University regarding this critical territorial conflict. A descriptive-comparative quantitative approach was employed to analyze how students from different colleges, year levels, sexes, and religions understand the issue on political, socio-economic, and geographical dimensions. Responses were analyzed using Mean to determine the level of awareness and chi-square and Mann-Whitney U tests to determine significant differences among groups. Findings revealed that most students are aware of the China-Philippines West Philippine Sea conflict, indicating moderate to frequent engagement with and understanding of it. Socio-economic aspects, such as their impact on fishermen and food security, were the most recognized. Political dimensions, including the role of international law and foreign policy, had the lowest level of awareness. Notably, awareness varied significantly by academic department and year level, with fourth-year students and those from the School of Teacher Education and Humanities demonstrating higher levels of comprehension. Female students also exhibited greater political awareness. This research highlights the need for targeted educational initiatives to bridge gaps in understanding the issue. It calls for dynamic, accessible campaigns to empower youth as informed citizens capable of defending national sovereignty and contributing meaningfully to the discourse on maritime rights to promote international peace.

Keywords: Geopolitics, national sovereignty, youth awareness, West Philippine Sea, political education, international peace

INTRODUCTION

Amid the boundless expanse of oceans, the West Philippine Sea (WPS) appears as a battleground for territory, power, survival, and identity. The resource-rich waters and important trade routes of the WPS have become a focal point of geopolitical tension between the Philippines and China. More than a territorial dispute shaped by maps and legal claims, the area represents the Philippines' sovereignty. It supports the country's economic and environmental well-being.

But how deep is the consciousness of Filipinos, more so of the youth, of this issue? As declared by the late Dr. José Rizal, "Ang kabataan ang pag-asa ng bayan" (The youth is the hope of the nation). Yet, for them to fulfill such a promise, awareness and action towards the nation's ills are needed. That's particularly the case in relation to the WPS dispute, which requires considerable knowledge and critical thinking to defend their interests and sovereignty. Without such a clear idea of the stakes involved, the youth stand to lose their futures, becoming more likely to be passive observers of what will shape their lives.

This study aims to help fill that gap by examining awareness and perceptions of WPS among Filipino students. These aspects are particularly potent in shaping public opinion, with both educational and media systems able

to influence a person's or a group's awareness. Furthermore, it seeks to provide an opportunity to express support for maritime rights and national security by engaging this segment of society, as they are expected to serve, lead, and make decisions in this country in the near future.

This issue cannot be overemphasized. The WPS is an important strategic geographical space and a source of livelihood for millions of Filipinos, particularly the coastal communities whose survival depends on access to marine resources. Moreover, this area contains substantial undeveloped reserves of oil and gas, which could greatly contribute to the Philippines' energy security and economic growth. This is the conflict that truly matters; understanding it has everything to do with standing up for territorial rights while keeping the country's resources safe for generations to come.

As the tide of global power shifts and regional tensions escalate, youth must step up to this challenge of informed citizenship. This study aims to enable students to gain knowledge and a critical perspective in addressing problems of sovereignty, geopolitics, and resource management. The empowerment of the youth aims to inspire a generation ready to defend the country's interests and navigate the intricacies of a world in which identity and survival are anchored in contested spaces such as the WPS. With greater awareness and action, hope is transformed into meaningful progress, strengthening the Philippines against the tests of time while building a future marked by resilience and progress.

Political Implications

Over the years, this dispute has had a wider political terrain fraught with challenges as well as opportunities. For the Philippines, it is a matter that closely relates to national identity, political will, and the direction of the country's diplomatic push. This case led the government of the Philippines to address the aggressiveness of China, which rejected the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling and pursued the militarization of disputed maritime territories [1], [2]. These moves weaken the Philippines' constitutional grounds for enforcing the arbitral award and make it harder to defend territorial claims, casting serious doubts on international law's efficacy in addressing power asymmetries.

Diplomatically, the Philippines faces the difficult task of balancing economic relations with China and its security alliance with the United States. This tension was evident in December 2024, when the Philippines lodged a diplomatic protest against China following an incident at Scarborough Shoal, where Chinese Coast Guard vessels blocked a Philippine fisheries bureau boat and used water cannons [3]. Such incidents emphasize the complexity of managing geopolitical relationships while safeguarding territorial rights. To address these challenges, the Philippines must navigate its foreign policy carefully, balancing national interests with regional stability and global partnerships.

Socioeconomic Implications

The conflict impacts the socioeconomic well-being of the Philippines, with ordinary Filipinos, particularly small-scale fishermen, bearing the brunt. China’s assertiveness in the region has led to numerous incidents of harassment and intimidation against Filipino fishermen. For instance, in January 2024, the Philippine Coast Guard confirmed that the China Coast Guard harassed Filipino fishermen near Bajo de Masinloc, deploying a rubber boat to chase them away [4]. Such aggressive actions severely restrict the fishermen’s access to traditional fishing grounds, leading to decreased fish catches, falling wages, and heightened economic insecurity in coastal communities. This situation exacerbates poverty levels and threatens food security, as the reduced supply of affordable fish products affects the broader Filipino population [5].

It also hampers the Philippines’ ability to harness the vast energy potential of the WPS. Studies have indicated the presence of abundant oil and gas deposits in the area. However, China's activities, including mineral extraction, impede the Philippines from exploiting these resources. In November 2024, reports emerged of potential black sand mining in Zambales, allegedly carried out by Chinese entities, prompting the Armed Forces of the Philippines to closely monitor the situation [6]. The lack of access to these energy resources denies the Philippines significant revenue that could fund infrastructure projects and drive economic growth. Additionally,

this shortfall exposes the country to energy shortages and fluctuating global fuel prices, which in turn raise living costs for everyday Filipinos, particularly those living close to the contested areas [7].

Geographical Implications

China's maritime claims are not random acts of sovereignty; they are methodically deployed to reinforce national identity and unify the population under a shared historical narrative. These claims are framed as the reclamation of lost territories, positioning the Chinese Communist Party as a guardian of the nation's dignity and historical legacy. In doing so, China fortifies internal legitimacy while diverting attention from socio-political vulnerabilities [1]. The WPS dispute is thus wielded as a strategic mechanism, consolidating domestic control and reinforcing the state's authority under the guise of defending territorial integrity.

The economic value of the WPS is undeniable. Its waters contain critical energy reserves and sustain marine biodiversity essential for food security. China's dependency on oil and natural gas, combined with its population's reliance on marine resources, has made the region a cornerstone of its long-term strategic planning [8]. These motivations are further embedded within China's Belt and Road Initiative, which demands secure access to trade routes that traverse the South China Sea. Control over these channels is not just about defense, it enables China to project economic influence across Asia and beyond [9]. This policy orientation reflects a deliberate integration of economic power with maritime dominance.

Nationalism plays a central role in shaping public perception and state policy. Through state-sponsored narratives and educational institutions, China elevates maritime sovereignty into a non-negotiable symbol of national pride. Public sentiment is tightly interwoven with the country's foreign policy, enabling the government to pursue assertive actions while silencing domestic dissent [10]. These narratives create a feedback loop: each aggressive move in the WPS garners domestic approval, which in turn legitimizes further escalation. National pride is not merely expressed; it is mobilized and directed toward advancing state objectives on a regional scale. In this dispute, geopolitics, resource control, and ideological engineering converge into a coherent national strategy.

Filipino Awareness

In the Philippines, the WPS dispute stands as one of the most pressing national concerns, constantly shaping public dialogue through the lens of media coverage and evolving state policies. Far beyond a maritime boundary issue, this conflict has become central to how the nation navigates questions of sovereignty, diplomacy, and national identity. The media, in particular, does not merely report events; it actively shapes the public's political consciousness. As Gellardo and Baviera [11] argue, media platforms drive civic awareness, initiate public discourse, and pressure institutions toward transparency. Their ongoing reporting of incidents such as the 2016 Hague ruling and China's militarization of the region has kept the conflict alive in the national conversation, directly influencing how Filipinos interpret their role in safeguarding the country's territorial rights.

Despite widespread media attention, significant gaps remain in how the public, especially students, comprehend the depth and stakes of the conflict. While exposure is high, comprehension is inconsistent. The nuances of international law, historical context, and economic implications often remain poorly understood, particularly among those with limited access to comprehensive education or critical media content. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility [12] highlights how unequal access to credible information and fragmented media narratives result in uneven levels of awareness, even among university students.

This gap in understanding is especially concerning, given the role students play in shaping the nation's future. As emerging professionals, advocates, and policymakers, students must be well-informed participants in national affairs. Baviera & Batongbacal [5] underscore the value of civic inclusion, stressing that broader participation strengthens democratic resilience. Without access to the necessary tools, accurate information, analytical skills, and historical grounding, students are left vulnerable to politicized narratives and misinformation.

The spread of disinformation further complicates the public's ability to engage meaningfully with the issue. Social media platforms, now primary sources of information for many Filipinos, are rife with manipulated content. Almonte [13] points to state-sponsored efforts to mislead the public, whether by casting doubt on the legal rulings against China or by portraying the Philippines' diplomatic efforts as ineffective. These distortions fuel confusion and skepticism, undermining institutional credibility and weakening national unity. Santos and Cruz [14] argue that countering disinformation requires more than fact-checking; it demands systemic solutions, such as media literacy campaigns, responsible content governance, and coordinated efforts across government and civil society.

Religion, often overlooked in geopolitical analysis, also contributes to how many Filipinos interpret the WPS conflict. The country's dominant Catholic population views national sovereignty through a moral lens. Justice, stewardship, and peace are not abstract ideals but guiding principles in how many advocate for rightful ownership of Philippine waters. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines [15] has repeatedly called on leaders to uphold these values in their handling of the dispute, urging peaceful resolution while affirming the country's legitimate claims.

Study Objectives and Gaps

A solid grasp of the WPS dispute is essential for the younger generation, as it shapes their understanding of national sovereignty and the intricate realities of international relations. This knowledge equips students with historical context and current realities, empowering them to think critically about issues that impact their nation. Current research largely centers on public awareness of the WPS dispute and its geopolitical implications. Still, there is limited exploration into how young Filipinos specifically perceive the issue. As future policymakers, leaders, and thinkers, students play an essential role in shaping the country's stance on foreign policy and national security. Their level of awareness will significantly impact how the Philippines manages territorial conflicts in the future [5].

While it is evident that student involvement in conversations on WPS is important, the underlying factors shaping their awareness remain underexplored. Differences in student understanding appear to be linked to variations in education, media influence, and cultural background. Still, the interaction among these factors requires deeper examination. While the media undeniably shapes public opinion, the exact ways it affects students' perspectives remain unclear. Factors such as how news is framed, access to trustworthy information, and students' media literacy demand focused investigation. Additionally, inconsistencies in educational programs addressing geopolitical issues risk widening existing knowledge disparities.

These gaps hinder students from gaining a clear understanding of the complexities and significance of the WPS dispute. Without targeted efforts to address these shortcomings, many students may stay uninformed, reducing their ability to participate meaningfully in national issues. This underscores the pressing need for a more comprehensive and focused approach to enhancing student awareness and involvement on the matter [11].

This study addresses these shortcomings by evaluating Filipino students' awareness of the China-Philippine conflict, particularly regarding the political, geographical, and socio-economic issues, and examining significant differences when grouped by their profile variables.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative approach to investigate students' awareness of the China-Philippines conflict. It employed a descriptive-comparative method; the descriptive component outlines respondents' profiles, including their home province, school, age, sex, religion, and level of awareness. The comparative segment examines significant differences based on respondents' demographic variables. The study was conducted with the students of Saint Mary's University (SMU), Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, a premier catholic educational institution of higher learning. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire. A pilot study with 30 respondents yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.913, indicating high reliability of the survey tool. The Mean was

utilized to analyze the level of awareness, while the Chi-Square and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to analyze significant differences among profile variables.

For the ethical considerations of the study, the study was reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board (SMU-REB), located on the 2nd Floor of Rev. John Van Bauwel Hall at the SMU Main Campus, Ponce Street, Don Mariano Marcos, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, 3700, Philippines. For inquiries, the board can be contacted by email at reb@smu.edu.ph.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Respondents

In the academic year 2025-2026, the university has a total population of 5,567 tertiary students from which 360 participants were selected. The largest proportion of respondents came from the School of Health and Natural Sciences (SHANS), comprising 34.7% of the total sample, or 125 students. The second-largest group was from the School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology (SEAIT), representing 27.8% (100 students). Following this, 19.2% (69 students) of the respondents were from the School of Accountancy and Business (SAB), while 18.3% (66 students) were from the School of Teacher Education and Humanities (STEH). This distribution illustrated the participation of students from different academic fields, providing a balanced representation across the University's colleges.

For the home province, the table shows that a significant majority of the respondents, 72.8%, were from Nueva Vizcaya, where the University was located. This indicated that most students in the survey were local to the University's province. Other respondents had come from Isabela (11.4%), Quirino (8.1%), Ifugao (5.6%), and other provinces (2.2%), reflecting a smaller but still notable proportion of students from neighboring provinces.

By year level, the table shows that first-year students made up the largest group at 37.5% (135 students), followed by second-year students at 30.6% (110 students). Third-year students constituted 15.6% (56 students), and fourth-year students made up 16.4% (59 students). This showed that the majority of respondents were in their first two years of study, which could have indicated higher engagement with the surveys early in their academic journey.

For sex, the table shows that 61.9% of the respondents were female, and 38.1% were male. This gender distribution was consistent with national trends in higher education, where women generally made up a larger portion of the student body.

Regarding age, the table shows that the largest group of respondents were 19 years old, representing 30.8% of the sample (111 students). The next largest group was 20 years old, at 20.6% (74 students). Other age groups included 18 years old (16.7%, 60 students), 22 years old and above (16.1%, 58 students), and 21 years old (15.8%, 57 students). The age distribution indicated that the majority of respondents were within the typical university age range of 18 to 22 years.

For religion, the table shows that the majority of respondents identified as Catholic (66.1%, 238 students), reflecting the predominant religion in the region. Other Christian denominations accounted for 20.6% (74 students), while Iglesia ni Cristo represented 12.8% (46 students). A small proportion of respondents were Muslim (0.6%, 2 students), reflecting the region's predominantly Christian population.

Regarding sources of information about the West Philippine Sea conflict, the table shows that 51.1% of respondents primarily relied on social media. Television followed at 16.7% (60 students), while newspapers were the least cited source at 2.2% (8 students). Additionally, 21.4% (77 students) reported using two sources, and 6.7% (24 students) reported using three or more sources. This demonstrated a clear reliance on digital platforms, such as social media, to gather information on political and geopolitical issues.

Section 2. Level Awareness of the Respondents on the Issue of the West Philippine Sea

The Level of General Awareness of the Issue on the West Philippine Sea

Table 1 The Level of Awareness of the Issue on the West Philippine Sea

Awareness	Mean	SD	QD
1. I am aware of the Philippine–China territorial dispute	3.28	.769	Aware
2. I am aware of the role of international organizations, such as ASEAN and the United Nations, in addressing the West Philippine Sea dispute	2.98	.834	Aware
3. I am aware of the effects of the West Philippine Sea dispute on the availability of fish and other marine resources in the Philippines	3.10	.852	Aware
4. I am aware of the importance of the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in asserting the country's territorial rights in the West Philippine Sea	2.98	.903	Aware
5. I am aware of the impact of China's artificial islands and military bases in the West Philippine Sea on regional security and stability	2.99	.874	Aware
Overall Mean	3.07	.686	Aware

Legend: 1.00- 1.49- Not Aware, 1.50- 2.49- Slightly Aware. 2.50-3.49 - Aware. 3.50 – 4.00-Very Aware

Focusing on the general awareness of the West Philippine Sea, the Mean scores ranged from 2.98 to 3.28, with an overall average of 3.07, indicating that respondents generally considered themselves "Aware" of various aspects of the territorial dispute. The results show a moderate to high level of awareness regarding the West Philippine Sea dispute among respondents. The highest mean score (3.28) reflected a strong self-assessment of awareness regarding the Philippine-China territorial dispute, suggesting that significant personal interest was likely influenced by ongoing media coverage and political discussions. In contrast, the mean score of 2.98 for awareness of international organizations, such as ASEAN and the United Nations, indicated that although respondents recognized their involvement, their understanding of these entities' specific roles may have been limited. Additionally, a mean score of 3.10 regarding the effects of the dispute on marine resources highlighted respondents' awareness of the environmental and economic implications, possibly driven by discussions on sustainability and the importance of marine resources to local livelihoods.

Despite the overall awareness indicated by the findings, discrepancies existed that warranted further examination. The higher self-assessment of awareness (3.28) contrasted with lower scores concerning the specifics of international organizations and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), suggesting respondents might have overestimated their knowledge. Research by See [16] suggested that individuals often felt informed by media coverage, even if their understanding of specific details was lacking. Furthermore, the study examines the economic consequences of territorial disputes, particularly in maritime regions [17]. It highlights how conflicts over marine resources impact local economies, trade, and livelihoods. The authors emphasize the need for policy interventions to mitigate economic risks associated with territorial disputes.

The Level of Awareness of the issue on the West Philippine Sea in terms of Political Issues

TABLE 2 Level Of Awareness Of The Issue On The West Philippine Sea In Terms Of Political Issues

A. Political Issues	Mean	SD	QD
1. I am aware of the political impact that the West Philippine Sea dispute has on the Philippines' foreign relations and diplomatic strategies.	2.86	.878	Aware
2. I am aware of the role of international law, such as the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, in shaping the Philippines' political position on the West Philippine Sea.	2.68	.886	Aware

3. I am aware of the political implications of the Philippines' dependence on foreign powers, such as the United States and China, in navigating the West Philippine Sea conflict.	2.77	.889	Aware
4. I am aware of how the West Philippine Sea dispute influences the Philippines' domestic policies and political stability.	2.92	.860	Aware
5. I am aware of the role of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in addressing the political tensions caused by the West Philippine Sea dispute.	2.81	.886	Aware
Overall Mean	2.81	.743	Aware

Legend: 1.00- 1.49- Not Aware, 1.50- 2.49- Slightly Aware. 2.50-3.49 - Aware. 3.50 – 4.00-Very Aware

The findings reveal a basic understanding of the political landscape, likely influenced by increased media coverage, particularly after the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling. However, the lowest mean score (2.68) relates to awareness of international law, suggesting that while respondents recognize the dispute, they may not fully understand the complex legal frameworks involved. The Mean of 2.77 regarding dependence on foreign powers indicates an awareness of geopolitical dynamics. In contrast, the highest score (2.92) shows that respondents feel a strong connection between foreign relations and domestic policies.

This aligns with the work of Storey [18], who notes that while nationalistic sentiment and general awareness of the West Philippine Sea issue are often high in the Philippines, a detailed understanding of legal and diplomatic nuances can vary. The lower understanding of the arbitration ruling in the data contrasts with the general awareness. In contrast, the higher awareness of domestic and foreign policy impacts supports Storey's observations on the visible political and diplomatic actions related to the dispute.

The Level of Awareness of the issue on the West Philippine Sea in terms of Socioeconomic Issues

TABLE 3 The Level Of Awareness Of The Issue On The West Philippine Sea In Terms Of Socioeconomic

A. Socioeconomic Issues	**Mean**	**SD**	**QD**
1. I am aware of how the West Philippine Sea dispute affects the livelihood of Filipino Fishermen and coastal communities.	3.16	.863	Aware
2. I am aware of the socioeconomic impact of losing access to natural resources, such as oil and gas, in the West Philippine Sea on the Philippine economy.	3.08	.888	Aware
3. I am aware of how the West Philippine Sea dispute influences the Philippines' food security, particularly the availability of fish for local consumption.	3.06	.884	Aware
4. I am aware of how restrictions in the West Philippine Sea caused by the territorial dispute impact the Philippines' energy security and development of natural resources.	3.03	.859	Aware
5. I am aware of how the West Philippine Sea dispute affects the Philippines' economic partnerships and trade relations with other countries.	2.99	.888	Aware
Overall Mean	3.06	.764	Aware

Legend: 1.00- 1.49- Not Aware, 1.50- 2.49- Slightly Aware. 2.50-3.49 - Aware. 3.50 – 4.00-Very Aware

The perceived awareness levels of respondents concerning the socioeconomic consequences stemming from the Philippine-China territorial dispute in the West Philippine Sea. An overall Mean and Standard Deviation summarizing awareness across these socioeconomic aspects showed that student respondents are basically aware of the socioeconomic issues surrounding the Philippines-China dispute over the West Philippine Sea.

Based on general observation, public awareness of the socioeconomic impacts of the West Philippine Sea dispute likely varies depending on the tangibility and frequency of related news or personal accounts. Issues directly

affecting livelihoods, particularly of fishermen, are often highlighted in media, making this impact potentially more widely known. Concerns about food security, especially regarding fish supply, also resonate closely with daily life, contributing to awareness. Conversely, understanding the broader, more complex implications for national energy security, resource development, or intricate economic partnerships with other countries may require more detailed information and analysis, which might be less accessible or less frequently emphasized in common public discourse.

The relatively high awareness of the impact on fishermen's livelihoods and food security aligns with reports highlighting the direct and severe consequences for coastal communities and the nation's fish supply [19]. Studies also discuss the significant potential of untapped oil and gas reserves in the WPS and the implications for energy security, supporting awareness in these areas, though perhaps less prominently featured in daily news than fishermen's plight. Conversely, the lower awareness of the dispute's impact on broader economic partnerships may reflect less in-depth media coverage or public discourse on this more complex dimension compared to the immediate resource-related issues. Overall, this suggests that the differential media attention and direct human impact of various socioeconomic consequences contribute to the varying levels of awareness observed.

The Level of Awareness of the issue on the West Philippine Sea in terms of Geographical Issues

TABLE 4 The Level Of Awareness Of The Issue On The West Philippine Sea In Terms Of Geographical

A. Geographical Issues	Mean	SD	QD
1. I am aware of the geographical areas involved in the West Philippine Sea dispute, including the Spratlys, Scarborough Shoal, and the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).	2.76	.867	Aware
2. I am aware of the strategic importance of the West Philippine Sea in terms of international shipping routes and global trade.	2.83	.896	Aware
3. I am aware of how China’s territorial claims in the West Philippine Sea affect the geographical control and security of the region.	2.99	.881	Aware
4. I am aware of how specific activities, such as China’s construction of artificial islands, have encroached on the boundaries of the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the West Philippine Sea	2.86	.886	Aware
5. I am aware of the significance of maritime features such as artificial islands and reefs (e.g., Mischief Reef, Subi Reef) in the West Philippine Sea dispute.	2.93	.922	Aware
Overall Mean	2.87	.756	Aware

Legend: 1.00- 1.49- Not Aware, 1.50- 2.49- Slightly Aware. 2.50-3.49 - Aware. 3.50 – 4.00-Very Aware

The respondents' self-assessed awareness regarding geographical aspects of the West Philippine Sea dispute presents a Mean of 2.87 for five items covering awareness of involved geographical areas (Spratlys, Scarborough Shoal, EEZ), understanding of the strategic importance of the region, awareness of how China's claims affect regional control and security, ability to identify encroachment by activities like artificial island construction on the EEZ, and understanding the significance of maritime features such as artificial islands and reefs. This overall Mean is quite lower than the other awareness levels.

Awareness of the geographical aspects of the West Philippine Sea dispute was likely moderate. Many people might have heard of places like the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal in the news. Still, they might have lacked a precise understanding of their exact locations, the full extent of the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), or the specific reasons behind the legal and strategic importance of these features. Media coverage often emphasized events and incidents rather than detailed geographical information or maritime law. Furthermore, grasping the strategic importance of international shipping routes could have been less intuitive for the public than understanding direct socioeconomic impacts. Knowing how specific actions, such as artificial island construction, violated EEZ boundaries also required a deeper understanding of geography and legal principles.

The notion is that, while the public was generally aware of the dispute, its specific geographical and legal dimensions may have been limited, aligning with the moderate awareness levels in the table. For instance, an ABS-CBN News report [4] discussed calls for the mandatory inclusion of West Philippine Sea issues in the school curriculum to improve understanding, suggesting that current awareness was considered insufficient. The article highlighted the need to clarify terms like "West Philippine Sea" and the EEZ, indicating a recognition in public discourse that Filipinos did not universally understand these geographical and legal concepts. This supported the observation that detailed geographical awareness was less prevalent than general knowledge of the dispute's existence. This also aligned with Hayton's [20] analysis regarding the strategic importance and the impact of China's actions on the region's geography. However, the data nuanced this by showing that while the general geographical impact was understood, specific knowledge of key geographical areas might have been less prevalent among the public than the detailed information available in expert analyses.

Section 3. Awareness of the Issue of the West Philippine Sea Based on Profile Variable

Significant Difference in the Awareness of the School Profile

TABLE 5 Significant Difference In The Awareness Of The School Profile

Areas	School	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.	Decision
Political Awareness	School of Teacher Education and Humanities (STEH)	223.36	19.192	3	.000**	Reject HO.
	School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology (SEAIT)	190.33				
	School of Health and Natural Science (SHANS)	161.36				
	School of Accountancy and Business (SAB)	159.93				
Socio-economic Awareness	School of Teacher Education and Humanities (STEH)	218.31	14.827	3	.002**	Reject HO.
	School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology (SEAIT)	188.87				
	School of Health and Natural Science (SHANS)	164.74				
	School of Accountancy and Business (SAB)	160.77				
Geo-graphical Awareness	School of Teacher Education and Humanities (STEH)	211.85	16.322	3	.001**	Reject HO.
	School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology (SEAIT)	197.87				
	School of Health and Natural Science (SHANS)	164.70				
	School of Accountancy and Business (SAB)	153.98				

Legend: p ≤ .05 - Statistically significant, p > .05 - Not statistically significant

Using the chi-square test, it was found that students from the School of Teacher Education and Humanities have a significant difference when compared with other schools, as it has a p-value less than .05. The results suggested that students from the School of Teacher Education and Humanities (STEH) have a higher level of awareness when compared to the students of the School of Accountancy and Business, the School of Health and Natural Sciences, and the School of Engineering, Architecture and Information Technology. This could be explained by the fact that the School of Teacher Education and Humanities focuses on general education subjects, in which social and political issues are discussed. Furthermore, those in the School of Teacher Education and Humanities include Political Science majors and students studying the laws of the land and those of other countries, such as Criminology and Forensic Science students, among others.

The result also suggests that academic background influences the students' awareness of the dispute. There are differences in their general awareness across political, socioeconomic, and geographical contexts. These differences are statistically significant, indicating that the school students belong to matters, as supported by the findings of Batongbacal [21], who stated that awareness of issues correlated with exposure to relevant educational content. STEH's high level of awareness came from subjects that focused on humanitarian and political issues.

Significant Difference in the Awareness of their Year Level

TABLE 6 Significant Difference In The Awareness Of Their Year Level

Areas	Year Level	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.	Decision
Political Awareness	4th Year	252.20	37.698	3	.000**	Reject H_0
	1st Year	179.33				
	2nd Year	158.13				
	3rd Year	151.71				
Socio-economic Awareness	4th Year	235.81	24.537	3	.000**	Reject H_0
	1st Year	183.36				
	3rd Year	161.88				
	2nd Year	156.81				
Geo-graphical Awareness	4th Year	247.58	30.759	3	.000**	Reject H_0
	1st Year	173.84				
	3rd Year	168.13				
	2nd Year	159.00				

Legend: p ≤ .05 - Statistically significant, p > .05 - Not statistically significant

When it comes to the differences in awareness of the West Philippine Sea across all academic year levels, the p-values of .000 for all general awareness, political awareness, socioeconomic awareness, and geographical

awareness, all below the 0.5 threshold. The Mean ranks showed that 4th-year students demonstrated a high level of awareness, with mean ranks of 242.64 (Awareness), 252.20 (Political), 235.81 (Socioeconomic), and 247.58 (Geographical). They were followed by 1st-year students, with mean ranks of 170.06 (Awareness), 179.33 (Political), 197.87 (Socioeconomic), and 173.84 (Geographical). The mean ranks indicated that 2nd-year students had higher levels of Awareness and Political Awareness; they had mean ranks of 167.76 in Awareness and 158.13 in Political Awareness.

In contrast, 3rd year students had 165.23 in Awareness and 151.71 in Political Awareness. Meanwhile, the mean ranks indicated that the 3rd-year students had a higher level of Socioeconomic and Geographical Awareness than the 2nd-year students, with mean ranks of 161.88 in Socioeconomic and 168.13 in Geographical. In contrast, 2nd-year students had a mean rank of 156.81 in Socioeconomic and 159.00 in Geographical.

Year level influences students' awareness of general, political, socioeconomic, and religious issues, contributing to their overall sense of significance. This finding is supported by Caballero-Anthony [22], who emphasized that higher education plays a vital role in fostering security consciousness and civic responsibility. The results reflect that increased academic exposure and engagement enhance students' awareness in these areas.

Significant Difference in the Awareness of their Sex Profile

TABLE 7: Significant Difference In The Awareness Of Their Sex Profile

Areas	Sex	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Political Awareness	Female	189.05	13166.000	.041*	Reject H_0
	Male	166.58			
Socioeconomic Awareness	Female	189.05	13533.500	.098	Accept H_0
	Male	169.45			
Geographical Awareness	Female	180.60	14977.000	.900	Accept H_0
	Female	180.33			

Legend: $p \leq .05$ - Statistically significant, $p > .05$ - Not statistically significant

The Mann-Whitney U test results showed significant differences in awareness of the West Philippine Sea issue between male and female students: p-values for general awareness (.100), socioeconomic awareness (.098), and geographical awareness (.900) were above .05, indicating no significant differences. The females had slightly higher mean ranks in Awareness (187.46 vs. 169.18), in socioeconomic awareness (187.29 vs. 169.45), and nearly equal ranks in geographical awareness (180.60 vs. 180.33). When it comes to the mean rank, females had higher awareness, but this is not statistically significant because the p-value is greater than .05; therefore, female and male students are the same when it comes to their awareness.

However, their mean rank differences in Political Awareness can be attributed to factors such as gendered socialization, educational exposure, and media influence. The studies by Cleofas, Dayrit, & Albao [23] and the Pew Research Center [24] indicate that females often demonstrate high civic engagement due to socialization that emphasizes empathy, community awareness, and responsiveness to social justice. Females also tend to interact with media content that emphasizes political and social narratives.

Significant Difference in the Awareness of Religion

TABLE 8:Significant Difference In The Awareness Of The Religion

Areas	Religion	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Political Awareness	Others	185.78	1.256	2	.534
	Catholic	180.43			
	Iglesia ni Cristo	164.60			
Socio-economic Awareness	Others	190.27	5.529	2	.063
	Catholic	182.39			
	Iglesia ni Cristo	147.21			
Geo-graphical Awareness	Others	203.45	8.660	2	.013*
	Catholic	178.39			
	Iglesia ni Cristo	146.73			

Legend: $p \leq .05$ - Statistically significant, $p > .05$ - Not statistically significant

Table 8 shows differences in awareness of the West Philippine Sea issue across religious affiliations, specifically Catholic, Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), and Others. It is worth noting that only Geographical Awareness exhibited a statistically significant difference (.013), as indicated by the p-value. The differences across religious groups were not statistically significant for Socioeconomic Awareness (.063), Political Awareness (.534), or Awareness (.501). Despite this, variations in mean ranks were seen: those in the "Others" consistently scored higher levels

of awareness. At the same time, INC members recorded the lowest ranks, especially in Geographical Awareness (146.73) and Socioeconomic Awareness (147.21). Catholics generally scored in the middle across all categories. Hence, whether the students are Catholic, Iglesia ni Cristo, or Others, their awareness is alike, except in their geographical awareness.

The significant difference in Geographical awareness suggests that students' religious affiliation may influence their familiarity with the territorial aspects of the West Philippine Sea issue. "Others" higher awareness might reflect broader exposure to non-mainstream discourse or alternative education settings. Conversely, lower awareness among INC members may indicate limited emphasis on geopolitical topics within religious or educational environments. These patterns support the findings of Ravnilla (2024), which highlight how the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ) "vote as one" doctrine reflects a collective approach to political participation, shaping individual members' exposure to varied political discussions.

CONCLUSION

In relation to the study's objectives, the following conclusions are drawn from the major findings. Students of Saint Mary's University are generally aware of the West Philippine Sea dispute, particularly its socioeconomic dimensions, including livelihood, food security, and access to natural resources. However, awareness was relatively low in political areas, especially regarding international law, foreign policy, and the Philippines' legal standing under the 2016 Hague ruling.

Social media remains the primary source of information for most students, indicating a reliance on informal channels over structured academic content. While this promotes accessibility, it also presents a vulnerability to misinformation and superficial understanding.

Significant differences in awareness were observed across demographic profiles. Students from the School of Teacher Education and Humanities and the School of Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology demonstrated higher awareness compared to those from the Schools of Accountancy and Business and Health and Natural Sciences. Fourth-year students showed the highest level of awareness, likely due to advanced academic exposure. Female students displayed higher political awareness than males. In contrast, geographical awareness varied significantly by religion, with Muslim students and those from other Christian denominations scoring higher than Catholics and members of Iglesia ni Cristo.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. A module titled "Understanding the West Philippine Sea" may be integrated into the National Service Training Program (NSTP) for all first-year students and can be incorporated into subjects such as Contemporary World and History. This module may introduce the basic history of the conflict, the significance of the 2016 Hague ruling, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and its broader socio-political implications. It may be delivered through short lectures, video presentations, group discussions, and reflection activities facilitated by the Department of Philosophy or Social Sciences. This will help lay the foundation for national awareness and informed citizenship early in students' academic journey.

2. A West Philippine Sea Awareness Week may be organized every July to mark the anniversary of the Hague ruling. This event may be led by Senior Political Science students. As experts in matters of governance, law, and civic duty, these groups are well-positioned to lead activities such as student-led forums, debates, poster exhibits, and interactive booths. The event may serve as a platform to deepen students' engagement with national issues through dialogue and advocacy.

3. The school publication, together with the Student Central Council and various student organizations, may serve as the primary media partner and co-organizer of the awareness week. With its influence and reach among the student body, the school publication may produce articles, editorials, and digital content to

promote the event. It may also encourage first- to third-year students to participate in journalistic, creative, and advocacy roles, thereby increasing engagement and awareness through storytelling and student-driven initiatives.

4. A centralized Digital Resource Hub on the West Philippine Sea may be developed to provide students with access to credible and curated materials. This platform may include legal documents, infographics, scholarly articles, maps, and educational videos. Library Science students or the university librarian may take charge of maintaining and updating the hub, which may be accessed through the university website using students' corporate account or Learning Management System. This resource may support both independent research and classroom instruction on the WPS issue.

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