

# Sa Likod ng Screen: Mental Health Challenges and Coping Strategies of Content Moderators in Cebu City

Marielle Lourdes Cabaluna<sup>1</sup>, Mitchie Lee Obiedo<sup>2</sup>, Edlyne Faye Santos<sup>3</sup>, June Rey Villegas<sup>4</sup>

Cebu Technological University-Argao Campus, College of Arts and Sciences, Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

Content moderators play a vital role in maintaining safe and appropriate online environments by filtering harmful and inappropriate content. However, the constant exposure to graphic and disturbing materials poses significant risks to their psychological well-being. This study explored the mental health challenges and coping strategies of content moderators in Cebu City through a qualitative phenomenological approach. Ten participants with at least two years of experience in content moderation were purposely selected and interviewed using a semistructured guide. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The findings revealed that moderators commonly encountered disturbing content involving violence, sexual abuse, and gore, which led to stress, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion. Major stressors included heavy workloads, long working hours, and unstable internet connections. To manage these challenges, participants utilized both organizational and personal coping strategies such as seeking peer support, engaging in wellness programs, humor, leisure activities, and maintaining work-life boundaries. They also emphasized the importance of enhancing wellness initiatives, mental health insurance, and supportive workplace programs. The study emphasizes the need to develop comprehensive mental health support systems and culturally responsive interventions to protect the well-being of content moderators in the BPO industry.

**Keywords:** content moderators, mental health challenges, coping strategies

## INTRODUCTION

The internet has become an integral part of daily life, serving as a vital tool for information acquisition and dissemination. Over the past several decades, social media platforms have become central to interpersonal connection, business management, media and news access, entertainment and more (Cagatin, 2024). To maintain safe and appropriate online spaces, these platforms engage in content moderation—a process that involves reviewing user-generated content and enforcing community guidelines (Gerrard, 2022). However, despite its significance in the industry, content moderation is often described as the “dirtiest job on the web” due to the nature of the content being filtered (Fenol, 2018).

Content moderation is one of the most fundamental services online platforms like social media companies provide. Without it, sites could become awash with illegal or offensive content and the business model of selling advertisers access to users would fail (Barrett 2020; Gillespie 2018). Across the world, more than 100,000 people are employed to moderate online content with many of these content moderators working in developing nations (Spence et al., 2022). However, these roles are often outsourced to countries with lower labor costs, such as the Philippines and Estonia, where companies like TaskUs Inc. and Sutherland Global Services operate (Bharucha et al., 2023).

Beyond just a logistical necessity, content moderation—deciding what stays online and what gets taken down—is an indispensable aspect of the social media industry. It involves monitoring user-generated content and applying acceptable content rules (Spence et al., 2023). As online gatekeepers, they foster a secure and positive digital environment. However, their repeated exposure to disturbing and harmful material raises serious concerns about their psychological health (Strandell, 2023). As moderators become increasingly aware of adverse effects of their work, the need to examine health consequences, particularly on their mental wellbeing, becomes more urgent (Anselmo et al., 2025).

For instance, a study by Spence et al. (2023) found that 40.8% of 213 platform-level content moderators encountered distressing content on a daily basis. The study also revealed a dose-dependent relationship between the frequency of exposure to such content and the levels of psychological distress and secondary trauma experienced. These mental health risks are further intensified by the demanding nature of the job. High accuracy targets, relentless workloads, and minimal recovery time contribute significantly to the stress moderators endure. In severe cases, this can lead to vicarious trauma, a condition resembling PTSD due to repeated exposure to disturbing content (Steiger et al., 2021).

The Philippines has emerged as a major player in the global business process outsourcing (BPO) industry and has become a prime location for content moderation due to its young, computer-literate, and social-media-savvy workforce (Roberts et al., 2023). However, one of the primary risk factors for BPO employees is the graveyard shift, which is associated with physical and mental health challenges (Calendario et al., 2024). As part of the BPO workforce, content moderators are similarly exposed to these detrimental working conditions. While content moderation in the Philippines is expanding, research on its long-term psychological effects remains limited, necessitating further exploration, particularly within the Philippine setting.

Although mental health issues of content moderators are being slowly recognized, research on the coping strategies adopted by such individuals who witness disturbing content on a daily basis is scarce. Some platform sites such as Google and Facebook, have begun to implement interventions such as training programs on working with sensitive content, access to counselling, and suggested 'wellness breaks' (Halevey et al., 2020). Still, the effectiveness of these measures for moderator wellbeing remains unclear. Additionally, in the study of Spence et al. (2023), it has been found that content moderators utilize both formal and informal coping strategies such as seeking support or engaging in stress-relief activities, plays a role in managing emotional distress. However, barriers such as reluctance to discuss their experiences and skepticism about available resources hinder access to coping mechanisms (Spence et al., 2023).

Existing studies, such as those by Steiger et al. (2021) and Spence et al. (2023), have made significant contributions to understanding mental health impacts and coping strategies by content moderators, respectively. Although these distinct studies provide a valuable contribution, there is a lack of exploration of comprehensive integration of mental health challenges and their corresponding coping strategies.

Given all of these, the mental health challenges and coping strategies for content moderators have never been more relevant. This study aims to explore the mental health challenges of content moderation and examine the coping strategies they employ to manage these challenges. By understanding the specific stressors and coping strategies within this profession, this study seeks to provide insights that can inform better support systems and workplace policies for content moderators in Cebu City.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of content moderators in Cebu City, specifically focusing on their mental health challenges and the coping strategies they use. Phenomenology is a well-established method that is oriented at getting an in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experience (Gibson & Hanes, 2003; cited in Gill, 2020). Thus, this method is suitable for this study since it aims to capture the lived experiences of content moderators in Cebu City, providing an in-depth understanding of their mental health challenges and coping strategies.

Furthermore, this study utilized purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses (Etikan, 2016). This involves identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that are proficient and well-informed with a phenomenon of interest (Guest & Fleming, 2015). This sampling method ensures that the participants have sufficient experience and knowledge to provide relevant insights into the mental health challenges and coping strategies in content moderation. In addition to knowledge and experience, the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

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## Research Participants

The study involved ten content moderators based in Cebu City who are currently working in the field, each with at least two years of work experience. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a relevant and diverse sample. Moreover, participants were recruited from various content moderation platforms to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and more comprehensive data.

## Research Setting

The study was conducted in Cebu City, Philippines. Cebu City has established itself as one of the Philippines' most successful BPO hubs, with significant contributions from the national outsourcing industry. In fact, in recent reports in the year 2020, Cebu City remains a top destination of firms in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry. As this study focuses on content moderators and since it is part of the BPO workforce, Cebu City presents a unique opportunity for this study. The area provides a good scope of population for content moderators that could potentially provide insightful information about their mental health challenges and their corresponding coping strategies.

## Instruments

This study employed a semi - structured interview questionnaire that was validated by Subject Matter Experts (SME) to assess the instrument's content validity, question clarity, and relevance to the research objectives. Prior to conducting the study, researchers obtained written informed consent from all participants. This provided a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were assured of voluntary involvement, with the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality measures were clearly outlined, and contact information was provided for any questions or concerns.

Furthermore, to ensure accurate data collection, the researchers requested participants' permission to audiorecord the interviews. Participants were explicitly informed that recording is optional, and their consent will be obtained before proceeding. Recordings were securely stored and accessible only to the research team, with transcripts anonymized to protect confidentiality.

## Procedure

To gather the necessary data, the researchers seek approval from the research committee to ensure ethical compliance. Following approval, the researchers recruited qualified participants—specifically content moderators currently working in the field with at least two years of experience—using purposive sampling. Participants signed an informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks/benefits, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time.

During data collection, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews in-person or online, based on participant preference. Before each interview, participants were reminded of their rights, confidentiality, and the use of audio recordings for accuracy. Recordings were securely stored, anonymized, and deleted after analysis. Participants received compensation for their time and effort.

After data collection, researchers conducted thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process (2006). This includes familiarizing with data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing and naming themes, and reporting the findings. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to ethical standards.

## Data Analysis

The data that collected by the researchers from content moderators were transcribed verbatim, ensuring that the participants' responses were recorded and acknowledged exactly as what they have provided. This transcription process served as a reflection and knowledge of the participants' experiences and opinions.

Furthermore, thematic analysis was utilized in identifying the common patterns and themes of the participants' responses. The researchers adopted the six-phase process as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; cited in Dawadi, 2020). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that researchers use to systematically organize and analyze complex data sets. It is a search for themes that can capture the narratives available in the account of data sets. It involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999 cited in Dawadi, 2020). Thus, the researchers followed the step-by step phases as provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure a comprehensive and a well detailed analysis of the participants' experiences.

To begin, the first phase (familiarization with the data), as its name suggests, begins with researchers' interest in familiarizing themselves with their data. This phase helps them to figure out the type (and number) of themes that might emerge through the data.

Following this is the second phase — generating initial codes by selecting phrases or sentences/paragraphs that were of interest. This phase involves the production of initial codes from the data. These codes represent the most basic elements of the data that can be meaningfully interpreted in relation to the research phenomenon. Codes may reflect either the explicit content (semantic) or underlying meaning (latent) that appears interesting to the analyst.

Consequently, the third phase is searching for themes. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), begin with a long list of the codes that were identified across the data set. The main purpose of this phase is to find out the patterns and relationships between and across the entire data set (Chamberlain, 2015). The codes had to be analyzed considering how different codes could be combined to form an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, the major focus in this step was on the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes.

The fourth phase, reviewing themes, involves refining and validating the themes identified in the previous stage. At this point, all themes—master themes, main themes, and sub-themes—are brought together and evaluated for internal coherence and consistency (internal -homogeneity), as well as for distinctiveness from one another (external heterogeneity), as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Afterwards, defining and naming themes will be the fifth phase. This phase will begin with an aim of further refining and defining the themes, that is, “identifying the essence of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, the themes will be further refined by reading through all the main themes and subthemes, codes and extracts.

Finally, the sixth phase is producing the report. This phase involves presenting the findings in a well-structured, concise, coherent, and engaging manner. The write-up should provide a logical and non-repetitive account of the data, supported by relevant data extracts, and should effectively convey the story told by the themes within and across the data set.

## **Ethical Consideration**

This study will adhere to the ethical considerations outlined by Arifin (2018), which emphasize the ethic of respect, ensuring that all individuals involved in the study are treated with respect and utmost trust. Consequently, five important ethical issues will be considered in this study.

First, informed consent and voluntary participation are essential. The process of obtaining consent will consist of the following; consent must be given freely (voluntarily), participants should understand what is being asked of them, and individuals must be competent to consent. Therefore, all participants will be approached individually and provided with an explanation of the purpose of the study and the data collection process. They will be given adequate time to ask questions and address any concerns.

Next, participant anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved by ensuring no names or identities are revealed during data collection, analysis, or reporting. The privacy of interview environments will be strictly maintained during telephone communications, interview sessions, data analysis, and findings dissemination. Furthermore,

if the company has a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), the researchers will fully comply with its confidentiality provisions to protect participants' identities.

Consequently, data transcription will be carried out in a private room, using earphones to ensure that recordings are not overheard by others. During transcription, participants' identities will be removed, including any names or identifying information. In presenting the findings, participants will be referred to by pseudonyms in verbatim quotes.

Following this, ethical approval and access to participants will be sought. Ethical approval will be obtained from the Local Research Ethics Committee. Lastly, data protection will be ensured. Data will be stored on encrypted devices with password protection. Information stored on mobile phones, personal computers, laptops, or any other devices will also be protected by passwords. Moreover, hard copies or written materials will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked room with no access to unauthorized individuals, in adherence to legal requirements.

## RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the qualitative data gathered from ten content moderators based in Cebu City. The data were collected through in-depth interviews to explore the mental health challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ in managing these experiences. The researchers utilized the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This systematic process facilitated the identification and interpretation of significant patterns and themes, including subthemes, that encapsulate the participants' lived experiences. The presentation of findings is organized according to the sequence of the statement of the problem to ensure coherence and clarity in addressing each research question.

This study involved ten content moderators with work experience ranging from two to seven years, representing both novice and experienced moderators. A majority of the participants (n=6) were assigned to the TikTok platform under Alorica, while the remaining four (n=4) managed Facebook content under Wipro. One participant (P7) had experience with both Alorica and Ethos, indicating cross-company exposure. The variation in tenure and organizational affiliation provides a comprehensive perspective on how differing work contexts and durations influence the mental health experiences of content moderators.

Table 1 presents the theme and subthemes that emerged from the participants' responses to two interview questions. These questions aimed to identify the specific types of content they find disturbing, determine how such content affects them, and explore the common mental health challenges experienced by content moderators in their job. This set of questions was designed to address the study's first statement of the problem.

**Table 1 Common Mental Health Challenges faced by Content Moderators**

Themes	Subthemes
Exposure to Disturbing Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rape and Torture</li> <li>• Violence and Gore</li> </ul>
Job Demands and Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heavey Workload and Long Working Hours Resulting in Emotional Exhaustion and Sleep</li> </ul>

Table 1 outlines the emergent theme and subthemes derived from the participants' accounts of the disturbing content they encounter, its effects on them, and the mental health challenges commonly experienced in their work. The two main themes—Exposure to Disturbing Contents and Job Demands and Challenges—are further organized into subthemes. Exposure to Disturbing Contents includes Rape and Torture and Violence and Gore, while Job Demands and Challenges comprises Heavy Workload and Long Working Hours Resulting in Emotional Exhaustion and Sleep, Work Targets, and Network Connectivity.

The first emergent theme reflects the types of content that participants find most disturbing and the psychological effects such content has on them. Participants consistently reported encountering material that is graphic, violent,

or sexually explicit, which elicits strong emotional and psychological reactions. This repeated exposure not only affects their immediate well-being but also has cumulative effects on their mental health.

The first subtheme, Rape and Torture encompasses content that depicts sexual assault and extreme physical harm, reflecting some of the most distressing materials participants encounter. Such content not only portrays the violation of personal and bodily autonomy but also confronts moderators with the raw realities of human suffering. Participants consistently reported experiencing intense emotional responses when exposed to these materials.

“If I were to choose one type of content that really is disturbing to me, I’d say the contents of killing people especially women being tortured and raped. It bothers me in ways that my hands can’t stay still, and makes my mouth shut, and makes me stressed...It affects me negatively in a way that I get to question, as to how can possibly a person be so animal and messed up to end up killing someone.”

“Ang pinaka-common na maka-stress for me is kanang mga torture or kidnapping...Grabe gyud iyahang effect negatively kay mag balik-balik gyud gani sa imong hunahuna, nya dili biya gyud na siya ingon na common kaayo makit-an nato diri sa Philippines. (The most stressful for me are those involving torture or kidnapping. They have a strong negative impact because they keep replaying in my mind, and such scenes are not something we usually see here in the Philippines.)”

“I think nakita pud ‘to siya sa facebook, katong torture bitaw sa usa ka OFW na gi gang rape then ang iyahang female genitals kay gibutangan og botilya like gi-pasok jud and everything...Sa sexual torture ang lisod siguro kay babae pud ta and in ana, kato siya ang murag dili ko makatulog, mga almost 1 month pud ko ato nga dili mawala sa akong hunahuna. (I think it has also been seen on Facebook, a case of an OFW who was gang-raped and sexually tortured. As a woman, it really affected me, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it for almost a month.)”

“So the kind of contents that we would encounter particularly are appetizing contents such as suicide, murder, and torture. For me, there's this weird feeling if you watch torture contents. It almost feels like sometimes it’s very detailed and it almost feels like its happening to you and you start to feel the pain as well of the victims that your watching...It’s very disgusting to watch but you know since it's your job to watch the entire video so you have to watch it...It really affects your fate in humanity.”

The second subtheme, Violence and Gore emerged as participants frequently encountered content depicting physical harm, blood, accidents, and other forms of brutality that elicited strong emotional reactions. Such content stood out as particularly distressing due to its graphic nature, which often triggered feelings of shock, discomfort, and lingering mental strain. Participants’ statements indicate that repeated exposure to violent material not only affects their immediate emotional state but also contributes to cumulative psychological stress, as they are required to continue reviewing disturbing content despite its impact on their well-being.

“Sa daghan nakong mga content na ma-encounter pero ang mas ang naay effect gyud kay ang kanang mga minor exploitism og animal abuse...Since kuan man gud kanang into pets ko ba unya mura gani kay murag malain gani akong buot if kanang naa’y iro na gipang-patay. (Among all the content I encounter, what affects me the most are those involving child exploitation and animal abuse. Since I’m fond of pets, it really pains me whenever I see dogs being mistreated or killed.)”

“Specific content that has an effect on our mental or emotional health are those gruesome content that we are going to review such as kanang naa’y blood related or accident surgery...Maka affect gyud siya sa mental health kay bisag hate nimo ang mga ingon ana nga content kay nag need man kag trabaho kay mapugos nalang pod kay piyot. (The content that most affects our mental health includes gruesome material like blood, accidents, or surgeries. Even though it’s disturbing, we have to review it to keep our job.)”

These utterances collectively underscore the significant negative impact that disturbing content has on the mental health and well-being of content moderators. They reveal both the immediate emotional responses, such as stress and anxiety, and the enduring psychological consequences, including intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion. The severity of these effects is amplified by repeated exposure and the occupational requirement to engage with such material, demonstrating the cumulative and persistent nature of the psychological burden experienced by content moderators.

The second emergent theme, Job Demands and Challenges indicates the various pressures faced by content moderators in their daily work. Participants described intense workloads, strict schedules, long working hours, and high performance expectations, as well as continuous exposure to disturbing materials and technical difficulties. These factors collectively contribute to a consistently high-stress environment, affecting both their mental and physical well-being.

The first subtheme, Heavy Workload and Long Working Hours Resulting in Emotional Exhaustion and Sleep Disturbances emerged since participants consistently reported experiencing significant strain from prolonged work hours and heavy workloads.

Continuous exposure to distressing content under demanding schedules often results in emotional exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and a cumulative mental burden. Participants emphasized the challenge of balancing workload demands with personal well-being, emphasizing how the intensity of the job adversely affects their overall mental health.

“I think due to heavy sacrifices and a loaded schedule, I don’t have time to think what part gyud of the things I have seen during my content moderator hours. Lisod gyud siya to deal with labi na affected gyud ang mental health. (I think the heavy workload and busy schedule leave me no time to process what I see during moderation, which is hard and affects my mental health.)”

“Troubles in sleeping, mag-lisod gyud og tulong. Especially if 8 hours ka mag atubang then lahi-lahi na levels sa content ang imohang makita from bata to tiguwang na slight pain to torture. Then, sa amoa kay 5 days a week man gyud mi mag duty...Usa siya sa cause of high stress, grabe pud siya maka-kuan og stress sa amoa especially sa mga working students. (Having trouble sleeping — it’s really hard to fall asleep. Especially when you face the screen for 8 hours and encounter different levels of content, from those involving children to the elderly, from mild pain to scenes of torture. And since we work 5 days a week, it becomes one of the main causes of high stress. It’s really stressful for us, especially for those who are also working students.)”

“Mag depende mana sako workload gud pananglitan daghan kay ang trabahuon mura’g diha ko ma feel og stress. (It really depends on my workload. For example, when there’s a lot of work to do, that’s when I start to feel stressed.)”

The second subtheme, Work Targets and Network Connectivity arose from the participants’ discussion of strict performance targets and the challenges posed by unreliable internet connections. The pressure to meet quotas under conditions of inconsistent network performance intensifies stress levels and negatively affects moderators’ mental states. Participants emphasized that failing to meet targets due to connectivity issues or other constraints could exacerbate feelings of frustration and helplessness, further contributing to occupational stress.

“What challenges us the most is having a bad internet connection because we are currently working in a home set-up right now. If there is slow internet connection all throughout our work, we’ll get affected immediately since all the jobs must comply with clients’ requirements, which is commonly known as quota. So kami naa man pud mi quota gyud kung ang internet connection muhinay, probably dili gyud na namo maabot mao na ma frustrate dayun mi unya maka affect pud sa among mental health. (Our biggest challenge is having a poor internet connection while working from home. When it’s slow, we can’t meet our quotas, which frustrates us and affects our mental health.)”

“Usa pasad nga challenges kay kanang internet issue kana sad maka frustrate sad na usahay kay labi nag naa need nga quota ug mga productivity nga i-hit. (Another challenge is internet issues, which can be really frustrating, especially when we have quotas and productivity targets to meet.)”

Taken together, the participants’ statements illustrate how the demanding nature of content moderation—characterized by heavy workloads, long hours, strict performance targets, and technical difficulties—creates a high-stress environment that significantly impacts their mental and physical well-being.

The combination of emotional strain from exposure to disturbing content and the pressure to meet work expectations under challenging conditions underscores the complex occupational demands faced by content moderators.

**Table 2 Coping Strategies Employed by Content Moderators**

Themes	Subthemes
Organizational Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to Wellness Coaches and Professional Support</li> <li>• Availability &amp; Flexibility</li> <li>• Structured Wellness Activities</li> </ul>
Personal Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing with Colleagues or Friends</li> <li>• Emotional relief through humor and social interaction</li> <li>• Entertainment-Based Diversion</li> <li>• Work-Life balance boundaries</li> </ul>

The emerging themes from participants' responses on the coping strategies they employ to manage their mental health challenges they encountered were presented in Table 2. The themes are Organizational Initiatives and Personal Initiatives. These themes reflect how content moderators relied on both organization based initiatives and self directed strategies to regulate their emotional well being.

The first theme, Organizational Initiatives, highlights the essential role of workplace provided mental health resources in helping content moderators maintain psychological stability. This theme consists of three subthemes: Access to Wellness Coaches and Professional Support, Availability and Flexibility, Structured Wellness Activities. Under the first subtheme, participants recognized the availability of wellness coaches as one of the organization's key mental health supports. These wellness coaches offered both individual and group sessions that provided a safe space for emotional expression. Additionally, wellness breaks were incorporated into their daily schedule. These following statements show that content moderators are proactively engaged with structured professional assistance to manage their emotional challenges.

“Pwede raman gyud kami maka request og wellness kay naa man sad mi mga wellness coach didto. (We can request wellness because we have a wellness coach there.)”

“Pwede ka mag group session ba ron or individual lang siya nga pwede ka makig-jam sa imohang friends. (You can have a group session or an individual one where you can jam with your friends)”

“Plotted gyud na siya everyday nga mo-take ka’g 20-30 minutes nga wellness break. (It's already plotted everyday that we take a 20-30 wellness break.)”

For the second subtheme, participants emphasized the importance of flexible and easily accessible wellness sessions. Moderators valued the ability to request support at any time and adjust wellness breaks according to personal needs. The flexibility extends beyond scheduling, it also includes how moderators may choose to use wellness resources. This autonomy empowers them to regulate their emotional needs without rigid structures, making coping more immediate and personalized.

“Available ra man sad 24 hours among coach (wellness coach). Our coach is available for 24 hours.” “Depende ra namo if gamiton namo siya(wellness program). (It depends on us if we’ll use it.)”

“One hour gyud siya naa gyud siya’y kuan gyud kanang oras gyud kay pwedi depende nimo unsa siya nimo kuanon. (There's really an hour that depends on you on how you use it)”

These responses reflect that the availability and responsiveness of wellness programs allowed participants to obtain support at any time it was needed.

The third subtheme highlights the organization's structured wellness activities aimed to help content moderators recover from emotionally taxing job. These structured initiatives offered consistent opportunities for emotional recovery, demonstrating the organization's commitment to support content moderators mental well-being.

“Naa rasad pud sila kanang mga activities gani sa mga moderators. (They have activities for the moderators)”

“Kantang kuan naa gyud mi one hour wellness session gyud. (Like we really have a one hour wellness session.)”

These statements illustrate that structured wellness activities provide a stable and predictable avenue for maintaining emotional balance, helping moderators recover from the psychological impact of their tasks through routine and guided well-being practices.

\*However, despite these kinds of organizational initiatives, participants also emphasized that these supports have limitations, particularly in terms of professional competency and program enforcement. While wellness coaches are helpful, some moderators expressed the need for licensed mental health professionals, underscoring a gap in specialized psychological care.

“Hiring more licensed psychiatrists in the company.”

This indicates that the existing organizational coping mechanisms are available, it may be insufficient in addressing the deeper emotional effects of ongoing exposure to graphic content. Furthermore, some participants suggested that wellness programs are not consistently implemented, which affects their actual effectiveness.

“I think okay ra man ang ilang program...it’s just nga dili kaayo na ma enforce ug tarong; need lang gyud imandate. (I think their program is fine; it’s just that it’s not really properly enforced. It should probably be mandated — like, it should be mandatory to have regular sessions).”

In addition, limitations also arise from insurance gaps, with mental health services not being covered.

“Sa insurance bitaw kay sa work hopefully ma include pud na ang kantang mga in-ana pud nga health problems kay i dont think mang gud kay mahal mang kaayo ng mag pa session ka sa psychiatrist unya dili pa gyud na siya covered sa insurance (In terms of work insurance, I hope those kinds of health problems will also be included because I think it’s really expensive to have sessions with a psychiatrist, and it’s not even covered by the insurance).”

These limitations indicate that although organizational initiatives exist, they require strengthening, formal enforcement, and professionalization to fully address moderators’ psychological needs.

The second major theme, Personal Initiatives, reflects the individual coping efforts undertaken by content moderators outside formal organizational programs. This theme includes four subthemes: Sharing with Colleagues or Friends, Emotional Relief through Humor and Social Interaction, Entertainment-Based Diversion, and Work-Life Balance Boundaries. Participants frequently relied on conversations with coworkers and friends to process distressing experiences. They described sharing stories as a way to lessen emotional burden.

Participants also used humor and social interaction as emotion-regulation strategies, allowing them to diffuse tension. Additionally, many turned to close workplace friends as informal support systems. This interpersonal coping strategy allowed moderators to vent, process, and normalize their emotions with others who understood the nature of the work.

“Amo nalang siya storya-storyahan na grabe gyud to. (We just talk about how disturbing it is).”

“Kana ra akoang friends na kauban nako sa work. (Just my friends at work.)”

“Mura silag mahulog nga support group nako mag talk mi mga about mga in-ana.(They act as my support group, we talk about those things.)”

“You get used to the experiences man sad...be open lang pud to other people.(You will get used to the experiences... just be open to other people.)”

Moreover, humor emerges as an intentional coping strategy that helps moderators distance themselves emotionally from graphic and disturbing content. By reframing distressing experiences through laughter or light conversation, moderators create a psychological buffer against emotional fatigue. Humor reduces the intensity of the content and helps prevent it from becoming overwhelming. Social interaction like joking, chatting, or decompressing with peers serves as a collective mechanism for releasing tension.

“I-agi ra namog mga katawa pero sa work specifically naa ra pud like sa among workplace kay naa rapo’y mga kuan didto professional.(We just laugh about it but at work specifically our workplace have professionals.)”

“Mag chika mi about atong putol-putol og ulo dayon tan-awon gyud kung unsa gyud violation ato. (We talk about the beheading then look at what violation it really is.)”

“Try to cool down with friends like it helps a lot to talk about it.”

“Dili gyud siya nimo dapat mahulog na seryuson gali. (You should not take it seriously.)”

Participants also turned to digital entertainment like games, music, comedy shows, and anime to detach from work stress. Diversion through entertainment provides moderators with an emotional escape from the distressing nature of their work. Engaging in enjoyable activities such as gaming, watching shows, listening to music, or consuming light-hearted media helps them shift their emotional state from tension to relaxation. Entertainment serves as a self-directed method of emotional cleansing, replenishing their mood and counteracting the effects of prolonged exposure to harmful material. These activities serve as immediate emotional resets, helping participants relax, uplift their mood, and distance themselves from disturbing contents.

“Magduwa ko og games.(I play games.)”

“I-duwa ra ko ni og dota oy or mo listen ra mi og music mga in-ana tan-aw og mga jolly na salida, mga anime tan-awon. (I’ll just play Dota or we’ll listen to music — things like that. We’ll watch funny shows or some anime.)”

Lastly, participants maintained psychological well-being by creating boundaries between work and personal life. Given the emotionally taxing nature of their job, many choose to disconnect completely during off-hours by avoiding work-related applications or communication. This separation prevents work stress from intruding into their personal space. Some also limit their own social media use to avoid encountering triggering content outside work. These boundaries serve as protective barriers, allowing moderators to rest, recover, and preserve their mental well-being without the constant reminder of their professional tasks.

“Wala nako mag install og mga work-related applications...Dili ko magpa-contact. (I don't install work related applications... I don't let them contact me.)”

“Wala nako gikuan para if day off nako, kung unsa’y mga balita sa work, unya na nako siya i-face if nana ko sa office. (I didn't open it so whenever I” on day off whatever the news at work, I’ll only face it when I’m at work.)”

“Sa social media, wala nako’y tiktok...less na pud ko in terms of social media usage. (In social media, I don't have tiktok... I do less in terms of social media usage.)”

These statements reveal that creating firm work–life boundaries is a crucial coping strategy that allows moderators to mentally detach from work, protect their emotional well-being, and prevent burnout.

While personal strategies allow content moderators to temporarily regulate their emotional well-being, these approaches demonstrate clear limitations. Participants acknowledged that peer conversations, humor, and other diversions cannot fully counteract the emotional exhaustion resulting from continuous exposure to disturbing content. Several moderators emphasized the need for more structured avenues for social engagement and a more supportive work environment. It indicates a desire for organized company events and recreational activities, suggesting that personal strategies alone are insufficient.

“More on activities like company activities gani kanang naa mga duwa-duwa. (More on activities like company events, especially those that include games or fun activities).”

Overall, the results illustrate that wellness in the workplace is achieved through a combination of organizational support and personal initiative. The company provides a supportive framework through wellness coaches, structured breaks, and flexible sessions, while employees complement these efforts by practicing self-care, fostering social connections, and maintaining clear boundaries. The integration of both institutional programs and individual coping mechanisms creates a balanced and holistic approach to employee well-being, promoting a resilient and mentally healthy workforce.

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## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that content moderators are regularly exposed to highly disturbing materials, which exert a considerable impact on their psychological well-being. Participants identified sexually explicit and violent content as the most distressing, noting that such exposure significantly affects their mental health. Given the demands of constant exposure to graphic content, moderators reported experiencing heightened stress, emotional strain, and psychological fatigue. These findings resonate with Bourke and Craun (2014), who observed elevated rates of psychological distress associated with repeated exposure to graphic content. Similarly, participants' accounts highlight the hidden emotional labor embedded in content moderation, reinforcing prior research by Gillespie (2018), who emphasized the intensification of emotional demands when handling graphic digital materials.

Additionally, participants consistently reported that the effects of exposure to disturbing content on their mental health were predominantly negative. Additional accounts noted that their thoughts and behaviors were adversely influenced, with many describing heightened stress as a result of repeatedly encountering such materials. In addition, participants identified experiencing sleep disturbances and recurring intrusive thoughts, further illustrating the psychological toll of their work. Such outcomes demonstrate the psychological toll of content moderation, echoing the concerns of Strandell (2023), as cited in Anselmo et al. (2025), who emphasizes that repeated exposure to harmful and disturbing content poses serious risks to moderators' psychological health.

Moreover, these observations are consistent with Steiger et al. (2021), who reported that moderators regularly exposed to distressing materials, such as violent or hateful content, are at heightened risk of developing long-term psychological problems, including chronic stress, fatigue, and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This concern is further reinforced by Whon (2019), whose study demonstrated that repeated exposure to harmful digital content can result in enduring psychological consequences, particularly secondary traumatic stress and emotional burnout.

Beyond exposure-related distress, the findings reveal that workplace factors also contribute significantly to the mental health challenges of content moderators. Technical difficulties, such as poor internet connectivity, along with heavy workloads, demanding work schedules, and difficulties in meeting quotas, were frequently identified as major sources of stress and frustration. These findings align with Akbari et al. (2017), who argued that strict performance metrics not only intensify workplace demands but also undermine employees' sense of autonomy and control, leaving them vulnerable to disempowerment. Similarly, Wohn (2019) reported that moderators are expected to sustain high accuracy levels and throughput quotas, which adds considerable stress beyond that caused by viewing graphic content. Taken together, such job requirements—ranging from stringent accuracy targets to productivity benchmarks—impose immense pressure on moderators, exacerbating the psychological challenges of their work.

These findings may be more fully understood through the lens of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2000s, as cited in Bakker et al., 2022). The model posits that excessive job demands are strongly linked to exhaustion, while the absence of adequate resources contributes to disengagement. In this context, the dual demands of exposure to disturbing content and adherence to rigid performance requirements create conditions that heighten the risk of burnout among moderators, particularly when organizational support is insufficient.

Given these mental health challenges faced by content moderators—ranging from the psychological toll of repeated exposure to disturbing content to the added strain of heavy workloads, demanding schedules, and strictly enforced quotas—the findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted interventions and enhanced organizational support systems to protect and promote their well-being.

Framing these findings through the lens of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) allows for a deeper understanding of how moderators process and respond to occupational stress. According to this model, stress arises not just from the external event, but from how individuals appraise the situation and evaluate their coping resources. Participants' accounts reflected a clear primary appraisal in which they identified the reviewed content as highly threatening to their emotional and psychological well-being. Secondary appraisals then involved assessing whether they had sufficient coping mechanisms, either personally

or organizationally, to manage this threat. When participants lacked adequate resources, such as professional psychological support or mental health insurance coverage, their sense of control diminished, leading to increased vulnerability to stress.

The findings of this study reveal that content moderators experience a complex interplay of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to the stressors inherent in their work environment. Anchored on the Lazarus Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the results underscore how moderators engage in continuous appraisal of stressful encounters and implement coping mechanisms to preserve their psychological wellbeing. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress arises when individuals perceive that environmental demands exceed their coping resources. Within the digital labor context, moderators often assess distressing content as a significant threat to their mental and emotional balance, reflecting the model's primary appraisal process.

Consistent with Soriano (2021), the rapid expansion of digital labor platforms has created new employment opportunities, yet it also exposes workers to unprecedented psychological pressures. The moderators' recognition of emotional exhaustion and mental strain aligns with Ali's (2024) assertion that the exponential growth of user-generated content requires intensive moderation, which often leads to burnout and compassion fatigue. In the secondary appraisal stage, as described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), workers evaluate their available resources and coping options. The moderators in this study demonstrated reliance on organizational interventions such as peer support, counseling, and workload management as well as personal coping strategies like detachment, humor, and mindfulness to mitigate stress. This balance between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mirrors the dynamic adaptation emphasized in Lazarus's model.

The role of organizational culture and management support emerged as a critical determinant of resilience among moderators. When institutions actively provide psychological support and clear communication channels, employees report a stronger sense of control and purpose. This finding supports Gillespie (2018), who argued that content moderation, while labor intensive, can be rendered sustainable when institutions acknowledge its hidden emotional burden and offer systemic support. Conversely, the lack of institutional care exacerbates emotional strain and may lead to withdrawal, cynicism, or turnover outcomes that reflect maladaptive coping responses within the transactional stress framework (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Ultimately, the results reaffirm that coping among digital content moderators is not static but transactional shaped by continuous feedback between individual appraisal and environmental demands. By aligning these insights with the Lazarus Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, this study highlights that resilience and wellbeing in digital moderation are attainable when both individual and organizational coping strategies are synergized. In this way, the findings extend theoretical understanding of stress management within emerging digital labor settings and provide practical implications for developing sustainable support systems for content moderation professionals.

Aside from coping strategies content moderators employed, participants also suggested additional support or programs can help them improve their well-being. The results indicate that content moderators perceive institutional mental health programs and access to professional psychological care as vital in coping with the emotional strain of their work. Participants emphasized the need for sustained counseling sessions and the presence of licensed mental health professionals who can provide consistent psychological assistance. Participants expressed that dealing with distressing online content will result in emotional strain, which confirms Spence et al. (2023) point of view that moderating the distressing online content is a substantial strain and requires a structured organizational intervention. At the same time, Steiger et al. (2021) highlighted that counseling and debriefing sessions are among the most effective ways of reducing the negative emotional consequences content moderation experienced in their job.

Besides access to professional support, participants also expressed concerns about the insufficient implementation of workplace mental health programs and the exclusion of psychological care in company insurance policies. This concern resonates with Ocampo et al. (2018), who asserted that employee wellness programs must be supported by clear institutional policies and administrative support. Moreover, Spence et al. (2023) observed that while some companies have started offering mental health programs, these initiatives often lack consistency and organizational reinforcement which results in limited effectiveness.

From the perspective of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, the availability of professional mental health services and the supportive organizational policies that are integrated together act as essential job resources that alleviate the emotional demands of content moderation. The JD-R model claims that if there are job resources such as counseling, insurance, and wellness programs these will act as a buffer against the impact of emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, the lack of such resources will make the moderators more prone to burnout, withdrawal, and emotional trouble.

Additionally, content moderators considered the supportive and engaging work atmosphere as the most important factor, which helps them preserve their psychological resilience. The participants pointed out that ties between people, free flow of information, and group events at the workplace are the most important factors for relaxation and creation of a feeling of being at home among the workers. Specifically, team building and bonding activities are activities that indicate the belief of participants that social and recreational activities can help to restore emotional balance and create friendship among employees. These activities allow the moderators to relax, build closer relations with each other, and at the same time, disconnect from the unpleasant nature of their work. This finding aligns with De Neve et al. (2024), who emphasize that a sense of workplace belongingness and opportunities for social interaction foster overall well-being, especially in emotionally taxing work environments. Similarly, Spence et al. (2024) proved that peer support is instrumental in decreasing the feelings of isolation and effectively preventing secondary trauma.

Moreover, open communication and supportive management emphasizes the importance of empathy and openness in leaders so that they could maintain emotional stability and foster a good working environment. This aligns with Roberts (2019) and Newton (2020), who observed that a lack of managerial support and emotional understanding can exacerbate psychological strain in content moderation roles. Likewise, Bloom and Van Reenen (2024) and Kelly et al. (2011) highlighted that leadership marked by empathy, trust, and clear communication cultivates a positive organizational culture, which strengthens employee well-being.

Based on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, the results of the study indicate that social connection, peer support, and open communication are essential job resources that alleviate the emotional demands of content moderation. These resources, when available, help to maintain motivation, avoid fatigue, and foster the development of positive coping behaviors. On the other hand, the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping reveals how those supportive interactions are perceived by the moderators as a means of converting the stressful conditions at work into manageable challenges, thereby empowering emotional resilience and adaptive coping. All the findings together state that a socially engaging and supportive work environment is a must for the mental health and overall well-being of content moderators. The results thus show the combination of individual-level support and institutional commitment as the main strategy for the promotion of the resilience and mental well-being of the moderators.

## CONCLUSION

This study was able to bridge the gap by exploring the mental health challenges and its corresponding coping strategies experienced by content moderators in Cebu City. The findings show that content moderation is an emotionally taxing job. Moderators often deal with disturbing digital content, especially sexually explicit, violent, and hateful materials. This exposure, combined with heavy workloads, strict performance targets, and limited support from organizations, leads to significant psychological issues. These include stress, emotional exhaustion, sleep problems, and signs of secondary trauma. These experiences highlight the broader risks of digital work and confirm the serious impact that content moderation can have on mental health.

Despite these challenges, the findings showed that content moderators are resilient through both personal and organizational coping methods. Individually, they manage stress with mindfulness, humor, self-detachment, and other techniques that help them maintain psychological balance. On an organizational level, moderators depend on peer support, open communication, and activities that create a sense of belonging and shared understanding. The study also highlights the urgent need for mental health support in the content moderation industry. Companies must understand that emotional resilience does not depend only on individual coping but it also needs ongoing support from the organization. Filling these gaps with clear mental health policies, proactive communication, and structured support systems can greatly lessen the emotional strain of content moderation work.

This study adds to the growing research on digital labor by highlighting the hidden emotional work of those who keep online spaces safe. It emphasizes that mental health in content moderation should not be seen as an individual issue but as a collective responsibility of organizations and society. By encouraging supportive leadership, offering accessible mental health services, and nurturing a culture of peer support, companies can build systems that focus on both productivity and well-being. Thus, this study urges a kinder approach to digital labor that acknowledges the emotional strength of content moderators and protects their mental health behind the screen.

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